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Mother-Tongue Diversity in the Foreign Language Classroom: Perspectives on the experiences of non-native speakers of English studying foreign languages in an English-medium university.

Abstract

This paper considers the position of university language students whose mother tongue is other than the medium of instruction. Specifically, it investigates the attitudes and experiences of non-native English speakers studying either German or Japanese as foreign languages at an English-medium university. The findings indicate that the non-native speakers (NNSs) of English consider themselves to be at an advantage over the native speakers (NSs) of English in the study of German and Japanese as Foreign Languages, despite the fact that the medium of instruction is English, at least in the early stages of the language module. This is primarily owing to the fact that the non-native English speakers are already experienced language learners with an extensive linguistic repertoire. This view is supported by the NSs of English. Some concerns are expressed by non-native speakers of English in relation to an assumed knowledge of culture and society of the host country. The implications of these findings are discussed. Diverging from previous studies, this research focuses on learners of languages other than English and contributes to recent discussions on the increase in linguistic and cultural diversity and its impact within the foreign language classroom.

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1 Introduction: Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Higher Education

In 2007, Vertovec coined the term super-diversity to "underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything […] previously experienced" and to represent "a dynamic interplay of variables" including country of origin, migration channel, legal status and human capital, including issues such as access to employment and responses by local authorities, service providers and local residents (Vertovec 2007: 3). Similarly, Blommaert and Rampton

(2012: 7) characterise super-diversity as the "tremendous increase in the categories of migrants, not only in terms of nationality, ethnicity, language, and religion, but also in terms of motives, patterns and itineraries of migration, processes of insertion into the labour and housing markets of the host societies and so on".

The term super-diversity itself contested. However, there can be no doubt that mass movement across borders has resulted in many European societies, including Irish society, demonstrating many of the features associated with super-diversity at all levels within their education systems. For example, between 2002 and 2011, Ireland experienced a 143% increase in the number of foreign nationals living in the country and, according to the 2011 census, foreign nationals from 199 countries represented 12% of the population, with 182 languages spoken across the state (Duncan and Pollak 2015). This significant shift in the linguistic ecology is most prevalent in Dublin, the capital city, and particularly in the county council area where this study was carried out (Table 1). Kelly (2013: 858) notes that at the time of writing 15,114 people living in Ireland did not speak English at all and 74,447 did not speak it well, while there were 77,846 people under the age of 18 who spoke a language other than English or Irish at home.

[Table 1 near here]

A significant consequence of this change in the linguistic situation in Ireland is the increasing number of children entering primary, post-primary and tertiary education who speak a language other than English or Irish at home. Official statistics suggest that there are 48,000 migrant students attending post-primary school in Ireland, representing approximately 14% of the post-primary cohort (RIA 2011). There is, as yet, no comprehensive information available on the numbers from this cohort continuing beyond post-primary level into tertiary education.

[Table 2 near here]

This study was carried out in an Irish university where, in the academic year 2014/2015, there were 1,014, or approximately 10% of the student body, registered as international students with a nationality other than Irish (Table 2). In total, 46 different nationalities were registered including a relatively large "other" category comprising 323 students. However, this figure of 10% is not a true reflection of the diversity in the student

body, and would not by itself justify the term super-diverse. This figure represents only the number of students who are registered as international students with a nationality other than Irish. Significantly, the number of students registered as coming from Ireland (including Northern Ireland) does not capture the so-called "1.5 generation", a phrase coined by Rumbaut (1997, 2004) to refer to children who left their native country at a young age and thus exist in a liminal space, living in two languages and, in this case, receiving much of their schooling in Ireland. As noted in the previous paragraph, statistics are not readily available on the progression of these students into third level at either a national level or at the level of individual institutions, as these students enter third level using the general entry pathway, and are, therefore, recorded as Irish students. However, based on module registrations for the three year period spanning 2014-2016 for the degree programmes that were the focus of this study, and using names and lecturer's familiarity with the cohort as proxy measures, we can conclude that the 1.5 generation comprises approximately 17% of the student cohort.

