

**Comment on
Report from *programsensor* for linguistics at the University of Bergen, May 2018**

I note the following recommendations made in the report relating to ENG223/223L/263:

1. Make attendance compulsory for all courses above the 100 level.
2. Make qualifying assignments obligatory, so the students get some practice (1) expressing themselves in academic English, and (2) solving relevant exercises, before the exam. Qualifying tests have reduced the number of F's in the exams at the University of Oslo, in all our courses.
3. Make the course titles and aims identical for ENG223, ENG223L and ENG263 in (1) the online course descriptions and (2) the handouts distributed in class.
4. Solve the problem of trying to teach a 10-credit course (ENG223/ENG263) and a 5-credit course (ENG223L) simultaneously.

My responses to these points are:

1. I can see the point of making attendance compulsory and would personally welcome it. However, this should ideally be done as part of a wider move towards compulsory attendance at all courses at the Department of Foreign Languages, or even the Faculty of Humanities as a whole.
2. Obligatory qualifying assignments is a good idea. Ideally, students should write and receive feedback on their writing in all courses. This is time-consuming, however, and obviously requires teaching resources.

At the end of 2017, English linguistics at IF lost one member of staff (Karol Janicki) to retirement, and there seems to be little prospect of that post being filled soon. Some of the remaining members of staff in English linguistics already have large amounts of 'overtime' on their teaching and administration accounts. This shows that, in the five years since IF wiped out accrued overtime in 2013, the department has simply continued the practice of relying on using large amounts of research time to cover teaching. The need to do so is an indication that English linguistics has been understaffed even with six members, and this is further underscored by the fact that even relatively new staff have accumulated large research time deficits in just a few years. This understaffing/overteaching undoubtedly contributes to the decline in research production at the department and the faculty as a whole.

It is impossible to include obligatory writing assignments in these courses without a considerable expansion of teaching resources beyond those currently available to us, i.e. not only filling the existing vacancy in English linguistics, but also avoiding further attrition and acquiring new positions.

(The department might also consider streamlining administration to reduce the amount of time used on management and coordination at various levels, board and committee meetings, and administrative tasks like multiple rounds of reading, writing and replying to evaluations and reports, etc.)

3. This is an administrative task: the ENG223 description can be pasted into the pages for 223L and 263, with necessary adjustments regarding credits, course requirements, exam types, etc.
4. If only... It is some ten years since the staff in English linguistics and literature/culture unanimously signed a letter asking IF and those responsible for *Lektorutdanningen* at the Faculty of Psychology to adjust this integrated programme so that we might avoid having to offer amputated versions of literature/culture and linguistics courses to students on the teacher training

programme. To date, there has been no serious attempt to amend the structures that make it necessary to teach five- and 10-point versions of some courses. I note, however, rumours that those preparing the latest revision of the *Lektorutdanning* may be considering models that would in effect go some way towards doing what we were requesting in 2008 by organising the programme in a way that takes account of the needs of the other disciplines. This will be a welcome development.

Bergen, 13.09.2018

Kevin McCafferty

Report from *programsensor* for linguistics at the University of Bergen

May 2018

Programsensor: Gjertrud Flermoen Stenbrenden, Associate Professor of English Language, University of Oslo

Courses evaluated: ENG221/ENG261, ENG223/ENG223L/ENG263

Scope of evaluation: spring semester of 2017

1. Introduction

I received the documents pertaining to the courses evaluated in April 2018. The documents submitted for each course were: online and written course descriptions, the exam questions, the course report written by the teachers, and the student evaluations.

I will closely follow the *Retningslinjer for programsensor ved Universitetet i Bergen*, as outlined in the *Programsensormappe*. They suggest that my duties are to assess and evaluate the framework (*opplegg*) for and execution (*gjennomføring*) of courses offered in English language at the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Bergen.

The aspects which the *Retningslinjer* specify for assessment and evaluation are:

- I. Syllabi, course structure, teaching;
- II. Forms of assessment, including the use of external examiners;
- III. The extent to which the *programsensor* has participated in discussions about quality development/improvement in the particular *studieprogram* in question;
- IV. Any special circumstances in the execution of relevant courses;
- V. The role and tasks of the *programsensor*.

Points I, II, IV call for an assessment of the courses themselves and their execution, including course descriptions, learning outcomes, syllabi, forms of assessment, exam results, etc., whereas points III and V ask the *programsensor* to self-evaluate and assess her role as such. This is my third annual report as *programsensor*, so questions III and V will be addressed very briefly here: I have not yet participated in discussions of quality or potential improvements.

In the following sections, I will evaluate and comment on the courses assessed this time, in terms of points I and II (and IV where relevant) as specified above (sections 2-3); my role as *programsensor* is assessed (section 4), and I take a final look at the courses as part of a larger context (section 5). I will treat ENG221 and ENG261 together, and ENG223, ENG223L and ENG263 together.

