

## Studying in a second language: How does the use of English language teaching resources in Norwegian universities affect students?

Norwegians have some of the highest levels of English language proficiency in Europe (Bonnet, 2004), and are expected to read textbooks and articles in English at university. However, students may not be prepared for this, with some studies showing that two-thirds of Norwegian students entering university would not pass the language requirements of an English-speaking university (Hellekjær, 2005). It has also been demonstrated that even for highly proficient second language users, reading in a second language is slower than reading in a first language (Fraser, 2007; Shaw & McMillion, 2008). Norwegian students reading in English may, therefore, be at a disadvantage when compared to students reading in a first language.

The style of the language used in academic texts may present further challenges to students reading in English as a second language. The common Germanic origin of Norwegian and English, and the high number of cognates, undoubtedly give Norwegians an advantage when learning English. However, some of this advantage may disappear when it comes to learning academic English, given that such a high proportion of academic words are of Graeco-Latin rather than Germanic origin. For the most part, Norwegians are exposed to English through the media and popular culture rather than academic studies, which may contribute to the differences seen between the high level of proficiency in conversational English and the struggles that Norwegian students appear to have with academic English.

Reading speed and vocabulary comprehension were tested in 130 Norwegian and 36 native English speaking Australian university students in academic and non-academic texts in English. The Norwegian students took significantly longer than the Australian students to read both types of text and received lower comprehension scores in the academic reading tasks than the native English speakers did. They reported feeling that English language media and popular culture were more important than school lessons as a source of their knowledge of English. They also reported finding the style of writing more important for ease of understanding than whether it was in English or Norwegian.

This raises some interesting questions. If students studying in a second language take longer to read, which aspect of language are they struggling with? And if they are taking longer to read than students studying in a first language, are they reading less of the material, are they needing to spend more time on reading, or are expectations for second language readers lower? Moreover, if even Norwegians with their strong reputation as proficient English users are so different from native English speakers, what are the implications for other countries where levels of English proficiency are not as high?

The results from this study indicate that students may benefit from additional training in reading and understanding academic English. Further studies will be conducted to investigate which aspects of reading take longer in a second language, and whether university students' academic English reading speed improves with practice.

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