

UTRECHT UNIVERSITY  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE  
BA THESIS

# ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION AT GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY SCIENCE

EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS

KOEN SEBREGTS  
SUPERVISOR

CHANTAL VAN ZEELAND  
AUTHOR

## ABSTRACT

This study provides insight into the expectations and perceptions of the new English taught bachelor's degree Global Sustainability Science at Utrecht University. An online survey was spread among the second year students to gain responses for a quantitative study. The results suggest that students are positive about the English instruction level, but do indicate areas of improvement. The findings from this study may contribute to the Native vs Non-Native Speaker teacher debate and can be used to enhance the perceived English level at GSS and Utrecht University.

17 NOVEMBER 2017

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>3</b>
2.1 ENGLISH-MEDIUM INSTRUCTION (EMI) IN THE NETHERLANDS.....	3
2.2 NNS TEACHERS .....	3
2.3 STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES.....	4
2.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	5
<b>3 METHOD</b> .....	<b>6</b>
3.1 PARTICIPANTS .....	6
3.2 THE SURVEY.....	6
3.4 TOOLS AND PROCEDURE.....	7
<b>4 RESULTS</b> .....	<b>8</b>
4.1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION.....	8
4.2 EXPECTATIONS OF ENGLISH AT GSS.....	10
4.3 ATTITUDES TO COMPONENTS OF ORAL TEACHING .....	11
4.4 ATTITUDES TO ENGLISH AT GSS.....	12
<b>5 DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>16</b>
5.1 WHAT ARE STUDENTS ATTITUDES TO ENGLISH IN GENERAL? .....	16
5.2 WHAT ARE THE STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS OF THE TEACHERS' LEVEL OF ENGLISH? .....	16
5.1.1 Attitudes to Different Teaching Components.....	17
5.3 WHAT ARE THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TEACHERS' LEVEL OF ENGLISH? .....	17
<b>6 CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>18</b>
6.1 CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY .....	18
6.2 LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT .....	18
6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE ENGLISH AT GSS .....	19
6.4 FURTHER RESEARCH .....	19
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>APPENDIX A</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>APPENDIX B</b> .....	<b>25</b>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

---

English-Medium Instruction (EMI) is seen as a necessity for universities to be able to compete in the globalisation of academia (Margić & Krstanović, 2015). The rapid internationalisation of universities means that more stakeholders are involved with the English language. When a student chooses to attend a university degree, he or she desires to be taught by someone who is both knowledgeable and effective in communicating the material (Wilkinson, 2013). Non-Native English speakers have been teaching university courses in English globally since the emergence of English as a lingua franca globally. The first research on this topic began to emerge in the early nineties, when it became apparent that there was a clear division between Native (NS) and Non-Native Speaking (NNS) teachers with regards to English language teaching (Medgyes, 1992). NS are perceived as more reliable for language teaching. Meadows & Marumatsu found that the issue of NS/NNS teaching is “just as salient to the non-English teaching domain as it is to the English one” (p. 104, 2005). However, the issue can be expanded further as NNS are also involved with other academic areas next to foreign language teaching.

That part of the NS/NNS debate applies to Utrecht University (UU), as many courses are taught in English by NNS. This is due to the increased internationalisation of the university (Universiteit Utrecht, 2016). The rapid internationalisation means that Dutch teaching staff now teaches in English more frequently. Stichting OER, a Dutch academic research institute, conducted a study about the English-medium teaching used at the bachelor courses of UU (2013). According to their findings, 55% of the students that responded to their survey thought the English level of their teachers was sufficient enough to effectively teach the content of the lectures, whereas 17% thought it was below par. Various science based faculties from the university were included in the study. In the academic year 2016-2017, a new degree with an English curriculum was added to the UU course guide. *Global Sustainability Science* is an interdisciplinary degree that is taught fully in English, by teachers who have previously taught these courses in Dutch. Both Dutch and international students are enrolled in this degree programme.

Several students have indicated that the average English level of the degree is insufficient through personal contact with the author. Next to this, students have claimed the accents of the NNS teachers involved with the courses can be obstructing in their learning process. To gain better insight into their perceptions and expectations, a survey was spread among the first generation GSS students. This thesis encompasses all the findings of this survey and concludes with future recommendations to improve the level of English at GSS.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

---

### 2.1 English-medium Instruction (EMI) in the Netherlands

The initiative to make English the lingua franca in Dutch universities came in 1990 from the serving Minister of Education, Jo Ritzen (Stichting OER, 2013). According to him, the Dutch universities needed to start implementing English as the main language of academia to be able to compete with the international research market. The trend to incorporate EMI “follows a long tradition of associating high levels of academic knowledge with the status of language” (Shohamy, 2012, p. 197). The increase in internationalisation through EMI is also necessary to attract domestic students (Coleman, 2006). By 1995, EMI only appeared at a very modest scale in Dutch higher education (Vinke, 1995) although the first research about the EMI topic started to be carried out in the Netherlands. Previous research about English as a foreign language in higher education had been conducted in the United States (Vinke, 1995). However, the context of these studies was not one where English was a foreign instructional language to both teachers and students, which applies to the Netherlands.

The proponents and opponents of increasing EMI in Dutch universities have very contrasting positions. The proponents argue that EMI will make Dutch higher education more accessible to foreign students, as well as prepare Dutch students for an international career (OER, 2013; Roijmans, 2017; Vinke, 1995; Wilkinson, 2013). Using English as the main language in academia will help both students and the universities participate in the international science environment. However, Phillipson (2015) remains sceptical about the presence of a consensus about English as the “exclusive language of science” (p. 25). He is one of the sceptics of the increasing internationalisation of universities. One of the main arguments against EMI is the inevitable decrease in the domain for the L1 in higher education, and there are concerns that this may lead to loss of functionality of the L1 in other contexts (Coleman, 2006; Phillipson, 2015; Wilkinson, 2013). Furthermore, there are concerns that the content of the courses will not be acquired successfully because the foreign language serves as an obstruction in the learning process (Shohamy, 2012). This is supported by an experimental study at the University of Delft. Students who were taught in their L1, Dutch, scored higher on tests than those taught in their L2, English (Klaassen & Bos, 2010). This type of research has led to ongoing debate of EMI in higher education in the Netherlands.

### 2.2 NNS teachers

A Non-Native Speaking teacher, or NNS, is a teacher who does not teach a subject in their L1. It can be assumed that in the Netherlands there is a majority of natively Dutch in teaching staff at universities. There are some challenges that a NNS teacher may encounter. Not all teachers are sufficiently proficient in their L2 to teach at a C1 level, which is defined as “effective operational proficiency” by the CEFR and advised as the level teachers should have when teaching in higher education. Furthermore, Vinke (1995) found that the lecturing quality of NNS decreases when they teach in English: “a change of instructional language tends to reduce the redundancy of lecturers’ subject matter presentations, lecturers’ speech rate, their expressiveness, and their clarity and

accuracy of expression” (p. 145). However, Kling (2015) concludes that natively Danish lecturers are not worried about the weaknesses of being a NNS. Kling identifies a three step plan to which the participants of the study adhere:

First of all, the lecturers appear to acknowledge and accept the language weaknesses that have been identified in their oral production, e.g. pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, word choice, etc. Next, the lecturers claim that they do not really care that much about particular aspects of accuracy in their production. They are willing to accept these aspects of their language proficiency as long as their content specific vocabulary is in place. And finally, the lecturers find that with experience, they can rely on compensation strategies to overcome any problems that might arise that can lead to a breakdown in communication. (p. 219)

With regards to NNS content teachers in the Netherlands, Klaassen & Bos (2010) found that the English proficiency of the staff at Delft University of Technology varied greatly between levels of appointment from PhD to professor. However, they did not vary across faculties. They conclude by stating “the majority of the scientific staff have a language proficiency level at C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference” (p. 73). In the future, they will aim to lift this level to C2 to appease students.

### 2.3 Students’ and Teachers’ experiences

Students and teachers differ on the topic of what successful EMI entails. Kling (2015) and Klaassen (2010) found that experienced teachers who teach in a foreign language are finding this less challenging with time. This is mainly due to the decreased importance teachers give to native speaker norms, providing the discipline specific language is correct. However, students have a high expectancy from their teachers in both language teaching and content teaching contexts (Klaassen & Bos, 2010; Wilkinson, 2013). The reason for the difference in EMI teaching experiences can be partially explained by Roijmans (2017), who found in her BA thesis that students thought their own level of English was higher than that of their teachers. Next to this, students expect their language competency to improve even if this is not the purpose of the course (Wilkinson, 2013). However, EMI content lecturers’ have indicated that language learning is of secondary importance to them in content teaching (Airey, 2015). Finally, many students outside of the English language teaching context internalize the *native-speaker fallacy*, which results in shutting off of competent staff solely on their status as a NNS (Meadows & Muramatsu, 2007).

The attitudes of students are central to this research paper. In a study from 2010, Klaassen & Bos claim that “students see the need for high levels of academic English proficiency” (p. 75). The catalyst for their research project was the complaints from students that were pouring in at the Delft University of Technology. They found the level of their teachers’ English insufficient for university level teaching. Students have expectations about the English at their university: “they expect to learn the content for which they have enrolled, and they expect their language competence to improve; they expect the content staff to speak and write reasonably good English” (Wilkinson, 2013). In a recent study conducted by Stichting OER (2012) at UU, a correlation was found between science faculty students who have more English in their curriculum and the distraction experienced by NNS

teacher's accents. This applied to students at the veterinary and geoscience faculties the most (p. 27).

