

# Training academic writing in an international faculty: between Scylla and Charybdis

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## **Abstract**

Universities are by definition arguably concerned with seeking and extending knowledge across national and linguistic boundaries. The concept of the university after all predates the concept of the nation-state. University education may well imply acquiring competences to extract knowledge from sources in other languages or convey knowledge and skills to speakers of other languages. To this extent universities are internationalized. However, for reasons such as economic development, globalization, demographics, universities are embarking on a new phase in internationalization, one which increasingly involves recruiting students and staff from across the world.

An internationalizing university today will often establish a policy that overtly or covertly implies English-medium education, while at the same time expressing public support for language development. Yet in practice this may not amount to bilingual or multilingual education. In this paper we compare the practices of internationalization with respect to language in two faculties at Maastricht University, economics and health sciences. We relate these practices to findings from surveys of graduates, which suggest that the graduates’ perceived competence in foreign languages exceeds the foreign language requirements of the jobs they are doing.

We conclude that the policy of internationalization as practised at Maastricht University implies education through English, that internationalization may mean multilingualism at institutional level but not at the individual level, and that the additional languages that students do acquire are largely acquired outside the educational programmes the students are studying.

## **1. Introduction**

In Greek mythology Scylla was a monster lurking under a rock on one side of the narrow strait of Messina. Charybdis was the dangerous whirlpool on the other side. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus had to navigate a precarious route past these dangers, losing six of his crew to Scylla as he sailed through the Strait. Scylla and Charybdis have become a metaphor for a choice between terrible alternatives. In this paper we have taken the metaphor to reflect two equally great risks that an international faculty has to steer clear of in its training of academic writing. The faculty has to avoid a Charybdis effect, which entails otherwise competent students failing due to their

language, and a Scylla effect, in which academic success is achieved at the expense of ensuring writing quality and thus threatening the image and reputation of the institution.

In this paper we look at the initial academic writing programme of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of Maastricht University, the Netherlands. First we describe the Faculty itself and the training in academic writing. Then we investigate the results from 2005 to see if we can detect a Charybdis or a Scylla effect. Finally we conclude with some recommendations for practice, which are relevant for institutions offering multilingual education.

## **2. An international faculty: Faculty of Economics and Business Administration**

The Faculty of Economics at Maastricht University is an international faculty in that in the academic year 2003-2004, 34% of its academic staff, 8% of its administrative staff, and 40% of its students were international. Many of them come from the neighbouring countries Belgium and Germany, but in total there is a wide range of over 20 other nationalities (FEBA, 2005).

All of the faculty's programmes, except Fiscal Economics, are being taught entirely in English, with the first programme in International Management having started as early as 1987. No courses in other languages are given; in fact, second-language training ceased at the introduction of the Bachelors-Masters structure in 2002. English language training is restricted to a short academic writing skills training in the first year, details of which will be sketched below.

At first sight, it is not surprising that the English-medium content teaching is being carried out alone by content tutors who are usually non-native speakers of English. However, the implications this has on the English language development of students cannot be underestimated. At the moment, the faculty seems to assume that students acquire academic skills in English implicitly. Needless to say, the validity of this assumption is questionable. The present situation might result in what we like to call the Charybdis effect: content-competent students may fail the programme due to language weaknesses.

The faculty faces a lot of pressure to maintain its high quality standards. At the same time, there is more tacit pressure to maintain the actual success rate. This carries in itself the risk of the faculty sailing right into Scylla's arms: lowering the writing standards students have to meet can ensure that a high number of students pass; however, this may go hand in hand with inadequate writing standards of these otherwise competent students. This is likely to be a risk to future intakes as well as the faculty's image and reputation.

## **3. Academic writing training in English**

Having sketched a general picture of the international character of the faculty, we would now like to turn to the English training provided for students. As mentioned earlier, due to the change to the BaMa structure and a scarce budget, the faculty decided several years ago to provide one single academic writing skills course in the first year which is integrated with the content course and delivered by Language Centre tutors. In the subsequent years of the programmes, all content courses are required to include a writing assignment; these, however, are assessed by content staff only on both content and language.