Taking both international students and members of the 1.5 generation into consideration, it can therefore be assumed that approximately one quarter of the student body now presents with a complex repertoire of cultures and languages, creating a super-diverse context. These students are undertaking degree programmes which were originally designed for a predominantly linguistically homogeneous student population of English-L1 speakers. In the past, these students tended to have a more limited linguistic repertoire.

A growing body of research exists in the fields of Content-Based Instruction and Content and Language Integrated Learning which looks at the outcomes and processes of the study of what are primarily "non-language subjects" through the medium of the foreign language (see for example Cenoz 2015; Cenoz and Ruiz de Zarobe 2015; Dalton-Puffer 2008; Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra 2012; Shohamy 2012; Ní Chonaill 2013). However, there has been little systematic work done to date among university students which compares the experience of the NNS studying a foreign language through an L2 and the NS studying the same foreign language through their mother tongue. Notable exceptions include Hopkins (2008) and Jaensch (2012). Hopkins explores the processes and effects of teaching a third language through the L2 of the student, and considers the implications for L3 instruction. An advantage of learning an L3 through an L2, observed by the participants in Hopkins' study, includes the fact that it gives learners a chance to acquire the L2. Disadvantages observed included the need to translate from the L2 into the L3, less precise explanations, and different pronunciation which made it easier to confuse the L2 and the L3. Jaensch (2012) includes as one of her foci the impact of proficiency levels in the L2 on the acquisition of the L3/Ln,

observing that higher proficiency levels appear to be associated with higher degrees of success in L3/Ln acquisition. Jaensch also notes enhanced metalinguistic expertise, better lexical knowledge and more developed cognitive skills among multilingual students with prior formal experience of language learning.

In addition, a limited number of studies have started to look at ways in which language teachers can incorporate and harness language learners' existing language knowledge and language learning experience both in non-language classes (Rosiers et al. 2016) and the foreign language classroom (Hufeisen and Neuner 2004; Alba de la Fuente and Lacroix 2015; Bruen and Kelly 2016). The experience of the NNS studying foreign languages in higher education environments remains nonetheless very much underrepresented in the literature. This study is located within this gap in the research.

2 The Study

2.1 Background and context

This study was carried out in four undergraduate language modules:

1. German as a Foreign Language (Year 1: Beginners)
2. German as a Foreign Language (Year 2: Ex-Beginners)
3. Japanese as a Foreign Language (Year 1: Beginners)
4. Japanese as a Foreign Language (Year 2: Ex-Beginners)

Beginners modules in first year assume no prior knowledge of the target language and in second year build on the knowledge acquired in first year. In first year, therefore, classes took place initially through the medium of English. As the students' proficiency in these languages increased over their first year and into their second year, the amount of English used in the classrooms decreased. However, it continued to be used where the use of a common language other than the target language was felt to be necessary by the lecturer concerned (Bruen and Kelly 2014). Thus, for some of the participants, the medium of instruction, English, was their mother tongue. For the remainder, it was an additional language.

2.2 Objectives and focus

The question at the heart of this study concerns the extent to which university language students, whose first language is not the medium of instruction, perceive themselves as being at an advantage or disadvantage compared to their counterparts whose first language is the medium of instruction. In order to ascertain whether there are other aspects in the foreign language classroom that might give the NS an advantage over the NNS, the study looks at whether there was a requirement or expectation implicit in the language classes that students have prior knowledge and understanding of Irish culture and society. While knowledge of

Irish culture and society is not an assessed component of the course, the study explores whether, in informal classroom practice, students were being asked to compare aspects of the Irish culture with that of the country of the target language. A further objective is to probe reasons for feeling at either an advantage or disadvantage and to consider the extent to which language classrooms acknowledge the presence of linguistic and culture diversity and ways in which this could be increased and enhanced.

In summary, the three main research questions which this case study addresses are:

1. Do NNSs of English perceive themselves to be at a disadavantage in the foreign language classroom in an English medium university?
2. What is the attitude of students to the expectation that students have a knowledge of Irish culture and society when they are attending an Irish university?
3. To what extent do language classrooms acknowledge the presence of linguistic and cultural diversity and are there ways in which this could be increased and enhanced?