## 2.4 Research questions

The literature review shows that there are challenges for both students and teachers with regards to its increasing presence in higher education. Utrecht University is also planning to become more international (Universiteit Utrecht, 2016) and one of the ways to do this is to add more English-taught courses to attract foreign students and improve the bilingual environment. In 2016-2017, a new EMI-based Bachelor's degree called Global Sustainability Science was introduced. The degree is a fusion of two Dutch-language degrees that are no longer offered at UU. The curriculum is taught completely in English.

The main purpose of this thesis is to gain insight into the current status of the level of EMI at GSS as perceived by students. In other contexts, teachers have indicated to give less importance to native speakers norms, but from the recent study at UU, geoscience faculty students indicated they found their teachers' accents distracting. As the GSS curriculum is solely English, it is useful to investigate this relationship in more detail and discover potential areas of improvement. Due to time-constraints, the focus of this research will be on the students due to the fact that the author is a student at GSS.

The main research question is as follows:

*What are the student's perceptions of and experiences with the English medium instruction at UU bachelor degree Global Sustainability Science?*

To guide the research, three different sub-questions have been added:

1. What are the attitudes of the GSS students to EMI in general?
2. What are the students' expectations of EMI at GSS?
3. What are the students' perceptions of the teaching staffs' level of English?

## 3 METHOD

---

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the level of English at Global Sustainability Science as perceived and experienced by the students. A survey was published online in a Facebook group that included all the possible respondents: second year GSS students. It is loosely based on surveys by Roijmans (2017) and Ling & Braine (2007). Ling & Braine specified they adapted their survey from the International Teaching Assistants questionnaire designed by Plakans (1997) which was “originally designed to measure American students’ attitudes toward international teaching assistants from various disciplinary backgrounds” (Ling & Braine, 2007, p.262).

The survey is included in Appendix A. This chapter will focus on the method of the research: participant criteria, structure of the survey, and the tools and procedure.

### 3.1 Participants

The students that participated were undergraduate, second year GSS students. They were chosen as the test group for the following reasons. Firstly, there is only a limited number of students as potential participants, as GSS is a relatively new degree that started in September 2016. The current first-year students were excluded because they have only had limited experience with the courses and their teachers. This leaves the current second-year students as the participant group with the required experience. Another reason is that while the majority of this group are natively Dutch (81,7%), it also includes students from international backgrounds. About 8% of the total number of students at UU is international (Redactie, 2017). It is expected to grow to 10% in the next three years. This means the participant group is representable for the aimed student body of UU (Universiteit Utrecht, 2016).

### 3.2 The Survey

The survey consisted of 23 questions: 22 closed and one open question. The language of the survey was English. The majority of the closed questions were a Likert scale from one to six. Six, instead of five, was chosen to prevent students from picking a neutral option. The other closed questions asked students to give a rating between one and ten. One open question was included in the survey, to allow students to give examples of their experiences in the classroom. The survey was structured in four distinctive parts to gain as much insight into the expectations and perceptions the students of GSS. Because of the international nature of the degree, the first part of the questionnaire included questions about the respondent’s backgrounds (nationality, L1 and previous study programs) as the participant group was not homogenous. This was followed by the first part of the survey about the expectations of the students: there were four questions about the expectations of the English level as well as of the teaching level. The following part of the survey was the focal point of the research, namely the attitudes to English at GSS. It included questions about how important students rated several linguistic attributes (fluency, accent, speaking error-free) and the language that students interacted in with their teachers. Lastly, to assess students’ perceptions, they were asked to rate the overall level of English at GSS on a scale from one to ten.

### 3.4 Tools and Procedure

A pilot version of the survey was filled in by two individuals and their feedback was debated in a group setting to improve the quality of the survey. Several questions were rephrased or omitted, but none were added. The survey (Appendix A) was shared online via a link in the Facebook group that all the possible participants are a part of. The survey took about five minutes to complete. Google Forms was used to collect the data due to the of accessibility and the researchers' familiarity with the program. It is an online, freely available program widely used to collect data from surveys. A quick overview of the collected data was given on the Google Forms webpage to give an initial overview of the responses. The graphs were used to analyse the responses and draw conclusions to the research questions. Microsoft Excel was used to calculate the means and standard deviations. The results that were found will be discussed further in the next chapter.



## 4 RESULTS

During the first week, 51 respondents were gathered via Facebook. A link to the survey was shared in the 2016-2017 Facebook group of the GSS students. The remaining 9 responses were gathered on the last day that the survey was online via personal contact. In total, 60 GSS students responded to the survey.

This chapter will focus on the results of the survey. The first section discusses the expectations of students, followed by a sub-chapter on the perceptions. An overview of the responses will be given per question. The interpretation of the answers can be found in the next chapter. A complete overview of the results per question can be found in Appendix B.

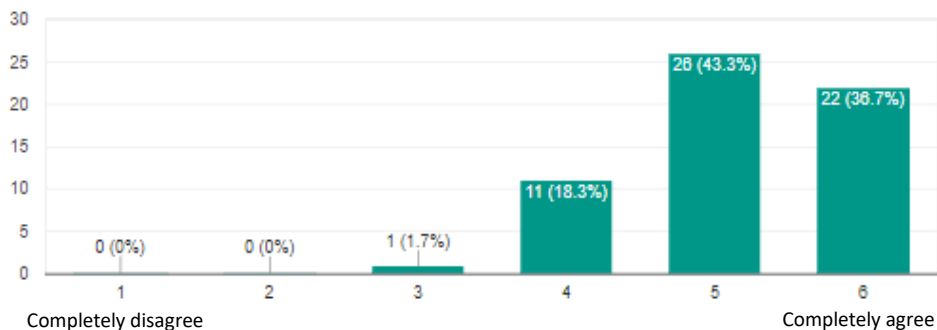
### 4.1 Background information

The respondents consist of 65% female (N= 39) and 35% male (N= 21)(Q1). Of this group, 81.7% has the Dutch nationality and the rest is from other different countries (Q2). Overall, the respondents rate their own level of English at 7.75 on a scale of one to ten with a standard deviation of 0.81, although 53.3% (N= 32) replied that they had 'none/a few months' of their previous courses in English (Q4). The respondents show an overall preference for English in academic contexts as can be seen in figure 1 below. Twenty-two respondents were in complete agreement with the statement and only one respondent answered a '3', or slightly disagree.

#### I prefer English over another language in academic contexts.



60 responses



**Figure 1 Responses to a question about English in academic contexts**

With regards to the future, the majority of the respondents (78.3%) answered that they thought an English taught bachelor's degree would make them more capable in an international environment (Q8). It should be noted that there were only three options to choose from to easily assess why the test group thought an English taught degree was important.

I am confident my level of English is high enough to succeed at university.

60 responses

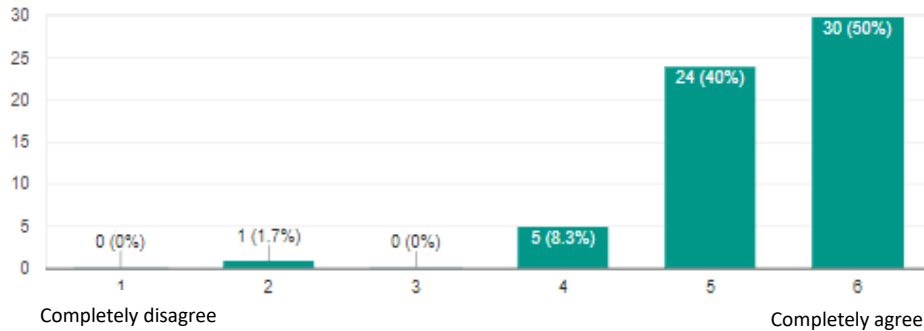


Figure 2 Responses to the question about confidence in English

These are results of the question whether the students deemed their own level of English high enough to succeed at university (Q9). What is noteworthy about the responses to this question is that one person did not agree with the statement and answered a two, whereas 90% (N= 54) answered a '5' or a '6'.

Finally, the students were presented with a statement about whether the fact that GSS is taught in English was a factor in their decision to do the degree (Q10). Although the majority of the respondents answered in agreement, there were also students who largely disagreed and answered somewhat to completely disagree: 25% (N=15). An overview of the responses is given in the figure below.

The fact that GSS was in English was a big factor in my decision to do this degree.

60 responses

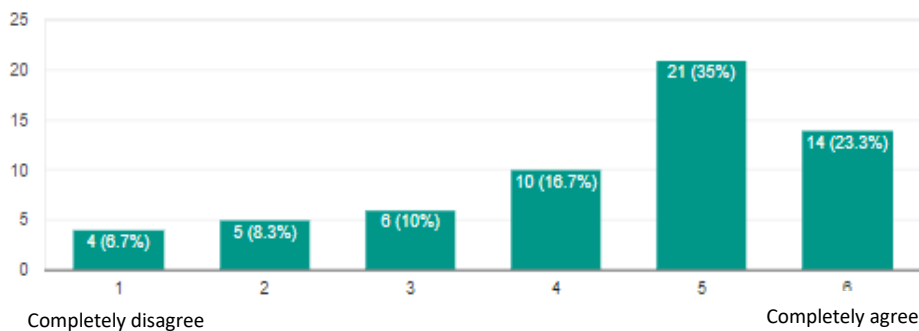


Figure 3 Responses to a question about the perceived importance of an English taught degree

Finally, these results show that students are quite confident about their own level of English, even though the majority of them had non or very minimum EMI classes in the past. They deem English an

important asset to their university experience and expect it to prepare them for a future in an internationally oriented environment.