In the English academic writing skills course, about 15 English writing tutors provide training for approximately 800 students divided in 60 groups. During the same block of 8 weeks, students

take part in one of two parallel programmes: Students who follow an Economics programme (Economics, Fiscal Economics, or Econometrics) follow a Microeconomics course, while students on the International Business programme follow an Economics & Business course. The academic writing skills training comprises two plenaries per programme and four tutorial sessions, which are student-centred and student-controlled and tutor-guided. In addition, students can and are asked to make use of an electronic learning environment. The writing training is the same for both programmes. Due to the shortness of the course, the educational objective lies in awareness raising rather than language development. The students are taught in homogenous small groups of 14-15 students following the same programme. The students do get different writing assignments (ca. 2000 words), which match the content of their Economics (Microeconomics) or IB (Economics & Business) course, and different marking procedures are applied. In the IB course, the Language Centre tutors only assess the language of the student papers, and IB tutors assess the content. In Economics, Language Centre tutors have been assessing both language and content in the Economics papers since 2003-04. Students receive written feedback on their paper and can sign up for individual consultations with the tutor who graded and marked their paper. In order to assure a high quality of both teaching and marking, the Language Centre provides pre-course introductory and post-course evaluation meetings for its tutors as well as marking workshops. Additional group and individual support for marking the Economics paper is provided by a member of the faculty and a senior LC tutor. In all, collaboration between the Language Centre and the course coordinators at the faculty is close.

#### **4. How do the students assess the training?**

Figure 1 (see Appendix) gives the results of the student evaluation in 2005 for the Economics (Microeconomics) course: the procedure at the Faculty is to invite about one quarter of the students by random group numbers to complete an evaluation form. The evaluation questionnaire comprises a set of statements to which students indicate the degree of their agreement on a 5-point scale (5 = totally agree, 1 = totally disagree). The questionnaire included only four items relevant to the academic writing training and the paper. It should be noted that the faculty did not evaluate the academic writing training nor the paper in the IB programme. The conclusion may be drawn from these results that, despite considerable attention paid to peer feedback, more effort is needed to train students to give each other feedback on their written work. This is what students have to be able to do in their studies.

As indicated in the previous section, in the IB programme the content teachers rated each student's main paper on content while the English tutor assessed for the writing coherence and language. In the IB programme students also had to take a written exam on the content. The mean scores for each component (before any resits) were: paper content: 6.47; paper language: 5.61; content exam: 5.78. On the written paper, the score for content was significantly correlated with that for language ( $r = .60$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $n = 383$ ). It is noteworthy that correlation of the score on the content exam was smaller with that for the written paper (content) ( $r = .21$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $n = 365$ ) than with the score for the written paper (language) ( $r = .32$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $n = 364$ ).

To illustrate the Charybdis effect, i.e. good students failing because of language, students in IB who failed one component but passed another were plotted as shown in Figure 2 (see Appendix) (thus students passing or failing the written paper on both content and language are excluded). Very few students who failed on content passed on language (3.13%) (figure 2, column 1), but 29.77% of the students failed on language but passed on content (column 3). This would seem to suggest quite a large Charybdis effect for IB. However, when the content exam is taken into

account, the Charybdis effect disappears: 20.05% passed the written paper on language but failed the content exam (column 2); and vice-versa only 13.74% did so (column 4).

It is instructive to compare the same figures for content only on the exam and the written paper (figure 3). Nearly 35% of the IB students who passed the content part of the written paper failed the exam; vice-versa only 3.0% did so. This suggests that the score for content on the written paper may have overestimated the students' true content knowledge.

In a study into students' perceptions of the ability of their tutors to assess writing, conducted in 2004, we asked IB students to rate the extent to which they thought IB tutors and Language tutors were able to assess the content and the English of written papers. Not surprisingly, the students felt IB tutors were significantly better able to assess content; but regarding English there was almost no difference (figure 4). This suggested that students have considerable confidence in their IB tutors' competence to assess language. It remains to be seen whether IB tutors are in fact able to meet the students' expectations in this respect.

