



## NOTAT FRA PROGRAMSTYRE KNYTTET TIL PROGRAMSENSORRAPPORT I ENGELSK FOR HØSTEN 2017

Dato for håndtering i programstyret: 18. oktober 2017

### Kommentarer fra programstyret:

Programsensor for engelsk lingvistikk, Gjertrud Flermoen Stenbrenden, UiO har levert rapport om ENG114 og ENG115.

Rapporten ble diskutert i programstyremøtet for engelsk 18. oktober 2017.

Rapporten kommenterer valg av pensumlitteratur, opplegget for emnene og karakterfordelingen.

Siden programsensorens kommentarer om pensumlitteratur og karakterfordelingen gjenspeiler lingvistenes oppfatning, er programstyrets notat begrenset til kommentar om opplegget for emnene.

Programsensoren foreslår at antall seminar i både ENG114 og ENG115 økes betydelig og at deltakelse i både forelesningene og seminarene gjøres obligatorisk. Mht. ENG115 ville obligatoriske seminarer være nyttig når det gjelder praksis (vi tolker 'praksis' som 'innøving av uttale'). Dessuten foreslår hunat innleveringene/arbeidskravene i både ENG114 og ENG115 blir gjort obligatoriske, som ville være understøttende når det gjelder oppnåelsen av den generelle kompetansen av å kunne uttrykke seg korrekt på akademisk engelsk. Mht. ENG115 ville obligatoriske innleveringer motvirke frafall og stryk. Det forslås at eksamensform i ENG115 endres fra digital skoleeksamen til muntlig.

Forslaget om å øke antall seminar gjenspeiler kursledernes oppfatning av et idealt opplegg, men dessverre tillater ikke ressursituasjon det. Det samme gjelder forslag om å ha obligatoriske innleveringer. Disiplinen uttaler seg derimot sterkt om obligatorisk deltakelse i forelesningene og seminarene. Når det gjelder programsensorens kommentar om praksis og eksamensform i ENG115, så er det viktig å understreke (a) at emnet er planlagt som en teoretisk tilnærming til engelsk fonetikk og fonologi, ikke som et praktisk emne, (b) at eksamen ikke ble gjennomført digitalt, og (c) at muntlig eksamen passer dårlig til et teoretisk emne men også ville være alt for ressurskrevende.

I tillegg påpeker programsensoren at den engelske versjonen av emnebeskrivelsen i både ENG114 og ENG115 inneholder en feilplassert link.

Fagkoordinator:           Dagmar Haumann

Dato:                       23.10.2017

# Report from *programsensor* for linguistics at the University of Bergen September 2017

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

**Courses evaluated:** ENG114, ENG115

**Scope of evaluation:** spring semester of 2017

## 1. Introduction

I received the documents pertaining to ENG114 and ENG115 on 1 September 2017. The documents submitted for each course were the exam, the course report written by the teacher(s), and the student evaluation.

I will closely follow the *Retningslinjer for programsensor ved Universitetet i Bergen*, as outlined in the *Programsensormappe*. I thus see it as my duty to assess and evaluate the framework (*opplegg*) for and execution (*gjennomføring*) of a variety 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 second 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 two courses assessed this time, in terms of points I and II (and IV where relevant) as specified above (sections 2-3); use of external examiners has been given a separate sub-section (section 4). I will then assess my role as *programsensor* (section 5) and take a final look at the courses as part of a larger context (section 6).

## 2. ENG114 English Grammar I

This course is an undergraduate course in English grammar; its relation to ENG101 English Linguistics I is a little unclear, but seems to overlap with it. ENG114 aims to provide students with “basic insight into the structures of the English language, and on [*sic*] central analytic terms in syntax and morphology” (online course description). 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.

### ***Course description, syllabus, structure, teaching and special circumstances***

The course description is clear and precise if a little short. In the English version, the link to the syllabus is replaced with a link to the schedule; it would be better to have a link to both in both versions.

The textbook is Huddleston & Pullum's *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar* (2005), which is the same as that used for ENG107.

Instruction is given in the form of lectures and seminars, up to 36 hours, according to the course description. Attendance seems to be optional for both. There are no obligatory assignments, even if 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.