## 4.2 Expectations of English at GSS

There were two statements regarding expectations of the level of English. The first was “I expect the level of English at GSS to be high”. Once again, the response to this was overall agreement: over 50% of the respondents answered with a ‘5’ or a ‘6’. Only 6.7% (N= 4) slightly disagreed with this statement and answered a ‘3’. An overview of the responses is given below.

### I expect the level of English at GSS to be high.

60 responses

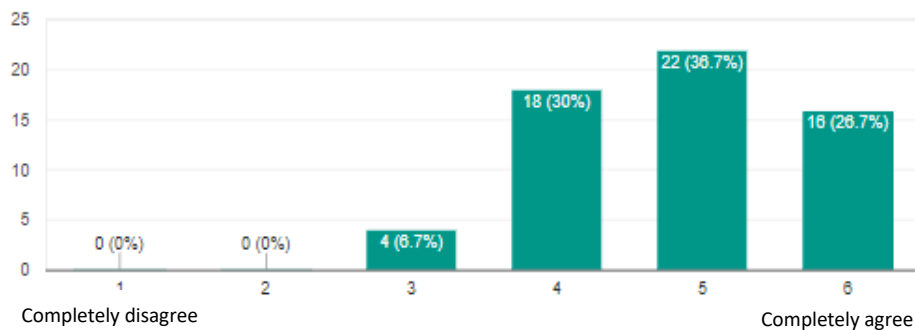


Figure 4 Responses to a statement on the level of English at GSS

The next question was aimed to discover the expectations that the students had of the teaching staffs level of English. To make the question as direct as possible and avoid misconceptions, the students were presented with the statement “I expect Native-English speakers as teachers of the courses”. The responses are shown in figure 5 below. The answers to this question are divided. There is a clear majority that neither strongly disagrees or agrees. However, there are several respondents that indicated to be in complete disagreement, ‘1’, or complete agreement, ‘6’ with the statement. In conclusion, this means that students agree that they expect a high level of English at GSS. There is disagreement whether or not they expect NS teachers: more than 50% neither strongly disagrees or agrees.

### I expect native-English speakers as teachers of the courses.

60 responses

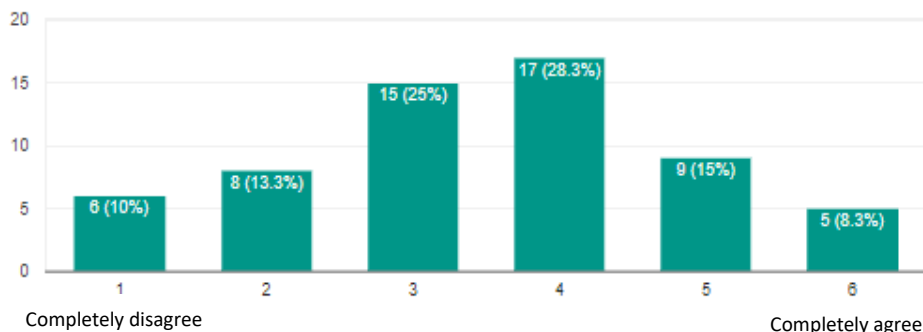


Figure 5 Overview of the expectations students have of the teaching staff

### 4.3 Attitudes to components of oral teaching

Three similar questions were formulated to gain further insight into how students value the different language qualities of teachers. They were about fluency, the presence of an accent and the ability to speak error-free. The results of the three questions are given in the graphs below.

#### How important is it to you that teachers speak English fluently?

60 responses

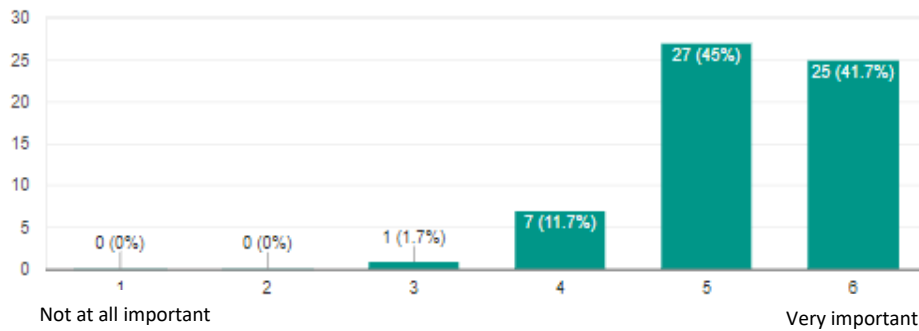


Figure 6 Responses to the fluency component of language

#### How important is it to you that teachers speak English accentless?

60 responses

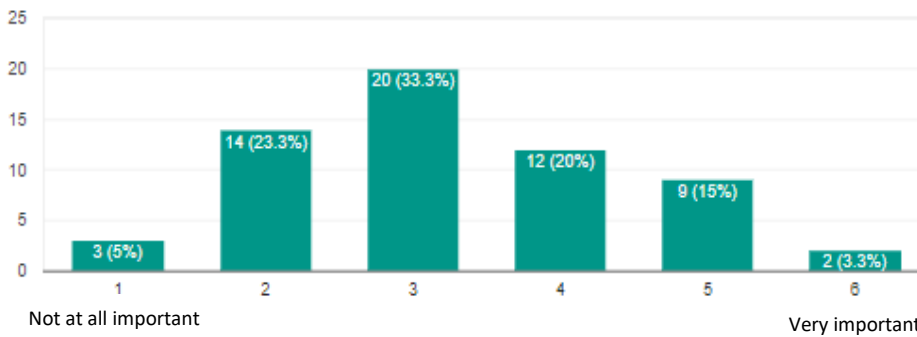


Figure 7 Responses to the presence of an accent in language

#### How important is it to you that teachers speak English error-free?

60 responses

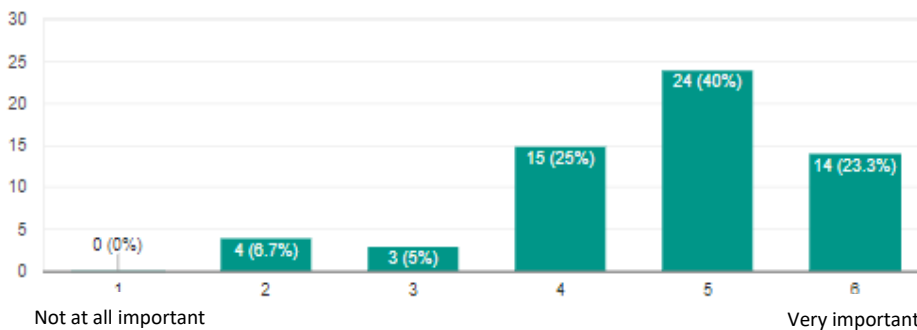


Figure 8 Responses to the expectations of error-free teaching

Several observations can be made of these responses:

- Fluency is deemed the most important component out of the three: 86,7% replied with a '5' or '6' on the scale which are the highest possible answers.
- The majority of the students find the absence of an accent neither important or unimportant. Next to that, there is a spread in the other answers: two people answered that they thought this language ability was very important (6) in teaching, whereas three said that it was not at all important (1).
- With regards to error, 63% indicated they thought speaking without errors was an either slightly important or very important teaching quality. The answers cluster around '5', with an almost equal amount of answers to either sides of this answer. There were four students who indicated they thought speaking error-free was slightly unimportant.

To summarise, students put the most value on the fluency of a teachers language, and the least on speaking without accent. Students also think speaking error-free is an important quality, but do not agree on this as strongly as with fluency.

#### 4.4 Attitudes to English at GSS

This section of the survey consisted of six scale questions and one open question. The answers of the open question will not be presented here, but used as examples in the next two chapters. A complete overview of all the open question responses can be found in Appendix B (Q 18).

Students were asked to rate the overall level of their teachers' English by answering disagree, '2', to completely agree, '6'. Over half of the respondents answered a '4', or slightly agree. Almost an equal number answered '3' and '5'. Four people did not agree with the statement and gave a '2'. Two people completely agreed with the statement.

#### The teachers at GSS have an overall good level of English.

60 responses

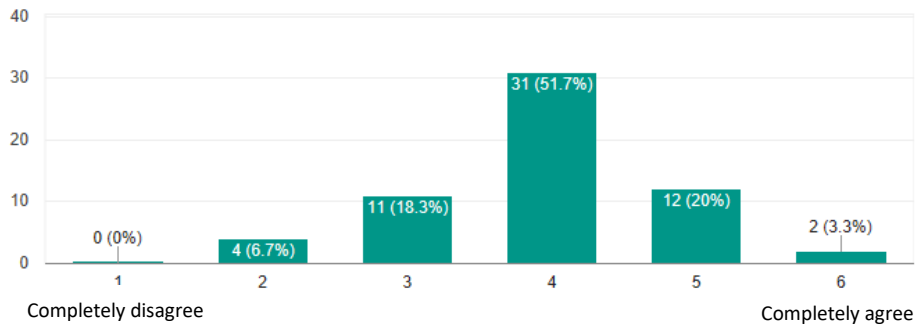
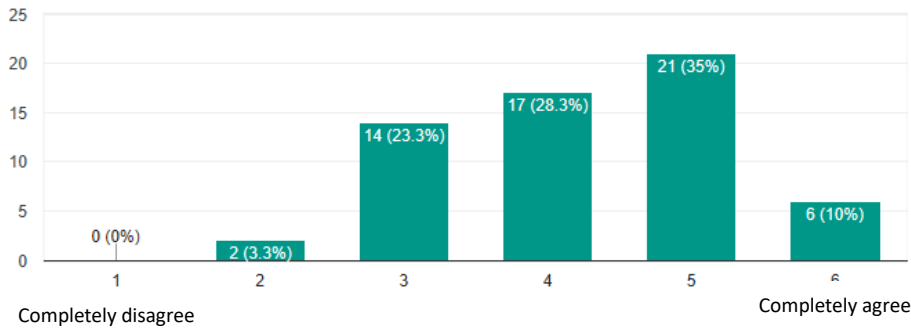


Figure 7 Students perceptions of the teachers level of English

The following question was related to the comprehension of the English in lectures. An overview of the responses is given in the figure below. 86.7% answered a '3', '4' or '5'- which means a clear majority of the respondent is between slight disagreement and agreement. However, this question places the students for an ultimatum: in theory this is a yes or no question. Each student will have interpreted this question differently. The mean for this question was 4.25, with a standard deviation of 1.04.