As has been mentioned, the Economics and IB programmes at Maastricht University no longer provide any language training. The courses are in English but there is little overt guidance in English and none in other languages. If the ability to function effectively in a variety of languages in one's profession is a key competence for today's graduates, then it is worthwhile investigating how graduate students do function in their jobs. Alumni research at Maastricht allows one to compare both economics and business graduates with graduates from other disciplines (Ramaekers, 2004). The findings shown in Figure 5 are based on data collected in 2002-03, roughly 6 years after the students graduated; thus graduates in year 1996-97. At that time both Economics and Business students received English skills training in year 1 (Business), year 2 (Economics and Business), year 3 (Economics), plus obligatory second language training (French, German, Spanish or Italian) on some Economics and Business programmes. Graduates in Economics and Business rate foreign language ability as a high requirement in their current job and rate their own competence very high too. Nearly 50% of them report that they acquired their multilingual competence during their studies. However, the question arises as to what the impact will be when the current cohort of Economics and Business students have graduated and are working: we may expect the percentages to decline regarding both their own foreign language competence and multilingual competence acquired during studies. However, we may expect an increase in the fourth item, that multilingual competence should be trained more.

## **5. Conclusions**

In conclusion, it seems that in International Business the Charybdis effect is probably quite small. Our data do not allow us to calculate the effect for Economics, but we have no evidence to suggest that it might be different. However, it was observed that content competence in the written paper in IB may have been overrated; this may suggest a Scylla effect, students passing with weaker writing ability, and thus potentially succeeding despite the lower quality of their written work. It may be that writing competence can be acquired implicitly; this may underlie the perception of students that content tutors are able to assess language ability. It may be that content tutors are seen as adequately competent to guide writing development. It would be wise to continue to monitor such effects to guard against programme quality decline. A further conclusion is to continue to monitor the effects in the job market: it is at present unknown whether the job market will accommodate or penalize students who study only through the medium of English and who are not obliged to demonstrate professional competence in any other language during their studies.

Finally, some recommendations can be given if a Charybdis or Scylla effect is observed. In the case of content-competent students who may fail because of language (Charybdis effect), it is recommended that students at risk be identified early and coaching be offered. In the case of lower writing standards (Scylla effect) which may lead to lower content quality, it is recommended that a system of continuous programme assessment be implemented, and where necessary staff training in writing development and assessment provided.

## **References**

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- Ramaekers, G. (2004). Hoe oud-studenten van de Universiteit Maastricht hun curricula evalueren. Research report. Universiteit Maastricht: Researchcentrum voor Onderwijs en Arbeidsmarkt. September 2004. ROA-R-2004/7.

Appendix: Figures

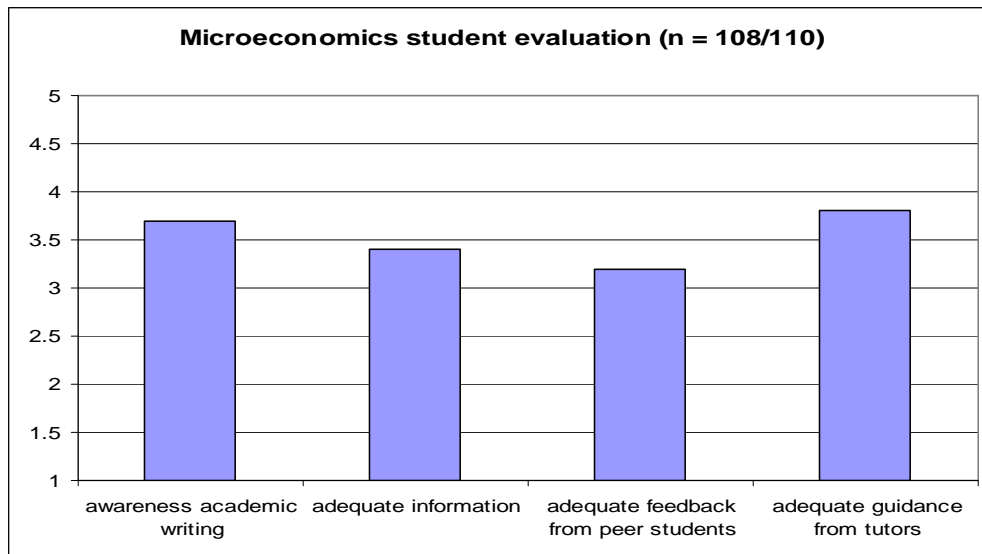


Figure 1: Results of student evaluation of the 2005 Microeconomics course. Only the four items relevant to writing or the paper have been included. Response: 108 -110 students (ca. 70% of those asked; ca. 25% of all economics students); s.d. 1.0/1.1.

