Language of Instruction and the First Year: Comprehension, Pace and Equity

What a Student Loses When She Studies in a Language She Is Still Learning

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A programme taught in a language that a student is still acquiring imposes a cost that no credit system records, and the cost falls most heavily on the first year. This article examines that cost: the four mechanisms through which a language of instruction affects learning, the difference between a bilingual structure and a translated one, and the support arrangements that change a student's trajectory. It argues that the decisive instrument is the teaching of the discipline's language alongside the discipline, and that an institution which admits a student into a second language without teaching its conventions has admitted her into a test rather than a curriculum.

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1. A Cost That the Credit Does Not Record

A credit measures the volume of a student's work, and it assumes that the work is of a kind that the student can perform at the pace the programme sets.

A student who is studying in a language she is still acquiring performs the same task with an additional operation: she decodes before she comprehends. The decoding consumes working memory, and the con-

sumption is largest in the first year, when the vocabulary of the discipline is itself new. The result is a student who understands the lecture twenty minutes late and who reads a page three times.

A student in a second language performs an extra operation that no credit records

The cost is not a deficit in the student. It is a feature of a programme that has been designed for a student who arrives with the language, and the design is expressed in a pace rather than in a requirement. A programme that covers the same content in the same weeks for a bilingual cohort and a monolingual one has set two different standards and described them as one.

2. The Four Mechanisms

The language of instruction affects learning through four mechanisms, and each of them can be observed in a first-year cohort.

The first is comprehension speed, which determines how much of a lecture a student can follow and how much she reconstructs afterwards from a recording or a classmate's notes. The second is participation, which requires a student to formulate a contribution while the discussion moves, and which a student in a second language will forgo rather than risk.

The third is reading, which is the largest part of a student's independent work and which is slowest where the vocabulary is technical. The fourth is assessment, which measures comprehension under time pressure and which converts a linguistic difficulty into an academic result.

The four interact. A student who cannot follow the lecture reads more slowly, participates less and performs worse in an examination, and the performance is recorded as an academic judgement rather than as a linguistic one.

3. Bilingual Structure or Translation

Two arrangements are available to an institution that teaches in a language its students are acquiring, and they are frequently confused.

The first is a bilingual structure: a defined part of the programme is taught in the student's first language, and a defined part in the second, with a transition at a stated point. The second is a translation: the same programme taught in two languages, with materials translated and examinations offered in both.

The two have different effects. A bilingual structure develops the second language progressively, because the student uses it for a growing share of her work. A translation allows a student to complete a programme without ever operating in the second language, which is efficient for her and which defeats the purpose of an international programme.

The instrument that makes a bilingual structure work is a transition rule: a stated point at which a module is taught in the second language, a diagnostic before it, and a support arrangement for the students who are not ready. The rule converts a structure into a trajectory, and a trajectory is what a student can plan.

4. Teaching the Language of the Discipline

The support that a student needs is not a general language course, and the distinction determines whether the support is used.

A general course in the second language teaches a student to converse about daily life, and the vocabulary of a discipline is a different register: a term with a precise meaning, a convention of hedging, a formula that is read aloud in a particular way. A student who has passed a general language test may still be unable to read a textbook in her field.

The instrument is a discipline-specific language component, taught by a language teacher with the collaboration of a subject teacher, in which the students read the actual texts of the first year and are taught to read them. The component is a module with credits, an assessment and a place in the timetable, and its absence is the reason that a language centre's support is frequently unused.

Mechanism	Observable as	Remedy
Comprehension speed	Late understanding	Recorded lectures, glossary
Participation	Silence in seminar	Small groups, written contributions
Reading	Slow progress	Discipline-specific reading course
Assessment	Low marks	Extra time, bilingual questions

Table 1 Four mechanisms and their remedies

5. The Assessment Question

An examination in a second language measures two things at once, and an institution that does not separate them cannot know which it has measured.

A student who fails an examination may have failed the subject or the language, and a transcript that records a single mark conceals the distinction. The consequence is a judgement about a person that the evidence does not support, and the judgement is frequently the one that removes her from the programme.