**In terms of language, I can always fully comprehend what the teachers say in the lectures.**

60 responses

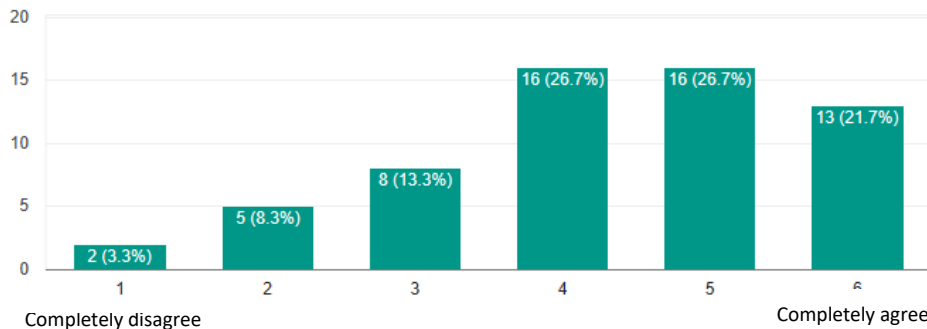


**Figure 8 Student comprehension of the lectures**

The next survey questions asked students to agree or disagree with the statement “I can learn just as well from a non-native teacher as a native teacher”. This statement is to support a previous question about expectations. If a student indicates he or she can learn just as well from a non-native speaker, the preference for a native speaker can be seen as irrelevant in content learning other than language learning. In this survey, 48% of the students answered '5' or '6'. Only 11.6% answered a '1' or '2'. The majority of the students agree with this fact, but there is a spread of answers. The mean for this question is 4.3 With a standard deviation of 1.37.

**I can learn just as well from an non-native English teacher as from a native English teacher.**

60 responses

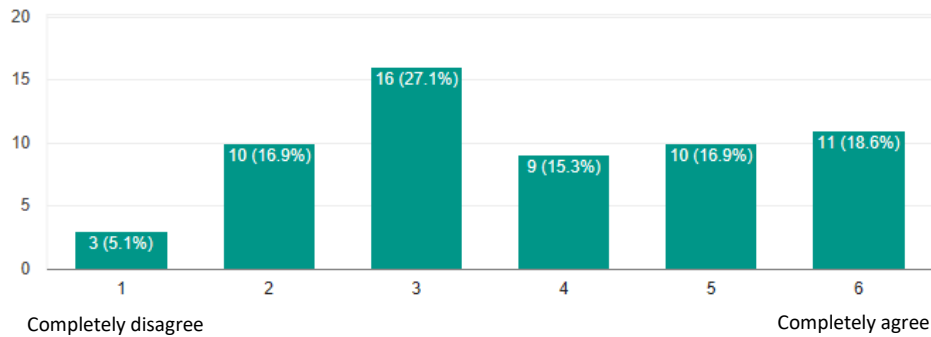


**Figure 9 NS/NNS learning ability of students**

There were two questions in the survey about direct student/teacher interaction. It is important to note that this question did not apply to students who did not have Dutch as their L1. The first question was asked to find out whether or not the students communicate in English with their teachers when they are in tutorials. The answers are displayed in figure 11. The answers show variation among students. There is no clear side of the scale as with the other questions. Three, or slightly disagree, was answered the most.

**I always have interactions in English with my teachers during lectures and tutorials.**

59 responses

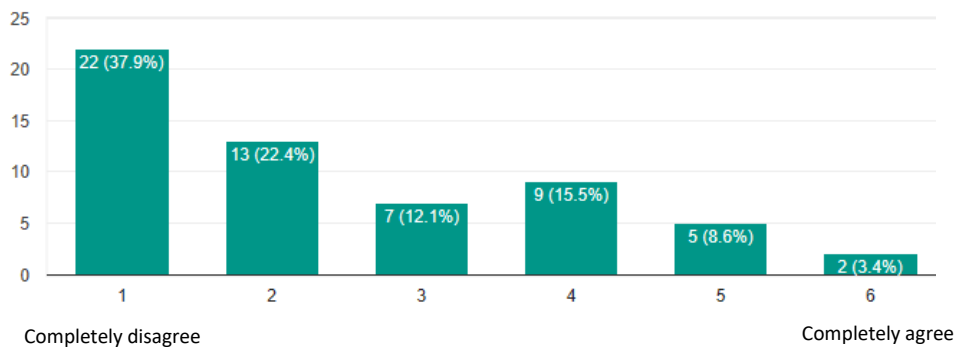


**Figure 10 English interactions between students and teachers**

The next question in this segment was aimed at behaviour of the students, and seeing if they experience English as a barrier to speak to teachers personally. This is the only question in the survey that is negatively asked, and the answers on the scale are mostly on the left side of the scale (N= 22 for completely disagree). However, 12% of the students indicated that they do feel less inclined to interact with their teachers (scores of '5' and '6').

**I feel less inclined to interact with my teachers because the instruction isn't in my native language.**

58 responses

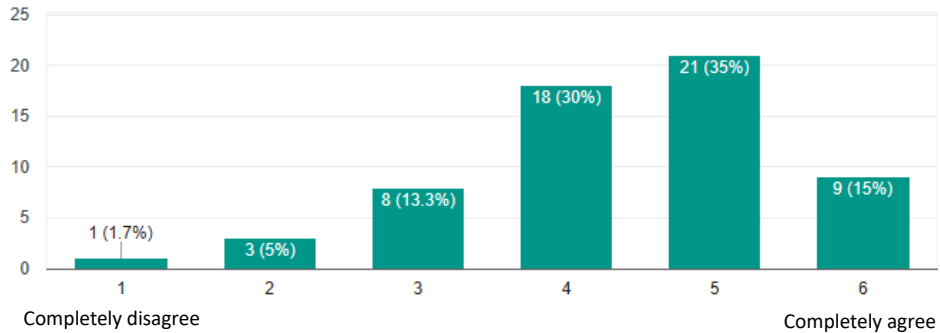


**Figure 11 Inclination of students to speak to teachers in the classroom context**

The last scale question on this survey was to find out the perceived obstruction that English has on the students learning abilities. Similarly, to previous questions, the answers are quite positive. 80% of the respondents replied between a four and a six. The other twelve people are on the other side of the scale, where one person completely disagreed with the statement.

### English at GSS helps me to achieve my learning goals.

60 responses



**Figure 12 Responses to the question concerning whether or not English is seen as an obstacle**

At the end of the survey, the students were asked to rate the level of English at GSS and overall grade on a scale of one to ten. The mean grade is 7.02, with a standard deviation of 0.91 in a range of 5 to 9.

In conclusion, the results from this segment of the survey show that students find the overall level of their teachers good and indicate they can understand their teachers in lectures most of the time. Most of the students agree that they can learn just as well from a NS and a NNS. The responses vary about whether students interact in English with their teachers, however, they agree that the instructional language does not obstruct them in interacting with the teachers. In the end, students do agree that English helps them in reaching their learning goals.



## 5 DISCUSSION

---

The following chapter will focus on answering the sub-questions of the research question. The responses to the survey and supporting literature will be used in the discussion of each question.

### 5.1 What Are Students Attitudes to English in General?

There were several questions throughout the survey related to general attitude towards the English language. A majority of the respondents showed a preference for English in academic contexts (Q7). Furthermore, 78.3% of them said an English taught bachelor's degree would make them more capable in an international environment. They picked this option over an advantage on the job market (18.3% voted for this option) or to get into the Master's degree of their choice (3.3%). This question was closed instead of open to get more viable results. However, these questions show that the students have a positive association with EMI and believe it will help them in the future.

The students rate their own level of English a 7.02 on a scale of one to ten with a small standard deviation of 0.91. This is interesting as the majority of them (53.3%) have indicated that they had none/a few months of study programs in English. The results of this question can be related to Q10, which is related to confidence in their level of English for university level. 30 respondents replied they are highly confident that their own level of English is high enough to succeed. However, MacIntyre et. al showed that students tend to overestimate their L2 level and self-efficacy (1997). Next, the students were asked if the fact that GSS is an English-taught Bachelor's degree influenced their decision to start this degree (Q9). The response here is quite varied, which is to be expected. Global Sustainability Science is primarily a science oriented degree and language learning could have secondary importance to the students. The international students will most likely have given this question a higher rating as they have no other language options at Utrecht University.

It is safe to conclude that students at GSS have an overall positive attitude towards, and give value to, English in classroom contexts.