2.3 Participants

Eighty-six students participated in this study (Table 3). Ranging in age from 18-22, the students were in either their second or fourth semester of a four year undergraduate degree in Applied Language and Translation Studies (ALTS), International Business or Joint Honours (Arts). Students on the ALTS degree study two languages and a range of translation modules. Students on the Joint Honours programme study one language and, in the case of these participants, either Media or Law. Students on the BA in International Business study one language in depth in addition to their business subjects.

[Table 3 near here]

Twenty-one of the participants were non-native speakers of English (Table 3). The term "non-native speaker" (NNS) is used in the research literature in various ways (see for example International Baccalaureate Organisation 2011). It may refer to the language learned first and/or the language spoken at home. For the purpose of this study, NNS encompasses both of these definitions. The NNSs who participated in this study also self-selected themselves as being non-native speakers of English. Nineteen of the students who participated in this study can be classified as belonging to the 1.5 generation referred to above.

In total, fifteen mother tongues were represented among the NNS participants in this study. These were Arabic, Polish, Italian, Chinese, Polish, Ukrainian, Mandarin, Cantonese,

Lithuanian, Croatian, German, Russian, Hungarian, French and Japanese. The second year Japanese module had the highest percentage of NNSs (35%), followed by second year German, first year German and finally first year Japanese at 15%.

The study was conducted in line with institutional guidelines on research ethics and written permission for the research was received from the Institutional Research Ethics Office. In accordance with institutional requirements, all students who participated in the study received a Plain Language Statement explaining the purpose of the study and signed an Informed Consent Form.

2.4 Design, instruments, procedure and data analysis

Data was gathered using two versions of the same basic questionnaire, one designed for the NNS participants and one for the NS participants (Appendix). The questions relate to the participants' status as either NNS or NS of English and whether this status advantaged, disadvantaged or made no difference to them in the study of their additional languages. In order to ascertain whether there are other aspects in the foreign language classroom that might give the NS an advantage over the NNS, questions are also posed relating to Irish culture and society and specifically requirements or expectations that might be implicit in their language classes that students have prior knowledge and understanding of such issues. This section was included after one lecturer reflected that there is a tendency to ask students to compare aspects of the Irish culture with that of the country of the target language in informal daily classroom practice. A final question is intended to elicit participants' views regarding how their language modules might be designed to acknowledge linguistic and cultural diversity to a greater extent.

The data generated was analysed using qualitative and quantitative analysis. The qualitative analysis took the form of thematic content analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions and yielded the following results.

3. Findings and Discussion

The primary objective of this study concerned the extent to which university language students whose first language is not the medium of instruction perceive themselves as being at an advantage or disadvantage compared to their counterparts whose first language is the medium of instruction. Findings suggest that approximately 90% of the NNS students felt that their status as such either advantaged them on their degree programmes over the NS students on the same programmes or made no difference, with 75% of the NSs supporting this view. First year students of both German and Japanese did not perceive any

disadvantages associated with their status as NNSs of English. A small proportion in second year did perceive a disadvantage associated with this status (Table 4).

[Table 4 near here]

Reasons given for these responses fell mainly into two categories, the first relating to the study of language modules and the second to the knowledge of Irish culture and society that is expected of NNSs. These are now reviewed in turn.

3.1 Study of language modules

Reasons given by the NNS of English for feeling at an advantage include the fact that once you have already acquired an additional language or languages, it is easier to add another one to your linguistic repertoire. This was expressed, for example, as follows:

Having another language helps in learning other languages, especially in pronunciation.

Having prior knowledge of a foreign language makes you more receptive in learning a new one

[…] it's easier to learn by association / links with the other language

[…] people who only speak one language might find it more difficult to grasp new concepts and languages

I also have my mother tongue to compare with German and find similarities.

It is an advantage because I have prior experience of learning a language from the beginning. I am also able to make comparisons between my mother tongue and German. I noticed that they [native English speakers] find it more difficult to speak the language and learning the grammar points because English grammar is not taught in Irish schools. Therefore, they are at a disadvantage. They also have difficulties in pronouncing words properly because they read it [the additional language] in a way that they would read English, which is totally wrong.