The instrument is a separation: an assessment of the subject in the student's stronger language for the modules that test conceptual understanding, and an assessment in the second language for the modules that test the ability to operate in it. The arrangement is defensible when the programme states which module assesses what, and it is what a bilingual structure implies.

6. The Lecturer in a Second Language

The cost of a language of instruction is borne by the lecturer as well as by the student, and the lecturer's cost is invisible in a workload model.

A lecturer who teaches in her second language prepares more, speaks more slowly and answers fewer questions in the time available. She is also evaluated by students on a criterion that includes her fluency, and the evaluation is compared with that of a colleague teaching in her first language. The comparison is unjust and it operates in every promotion file.

The instrument is a recognition: a multiplier in the workload model for teaching in a second language, and an exclusion of language fluency from the student evaluation of a lecturer who is teaching in a language that is not her first. The two measures are administrative and they are the difference between an institution that has a language policy and one that has a language requirement.

7. The First Year as a Threshold

The first year is where a language of instruction produces its largest effect, because the student encounters both a new discipline and a new register at once.

A first year that begins with a lecture in the second language, a reading list in the second language and an examination in the second language has set a threshold that only the students from bilingual schools will cross. The cohort that crosses it is competent and unrepresentative, and the institution reports a successful programme.

The instrument is a staged entry: the first semester's core modules in the national language with a parallel language component, the second semester's core modules in the second language with support, and the second year in the second language without it. The staging is a timetable decision and it changes the composition of the cohort that reaches the third year.

8. The Regional Dimension

In a region where the language of the labour market and the language of the literature are different, the choice of a language of instruction is a choice about a student's future rather than about her learning.

A graduate who will work in a provincial school, hospital or administration needs the national language at a professional level, and a graduate who will work in an international firm needs the second. A programme that teaches in one language and assesses in the same one has prepared a student for one labour market and described its qualification as general.

The instrument is a statement of language outcomes in the programme profile: the level a graduate will reach in each language, the modules that develop it and the evidence that is assessed. The statement is a paragraph and it allows a student to choose a programme by its language outcome rather than by its reputation.

9. The Student Who Translates

A bilingual student is frequently treated as a resource and rarely as a learner, and the treatment has a cost that a programme does not record.

A student who is fluent in both languages is asked to interpret for a classmate, to translate a handout, to explain a lecture to a friend who did not follow it. The service is useful and it is unpaid, and it is performed by the student who is best placed to study and least placed to refuse.

The instrument is a policy: the programme supplies the translation it requires and does not ask a student to supply it, and a student who assists a classmate is recognised through a paid role rather than an expectation. The policy costs a small budget and it converts a hidden subsidy into a service.

10. The Lecturer Who Teaches Across Languages

The competence that a bilingual programme requires of its staff is not fluency; it is the capacity to teach a subject in a language in which the student's vocabulary is partial.

That capacity is a technique: the use of a written summary before the lecture, a glossary distributed in advance, a pause after a technical term, a repetition in the other language for a key definition. None of it is taught in a language course and all of it is teachable in a workshop of two days.

The instrument is a teaching development programme for the staff of a bilingual curriculum, with the four techniques and a peer observation. An institution that has run it reports that the largest change is not in the lecturers' language but in their pacing, and the pacing is what a student in a second language needs.

11. Conclusions

A language of instruction imposes a cost on a student that no credit records, and the cost is largest in the first year and largest of all on the student from a school that taught the second language poorly. A bilingual structure develops the language; a translation defeats the purpose.

Three conclusions follow. A discipline-specific language component, taught jointly by a language teacher and a subject teacher on the texts of the first year, is the instrument that converts support into learning. The first year should be staged, with the core modules beginning in the national language and moving into the second, since a threshold set at the first lecture selects for the school rather than for the student. And the lecturer teaching in a second language should be recognised in the workload model and protected from a fluency judgement in her student evaluation, because an institution that ignores her cost will lose her.



Figure 1 A staged first year

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