2. ENG221 and ENG261 History of English

These courses are 200-level courses in the history of the English language; they are essentially the same courses, with the same teacher resources and lectures, but with different final exams. ENG261 seems to be chosen by those who need to write a term paper, which is a requirement for a BA degree (“Semesteroppgåva fyller kravet til det sjølvstendige arbeidet som skal gå inn in ein bachelorgrad”, accprdomg tp the online course description).

The courses aim to provide students with an introduction to the history and changes which have affected the English language, from the Old English to (and including) the early Modern English periods, on various linguistic levels – phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, orthography. The skills acquired are identical to those formulated for most courses in English, i.e., that the students are able to analyse linguistic material using the appropriate terminology, but from a historical perspective. Additionally, the students will of course have gained knowledge of the three major historical periods/stages of English.

Course description, syllabus, structure, teaching and special circumstances

The textbook is Barber, Beal & Shaw 2009, and the pensum consists of extracts from this textbook, as well as a short compendium on historical phonology (Rydland 2016) and some primary texts.

Instruction is given in the form of lectures and seminars, up to 24 hours over 12 weeks. Attendance seems to be optional. There are no obligatory assignments, but the students are given the opportunity to hand in papers and are recommended to do so. The final assessment is a four-hour written school exam for ENG221, and a term paper in combination with an oral exam for ENG261.

Assessment

The course descriptions are clearly formulated and precise. The pensum is well-chosen, and there are no negative comments on the students' part that suggest it is too difficult, though the courses themselves are deemed to be a bit challenging.

In the spring semester of 2017, instruction was given as a mix of lectures and seminars, over 12 weeks. The course report written by the teacher is very good and comprehensive and points to the familiar difficulties of teaching the history of the English language, and of student attendance and commitment. The students clearly want seminars rather than lectures, according to the student evaluation, but it should be kept in mind that some topics must be taught as lectures, so the teacher's decision to have lectures mixed with seminars seems wise. The quality of the instruction appears to be excellent, as the students' comments strongly indicate.

The students were indeed given the opportunity to hand in written work, but only about half the students chose to make use of this offer, according to the teacher's report. I strongly recommend that the qualifying paper be made obligatory, as it gives students the opportunity to practise expressing themselves in proper academic English, cf. the explicit goal of the course, as formulated in the course description regarding "general competence". I also recommend that attendance be made compulsory.

The choice of a school exam as the final assessment seems natural for ENG221, as the course covers a range of topics. The amount of work required (in the spring of 2017) was quite comprehensive, but not overly so, for four hours, and the various tasks tested a range of relevant topics. 34 students sat the final written exam, so there was a pre-exam drop-out rate of c. 31% (49 students registered for the course). Of those who sat the final exam, 10% failed, 33.4% received an E or a D, 25 % got a C, whereas 29.2% and 12.5% were awarded with a B and an A, respectively. A failure rate of 10% is quite normal, and the teacher thinks that the relatively high number of students who received an A or a B may be attributed to the fact that a number of students were consistent in attending and participating actively in class. Five students chose ENG261 and wrote a term paper, and they received the grades B, C, and D.

The teacher's practice of providing students with a list of suggested topics for the term paper is sound; I do that myself for my course in the history of the English language at the University of Oslo.

In sum, ENG221 and ENG261 appear to work well in terms of the topics covered, teaching, syllabus and exams. I do, however, recommend that both attendance and submission of written work be made obligatory.

3. ENG223/ENG223L/ENG263 Modern English Linguistics

According to the online course descriptions in Norwegian, these courses aim to give students insights into central topics in modern English linguistics and to introduce the students to linguistic theories and/or methods which may be used to describe modern English (my translation from Norwegian). Upon completing the course, students should have gained a critical and independent attitude towards linguistics problems and be able to express themselves in correct academic English.

However, the title of the courses online and the title given in the written handout (probably distributed in class) are very different; the latter has "Studying twentieth-century English" as its title, not "Modern English Linguistics", and the course aims are radically different from those specified online. In the written handout, the course is said to be "an introduction to corpus approaches to the study of the English language in use"; variation, change and the corpus method are highlighted.

Course description, syllabus, structure, teaching and special circumstances

ENG223 and ENG263 give 10 credits; ENG223L (for students at the *Lektorprogrammet* only) gives 5 credits. The reading list was identical for the three courses at the outset, but as a result of student complaints, the pensusum was reduced for ENG223L.

The instruction is given in the form of seminars, up to 24 hours in total, over 12 weeks, according to the course description. In the course report for the spring semester of 2017, it is specified that instruction was given as 10 x 2 hours of lectures, and 2 x 2 hours of *dugnad*, which involved the students more actively in studying grammatical features of the texts in the CORIECOR corpus and in extracting and analysing corpus material. The students were given the opportunity to hand in a written paper, but there are no qualifying obligatory assignments for ENG223 or ENG223L. For ENG263, the students are required to receive supervision and feedback on a draft of their term paper (2 sessions).

The textbooks are Lindquist 2009 and Mair 2006. The final assessments are school exams of 4 and 3 hours respectively for ENG223 and ENG223L, and a term paper combined with an oral exam for ENG263.