### 5.2 What are the students' expectations of the teachers' level of English?

For this thesis, it is important to distinguish between the expectations and the perceptions of students. Therefore the students were given two statements (Q11 & 12) to determine their expectations of the English of the teachers involved with the courses. Students expect the level of English at GSS to be high, although there is debate how high this level should be. There is division between the respondents, but overall the answers are on the high end of the scale, between a '4' and '6'.

Interestingly, the respondents were divided on their expectations of NS teachers. The majority of the replies are '3' or '4' on the scale, which means they are quite neutral about the statement. However, there were also some students who said they really do expect NS, and students who said that they definitely do not. This means that not all students expect a NS level from their teachers. To gain further insight into specific expectations of language qualities, there were three questions that will be discussed in the next subchapter.

### 5.1.1 Attitudes to Different Teaching Components

Questions 13, 14 and 15 were aimed at determining what language components students thought were important, which can also be seen as their expectations of the teachers. With regards to NNE teachers; *fluency*, *accent* and *speaking error-free* were the different components. There are many more components to language, but these three are deemed most applicable for successful learning from NNE teachers. The results show that fluency of English was quite important to the respondents: 25 individuals voted a '6' (very important) and 27 a '5' (important). This is interesting when contrasted with the results for question 15, which is about speaking error-free. Here, only 14 people voted for very important and 24 for important. This shows that students value the fluency of a teacher more than their correctness. However, it brings into question how the students define these two components.

The respondents were also asked to rate how important they thought it was that their teacher speaks accent-less. Previous literature shows that this is one of the biggest obstructions and irritations that students have during interactions with NNE teachers (Stichting OER, 2013; Vinke, 1995). The survey responses support this. The results show different attitudes towards the importance of accent-less teaching, with each option being chosen at least twice. It is important to take the different attitudes into account. It can be difficult to determine why there is a big division in opinions in this question.

To conclude, students do not explicitly expect a NS teacher, but do value fluency and error-free speaking in the lectures. This coincides mostly with the characteristics of a C1 one level on the Common European Framework of Reference and is similar to near-native proficiency.

### 5.3 What are the students' perceptions of the teachers' level of English?

The students generally agree with the statement that teachers at GSS have a good level of English (Q16). There are 15 students who slightly disagree with the statement. It is important to keep in mind that the respondents are second year students who have had over one year of experience in the GSS courses, but not all of them have taken the same courses as the students have to specialize in a track. In addition, there are many different teachers and assistants guiding the courses, which means that not every student has been in contact with every staff member.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked if they could always fully comprehend what the teachers say in lectures. This question is biased as it uses extreme words (always, fully) in order to obtain more opinionated responses. The individual respondents may interpret the statement differently. The response variation for this question might be due to the differences in language competence among the students, or their willingness to pay attention in lectures. There is also variation in answers about the difference between learning from a NS and NNS teacher. All different answers have been chosen, although more people indicate they agree with the statement they learn just as well from a NS as from a NNS. The answers to this question might be disputed because not all of the students have followed lectures from both of both types of teachers (Q5). Students indicate different things when asked if they interact in English with their teachers (Q20), however they agree that it does not obstruct them to interact with them because the instruction is not in their native language (Q21). Lastly, the students of GSS are positive about the English at GSS to achieve their own learning goals. This question was meant to measure if English is an obstruction to students, which the majority did not experience.

## 6 CONCLUSION

---

In this chapter, the findings of the study will be summarized, limitations to the research discussed, and recommendations to improve the perceptions of English will be given. In addition, suggestions will be made for further research to gain more insight into this topic.

### 6.1 Conclusion and summary

The aim of this study was to discover the expectations and perceptions that the students of GSS have of the English teaching medium at their courses. Sixty students of the second-year class participated in an online survey, which is half of the whole class. The questions in the survey were varied to get much insight into the topic as possible. First, there were questions about the value students give to English as an academic language and the previous experience they have with it. Next, they were asked what they expected of the English level at GSS. Finally, there were multiple questions to determine the perceptions of the students. The results of this study contribute to the debate on NS and NNS teaching.

One of the main findings of this study is that the students have a high expectation of the English level at GSS. They do not expect native English speakers, but have indicated that they think it is important that a teacher speaks fluently and without error. In the open question of the survey, students were asked to give examples of instances in lectures where they experienced some obstruction from the teacher's language. Many of them mentioned accents and L1 interference, although in the scale question about accent-less speaking, the answers were more neutral. This means that a strong accent can be irritating to students, but no accent is not a prerequisite.

Furthermore, students at GSS are positive about the level of English. They gave it an overall grade of 7.02. They found their teacher's English language level sufficient, although they were not extremely positive about it. They rated their own levels of English at an average of 7.75, which is higher than the overall level at the degree. This coincides with the research by Macintyre (1997) and Roijmans (2017), who both found that students tend to think their own level of English is higher than that in their surroundings. Students were divided about the fact whether they could learn just as well from a NS as a NNS. Also, some students said they did not interact with their teachers in English at all, while some did. However, students did not feel less inclined to interact with their teachers because the instruction language is English. This could be due to the fact that the majority of the students can use Dutch to interact with their teachers.

In conclusion, the present study shows that students are positive about the English level at GSS. However, students are quite critical of the level of their teachers, who are exclusively NNS.

### 6.2 Limitations of the project

There are several limitations to the study that should be taken into consideration. Firstly, there was only a limited amount of time available to prepare the survey and the literature review. The survey might have been better if it had been piloted by more people. The fact that the survey had scale questions was also a limitation. Both the values on this scale and the content of the questions might

have been interpreted differently by the respondents. Next, it could be debated if sixty students is representative enough. The students that responded are from many different nationalities, which made it difficult to generalise about the specific expectations and perceptions of these groups. Furthermore, in accordance with what Roijmans (2017) found, students seem to overestimate their own level of English, which might lead to biased answers. Lastly, there is a lack of background information about the language procedures of this degree. This causes a gap in the literature review and might affect the recommendations that are made in the next subchapter.

### 6.3 Recommendations to Improve English at GSS

With this study, it is possible to make viable recommendations to improve the student experiences at GSS. They indicate they are relatively satisfied with the English level as it is, although there is room for improvement. Firstly, it might benefit both the teachers and the students if there was a language program for the teaching staff. This might include language classes, conferences, or workshops to make the staff more aware of benefits of successful teaching in English. Margić & Krstanovic also identified this in their research, and suggest language assistance in the form of tests, training, proofreading of materials and supervision by foreign language experts (2015, p. 54). Next, the GSS lecture PowerPoints would occasionally be in Dutch or have Dutch phrases in them. Teachers fear that preparing lectures in a foreign language is more time-consuming, but they have to be made aware of the benefits (Margić & Krstanović, 2015). This also needs to be improved to enhance the experience of both Dutch and international students. An important component of effective teaching is legitimacy and authority (Meadows & Muramatsu, 2007), and this could be lost when the teacher has come unprepared to a lecture. Another key point of improvement is that students have indicated they do not speak English with teachers outside of the lectures. To resolve this, it would be wise to popularise EMI and make all stakeholders aware of the benefits and challenges.

### 6.4 Further Research

The research on this topic is limited to a specific cases and it is difficult to expand the results to other cases. It could therefore be beneficial to do this type of research on a larger scale at Utrecht University. It is certain that in the future, Utrecht University will keep internationalising due to pressures on different levels (Hultgren, Jensen, & Dimova, 2015). Continued testing will be necessary to maintain the high standards that UU has set. The NS/NNS is just a fraction of the problem that increased internationalisation brings with itself (Phillipson, 2015). This research provides insight into one of the EMI bachelor degrees at UU, but there are plans to introduce English-only BA degrees in Linguistics, Literary Studies, Celtic and English language studies. The NS/NNS issue plays a bigger role in language acquisition contexts (Meadows & Muramatsu, 2007). This study contributes to the general debate on NS/NNS teaching in academic contexts outside of language teaching. However, research need to be done to find the solutions both short term and long term. Further research would be more reliable if it included interviews with some of the students to gain better insight into their opinions and experiences. Lastly, it could be beneficial to do a practical experiment where two groups of students do the same test, but after a lecture from a NS and a NNS teacher.