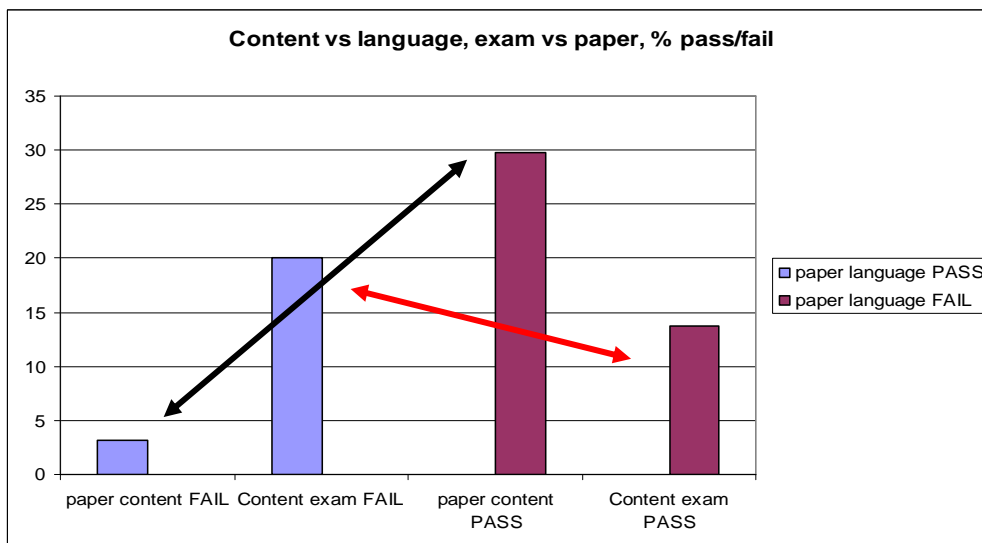


Figure 2: International Business. Percentage of students failing one item (e.g. content) and passing on another (e.g. language). So students who pass on both or fail on both are excluded. The difference between columns 1 and 3 suggests a Charybdis effect (good students failing because of language); however, the effect disappears in the comparison between the content exam and the written paper (language) (columns 2 and 4).

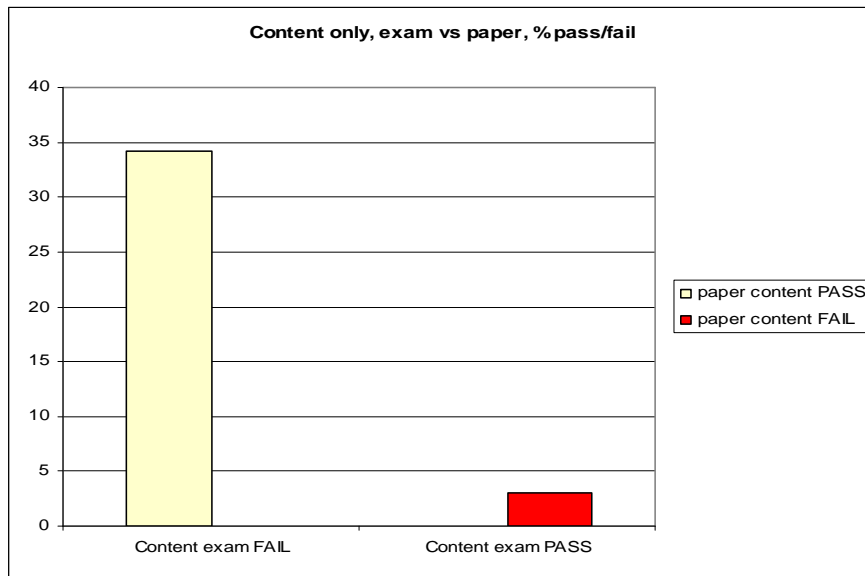


Figure 3: International Business content: exam and written paper content score compared. Percentage of students failing one item (e.g. exam) and passing on another (e.g. written paper content). So students who pass on both or fail on both are excluded.