I can pronounce different phonemes and since I already learnt a language, it's easier to know what to do […] some phonemes are near impossible for them [NSs] to pronounce.

Analysis of the reasons offered by the participants suggests that their perception – indeed, one that is supported by much research (see, for example, discussion in Ó Laoire and Singleton 2009: 80; Park and Starr 2016) – is that the addition of languages to a linguistic repertoire becomes easier as more languages are added.

Comments by the NS students reinforce these views, with several observing that the NNSs' knowledge of their mother tongue can facilitate the acquisition of the target language, particularly in cases where there is a similarity between the target language and mother language of the NNS, such as Chinese students whose target language is Japanese, which shares elements of the writing system with their L1.

> *[…] the non-native English speaking students, I find, are taught more of that stuff [linguistics and textual studies] in schools than natives*
>
> *[…] taught language properly in schools if taught English in their native country*

Other NS students commented more generally that they:

> *[…] feel at a disadvantage sometimes because some [NNS] students can understand grammar and cases better using their native languages as a reference.*
>
> *Some non-native speakers of English speak languages which are similar to the one they are learning, e.g. layout, grammar and vocab, which gives them an advantage.*

Or that:

> *They [NNSs] have already learned English fluently so are aware of what it takes to learn a new language and master it.*

Some NSs even perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage in terms of proficiency in the English language itself, particularly academic English, commenting for example that:

> *I can say with certainty that many international students have a higher level of English than I do. I may speak it and read it, but academic English is always a challenge.*
>
> *It is easier for them to study English language rules as they don't come automatically to them.*

Similar opinions to that in the foregoing comment were also expressed by NNSs, who noted:

> *I find that some non-native speakers make more of an effort to learn the rules of English than native speakers who tend to take them for granted*
>
> *From my experience, non-native speakers on my course have an excellent level of English.*

The comments by the NS students who participated in the study support the view that knowledge of several languages and a deeper understanding of grammatical structures (even English ones) and concepts can facilitate the acquisition of additional languages. This finding echoes those of Hopkins (2008) and Jaensch (2012) discussed in the Introduction to this paper. Also relevant is the fact that the NNS students who participated in this study enjoy a

high degree of proficiency in English, again echoing Jaensch's (2012) views on the impact of higher proficiency levels in the L2 on L3/Ln acquisition referred to above.

3.2 Knowledge of Irish culture and society

Asked if, in their language classes, there was an expectation of familiarity with Irish culture and society, the NNS students in this study responded as follows (Table 5).

[Table 5 near here]

Eight out of twenty-one (38%) NNSs expressed the view that there is an expectation of knowledge about Irish culture and society, with thirteen out of twenty-one (62%) considering this expectation to be reasonable, seven out of twenty-one (33%) considering it unreasonable, and one participant undecided.

In support of the view that the expectation is a reasonable one, a NNS commented as follows:

> *We choose to live in this country so I think it would be disrespectful not to be*
> *interested in this country's heritage.*

Some of those NNS participants who indicated that it was reasonable to expect a knowledge of Irish culture and society in language classes tempered their response somewhat in the qualitative comments, for example:

> *Maybe a little bit but definitely not as much as Irish people.*
> *Yes, but only to a certain extent.*
> *Yes but not as much as Irish students.*

Other NNS felt that it is to their own advantage to know about Irish culture and society:

> *Yes, it's easier for them to be more comftible [sic] in Irish daily society.*

The NS students agreed that it was reasonable to expect knowledge of the local culture and society for the following reasons:

> *Non-native speakers should at least have a basic knowledge of the culture and society*
> *of the country they study in.*
> *If they have been living in Ireland for a few years, it is important.*

Again, though, these responses were tempered and the view expressed that this was not particularly important or that, for example, only contemporary knowledge could be expected. This was expressed as follows:

> *Many Irish people still have little knowledge about Irish culture and society so I don't*
> *think it's too important if non-native speakers don't either.*

> *Not the history, just modern Ireland.*

Some of those NNSs who expressed the view that it was unreasonable to expect such knowledge commented as follows:

> *Even some native English speakers don't know about it. Same should be expected from us.*
>
> *We have different cultures and often feel alienated when being asked to compare Irish culture to German culture because it is not my culture.*

Based on the comments above, dissatisfaction was expressed regarding a perceived requirement among NNS participants that they display an understanding of Irish culture and society. While some are happy with this requirement, others express the view that it should apply to them to a lesser extent than to their Irish counterparts, the NSs in this case. This is an emotive topic for some who describe the requirement to compare Irish culture to that of the target language as an alienating experience for them. It is worth noting that, in their responses, students made no reference, either favourably or otherwise, to the modules where the lecturers give the students the opportunity to compare an aspect of the target culture with another culture of their choice.

