Report: The international classroom – pedagogical challenges and opportunities

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Introduction and background

Internationalisation of education has for long been part of the International Business and Economics Program (“Sprek”) at Linköping University. The first student exchange agreements for this program were established in the 1980ies and a study abroad experience has been an integral and mandatory part of the program ever since. Later on, students of the Business and Economics Program (“Rek”) also showed increased interest in such an experience and today, 100% of the students at Sprek and about 65% of the students from Rek do at least one semester abroad.

Establishing exchange agreements also involves welcoming incoming exchange students and thus, business administration courses in English targeting incoming exchange students have been in place since the mid-80ies at the division of Business Administration. As suggested however, these courses were only offered to incoming exchange students. Students enrolled in any of our Business programs followed another curricula – in Swedish. However, the autumn semester 2015, a new curriculum in English, including both Business Administration and Economics courses, were established and offered to both incoming exchange students and students from Sprek and Rek respectively. Hence, since the autumn semester 2015, exchange students and students from the programs who have not opted for an entire year abroad co-read their courses. In total, 25 courses are included in the curricula: 13 during the autumn semester and 12 during the spring (see appendix 1).

The decision to let students from the programs co-read courses with incoming exchange students was discussed at meetings with faculty members and was met with both enthusiasm and scepticism. Issues discussed were related to the fact that students come from various academic cultures and contexts (including more practice-oriented business schools in comparison to more academic and research-based universities), have varying abilities to express themselves, orally and in writing, when using English as the language of instruction, have varying abilities to deal with cultural clashes and so forth – i.e. challenges that has been experienced not only by our faculty members who have taught courses in English but also identified in previous research on international classrooms.

1 A few students from other programs can also choose from these courses. However, the great majority of national students enrolled in the courses concerned are from the International Business Program and Business Program.
Opportunities and challenges with an international classroom

Previous research has shown that an international classroom creates many challenges (e.g. Vinther and Slethaug, 2014) – both at an individual and at a group level. For example, Lux (2014) has shown that many exchange students experience the feeling of being isolated in the classroom. There might be many reasons to experiencing isolation; for examples difficulties to understand the meaning of the terminology used in a new context (Vandermensbrugghe, 2004) or difficulties in understanding the relationship between the student and the teacher (Grant and Manathunga, 2011). Furthermore, exchange students, at many times, do not succeed in forming relationships with national students despite efforts made to design courses in a way to facilitate such relationship building (see Carroll and Ryan, 2005). It stands clear that these kinds of difficulties might have negative consequences for the individual exchange student whose studies might suffer. One can also speculate that they might create dissatisfaction among national students expecting that the international dimension of the classroom contributes to enrich the teaching and their learning.

Previous research however, has also shown several opportunities and benefits of an international classroom where exchange students and national students study together in an integrative fashion. For example, Vinther and Slethaug (2015) count an increased awareness of, and understanding for, diversity, strengthened work ethics, intellectual curiosity and a more interesting social environment among the benefits of an international classroom. However, to be able to realize these benefits, and others, it is important that courses are designed taking international aspects into account. Spiro (2014) points to the importance of designing the courses in such a way that all students are given equal roles and status, thereby facilitating knowledge sharing between them. Spiro’s suggestions is very general however, and that is also the case with the pedagogical advice spelled out by Dovidio et al. (2003). In accordance with Spiro (2014:65) we would therefore also suggest that there is a lack of research on “how internationalization might be translated into classroom practice”, but also that the research conducted so far has not been undertaken in a Swedish classroom context. In order to shed light on these issues, promote discussion and being able to improve our own practices in the international classroom, we therefore decided on a follow-up study focusing the consequences of our decision to let students from our Business and Economics programs co-read their courses with exchange students.
**Purpose**

Against the background described above, the purpose of this project has been to investigate the opportunities and challenges of the international classroom, such as they are experienced by teachers and students of different backgrounds. In particular, the following questions have been in focus:

1. Which pedagogical opportunities and challenges of the international classroom do teachers and students of different backgrounds experience?
2. How do these pedagogical opportunities and challenges materialise in the classroom?
3. How can teachers and students respectively deal with those opportunities and challenges in such a way that international dimensions contribute to enrich the teaching?

