

English as a medium of instruction in higher education: The Lemma project
Rob Hartsuiker, Ghent University

There has been much discussion in recent years about the use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education - in Belgium and especially in The Netherlands. However, one important question is hardly ever seriously addressed in such debates: What are the consequences of studying in a second language (L2) for the student's processing and retention of the studied material?

The Lemma (Language Education and Memory in Multilingual Academia) project at Ghent University is a consortium of researchers with expertise in cognitive psychology, linguistics, and educational sciences. Over the past 5 years, Lemma has tested whether there are costs in cognitive processing and memory of material studied in the first language (Dutch) or second language (English) of Flemish undergraduate students.

Three conclusions stand out. First, there is overwhelming evidence that in this population, despite considerable proficiency in English, there are costs in all aspects of language processing, including reading of texts, recognizing spoken words, and producing spoken words. There is typically a slow-down of about 15%-20% in processing.

Second, memory experiments in which students studied a text in L1 or L2 and were subsequently tested showed that much depends on test type. In recognition tests, using true/false or multiple choice questions, the students performed equally well in their first or second language. This was not only true when the memory test was held right after studying, but also when the test took place a day, a week, or a month later. But in a free recall test, in which students were asked to write down as much as they could remember, there was a clear disadvantage when using an L2 for study, even when reproduction was in L1.

Third, educational studies investigated differences in student and lecturer strategies and behaviors in an L1 vs. L2 class. This suggested that students evaluate instruction in L2 positively, but sometimes struggle with vocabulary and often look up words during class. It also seems that the international classroom poses some extra challenges on lecturers, such as a greater need to stimulate students to ask questions.

All in all, the research paints a more nuanced picture than the simplistic statement that there is a huge cost in learning, which sometimes comes up. When switching teaching to L2 there is no reason to panic, but one should carefully consider aspects such as the time allotted for tasks, type of examination, language support for students, and didactic support for lecturers.

Lemma Website: <https://www.ugent.be/pp/lemma/en>

Conference on Multilingualism (COM 2018): <http://www.com2018.ugent.be/index.htm> (Ghent, 16-18/12; symposium "foreign language use in education" on 16 December).