

REPORT: SURVEY OF STUDENTS ON THE LANGUAGE SITUATION AT ISS

I. INTRODUCTION

During the fall 2020 semester, ISS tasked a working committee to look into the issue of the local language policy at the Department. The working group comprised the following members: Grete Brochmann, Michael Gentile, Aaron Ponce, Brita Langeid and Nora Celine Warholm Essahli. The composition of the working group was intended to reflect different categories of people at the Department. The committee realized during its work that it had little systematic knowledge about students' views and experiences related to the language situation at ISS. As part of the committee's report to the leadership, it recommended conducting a survey among ISS students to gather such information. In fall 2021, the ISS leadership tasked another working group with carrying out a survey of students.

The current survey report is a product of the Working Group for Language at ISS. This second working group consists of Aaron Ponce and Eira Witsø and, at an earlier stage, Juni Lie. The goal of the survey is to gauge students' backgrounds, views, and experiences related to the language situation at ISS. The survey was necessarily limited in scope because the working group decided it should be easy to take and short enough to ensure a high response rate. It was offered in both Norwegian and English. The same questions were asked of all respondents, except for one question that asked about dropping courses because they were in English, which was not asked in the English survey. The vast majority of respondents took the Norwegian version of the survey (90.2 percent). Only 20 respondents took the English survey. In total, 204 respondents completed the survey, representing a wide spread of study programs at both the bachelor's and master's levels. In addition to the survey, one focus group was conducted. Focus group recruitment during this period was not as successful as survey recruitment. As such, we include only brief details and analysis of the focus group interviews. It should be noted that some figures given below do not include those who did not know or did not wish to answer a question; thus percentages may not sum to exactly 100. Most answer choices were based on Likert-type scales and were adjusted with the intent to harmonize the meaning across both languages. For example, a scale in Norwegian 'ikke i det hele tatt – i liten grad – til en viss grad – i stor grad – i svært stor grad' corresponds to English 'not at all – slightly – moderately – a lot – a whole lot', even though small semantic differences may still exist. Likert scales were slightly adjusted across questions to provide optimal answer options.

Below are the main descriptive findings for the survey with analysis and commentary. We end the report with a summary and conclusion and some general recommendations.

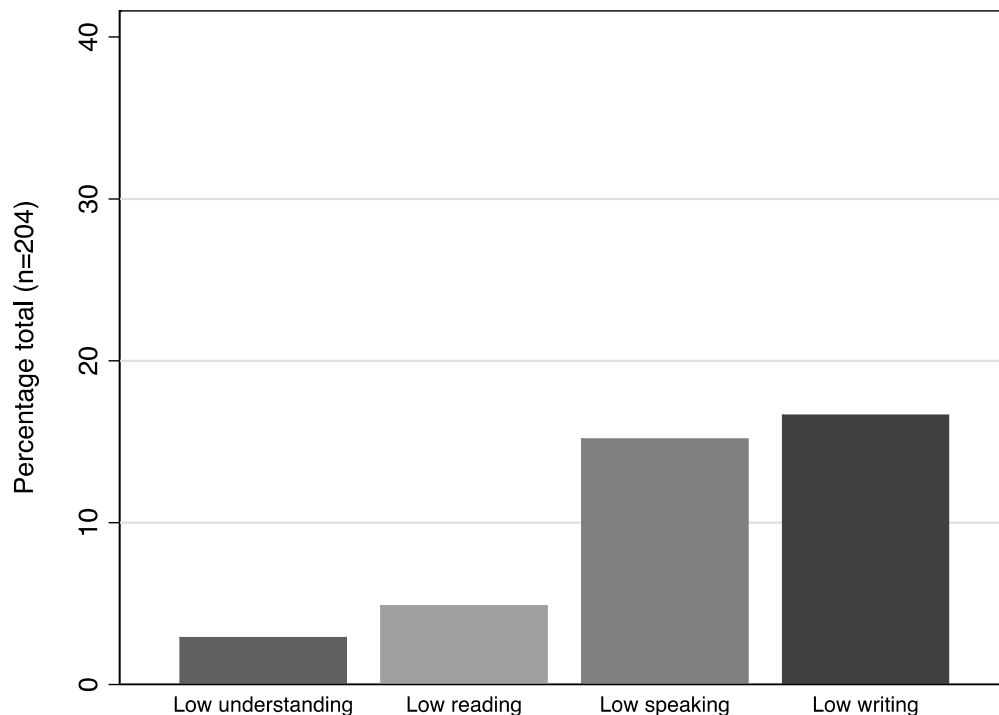
II. STUDENTS' LANGUAGE BACKGROUNDS AND ABILITIES

