

English as “Lingua Franca” and the Internationalization of Academe

Michele Rostan

Michele Rostan is director of the Center for Study and Research on Higher Education Systems, University of Pavia, Italy. E-mail: michele.rostan@unipv.it. This article is one in *IHE's* series focusing on the Changing Academic Profession Project, an 18-nation survey of faculty attitudes worldwide.

English is considered as the Latin of the 21st century and a language playing a relevant role in the internationalization of academe. Data collected through the Changing Academic Profession (CAP) survey—referring to 25,000 academics working in 18 countries located in 5 continents—allow to investigate whether and to what extent English is the contemporary academic “lingua franca,” and how it contributes to the internationalization of the academic profession in different countries.

ENGLISH AS LINGUA FRANCA

At the global level, 53 percent of the academics involved in the CAP survey primarily employ English for their academic activities: 17 percent of the academics use it as their mother tongue and 36 percent as their second language. English is much more used as lingua franca for research activities than for teaching activities: while 51 percent of the academics employ English for

research, only 30 percent actually use it for teaching. This gap mainly concerns non-native speakers. Among native speakers, almost all academics use English both for teaching and for research purposes. On the contrary, twice as many academics employ English as their second language in research than those who use it as their second language for teaching.

ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

English can play a different role in the internationalization of both higher education and the academic profession, depending on the official language of a country. Countries participating in the CAP survey can be divided into three groups. First, in three countries English is either the official or the main language: Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In these countries, the overwhelming majority of academics teach in English as it is the mother tongue, but a significant minority uses English for teaching as their second language, while few academics teach using a different language than English. Briefly, in these countries practically all academics teach using the contemporary lingua franca, giving institutions and higher education systems a competitive advantage in the global student market.

Second, in four countries with a special bilingual or multilingual context, English is one of the official languages, together with one or more other languages: Canada, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and South Africa. In these countries English is used for teaching by the majority of academics as it is either their mother tongue (Canada) or their second language (Hong Kong, Malaysia, South Africa). Moreover, a significant minority of academics mainly use a different language for teaching, but a smaller minority also exists that teaches in English

as the second language (Canada) or the main language (Hong Kong and South Africa). All in all, in these countries 65 to 75 percent of academics teach in English. As a consequence, these countries also enjoy quite a strong competitive advantage, globally.

The role played by English as the second language in these two first groups of countries is somehow different. In three multilingual countries—Hong Kong, Malaysia, and South Africa—many academics (57% to 71%) use English for teaching as their second language. In most cases, these people are national academics employing a language that is not their mother tongue. So, it can be argued that in these countries as non-native speakers academics may have two goals: introducing an international dimension into teaching and providing a common language for education in a multilingual national context.

In Canada, Australia, and the United States, the majority of academics employing English for teaching as their second language—more or less two out of three—are national citizens, likely belonging to linguistic minorities or having acquired the national citizenship during their career. International academics are a minority, around one out of three. This situation probably depends on the long-lasting capacity of international attractiveness of the three countries' higher education systems. In the United Kingdom most academics employing English for teaching as their second language are international academics, mostly European, witnessing the attractiveness of the UK higher education system.

In countries where English is either the official, or one official, or the main language, almost all academics, or a strong majority, employ English in research either as their mother tongue or their second language. In these countries, employing English in research cannot be considered as an indicator of

participation in international research. The use of English gives academics working in these countries an ipso facto advantage as it is the dominant means of communication in the international scientific community. Yet, when English is academics' mother tongue, employing it in research does not necessarily imply participating in international research networks. Moreover, using English as second language may simply be necessary to take part in national research activities.

NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

The third group of countries includes those where English is not an official language. According to the CAP data, this group can be split into two subgroups. On one side, in three countries a small but considerable part of academics (10% to 20%) are committed to employing English as the mean of instruction, as an effort to attract international students and/or to provide domestic students with useful language skills: Finland, South Korea, and Norway. In these three countries, almost all or most academics teaching in English are national academics whose mother tongue is the official language of the country or one of the official languages. On the other side, in eight countries with strong linguistic identities, English is not, or seldom, used for teaching: Argentina, Brazil, China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, and Portugal. In most of these countries (except China, Italy, and Japan) academics belong to non-English-based international language communities.

In four countries (Italy, Finland, Portugal, and Norway), English is used in research by the majority of academics, and in other three countries (Germany, South Korea, and Brazil), it is used by a significant minority. Finally, in four

countries (Argentina, Mexico, Japan, and China) English is used in research by a small minority.

In countries where English is not an official language, the use of it by national academics whose mother tongue is not English is a necessary tool for participating in international research. As a consequence, employing English as the second language in research can be viewed as an indicator of integration within international research networks. On this basis, two groups of countries can be identified. The first group includes the six countries where the percentage of academics employing English as their second language in research is above average (Italy, Finland, Portugal, Norway, Germany, South Korea). Academics working in these countries can be featured as well integrated in the international research networks. The second group includes the five countries where the percentage of academics employing English as their second language in research is below average (Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Japan, and China). Academics working in these countries are not well integrated within the international research networks.

INTERNATIONALIZATION—CERTAIN CONCLUSIONS

The CAP data support the conclusions that English is the contemporary “lingua franca” within academe and that research is the most internationalized academic activity. Besides, they also provide a map of the internationalization of academe, based on the role of the English language. According to CAP data, it can be argued that academics working in 13 countries, representing 64 percent of the sample (Australia, Canada, Germany, Finland, Hong Kong, Italy, South Korea, Malaysia, Norway, Portugal, United Kingdom, United States, and South Africa)

are more internationalized, albeit for different reasons, while those working in five other countries, representing 36 percent of the sample (Argentina, Brazil, China, Japan, and Mexico), are less internationalized.

While in the countries where English is not an official language, the use of it as second language can be considered as a clear indicator of the internationalization of academe, in English-speaking countries the relationship between the use of English and the internationalization of academe is less straightforward. In these countries, higher education institutions and academics enjoy an advantage as almost all or most of the academics use English, but the use of English as such cannot be considered as an indicator of participation in international research networks. Moreover, the use of English as second language for teaching has different meanings, depending on the nation context. It possibly refers either to academics' contribution to the internationalization of their higher education or to their contribution to its national integration or to the international attractiveness of higher education systems.