**Methods**

This study was conducted by means of a survey distributed to the students enrolled in the above-mentioned courses and by means of interviews with the course directors. The survey incorporated three parts; social aspects of the international classroom, academic aspects of the international classroom and a part where the students could list opportunities and challenges of the international classroom of their own choice (see appendix 2). The questions of the survey were elaborated taking the results from previous research on international classrooms into account and students answered by indicating the degree to which they agreed with a particular proposition using a four-level Likert scale (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: agree, 4: strongly agree or by indicating “no opinion”). The survey was distributed at a lecture at three different occasions: mid-term 2015, end of the fall semester 2015 and mid-term 2016. Initially, we were interested in finding out whether the way in which students experienced the international classroom changed with the increased familiarity of such an environment. This was the reason to distribute the survey both mid-term and end of the semester 2015. However, many students left for the Christmas break and did not come back in January – something which posed a challenge to this approach. Therefore we do not include the results from the second survey in this report. Thus, the results presented in this report are collected from the surveys distributed mid-term 2015 and mid-term 2016. The reason to
focus the courses during the autumn semester is the higher number of incoming exchange students during this semester.

In addition to the survey distributed to the students, interviews were conducted with the course directors of the above-mentioned courses at the end of each course in 2015 and 2016 respectively. The interviews focused three parts: the structure of the course (teaching methods, examination etc.), opportunities of the international classroom and challenges of the international classroom (see appendix 3). The interviews conducted in 2016 primarily focused on any changes made to the courses, how the changes related to the fact that the classroom was constituted by a mix of exchange students and national students and the consequences (as experienced by the course director) of the changes. Not all of the course directors agreed to being interviewed and therefore, we lack information on the experience of the international classroom of these course directors. However, from curricula, webpages etc. we have collected information related to the teaching methods and examination of these courses as well in order to get a full view of the diversity in teaching methods and examination that exist – not the least since the survey indicated large differences between exchange students and national students particularly with respect to the way examinations were conducted. The comparably large differences in how national and exchange students experienced examination also led us to collect information about the grades for the two groups of students to be able to compare the performance of the respective groups.

Results and discussion

During fall 2015, a total of 137 students were enrolled in the above-mentioned courses. 40% of the students were national students, whereof the great majority were enrolled in one of our Business Programs and 60% were exchange students who had opted for one or two semesters at Linköping University. 109 students answered our survey, corresponding to a response rate of 80%. Of those responding, 47% were national students and 57% were exchange students. During fall 2016, a total of 149 students were enrolled in the courses whereof 91 students answered the survey, corresponding to a response rate of 61%. 40% of the respondents were national students and 60% were exchange students. This reflected the constitution of the target group. Below, we will present the results from the surveys, focusing those social and academic aspects of the international classroom
where the results differed the most between national students and exchange students\(^2\). It should also be pointed out that the aspects where the compared mean value between national and exchange students differed the most were \textit{exactly} the same between the years. We also ask the reader to keep in mind that the mean value using a 1-4 grade scale is 2.5.

**Survey results: Social aspects of the international classroom**

Three of the four variables where the mean value between exchange students and national students differ the most are related to motivational issues (see table 1). Although the mean values of both exchange students and national students are high, it is statistically significant that the exchange students enjoyed the opportunity to study in an international classroom more than the national students enrolled in the courses. Differences in the mean values between the groups however are higher when it comes to whether the international classroom increases the motivation to learn or the ability to learn. On these variables, mean values are also lower for both groups. There might of course be different explanations to these differences. While we have not asked the students about the reasons for their specific answer, nor compared their level of enjoyment or motivation in the international classroom with that of another type of classroom context, we can only speculate as to why those variables come out as those where the mean values between the groups are the highest. Exchanges students have made a deliberate choice to seek an international academic experience which might explain why they enjoy the international classroom to such a large extent. This in turn, might spill over on their motivation and/or ability to learn. In a similar way, national students, while still enjoying the international classroom have not made a deliberate choice but rather have had to accept that the classroom is an international one. This might in turn explain why the international classroom does not increase their motivation to the same extent (it might even be that it decreases their motivation and ability to learn although we do not know and have no figures to compare with).