3.3 Accommodating diverse mother tongues in the classroom

Finally, with regard to the accommodation of diverse mother tongues in the classroom, the majority of the participants in this study, both NNS and NS, felt that the four language modules which formed part of this study were already "inclusive to everyone" and did not require change.

The small minority who did make suggestions for improvement felt, for example, that the target language could be used to a greater extent than at present, stating that language lecturers should:

> *[…] speak less English in a language class for a specific language as this confuses and makes it more difficult to remember and concentrate. Speaking more of the study language makes it easier for non-natives to learn.*

One NS also felt that additional language support could be provided to NNS students outside the standard language contact hours. It was suggested that this could take the form of extra class contact hours specifically for NNSs and/or teaching the target language through the individual mother tongues of the NNSs.

4. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this paper was to report on a study intended to gain a deeper understanding of the experience and attitudes of NNSs studying foreign languages at university with the

additional goal of finding ways of improving this experience. In particular, the focus was on non-native speakers of English studying German and Japanese as Foreign Languages in an English-medium Higher Education Institution in Ireland, with a view to ascertaining 1) whether NNSs perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage compared to NSs in the foreign language classroom, 2) the attitude of the students regarding the expectation that both NS and NNS students have a knowledge of Irish culture and society, and 3) the extent to which language classrooms acknowledge the presence of linguistic and culture diversity and ways in which this could be increased and enhanced.

The findings suggest that the majority of NNS participants in this study do not perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage when compared with NSs of English either on their degree programme generally or more specifically when studying Japanese or German as Foreign languages. Significantly, in the context of this study, none of the NNSs expressed the view that they were at a disadvantage in their foreign language modules. This position was supported by the NS participants who concur with the view of the NNS speakers that they as NNS speakers are at an advantage, or at the very least not at a disadvantage, in German and Japanese language modules. In addition, NNSs of English who enter the university where this case study is set, in addition to the specific course requirements, must also provide evidence of competence in the English language[1]. Students who fail to reach the required level of English competency must take a one year International Foundation Programme. This fact provides support for the views of Ní Chonaill and Harris (2013) who argue that it may be comparatively more difficult for NNSs to attain the points required to attend university than it is for NSs, a fact which may result in those NNSs who attain university places being particularly academically able. The results for NNSs attending other third level institutions where the entry requirements are lower, such as for example Institutes of Technology in Ireland, may not align with the findings in this paper, an issue which is however beyond the scope of this current study.

Findings from this study would suggest that sensitivity on the part of academics designing and delivering language modules to the fact that not all of the students before them may be equally familiar with the host culture would be beneficial. For example, in comparative exercises, providing an opportunity for students to compare the culture and

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[1] IELTS (composite score of 6.5, with no less than 6.0 in any one component); Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English (Grade C); Cambridge Certificate of Advanced English (Grade B); ETAPP (C1); TOEFL I BT (237 computer based, 580 paper-based test); GCE A-level English (Grade D); Irish Leaving Certificate English (Ordinary Level Grade D3).

society of the target language with that of the student's mother country or another country of their choice could benefit NNSs of English.

Finally, findings of this study suggest that, in order to differentiate instruction to address linguistic diversity (see also Tedick and Weseley 2015), discourse in the target language class should be less rooted in the country in which they happen to be taking place given the fluidity of the participants' backgrounds and the impact of the phenomenon of super-diversity. Where possible, it would appear advantageous for lecturers to be aware of, and to attempt to incorporate into the classroom, the cultures and backgrounds of all of the participants. In the words of Cenoz (2015: 22), it is important to recognise that, unlike in the past for many English-medium universities, "we can no longer think of homogeneous classes of students who have the majority language as their L1 […]". Instead, there is a need to be cognisant of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity and its impact in the language classroom.