Assessment

Both the online course descriptions and the description in the written handout are precise, and the learning outcomes are formulated clearly, but they should be identical. The fact that there are three course codes may be confusing, as pointed out by the teacher in the course report.

The textbooks seem well-chosen, and the students do not seem to have found them difficult. The teacher laments the fact that the *Lektorprogram* students lacked academic curiosity and complained that the reading list was the same for them as for ENG223 and ENG263. It is easy

to agree, but at the same time, ENG233L gives only 5 credits, so having a reduced reading list would be perfectly normal.

The teaching seems to have been of high quality. The teacher is reasonably content with the course, but states that the students were passive and more interested in the questions of the final assessment than in learning something new. The *dugnad* seminars worked surprisingly well and the students are reported to have provided good solutions to their team projects. I take this as an indication that a course of this kind probably works better taught as seminars than as lectures, i.e. with a lot of time spent on hands-on problem-solving and practical exercises. The student answers in the evaluation support this. It is difficult to find a balance between theory and practice in this type of course, especially when the students are so diverse and have very different objectives with their studies.

The choice of traditional school exams for ENG223 and ENG223L seems natural, given the nature and level of the course. The questions posed are good and do indeed test the contents of the course; i.e., the pass marks A-E reflect the extent to which the learning outcomes have been achieved. The students have no complaints about the length of the exams, but the teacher notes that a 2-hour exam would be sufficient for the ENG223L students. It is unclear whether any students sat the final exam for ENG263.

The grades obtained in the spring semester of 2017 are fairly normally distributed, at least for ENG223. 16 students sat the final ENG223 exam, with the following marks: A 7%, B 25%, C 12%, D 30%, E 7%, F 19%. 13 students sat the final ENG223L exam, with the following marks: B 8%, C 46%, D 31%, F 15%. The marks are thus considerably lower for ENG223L, which may be linked to the students' lack of enthusiasm for the course (cf. the student evaluation and the teacher's report). As the teacher points out, the students seem to be unaware that knowledge of linguistics and English language constitutes one of the pillars of their education and is going to be crucial in their work as teachers. This might be pointed out to them at the beginning of the course: knowledge *of* English and knowledge *of how* to teach it are both required in a good teacher.

Otherwise, the teacher expresses some frustration at the number of course codes and the fact that he has to upload course materials in three different places. I recommend that his request to link the course codes be followed up.

4. The role and tasks of the *programsensor*

Points III and V in the *retningslinjer for programsensor* concern “the extent to which the *programsensor* has participated in discussions about quality development/improvement in the particular *studieprogram* in question” and “the role and tasks of the *programsensor*”.

Regarding the first point, I have not participated in discussions of the development of quality at the University of Bergen, but I consider this report and prior reports to *be* part of such a discussion, as they address the quality of the courses taught as well as potential improvements. If the University of Bergen and the Department would like me to, I am of course willing to participate more directly in such discussions.

The *programsensor's* role, in my opinion, is to address all the topics explicitly raised in the *retningslinjer*, and to offer suggestions for improvement, if relevant. Any such suggestions are advisory only, and it is up to the Department to implement them. The Department and teachers are very welcome to contact me if there are matters which are unclear.

5. Summing up

The two sets of courses evaluated here seem to have worked satisfactorily, both at their intended level and as part of the totality of courses taught on English language and linguistics. Challenges with the ENG221/ENG261 courses are related to the general difficulty of the subject matter; in other words, there is a lot to learn, there are many dates to remember, some of the topics are difficult, etc. The challenges faced by the ENG223/ENG223L/ENG263 courses are of a different nature: Trying to amalgamate three different courses and giving the students of these courses identical instruction is a considerable problem, for both the teacher and the students. The teacher suggests as a solution that in the future, students of ENG223L may have to attend only the first 5-6 lectures. But even this is not unproblematic, even if it is possible: A course normally has natural progression, and later lectures build on earlier lectures, or topics are treated more than once, more superficially at first, then in-depth, etc. Attending the first 5-6 lectures out of a series of 12 would not necessarily solve the issue, as the students might miss out on crucial information. Perhaps the solution is to make ENG223L a 10-credit course as well? The teachers show a very high awareness of the challenges and weaknesses of their courses, so I am convinced they will address the problems on their own accord.

I have a few suggestions for improvement:

- Make attendance compulsory for all courses above the 100 level.
- Make qualifying assignments obligatory, so the students get some practice (1) expressing themselves in academic English, and (2) solving relevant exercises, *before* the exam. Qualifying tests have reduced the number of F's in the exams at the University of Oslo, in all our courses.
- Make the course titles and aims identical for ENG223, ENG223L and ENG263 in (1) the online course descriptions and (2) the handouts distributed in class.
- Solve the problem of trying to teach a 10-credit course (ENG223/ENG263) and a 5-credit course (ENG223L) simultaneously.

Oslo, 28 May 2018

Sincerely,

[sign.]

Gjertrud Flermoen Stenbrenden