\(^2\) If you are interested in the complete results, please contact Cecilia Enberg (cecilia.enberg@liu.se).
Table 1: *Social aspects of the international classroom. The four variables where differences in average between international and Swedish students are the largest.*

Another variable where differences between the mean value of exchange students and national students were high refers to the ability to express their arguments verbally in English. Here, the group of national students shows a mean value which is significantly higher than the mean value of the exchange students. We could also see from the open answers listed with respect to challenges of the international classroom that the most common aspect mentioned was language barriers. While the figures only reveals the experience of the respondents, we do not know whether it is actually the case that national students are better at expressing themselves in English – that they *do* speak better English. What we can suggest, based on the interviews with course directors however, is that the most mentioned challenge with the international classroom is related to the students’
English proficiency and that there is a tendency among the course directors interviewed to suggest that it is the English proficiency of the exchange students rather than the national students that constitutes a challenge. Also, the course directors suggest, this challenge is bigger when it comes to expressing oneself in individual written assignments than verbally in the classroom. This, it was suggested, related to the fact that in the classroom, the students help each other to find the right words. Together, this constituted something of a worry to several course directors who considered it to be somehow “unfair” to evaluate the performance of exchange students along the same criteria as for the national students since first, they were not as good in English and second, they did not have the same pre-knowledge with respect to the specific subject area. We will come back to this later on when focusing more on the assessments of students, i.e. examination. With respect to a related issue which has also brought some interest in recent years, it could be pointed out that no course director considered his/her own English proficiency to be insufficient for using English as a language of instruction.

Survey results: Academic aspects of the international classroom

In general, the mean values with respect to academic aspects of the international classroom are high for both groups, suggesting that both exchange students and national students are familiar with the different teaching and examination methods. However, mean values are lower for exchange students on 13 out of 14 variables and the difference in mean values between exchange students and national students is larger for academic aspects than for social aspects of the international classroom. In table 2 below, the academic aspects of the international classroom where mean values differed the most between the groups of students are presented. Those aspects include familiarity with discussion seminars, familiarity with group work and seminars being part of the examination, familiarity with case-based teaching and familiarity with case work being part of the examination. Those items which measure the degree to which the students know what are expected from them when conducting different types of examination have relatively low mean values. However, the difference between exchange students and national students is low, suggesting that not knowing or understanding what is expected during an examination constitutes a problem in both groups.
Table 2: Academic aspects of the international classroom. The five variables where differences in average between international and Swedish students are the largest.

Judging from the results of the survey, the challenges (from the exchange students' perspective), to a large extent are related aspects of examination. Taking a closer look at course structures and syllabi, we can conclude that a smorgasbord of different examinations are being used; individual written
examinations, participation in seminars, debates, diaries, take-home exams, business plans, organization of case seminars, group reports, individual essays, oral presentations and so on. Thus, it is easy to understand why those aspects which are related to examinations stand out among the academic aspects. Several course directors also suggested that exchange students failed the course to a larger extent than Swedish students. However, a look at the percentages of students from both groups who did fail, i.e. who had an F reported after the first exam, shows that the course directors are not fully right. Generally, it can be suggested that while the exchange students failed to a larger extent than the national students on one of the first courses of the semester (Business Ethics in a Globalized World), their results quickly improved and for courses given during the second part of the semester, exchange students actually performed better than the national students for both years compared (i.e. 2015 and 2016).