Student's linguistic backgrounds are somewhat varied, with a strong majority having Norwegian or another Scandinavian language as at least one of their native languages. A full 84.8 percent of respondents say that their native language is Norwegian, another Scandinavian language, or Scandinavian plus another language. 12.25 percent say their native language is neither Scandinavian nor English.

Educational background is also less varied. The vast majority of those who responded to the survey (90.2 percent) said that Norwegian or another Scandinavian language was the primary language of instruction in their high schools. Of those students who attended high school in a Scandinavian language, 43.48 percent said they took English as part of their high school curriculum (*programfag eller engelsk fordypning*). Having this exposure to English in high school appears to be related to some English language outcomes. Simple t-tests of group differences suggest that those who have had English in high

school are less likely to report low writing and speaking abilities in English (see Appendix for full t-test results). English exposure in high school does not seem to influence the likelihood of reporting low reading or understanding skills, however. Below, we provide more details on the percentage of students' self-attested English skills. Only 13.04 percent of respondents report experience in an exchange program in high school, the vast majority of which were in English-speaking locales.

Overall, students at ISS show relatively high levels of comfort with English. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents who report low comfort levels with four types of English language skill. Understanding English is the skill with which the fewest number of students feel uncomfortable. Only 2.94 percent of students surveyed say they are “not at all comfortable” or only “slightly comfortable” with understanding English. As a passive skill, it appears that the vast majority of students are comfortable understanding English, with 61.27 percent even saying they are “extremely comfortable.”



Note: Question asked of all respondents; respondents who answered, “Not at all comfortable” or “Slightly comfortable” to the questions: “How comfortable would you say are with reading/writing/understanding/speaking English?”

Figure 1. Percentage of ISS Students with Low Self-Attested Skills in English

Returning to Figure 1, few students report being uncomfortable reading English. Only 4.9 percent of students surveyed say they are at most slightly comfortable reading in English. This low number suggests overall high comfort levels with reading English texts, which presumably also includes course readings in English. As a check on this, we asked students in a separate question what aspects of English instruction they found difficult. We included an option for “readings from the syllabus” and students were able to check as many options as they felt applied. While roughly only 5 percent of students report feeling uncomfortable reading English, a bit over a quarter of respondents (26.96 percent) report difficulties in reading course readings in English. While this is not a negligible amount, it is also not clear whether difficulties stem from the readings’ content or language. It is likely, however, that these are not entirely separable and that language compounds content difficulty. As a point of comparison, a similar percentage

of total students also report finding difficulty with “understanding concepts.” Below, we describe in more detail patterns related to understanding English in the classroom.

Figure 1 shows that students are somewhat less comfortable with active English skills. For speaking English, 15.2 percent of students say they are either “not at all comfortable” or “slightly comfortable.” Writing English is the skill with which students are least comfortable, with 16.67 expressing that they are at most only slightly comfortable. While a larger proportion of students report feeling less comfortable with active language skills in English, the percentages are still quite low, not reaching 2 of every 10 students. This suggests that a lack of general skills in English among students is not a major cause for concern. Whether this carries into English in an educational setting is addressed in the following section.

III. STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES WITH ENGLISH IN THE CLASSROOM

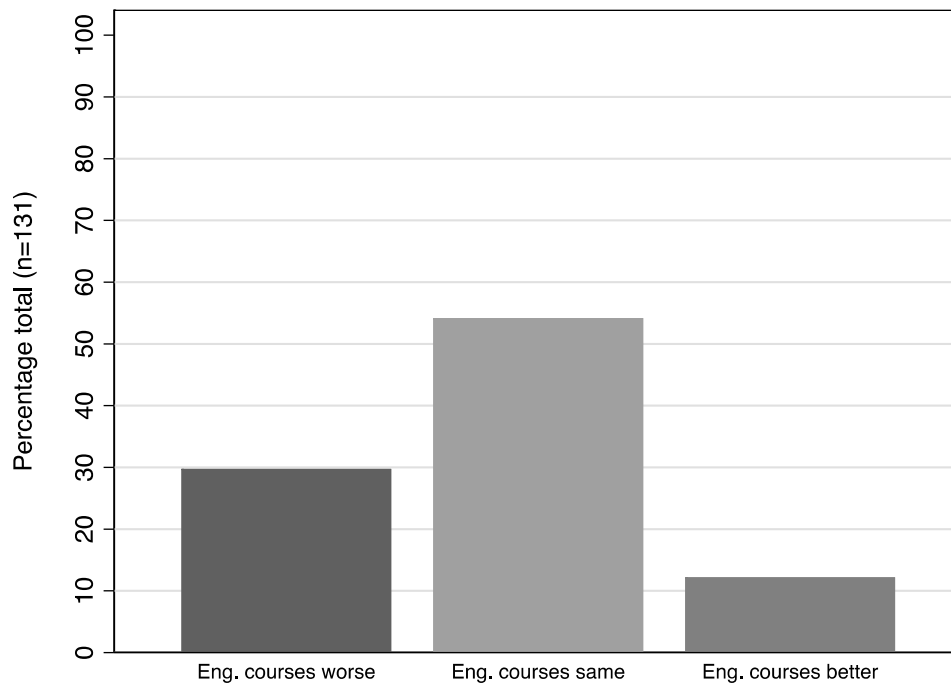
The survey also attempts to map ISS students’ experiences with language in the classroom. This includes whether they have taken courses offered in English, their thoughts on the courses’ quality, and the challenges they faced in taking such courses.

Most respondents have already taken courses in English during their time at ISS: 64.22 percent of respondents state that they have taken English courses. Of these respondents, a little over half (55.73 percent) say they have taken one to three courses during their time at ISS. The remaining 43.51 percent have taken four or more courses in English. Of all respondents, 35.78 percent state they have not yet taken any courses offered in English. While we did not collect information on what year students were in due to anonymity concerns, we did gather information on study program. Of the respondents who have not taken courses in English, 64.38 were studying at the bachelor’s level while 34.25 percent were master’s students.

Respondents who have taken courses offered in English were asked a series of questions about the quality of such courses. The survey first asked students to compare courses offered in English with those offered in Norwegian. Figure 2 shows that a majority of students think courses in English are of approximately the same quality as courses in Norwegian (54.20 percent). In comparison, a small proportion of respondents, 12.21 percent, thinks that courses offered in English are better than those offered in Norwegian. A non-negligible 29.77 percent, however, would rate courses offered in English as worse in quality. In an attempt to dig a bit deeper into English courses’ quality, the survey asked whether students think a lack of English skills on the part of instructors hinders learning the subject material. A majority of students (57.25 percent) say they have never or almost never experienced this. About a third of students, 32.06 percent, say that they sometimes experience that instructors’ lack of English skills hinders their learning. Only 10.69 percent of students say this happens often or very often. While the majority of students feels that lack of English language skills among instructors is not an issue, around 4 in 10 students say that this could impede learning.

