

The Language Environment of Exchange students at Scandinavian universities

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One aspect of, and one reason for, the internationalisation of Scandinavian universities is the increasing number of exchange students and postgraduates from outside Scandinavia attending courses here. Unlike visitors to universities in countries where the majority language is English, or French, German, Spanish, etc. , very few of these students are primarily motivated by a desire to learn the local language. In fact it is widely believed that many of them live in a lingua-franca English-speaking environment . This paper reports results of a study of the language environment and language-learning experiences of some thirty-five Erasmus exchange students at the Royal Institute of Technology (Kungliga Tekniska Högskola), Stockholm. The students were interviewed three times over the course of a term on which languages they used with whom, and how they perceived their English and Swedish as developing, and their language was also tested informally.

A striking result was that a number of well-motivated students were able to attend lectures in Swedish after only a few weeks of courses, and this is because of the nature of mathematical lectures in which clear visual material – blackboard derivations – is combined with a commentary using a limited and international vocabulary. Most subjects spoke English most of the time, and mother-tongue use decreased as social groups came to be more integrated across national boundaries. Contact with Swedes was limited , but strongly associated with sport participation, which once again provides clearly situationalised language use.

This study was in fact the pilot for a larger study comparing exchange students' language situation in four institutions which is being financed by the Nordic Council under its Nordplus Språk programme. Preliminary results from this comparison of the Royal Institute, Stockholm University, Århus University (Denmark) and the Århus School of Business will also be reported.