Interview results: opportunities and challenges according to course directors

All course directors identified the possibilities of embracing more perspectives in an international classroom than in a classroom constituted by only national students. This is related both to the multi-nationality of the group and that the students do not share the same educational and academic background. Several course directors made efforts to include additional perspectives and experiences which are typically not included in a class of only national students or students from the business programs only. When asked how they worked to include those additional perspective, course directors for example suggested that they asked the students to present examples and cases collected from their national context to present and discuss in class. Several course directors also suggested that they created pre-determined, multinational, teams to work on specific assignments, hoping that more perspectives would be expressed in such a setting. Thus, they deliberately tried to design the structure of the course to capture more perspectives and thus making use of the fact that the classroom was international.

However, there were also single course directors who suggested that although they could identify the opportunities presented by having more perspectives, they did not try to deliberately design the course for those perspectives to be embraced. One reason mentioned was that they did not know whether they would have the competence needed to deal with those perspectives and/or that they had bad experiences of trying to manage
cultural clashes which, they suggested, were emphasised by such measures as e.g. them creating the multinational teams instead of letting the students design their own teams. One of them also suggested that they were not interested in “additional unpaid work” when having to manage the consequences of such attempts. While the opportunity of embracing more perspectives was mentioned by all course directors, it was also the only opportunity mentioned. Challenges, it appeared, were easier to identify and resulted in a long list (please note that not all of these challenges were mentioned by all course directors); English proficiency, a lack of subject-related pre-knowledge, a lack of knowledge about referencing and academic writing, low analytical abilities, a lack of reflection and critical thinking, difficulties of getting the students to understand each other’s perspectives, low integration between exchange students and national students and difficulties with the administrative support related to exchange students/courses. When talking about those challenges, the course directors often explicitly compared to courses consisting of students from the Business programs only, which is to say that they consider a lack of e.g. subject-related pre-knowledge to be a problem primarily among exchange students.

**Attempts at improving the possibilities of the international classroom**

In an attempt at better capturing the opportunities of the international classroom, the division of Business Administration organized a Welcome reception for all exchange students taking one or several of the concerned courses during the autumn 2016 or spring 2017³. Changes were also made in some of the courses to improve results and better benefit from exchange students’ experiences and different perspectives.

At the Welcome reception, we focused two aspects of importance; our academic culture and issues related to academic writing and referencing. After a short introductory presentation of the division of Business Administration, the students were grouped in multinational groups to discuss one of the following themes related to the academic culture; teaching methods and course structure, teamwork and group assignments, the students-teacher relation, university campus and everyday life. By focusing these aspects, a number of differences between our academic culture and their own were put on the table to be discussed and explained. Although cultural clashes might not be possible to avoid by such an exercise, they might be easier to handle because the students better understand our

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³ One welcome reception was organized in August 2016 and one in January 2017.
expectations on them and they might also be better able to understand why cultural clashes materialize as they do. After this discussion, an interactive lecture on academic writing and “borrowed words” were given by the University Library. This lecture aimed at clarifying our expectations on the students when it comes to writing reports and examinations.

Changes were also made in some of the courses. In one course an FAQ lecture focusing the examination of the course was organized. At the lecture the students had the possibility to ask questions about the examination and they were introduced to the type of questions constituting the examination, examples of better and worse answers and an illustration of the most common mistakes failing students tend to do (e.g. they do not answer the specific question). At another course the students got a test assignment prior to the examination. This assignment was assessed and the student was given specific feedback on how to improve his/her answer. It is interesting to note that the course directors of the courses where these measures were taken suggested that the results had been improved as compared to last year. However, a close look at the proportion of students who passed the first exam reveals that it was not the actual case. Nevertheless, the experience of the course directors were positive and it might have saved them work after the first examination was assessed and distributed since students could better understand why they did not pass. It could also be that students were generally more positive since they had had the possibility of getting answers to their questions and/or thought that the expectations had been clarified. However, these are mere speculations – we have not asked the students about their experiences of these initiatives.