It appears that a sizeable proportion of students report difficulty with English in the classroom setting. When asked whether students have ever decided *not* to take a course because it was offered in English, nearly three in every ten students answer yes (28.26 percent). Nearly an equal proportion of bachelor’s and master’s students report having avoided courses offered in English. When further asked how often they struggle with English subject matter in courses at ISS, 30.39 percent of students respond “sometimes” while an additional 22.06 percent answer “often” or “very often.” The proportion of students who report at least sometimes struggling to understand English material in courses reaches over 50 percent. This number puts into perspective the general English language skill patterns presented in Section II above. It appears that the English subject material in courses is more difficult to understand than more general or everyday English. This point may underscore the importance of presenting complex

subject-specific concepts in simpler (English) language in the classroom and, particularly, of taking the time to explain complex English readings in simpler language (see more below).



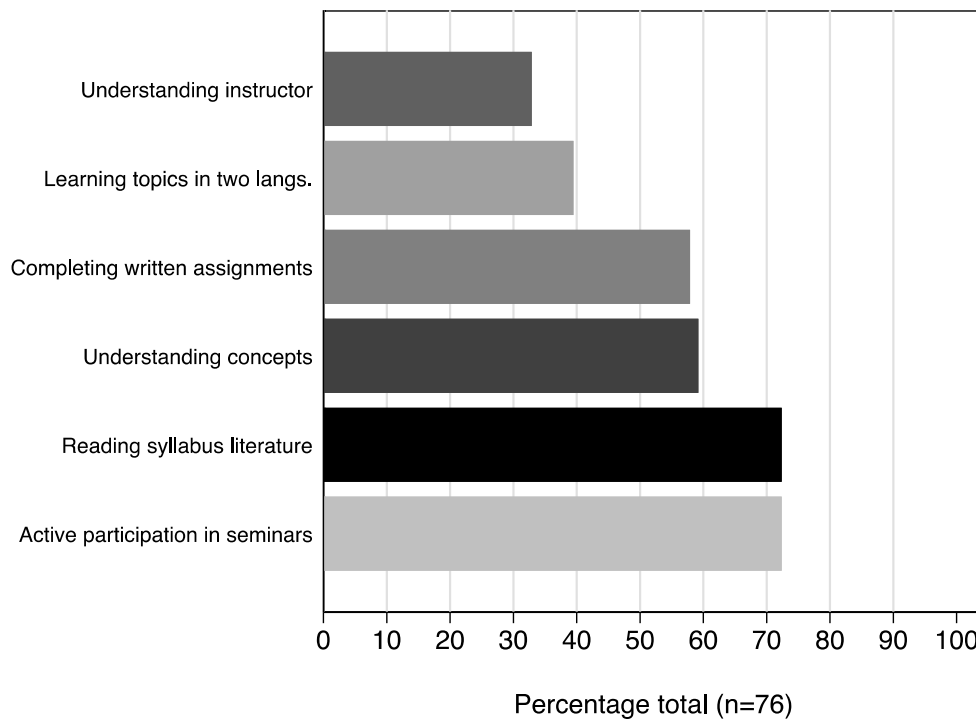
Note: Question asked of those that reported having taken English courses: “Do you think that the quality of courses in English are better, worse, or about the same quality as courses in Norwegian?” “A lot worse” and “A little worse” categories collapsed; “A little better” and “Much better” categories collapsed.

Figure 2. ISS Students’ Assessment of Courses in English Compared to Those in Norwegian

Fewer students report difficulties *participating* in courses offered in English. The survey asked students whether they thought it was challenging to participate when instruction is in English at ISS. Nearly four in ten students report that it is challenging to participate in courses offered in English (37.25 percent). As a follow-up question, we asked those who answered “yes” to select which aspects of instruction in English they find challenging from a limited list with an open-ended “other” option. Respondents were able to select multiple challenges. Figure 3 shows challenges to course participation when instruction is in English at ISS. Fewer than half of those who were asked selected “understanding the instructor” (32.89 percent) or “learning about a topic in both Norwegian and English” (39.47 percent) as significant challenges to learning in an English context. These relatively low proportions of an already delimited sub-population indicate a relatively high level of comfort with bilingual contexts and ease in understanding the language that instructors use. In contrast, higher proportions of students answering the question checked “completing written assignments” (57.89 percent) and “understanding concepts” (59.21 percent) as principal challenges. These tasks are seen as more difficult, perhaps because they require more active thinking in a second language and are task-oriented.