## REFERENCES

- Airey, J. (2015). From stimulated recall to disciplinary literacy: summarizing ten years of research into teaching and learning in English. In Dimova, Hultgren & Jensen (Ed.), *English-Medium Instruction in European Higher Education* (pp. 157–167).
- Coleman, J. A. (2006). English-medium teaching in European higher education. *Language Teaching*, 39(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144480600320X>
- Hultgren, A., Jensen, C., & Dimova, S. (2015). English-medium instruction in European higher education: From the North to the South. In *English-Medium Instruction in European Higher Education* (pp. 1-19).
- Klaassen, R., & Bos, M. (2010). English language screening for scientific staff at Delft University of Technology. *Hermes—Journal of Language*, 45, 61–76. Retrieved from <http://download2.hermes.asb.dk/archive/download/Hermes-45-klaassen&bos.pdf>
- Kling, J. (2015). “You try with a little humor and you just get on with it”: Danish lecturers’ reflections on English-medium instruction. In Dimova, Hultgren & Jensen (Ed.), *English-Medium Instruction in European Higher Education*, (pp. 201–223).
- Ling, C. Y., & Braine, G. (2007). The attitudes of university students towards non-native speakers English teachers in Hong Kong. *RELC Journal*, 38(3), 257–277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688207085847>
- Macintyre, P. D., Noels, K. A., & Clément, R. (1997). Biases in self-ratings of second language proficiency: The role of language anxiety. *Language Learning*, 47(2), 265–287.
- Margić, B., & Krstanović, I. (2015). Introducing EMI at a Croatian university: Can we bridge the gap between global emerging trends and local challenges? In Dimova, Hultgren & Jensen (Ed.), *English-Medium Instruction in European Higher Education* (pp. 43–63).
- Meadows, B., & Muramatsu, Y. (2007). Native speaker or non native speaker?: A report of student preferences in four different classrooms. *Arizona Working Papers in SLA & Teaching*, 14, 95–109.
- Medgyes, P. (1992). Native or non-native: Who’s worth more? *ELT Journal*, 46(4), 340–349. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/46.4.340>
- Stichting OER. (2013). *Engels in het bacheloronderwijs van de Universiteit Utrecht*. Retrieved from <http://www.stichting-oer.nl/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Onderzoeksrapport-Engels-in-het-bacheloronderwijs-2012-2013-Webversie.pdf>
- Phillipson, R. (2015). English as threat or opportunity in European higher education. In Dimova, Hultgren & Jensen (Ed.), *English-Medium Instruction in European Higher Education* (pp. 19–42).
- Plakans, B. S. (1997). Undergraduates’ experiences with and attitudes toward international teaching assistants. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(1), 95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587976>
- Redactie. (2017, October 31). Kan Utrecht de buitenlandse studenten nog wel aan? *Duic*. Retrieved from <https://www.duic.nl/algemeen/kan-utrecht-de-buitenlandse-studenten-nog-wel-aan/>

Roijmans, E. (2017). *English Language and Culture Students' Perceptions of English-medium Instruction at Dutch Universities*.

Shohamy, E. (2012). A critical perspective on the use of English as a medium of instruction at universities. In *English-medium instruction at universities: Global challenges* (pp. 196–221).

Universiteit Utrecht. (2016). *Strategisch plan 2016-2020*. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.uu.nl/organisatie/profiel/missie-en-strategie/strategisch-plan-2016-2020>

Vinke, A. A. (1995). English as the medium of instruction in Dutch.

Wilkinson, R. (2013). English-Medium Instruction at a Dutch university: challenges and pitfalls. In D. L. and J. M. S. Aintzane Doiz (Ed.), *English-Medium Instruction at Universities* (pp. 3–27).

## APPENDIX A

---

This appendix includes the original survey used for the study.

Hello,

First of all, thank you for partaking in the survey! This survey will take about 5-10 minutes and consists of 23 questions. Please mind that you can only take the survey if you are currently a second-year student of Global Sustainability Science at Utrecht University. The responses will be completely anonymous. The results of this survey will be used in my BA Thesis at UU. The first part of the survey is background information, followed by the official questionnaire. If you have questions, feel free to send me a Facebook message or an email at [clvanzeeland@hotmail.com](mailto:clvanzeeland@hotmail.com). Thank you for participating!

---

### I. Background information

Q1: What is your gender?

- Female
- Male

Q2: What is your nationality?

- Dutch
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Q3: Which of the following is your mother tongue?

- Dutch
- English
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Q4: How high would you rate your own level of English?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

lowest           highest

Q5: Before you started GSS, how long did you previously have study programs in English?

- None/a few months
- One year
- Between one and five years
- Between five and ten years
- More than ten years

Q6: This previous study was in...

- The Netherlands
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Q7: I prefer English over another language in academic contexts.

1   2   3   4   5   6

completely disagree       completely agree

Q8: How will an English taught bachelor's degree benefit you the most in the future?

<Select the option you feel applies to you the most>





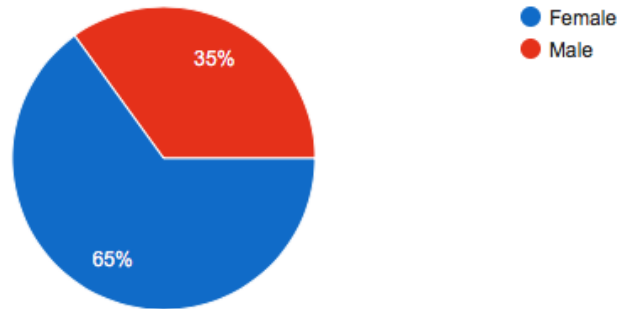


## APPENDIX B

This appendix gives an overview of the results from the survey.

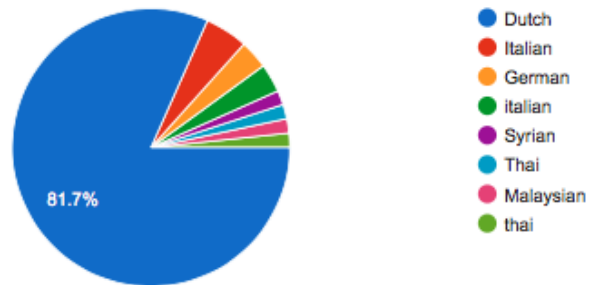
### Q1 What is your gender?

60 responses



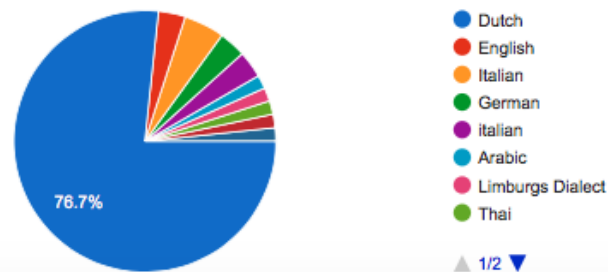
### Q2 What is your nationality?

60 responses



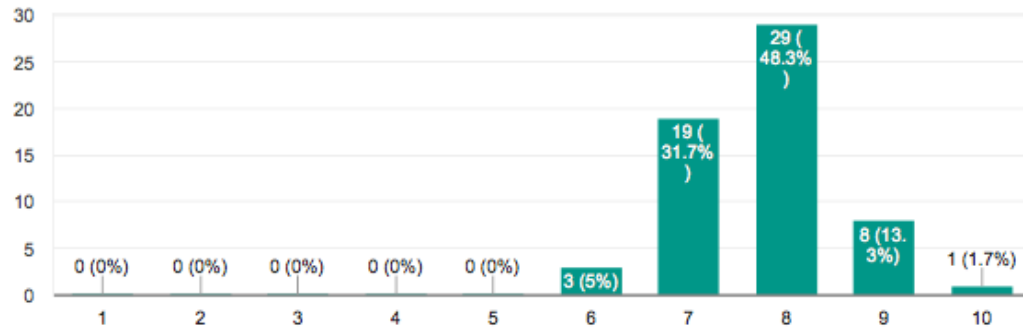
### Q3 Which of the following is your mothertongue?

60 responses



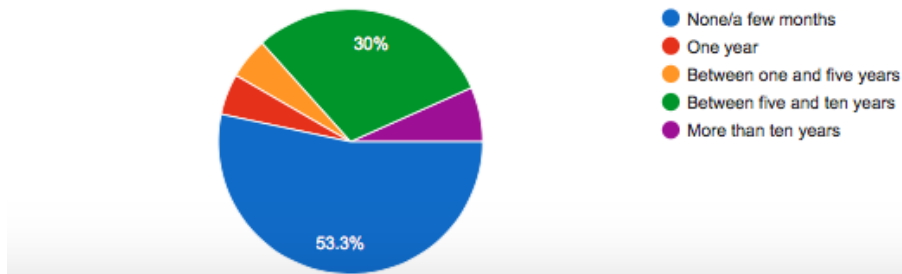
**Q4** How high would you rate your own level of English?

60 responses



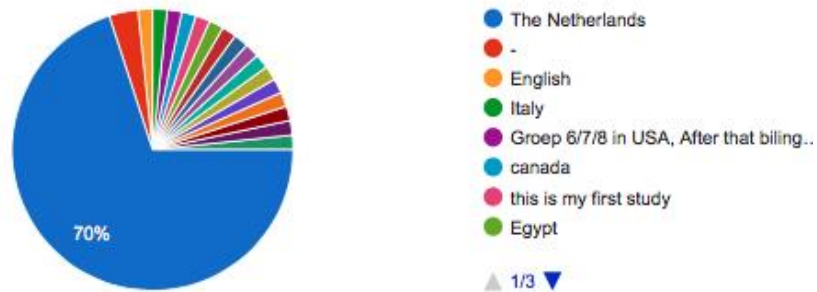
**Q5** Before you started GSS, how long did you previously have study programmes in English?