Several course directors had also made changes in course assignments and seminars with the aim of better capturing different cultural contexts and empirical examples. Again, course directors were positive, suggesting that exchange students and national students had got more equal possibilities to pass the course – except from them becoming better integrated since they had to interact and discuss more to grasp each other’s examples and perspectives. Again however, the results were not improved for any of the student groups.

What did we learn from this?

Our third question, and the one still to answer, is; How can teachers and students respectively deal with those opportunities and challenges [of the international classroom] in such a way that international dimensions contribute to enrich the teaching? With respect to this question however, our results are inconclusive and we have no straightforward answer to give.
Therefore, let us first conclude that there are challenges, emanating not the least from the differences in how the two groups of students experienced the international classroom. Exchange students enjoyed the international classroom more and they were more motivated than national students. Furthermore, exchange students were more concerned with respect to the various forms of examination that existed than national students. Course directors also expressed a concern with respect to the ‘academic’ integration of exchange students in the classroom. Still – and this is important – these differences and concerns were not mirrored in the examination results, where exchange students on the average did as good as and sometimes better than national students.

Second, let us suggest that there is something of a myth with respect to the challenges of the international classroom. As our interviews with course directors showed, many of them suggested that exchange students performed worse than Swedish students even when that was not the case (when measured by the proportion of students who failed the first exam in each of the groups). In some cases, measures were also taken to remedy this experience by reformulating assignments in a way which was suggested to better capture exchange students’ national contexts and benefit from their experiences. However, these efforts had no obvious or visible impact to the better. Although we do not suggest any causality here, we can just notice that the mean values of exchange students’ answers on variables related to academic aspects were lower in 2016 than in 2015 and that exchange students’ results at the examination of some of these courses lowered quite significantly after these measures were taken. Thus, we can conclude that measures taken with a positive intention to better capture the international aspects and thereby try to enrich the teaching do not necessarily bring effect. This might have different reasons; perhaps students in 2015 were better students than those enrolled in 2016 and therefore the specific measures did not matter? Or the measures taken were inadequate and other tools would be needed? Perhaps it is built on the false premises that exchange students are worse performers and need some help and pushing by specific measures that capture their national context? But perhaps this point of departure only bring more, or new, or different challenges? Perhaps we had been better off if instead we had focused on measure to increase the motivation of the national students? We can also note that the discussion tends to take its point of departure in the expected needs of exchange students rather than in the expected or real needs of all students in the classroom.

Perhaps the challenges of the international classroom are exaggerated? We do not know. Challenges probably differ in terms of which they are and
how they materialise between different international classrooms. What we do know is that it is possible to establish an international classroom and that several positive aspects were also identified – although not necessarily possible to measure in a very exact manner. The open answers given by students when asked to list three opportunities with the international classroom however reveals the following to be positive aspects; 1) an opportunity to improve one’s English 2) an opportunity to interact with people from other cultures/learn about other cultures 3) an opportunity to meet new people/establish an international network and 4) a nice work environment characterised by interesting discussions.

Final remarks

The results from this study has also been presented at the following conferences/seminars: FEKIS (the association “Företagsekonomi i Sveriges” annual conference) in Uppsala 20-21 October 2016; Filosofiska Fakultetens Internationaliseringsdag (International Day of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at LiU) 18 January 2017; LiU’s Pedagogikdag (Pedagogical days at LiU), 14-15 March 2017. Furthermore, the results have been presented and discussed at internal seminars at the division of Business Administration and the division of Economics at LiU. Likewise, the survey caught much interest at FEKIS and has therefore been distributed on request to Borås University, Gothenburg University and Jönköping University – something which we hope will contribute to possibilities of comparing results and to further discuss and share experiences on the international classroom between our universities. A skype meeting to discuss the results of this follow-up study has also been held with the director of internationalization at Universidad de Granada. Thus, there appears to be a large interest in issues related to the international classroom.