Figure 3 shows that the two challenges that the highest proportion of respondents selected are “reading syllabus literature” and “active participation in seminars” (both at 72.37 percent). It appears that reading complex material in English poses a higher level of difficulty than general reading in English, when compared with the patterns in Section II above. 45 students who selected “reading syllabus literature” as a main challenge did not report significant difficulty with reading English generally. Active participation in

seminars is also reported as a main challenge, presumably with the assumption that participation sometimes requires speaking in English. Around half of those who selected “active participation in seminars” also indicated low comfort levels with speaking English. These patterns suggest that greater effort should be made in articulating and explaining the main themes from syllabus readings in simple language and making seminars more comfortable for students to participate in. Part of making seminars more comfortable may include facilitating a parallel language situation, where possible, that allows students to discuss in Norwegian while the instructor explains in English. This, of course, may not be possible in courses offered in English to students who are not proficient in Norwegian.



Note: Question asked of those who find it difficult to participate when instruction is in English.

Figure 3. Challenges to Course Participation When Instruction Is in English at ISS

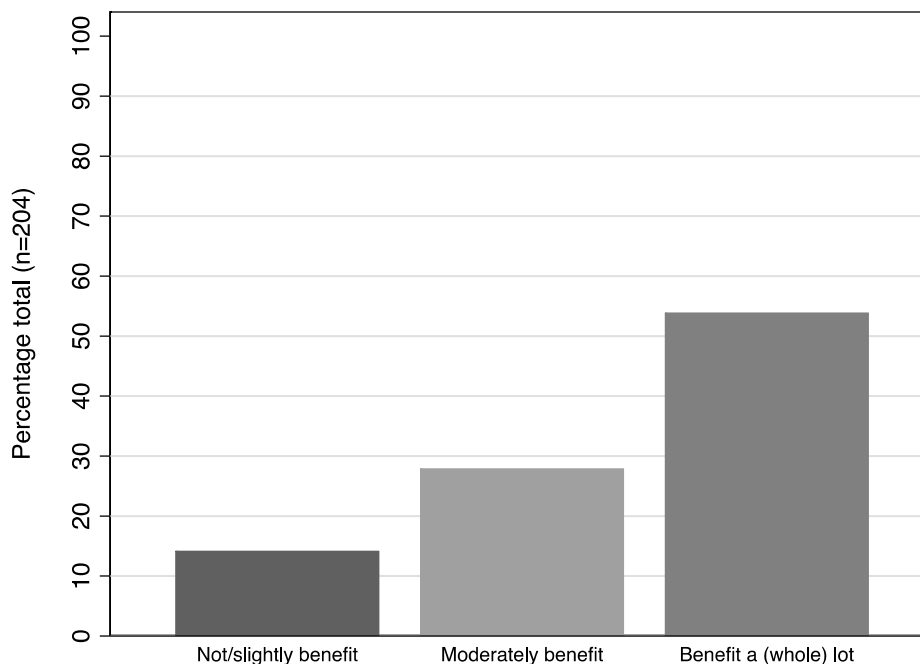
IV. STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE LANGUAGE SITUATION AT ISS

The final section of the survey collected information on students’ perceptions of and wishes for the language situation at ISS.