60 responses



**Q6** This previous study was in...

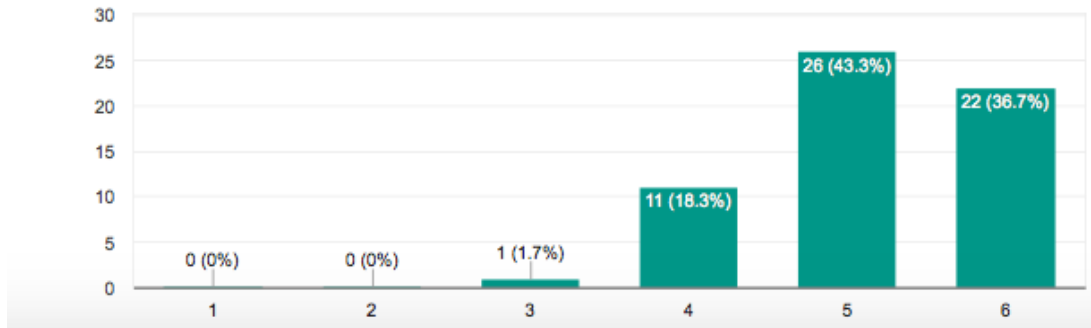
60 responses



---

**Q7** I prefer English over another language in academic contexts.

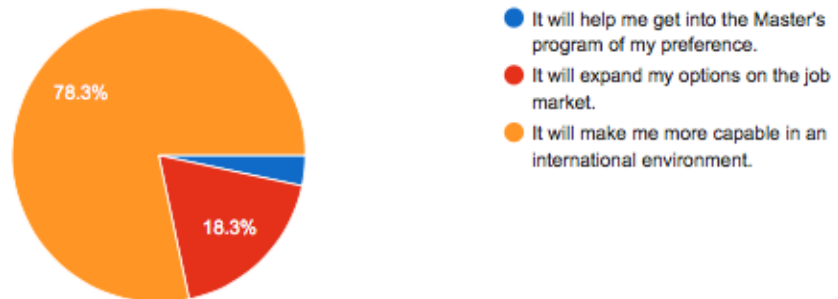
60 responses



---

**Q8** How will an English taught bachelor's degree benefit you the most in the future?

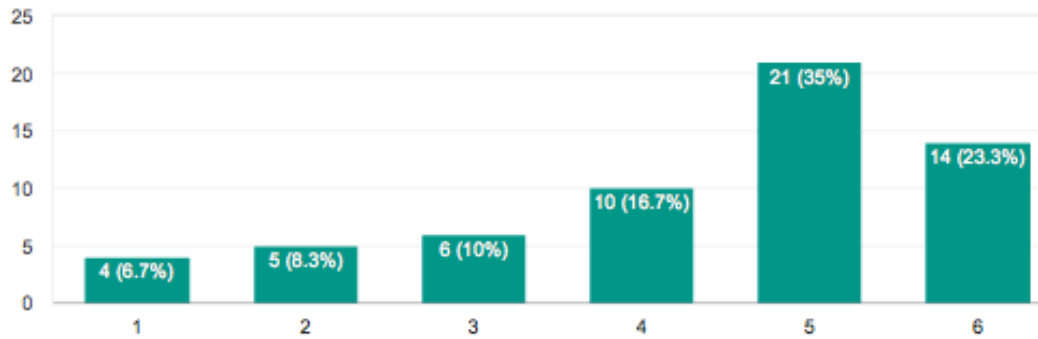
60 responses



---

**Q9** The fact that GSS was in English was a big factor in my decision to do this degree.

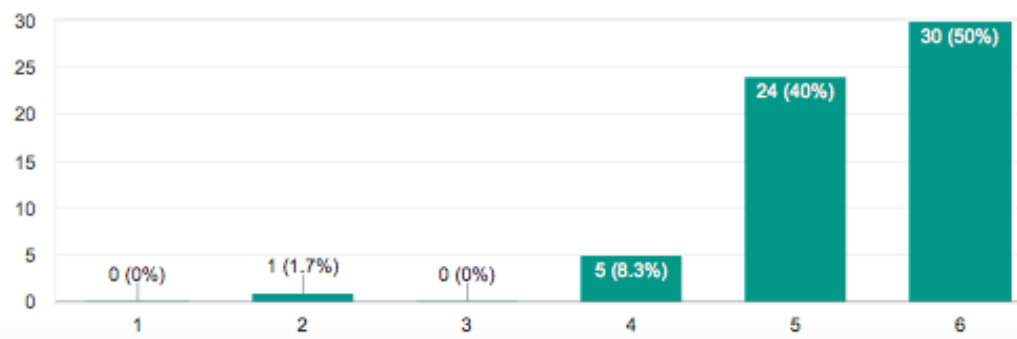
60 responses



---

**Q10** I am confident my level of English is high enough to succeed at university.

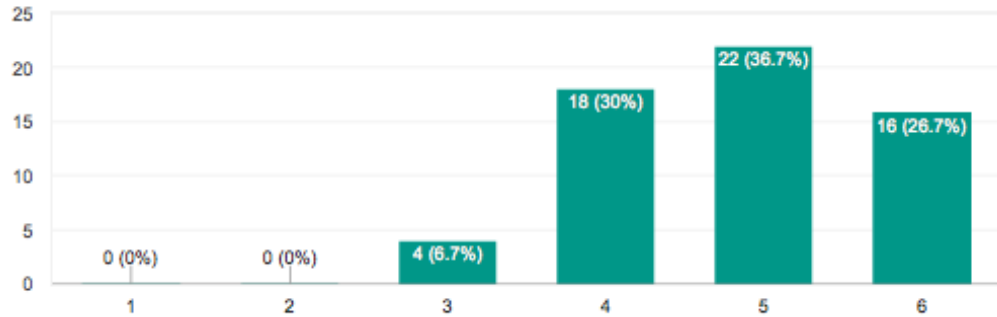
60 responses



---

**Q11** I expect the level of English at GSS to be high.

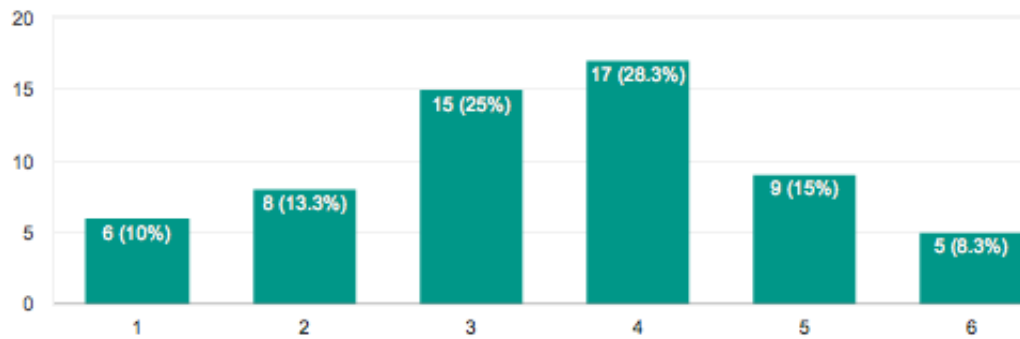
60 responses



---

**Q12** I expect native-English speakers as teachers of the courses.

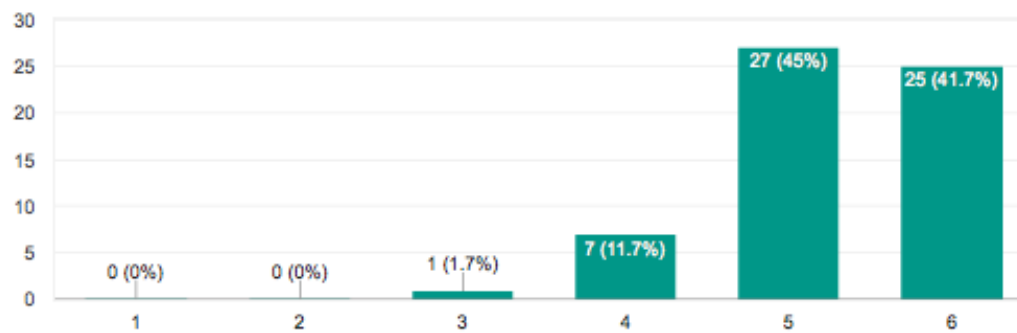
60 responses



---

**Q13** How important is it to you that teachers speak English fluently?

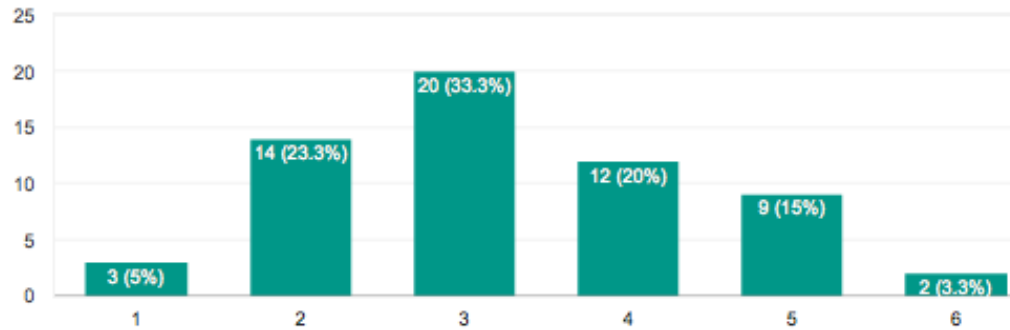
60 responses



---

**Q14** How important is it to you that teachers speak English accentless?

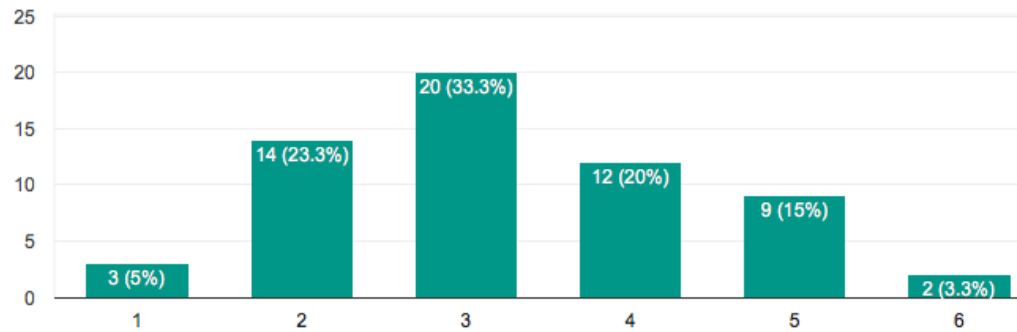
60 responses



---

**Q15** How important is it to you that teachers speak English accentless?

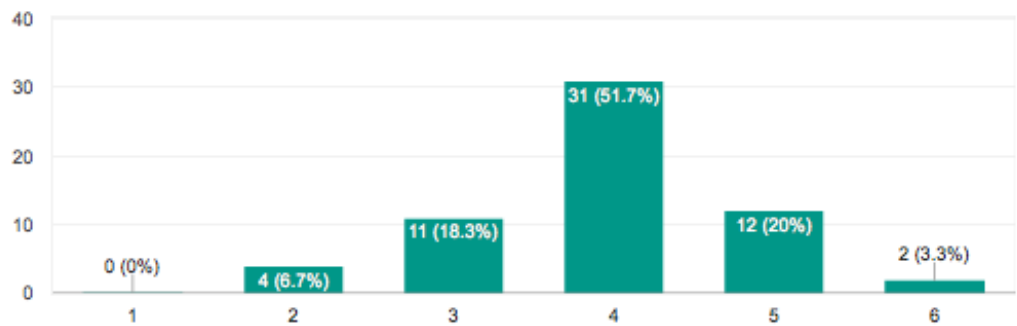
60 responses



---

**Q16** The teachers at GSS have an overall good level of English.

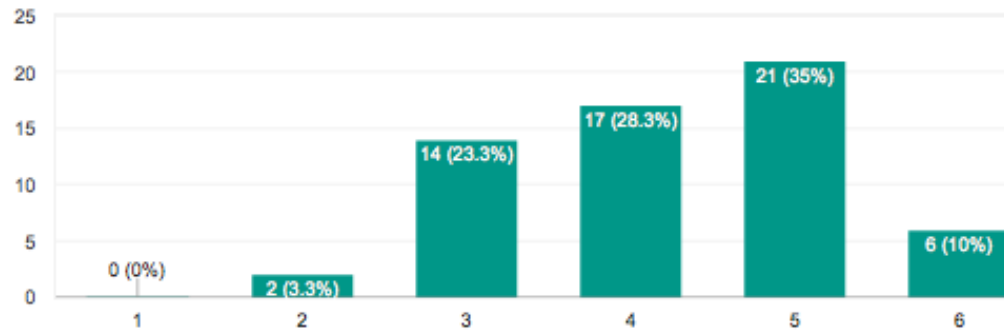
60 responses



---

**Q17** In terms of language, I can always fully comprehend what the teachers say in the lectures.

60 responses





## Q18

## Please give an example if this is not the case:

28 responses

Using dutch words throughout a presentationonly instances of dutch graphs or pictures could cause difficulty"I will learn you...", "when I was bikeling to the city"

Just a lot of small errors

the accent is sometime bit too strong

Weird choice of words (especially written questions), words used in the wrong context

With Mathematics first year, the male teacher did not speak clear and used dutch words

My biggest pet peeve is teachers saying 'he?' at the end of each sentence when explaining something. Apart from that many are unable to pronounce words correctly and use incorrect grammar.