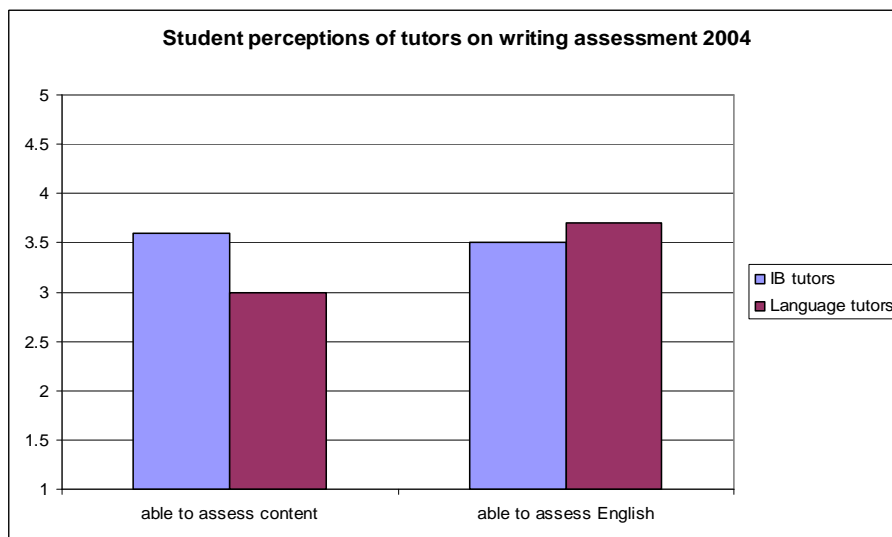


Figure 4: International Business students' perceptions of the ability of IB tutors and Language tutors to assess content and English in writing papers.

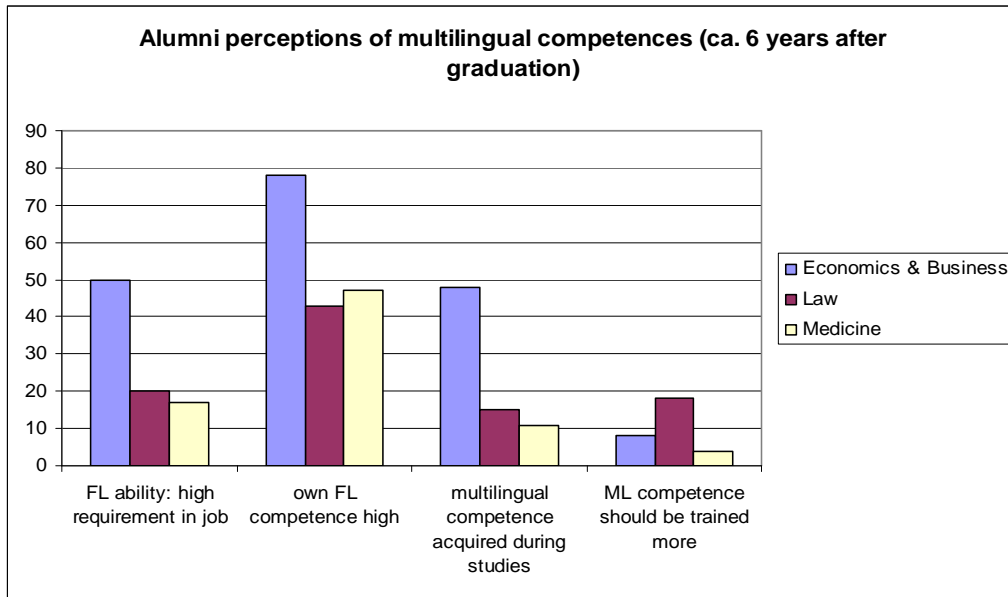


Figure 5: Alumni perceptions of multilingual competences approximately 6 years after graduation. Percentages of respondents reporting that foreign language ability was a high requirement in their present job, that their own FL competence was high, that they acquired their multilingual competence during their studies, and that multilingual competence should be trained more during their studies. (Source: Ramaekers, 2004)