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Tables

Table 1: Number of people who speak a language other than English at home in the county council area of Fingal (Source: Duncan & Pollak, 2015)

Polish	10,345
French	4,492
Lithuanian	3,274
German	1,582
Russian	3,404
Total	54,123

Table 2 : Domiciliary of Origin of Full-time Students in Irish university Academic Year
2014/2015. (Source: http://www.hea.ie/category/statistics)

Domiciliary of Origin	No. of students	% of student population
Ireland (including Northern Ireland)	8747	89.6%
Asia	343	3.51%
Other	323	3.3%
EU (other than Ireland)	313	3.2%
North America	13	0.13%
Africa	13	0.13%
Europe (non EU)	6	0.06%
Oceania	2	0.02%
South America	1	0.01%
Total	9761	100%

Table 3: Number of students on each module who speak a language other than English at home

Module	No. of students in module	No. of students whose MT is not English
German Y1	12	3 (25%)
German Y2	15	4 (27%)
Japanese Y1	33	5 (15%)
Japanese Y2	26	9 (35%)

Table 4: Impact of being a NNS on engagement with degree programme

	Advantage	Disadvantage	Makes no difference
All participants with a mother tongue other than English	47.6 (10/21)%	9.5% (2/21)	42.8% (9/21)
German, year 1	33%	0	67%
German, year 2	75%	25%	0%
Japanese, year 1	60%	0	40%
Japanese, year 2	33%	11%	56%

Table 5: Expectation of knowledge of Irish culture and society

	Knowledge assumed	Knowledge not assumed	Reasonable to assume knowledge	Unreasonable to assume knowledge
All NNS of English	8 (38%)	13 (62%)	13(62%)	7 (33%)
German, year 1	0	3	2	1
German, year 2	2	2	2	2
Japanese, year 1	2	3	5	0
Japanese, year 2	4	5	4	4

Appendix

Questionnaire for NNS participants

1) Prior to entering this degree programme, were you, as a non-native speaker of English, required to take an English competency exam?

    [Yes / No]

    If yes, what was the outcome?

2) Compared with other students whose mother tongue is English, do you think that the fact that you are a non-native speaker of English is:

    a) an advantage

    b) a disadvantage or

    c) makes no difference

    Please explain your answer.

3) Do you feel that native speakers of English who are studying on your degree programme have:

    a) any advantage

    b) any disadvantage or

    c) it makes no difference

    Please explain your answer.

4) Are there any specific modules on your degree where you, as a non-native English speaker, are at an advantage/disadvantage? If yes, please identify the modules and explain why you are at an advantage or disadvantage.

5) Do you feel there is an expectation in your language class to know about Irish culture and society?

    [Yes / No]

    If yes (or no), can you give more details?

6) Do you feel that it is reasonable to expect non-native English speakers to know about Irish culture and society?

    [Yes / No]

    Give a reason for your answer.

7) Are there any ways that you feel your language module could be made more inclusive to accommodate the needs of students who may have spent their earlier years in another country?

Questionnaire for NS participants:

1) Compared with other students whose mother tongue is not English, do you think that the fact that you are a native speaker of English is:

    a) an advantage

    b) a disadvantage or

    c) makes no difference

    Please explain your answer.

2) Do you feel that non-native speakers of English who are studying on your degree programme have any advantage?

    [Yes/no]

    Please explain your answer.

3) Are there any specific modules on your degree where you, as a native English speaker, are at an advantage/disadvantage? If yes, please identify the modules and explain why you are at an advantage or disadvantage.

4) Do you feel there is an expectation in your language class to know about Irish culture and society?

    [Yes / No]

    If yes (or no), can you give more details?

5) Do you feel that it is reasonable to expect non-native English speakers to know about Irish culture and society?

    [Yes / No]

    Give a reason for your answer.

8) Are there any ways that you feel your language module could be made more inclusive to accommodate the needs of students who may have spent their earlier years in another country?