When asked about their preferences for the ideal number of courses offered in English at ISS, around a third of respondents said that there should be fewer or a lot fewer courses (33.34 percent). The vast majority of respondents reporting low comfort levels in each aspect of English were among those who believed there should be (a lot) fewer courses offered in English. Almost an equal proportion of respondents answered that the number of courses in English should stay about the same (30.88 percent). Fewer respondents, around a quarter, thought there should be more/a lot more course offerings in English (24.02 percent). It should be noted that a considerable number of students selected “don’t know” for this question (11.76 percent), suggesting either a reluctance among many students to answer or a lack of strong opinions. Overall, the split among the three different categories, without any one category

dominating, also suggests a lack of consensus. Still, at least a third of students thought there should be fewer course offerings in English.

Respondents were asked to reflect on the importance of English for their future careers. Here, students were overall more positive about instruction in English. When asked to what extent education in English will benefit their future careers, a strong majority of students recognize at least some benefit. Figure 4 shows that over half of all students said it will benefit them a lot or a whole lot (53.92 percent). An additional 27.94 percent said it would benefit them moderately. A relatively small minority of students believe that instruction in English will not at all or only slightly benefit them in their future careers (14.22 percent, of which 3.92 percent said not at all). As a follow-up question, the survey asked to what extent students expected the University of Oslo (UiO) to prepare its students to use English in future career contexts. Responses indicate that many students believe UiO clearly has a responsibility for preparing its students to master a high level of English for the future. Over a third of students (37.74 percent) say that they expect UiO to prepare its students either a lot or a whole lot. Nearly an equal proportion of students (37.25 percent) say they moderately expect UiO to prepare students to master a high level of English. In contrast, fewer students say they do not at all or only slightly expect UiO to take such a role (18.13 percent, of which 5.88 percent say not at all). Thus, it appears that ISS students on average recognize benefits in receiving instruction in English for their future careers, and they look to UiO to help them master English to a high level.



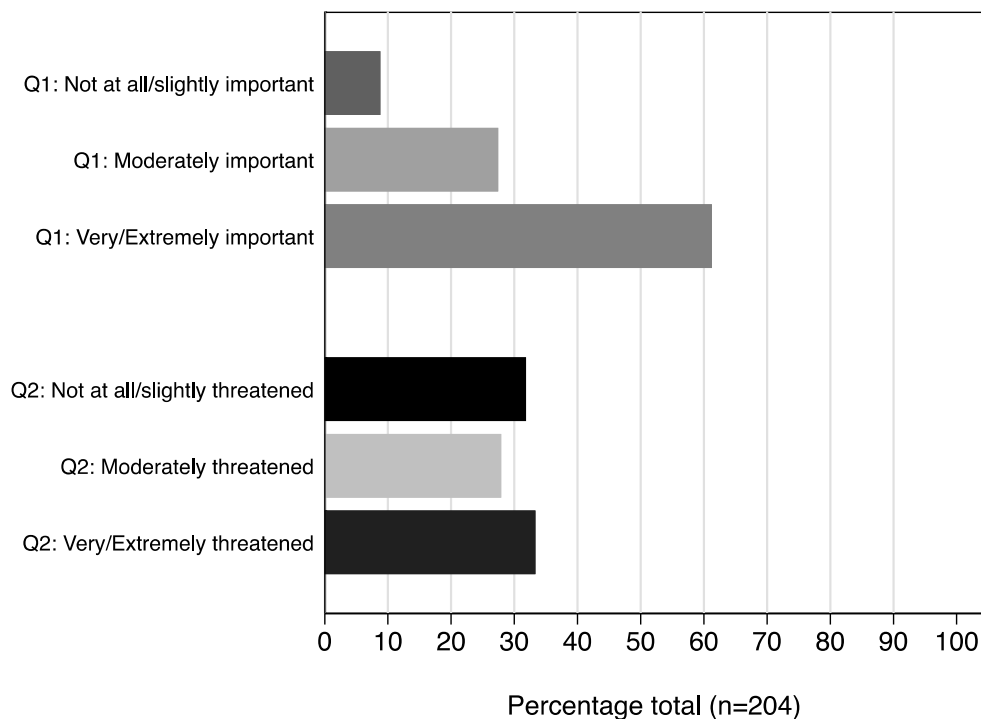
Note: Question asked of all respondents: “To what degree do you think education in English will benefit you in your future career?”; “A whole lot” and “A lot” categories collapsed; “Not at all” and “Slightly” categories collapsed.

