

Multi-Language Challenges in International Agroecology Courses

Introduction

We have all experienced communication challenges during lectures, discussions and team field activities in our international MSc degree programs. When English is the native language for only a small number of student participants, and also for few of the teachers, it becomes difficult for those with less experience and language facility to keep up with discussion. If we observe a student carefully searching through the dictionary to locate one word, it is certain that they are not following the ongoing discussion.

Numerous literature reports emphasize the importance of instructors using alternative methods of presentation, of engaging students and of encouraging students to express themselves (eg. Izzo, nd). This Ohio State University “fast facts for faculty” worksheet also suggested guided notes, comprehensive syllabus and detailed study guide (course preparations), illustrations, handouts and visual materials (methods of presentation), and personal real-life examples as methods to engage a multi-language class of students. Stephenson (2012) states that the burden for communication rests on the instructor and many cross-language barriers may be overcome by greeting the class in a friendly manner, being courteous to every student and confronting the language challenges up front. Students introducing themselves, mentoring their peers in how to pronounce their names, openly recognizing language differences as an issue to be considered are all steps toward opening the learning community to new experiences and growth. Often the process will take longer and visual examples and personal experiences will help to build understanding and confidence. We recognize these challenges and openly discussed them in our own multi-language ENOAT (European Network of Organic Agriculture and Agroecology Teachers) workshop.

A workshop on language and communication issues was conducted during the ENOAT workshop in Plovdiv, Bulgaria in 2013 to uncover specific experiences of participants, to learn how different people deal with this language situation and to summarize the general and specific approaches used by instructors to design learning opportunities that overcome or at least minimize language problems.

Method

The facilitator posed two key questions to a group of 16 educators: 1) In which situations do you perceive problems due to teaching in English? Participants had to write down their individual perceptions of challenges and then discuss these with a group of three other persons before reporting out to the entire plenary group. And then he posed another: 2) What are potential solutions to these language challenges? In the results section of this report we present the comments written by people, and expand them with some discussion about each issue. The solutions were provided by the participants and expanded by the facilitator and recorder of the session after reflection on the overall language challenge issues.

Results

We summarized comments from the 16 educators into *eleven observations* about their own classes and personal experiences where English was the language of primary communication and the ‘official language’ of the course:

1. Knowledge of English for older generation teachers in some countries is a challenge, especially for those who are not fluent and often those who have not studied abroad in an English-speaking country; it appears that this is improving with younger instructors having more experience and practice.
2. English knowledge in our students is a current challenge and this will continue as more courses are offered in this ‘common academic language’ used in international education programs in Europe and elsewhere. Even when test scores of applicants appear to be acceptable, at times there is a disconnect between what people are able to do on a written/oral exam and what is possible in the rapid give and take discussion in the classroom.

3. Correct or precise translations or terms may be a problem, since this may be different in different cultures even when the terms seem to have clear meaning in U.K., U.S., Canadian or Indian versions of English; just as when we use terms in publications, it is important to provide a definition if there is any doubt.
4. Often it is difficult to understand properly the questions that are posed in class due to English being spoken with many different accents. This is sometimes a challenge both from teachers to students and vice-versa, and from students to students.
5. Field trips and excursions with presentations by farmers may present special cultural and language challenges due to differences in backgrounds, lack of farm experience for some of the students and limited experience of some farmers with an international visitor group, all in addition to a language barrier.
6. A particular challenge may be presentations by farmers or other stakeholders in their native language which have to be translated by the teachers; there is the inefficiency of delay, but also a chance of misinterpretation of details.
7. Agricultural terminology may not be known by teachers who come from the pedagogy or language department, and at times they are the ones who prepare and present language classes to students who are new to English. It is particularly difficult for non-native speakers of the language to use agricultural terminology, even though they may be relatively fluent in their own specific teaching or research domains.
8. Psychological resistance and discomfort may be part of any multi-language situation in courses and in the field work with students. Obviously some people learn a different language more quickly than others.
9. Teachers may not be fully prepared to teach in English, even though they have years of experience with conversation, and may be hesitant to launch a new course that must be taught in another language.
10. It takes more time to prepare classes in English than in one's native language and there may or may not be extra compensation for this additional time and energy investment by the teacher who is already dividing time between teaching and research.
11. We recognize that some students have as a major objective the improvement of their language skills, in addition to the content of the course in organic agriculture or agroecology. We respect that goal and certainly encourage language improvement; however, we must also state that acceptable language level is indispensable, in particular for courses with participatory learning approaches.