References

Dovidio, J., Gaertner, S. och Kawakami, K., (2003). Intergroup contact: The past, the present and


### Appendix 1

#### Courses autumn semester

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Appendix 2

Survey – The International Classroom

This survey is to investigate your experience of being part of an international classroom and constitutes part of an evaluation that ELIN (fraternity for Business & Economics students) and the divisions of Business Administration and Economics is doing to further improve our education. When answering the survey, please consider the questions in light of the experience from the last course that you attended. **Your answers are anonymous.**

Which was the last course you finished?

Please answer the questions in light of the last course you finished.

**Thank you for your time!**

**Your background**

**Please type your answer to the following questions:**

**Nationality:**

**Mother tongue/first language:**

**Age:**

**Sex (female/male):**

**Do you have previous experience of studying abroad? (yes/no):**

**Social aspects of the international classroom**

**I ask questions in class when I don’t understand**

1 2 3 4 no opinion

**I ask friends after class if there was something I did not understand**

1 2 3 4 no opinion
I contribute actively to group work/small group discussions (e.g. in preparing seminars or cases)

1 2 3 4 no opinion

I contribute actively to seminar discussions (e.g. asking and answering questions, presenting case solutions)

1 2 3 4 no opinion

I can easily express what I know/my arguments verbally (e.g. at seminars)

1 2 3 4 no opinion

I can easily express what I know/my arguments in writing (e.g. at written examinations)

1 2 3 4 no opinion

I have the requisite knowledge to easily follow the course that I have chosen

1 2 3 4 no opinion

The course that I have chosen is too easy

1 2 3 4 no opinion

I enjoy the opportunity to study in an international environment

1 2 3 4 no opinion

The international environment increases my motivation to learn/study

1 2 3 4 no opinion

The international environment increases my ability to learn

1 2 3 4 no opinion

Academic aspects of the international classroom

I understand the terminology used in the classroom

1 2 3 4 no opinion

I am familiar with lectures from my home university

1 2 3 4 no opinion
I am familiar with discussion seminars from my home university

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I am familiar with case-based teaching from my home university

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I am familiar with web-based learning platforms (e.g. Lisam) from my home university

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I am familiar with individual written examinations from my home university

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I am familiar with written take-home exams from my home university

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I am used to lectures and/or seminars being mandatory at my home university

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I am used to seminars being graded/part of the examination at my home university

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I am used to groupwork being graded as part of the examination at my home university

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I know what is expected of me when doing individual written examinations

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I know what is expected of me when doing take-home exams

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I know what is expected of me during discussion seminars

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

I know what is expected of me when working with case-based teaching

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | no opinion |

Opportunities and challenges
I appreciate the following three opportunities with the international classroom:

1. 
2. 
3. 

I acknowledge the following three challenges with the international classroom:

1. 
2. 
3. 
Appendix 3

Interview guide course directors

Course structure
- Describe the course structure
  o (Teaching methods/activities, examination, individual work/teamwork, mandatory activities/non-mandatory activities etc.).

Opportunities with the international classroom
- Which opportunities, related to the fact that the classroom was an international one, did you experience?
  o (example)
- Which was the most positive aspect of the international classroom that you experienced during the course?
  o How did you make use of that opportunity? (describe)
- Do you see any possibilities to further develop the opportunities presented by the international classroom next time you give the course?
  o How could this be done? (example)

Challenges
- Which challenges, related to the fact that the classroom was an international one, did you experience?
  o (example)
- Which challenge, related to the fact that the classroom was an international one, was the most difficult to manage
  o How did you manage this challenge? (describe)
- Do you see any possibilities to avoid the problem/challenge described next time you give the course?
  o How could this be done?

The students’ perspective
- How do you think that the students experienced the international classroom?
  o (any particular example supporting the suggestion)