Figure 4. ISS Students’ Views on the Benefit of Education in English on Their Future Careers

Languages exist in social status hierarchies. Since exams and theses can be written in English, we wanted to know whether students perceived writing in English to have a higher status than writing in Norwegian or another Scandinavian language. Over half of all respondents perceive writing in English to have higher status attached to it than writing in a Scandinavian language (53.92 percent). Around a quarter of students

say that writing in English is not associated with higher status (26.96 percent). It should also be noted that a high proportion of students could not determine whether writing in English has higher status; around 19.12 percent answered “don’t know.” Thus, for many students, status hierarchies are not quite so clear cut when it comes to language and specifically language in its written form.

Finally, students were asked about how they perceived the status of Norwegian in the university setting. This is a very relevant and timely topic considering the current public debates regarding the internationalization of universities in Norway and its effects on language use. When asked whether they thought it was important to keep Norwegian as an academic language in universities, a considerable majority of students said yes. The top half of Figure 5 shows that 61.27 percent of students thought it was very or extremely important to preserve Norwegian as an academic language. Respondents in this group are represented in all native language groups in the sample. An additional 27.45 percent thought it was moderately important to do so. These numbers contrast with the small minority of students who believed that it was not at all or only slightly important to preserve Norwegian in universities (8.82 percent).



Note: Both questions asked of all respondents: Q1: “To what degree do you think it is important to keep Norwegian as an academic language in Norwegian universities?”; Q2: “To what degree do you think that Norwegian is threatened by English as an academic language at Norwegian universities?”; “Very” and “Extremely” categories collapsed; “Not at all” and “Slightly” categories collapsed.

Figure 5. ISS Students’ Views on Whether It Is Important to Keep Norwegian as Academic Language, and Whether It Is Threatened by English

Figure 5 also presents the extent to which students believe Norwegian is under threat from English. Here, there is less consensus among students. Nearly equal proportions fall in each of the three categories. A third of students say that English is very or extremely threatened by English at Norwegian universities (33.33 percent). Almost as many, 31.86 percent, say the opposite: that it is not at all or only slightly threatened by English. This pattern indicates a division among students and one that is likely to influence and/or be influenced by current debates regarding internationalization and language. A somewhat smaller

proportion of students fall in a middle category, saying that Norwegian is moderately threatened by English (27.94 percent). If we take this middle category and the very/extremely category together, there is some indication that a majority of students believe Norwegian is at least moderately threatened by English in the university setting.

V. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

We prepared a focus group, but attendance was low; two out of the six students that had confirmed their presence arrived. On the grounds that the two students advanced contrasting views on the discussion topic, we have decided to still include insights from the interview in the report. Both are in their third semester at ISS. One respondent had a strong preference towards the use of Norwegian as an academic language at ISS, while the other favored the use of English. The arguments that endorse the use of Norwegian are mainly tied to the ability of conceptualizing course material. One respondent highlighted that learning key terms in Norwegian was decisive for her to develop a sense of ownership to the course material. The participants agree that terms are more intuitively comprehended when they are presented in Norwegian, their native language. Both highlight the importance of learning about the same key terms and concepts in both languages as this widens their understanding and adds nuance to significant course material. “Ressursfellen” and “the resource curse,” for example, give off two different connotations. A pamphlet with such translations was suggested. Both respondents acknowledge the importance of introducing articles in English to course curricula. One sees it as a ‘necessity’ since it widens the ‘catalogue’ of available research. Respondent number two prefers reading English as this prepares her for an international career and because it “feels more academic.” She speculates that mixing the use of English and Norwegian is representative of daily life post-studies and argues that learning to switch between both is an important skill.