These are *some potential solutions to the challenges* related to English, as discussed in the plenary session and expanded by the facilitator and recorder:

1. It is important to develop a more rigid screening process to be sure that students are well prepared when they arrive to begin the courses; students may do well on written essays, but their oral English skills may not be good enough to allow them to participate immediately in the full discussions in class. Compulsory tests could help; personal and individual interviews can be done by telephone or by Skype today, or by in-person interview if this is possible. When a certain level of competency is not achieved before starting a class, this creates frustration on the part of students and instructors alike, as well as mis-communications about assignments and expectations. It is unfair for those who are well prepared to conduct a course at "the lowest common language denominator" so that those who are just learning English can keep up with the class.
2. We can offer English language competency courses for students to get up to speed in the new language; these should ideally be with native speakers of English. Additional tutorials for students

should be available, and we could provide more literature in English and make it available to students.

3. There is value in specific help sessions for those students who need them; language tables or meals where students gather for conversation in an informal setting can be useful, and writing centers are available at some universities.
4. One approach to improve instruction is to provide English courses for teachers, and perhaps provide paid incentives for them to attend, or at least not charge for these classes. We may need additional budget for this activity. Individual tutoring for teachers could be made available, one on one. Assessment of teachers could be a pre-requisite for allowing a course in English.
5. Instructors could start with limited lectures in English; the university could provide more preparation time for the first time a course is taught in English. In some universities, academic credit accounting for teachers may be 1.5 times for courses in English.
6. Power points in English can be used to reinforce lectures in class, so that students both see and hear the material presented.
7. When organizing the class for field work or classroom projects, we should mix teams in project work and if possible have at least one native English speaker on each team.
8. Translations on farm from a farmer presentation may be problematic and it is difficult at times to interrupt and translate. It is useful to prepare written information ahead, including descriptions of farms, photos of activities, maps, and lists of enterprises. Native speaking students may be asked to support translation from the farmer. More observations and active learning on farms instead of verbal communication may be more effective for learning.
9. Native speakers often speak too long and too fast; it is important to orient accomplished speakers of English to consider their audience and speak slowly.
10. We need to define technical terms and use photos or figures in addition to words to explain concepts when possible; having small cards with English technical terms or glossaries with translation could help students practice and build understanding.
11. Peer review of student work before handing in assignments can help improve language of the reports and serves as an additional learning experience for the mentor.
12. Technical reports and translations into English of articles familiar to students in their own languages could be more available; preparing a glossary of terms for students to learn should be useful for most courses.
13. We should create teams with a mix of nationalities, gender, learning styles, and language skills for project work.
14. One option in extreme cases is to have discussion in small groups in native languages, and then have a report out session in English to all other students.
15. We can overcome difficulties with understanding questions by having them written, or have students repeat the question, or have a neighbor interpret the question; we can always ask the class what they think and how they would respond.

Conclusions

No simple answer exists to solve communication challenges related to English as context will vary and there are many individual differences. Instructors learn through experience how to handle

unique situations, but it is important to anticipate this language challenge and to prepare as much as possible by using the 15 guidelines listed and described above.

References

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Submitted by:

Alexander Wezel
ISARA
Lyon, France

Charles Francis
UMB, Aas, Norway and University of Nebraska, Lincoln