part of the material, especially in old dutch courses readapted in english sometimes is in dutch sometimes a dutch way of speaking english, happens but not often

Use of Dutch words, extreme accents

Extreme accent and wrong use of grammar. It's that I'm Dutch, so I can "understand" the Dutch use of grammar in English sentences. About the accent; especially the German teachers have an accent that makes it hard to understand what they're saying.

Ik ben nederlands, dus ik versta meestal wel wat de docenten zeggen, maar soms (niet heel vaak) vraagt een internationale student aan mij wat er gezegd wordt, omdat het nederlandse accent soms moeilijk te verstaan is

Accents make it difficult sometimes

I feel like teachers have often difficulties finding their words

Distracting accents

Use of Dutch words, EXTREME accents, wrong pronunciations, wrongly used grammar, etc sentences directly translated from dutch

Some teachers have (really) strong Dutch accents and will translate Dutch words/sayings/sentence structures into English incorrectly. Because I'm Dutch I usually understand what they mean but I can imagine Internationals might not

Thick accent and 'denglish'errors in exams (poorly structured sentences), Some english words have strong accents that it can be hard to understandLots of Dutch sentence structures, overall errors (in speech and in writing (handouts, exams etc)), bad pronunciationUse of dutch words in english sentencesSnel onduidelijk. Australië's Engels niet te verstaan, waar britts en Amerikaans prima zou zijn

Extreme accents

Strong dutch accent

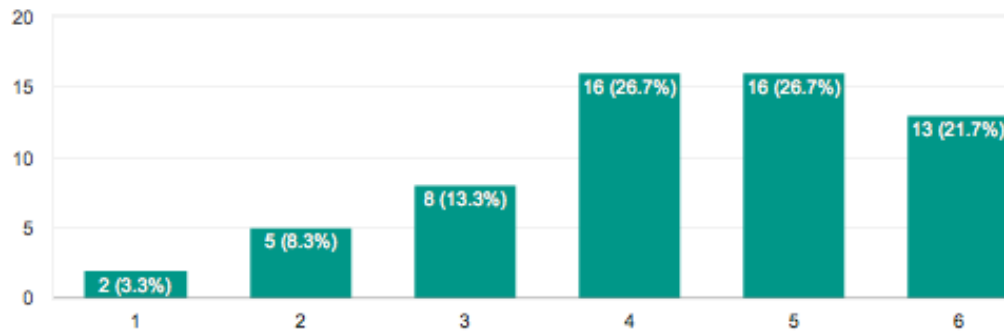
Use of Dutch words

Sometimes the accent is thick and not so comprehensible

---

**Q19** I can learn just as well from a non-native English teacher as from a native English teacher.

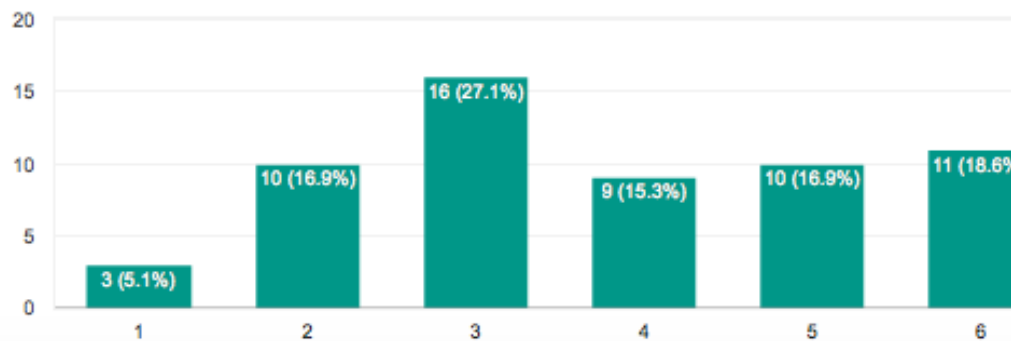
60 responses



---

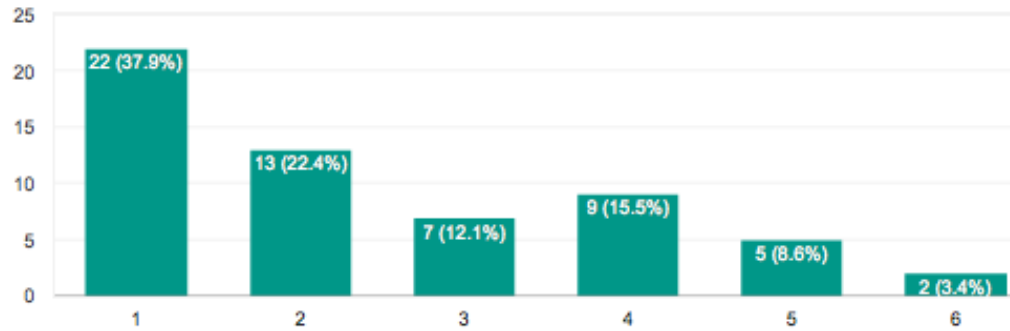
**Q20** I always have interactions in English with my teachers during lectures and tutorials.

59 responses



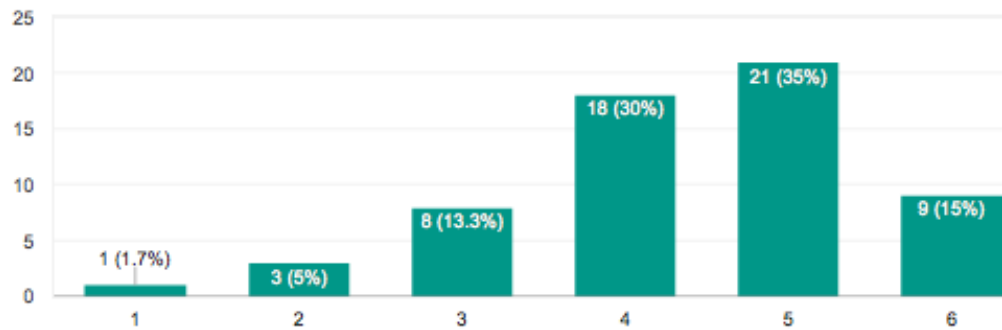
**Q21** I feel less inclined to interact with my teachers because the instruction isn't in my native language.

58 responses



**Q22** English at GSS helps me to achieve my learning goals.

60 responses



**Q23** On a scale of 1 to 10, please give the English at GSS an overall grade.

60 responses