Both agree that one should be allowed to speak Norwegian with Norwegian-speaking students during seminar discussions; “it feels unnatural to speak English with my Norwegian friends”. One participant says she avoids speaking if she has to do so in English. Not only do a large proportion of those who find the use of English in educational settings report difficulties with active participation in seminars, they might not engage at all. Both believe that active participation decreases when students are forced to speak English. The respondents are grateful that the institute allows for using both Norwegian and English in exams. They, in particular the one who dislikes English, highlight how important the introduction book in SGO1001 has been for their academic career. It has helped both students gain a sense of ownership to the discipline and with conceptualizing and internalization of important concepts.

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The working group’s motivation was to find out more about ISS students’ language backgrounds and abilities, how they have experienced instruction in English, and what they wish for the language situation moving forward. The working group carried out and analyzed a survey of ISS students and followed up with a small focus group. The current report is a product of our work over the fall 2021 semester. Below we summarize findings and provide some general comments and suggestions.

A number of key findings from the current report stand out. First, generally speaking, students report high levels of comfort with understanding, speaking, reading, and writing English. No more than 17 percent of students express discomfort in their English skills, in this case writing English (active skill). Much lower

percentages of students express discomfort in understanding and reading English (passive skills). In the abstract, there is little reason to worry about students not having a solid foundation in English language.

However, when these skills are applied in classes conducted in English, the survey suggest that there is still a non-negligible proportion of students who struggle. Over half of the students surveyed say that they at least sometimes struggle with English subject matter in ISS courses. This is especially the case with active language skills and when dealing with complex subject material in English. Among the classroom challenges that get mentioned the most are reading syllabus literature and active participation in seminars. This finding underscores the importance of presenting complex subject-specific concepts in a comprehensible manner, perhaps by taking the time to more thoroughly explain complex concepts in simpler English. It also emphasizes the need for flexibility in pedagogical approaches. For example, in seminars, students should be allowed to discuss in Norwegian when this is possible in groups or breakout rooms. Further, pamphlets could be provided with Norwegian and English translations of key terms and concepts to the students in each course, preferably alongside a small explanation. Overall, survey findings suggest that while students have foundational English language skills, many still feel overwhelmed in English-only settings.

Despite these challenges, the vast majority of students surveyed are upbeat about English instruction when thinking about their futures. Around 8 of every 10 students say that education in English will at least moderately benefit them in their future careers. These findings suggest a consensus that improving one's future job prospects involves proficiency in and use of English. Further, around three-quarters of students believe that UiO should have at least a moderate role in preparing its students to master a high level of English. Thus, it appears that the students see UiO as responsible for their continuing education in English language. To this end, it may be possible to provide academic English writing workshops to students in order to bolster their confidence levels for using English in the classroom. Such workshops could be given after regular class hours and available during multiple dates; free refreshments/food could increase attendance. As a more institutionally robust commitment, a new course could be created to more systematically train students in using English professionally. Such a course, perhaps titled something like "social sciences in English," could aim to improve both the understanding of academic English and the students' writing skills. This, of course, would require additional resources, however could provide more consistent and long-term payoff to students.

Even with relatively high levels of support for education in English, most students surveyed also want to keep Norwegian as an academic language at universities. The vast majority, nearly 9 of 10 students, say that it is at least moderately important to preserve the status of Norwegian. While there is consensus on the preservation of Norwegian as an academic language, there is much less consensus on whether Norwegian is threatened by English. Nearly equal proportions say that is not at all/slightly threatened as say it is very/extremely threatened. This could reflect the increasing polarization and politicization of the topic of internationalization in Norway and the related use of English. Care should be exercised when committing resources to English training not to erode resources committed to the continuation and strengthening of Norwegian as a professional language.

Blindern, December 2021

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