### ***Assessment***

The textbook seems well-chosen (Huddleston & Pullum 2005), and there are no negative comments on the students' part that suggest it is too difficult.

In the spring semester of 2017, instruction was divided between 12 lectures and 3 seminars, but the number of hours for each is not specified in the course report. The number of seminars seems very low for a course that in our experience proves difficult for many students. I recommend that the number of seminars be increased and that attendance be made compulsory; the students agree in this assessment. The quality of the instruction appears to be very high indeed, as the students' comments strongly indicate.

The students were given the opportunity to hand in two written assignments, but only 33 out of 173 registered students chose to make use of this offer. I strongly recommend that the qualifying papers be made obligatory, as they give students the opportunity to exercise their abilities in expressing themselves in proper academic English, cf. the explicit goal of the course, as formulated in the course description regarding "general competence". Academic English is a genre unto itself, and students need a lot of practice to master it. Qualifying assignments measure the students' progress, and test them in syllabus topics before the final exam. The students' own remarks support my recommendation.

The choice of a school exam as the final assessment seems a natural choice. The amount of work required (in the spring of 2017) was fine for four hours, and the various tasks tested a range of relevant topics.<sup>1</sup> 116 students sat the final exam, so there was a pre-exam drop-out rate of *c.* 33%. Of those who sat the exam, 26% failed, 42% received an E or a D, 12 % got a C, whereas 12% and 8% were awarded with a B and an A, respectively. This means there is a concentration of grades in the lower end of the scale, which is fairly typical for grammar exams. A failure rate of 26% is also quite typical.

### **3. ENG115 English Phonetics and Phonology**

The course aims "to give insight into English pronunciation and into central terms in phonetics and phonology. It also aims to offer a precise linguistic vocabulary as a working tool" (online course description). Upon completing the course, students should possess

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<sup>1</sup> However, the wording of Task 5 is somewhat unfortunate, in that it seems to say that there is only one correct option in all of the examples, whereas certainly for example g), both a singular and a plural verb are correct in British English, depending on whether there is unit reading (*the council is*) or distributive reading (*the council are*). In b), prescriptive grammar requires *is*, but even native speakers use *are* these days.

knowledge of the English phonemes and classificatory system, and be able to analyse linguistic material using the tools they have acquired.

### ***Course description, syllabus, structure, teaching and special circumstances***

The online course description is precise, and the learning outcomes are formulated clearly, both in Norwegian and in English. However, the link to the syllabus is absent from the English version and is replaced with a link to the schedule, cf. my remark regarding ENG114 above.

The instruction is given in the form of lectures and seminars, up to 36 hours in total, according to the course description. In the course report for the spring semester of 2017, it is specified that instruction was given as 24 hours of plenary lectures and 4 seminars of 3 hours each. The students were given the opportunity to hand in three written papers (optional).

The textbook is Thor Sigurd Nilsen's *English Pronunciation and Intonation* (2010). The final assessment is a three-hour written school exam.

### ***Assessment***

The textbook seems well-chosen, even if some of the students find it difficult. We used it as our textbook in English phonetics at the University of Oslo for a few semesters some years ago, but found it too detailed for an introductory course.

The choice of having seminars is a good one for an introductory course like this, because smaller groups offer hands-on experience for the students: they can ask questions, discuss difficult topics, work with exercises, get pronunciation and dictation practice, etc. Thus, even if the lectures last for 2 hours, having only 4 optional seminars seems too little. At the very least, they ought to be made obligatory (the course report states that 35-40 out of the 160 students attended the seminars). The student evaluation supports this recommendation, as many of the students ask for more seminars (even if not all of them attended those that were offered).

Also, the assignments should be made obligatory, as they enable the students to exercise their abilities in analysing linguistic material, using the appropriate terminology and in proper academic English. Otherwise, it is hard to see how the students may achieve the course description's explicit goal that they "can express himself or herself in correct academic English", if they have no training in it before the exam itself. It might also reduce (1) the drop-out rate, and (2) the number of failures in the exam, both of which are quite high, at 40% (drop-outs) and 42% (failures), respectively. Another advantage of having compulsory qualifying assignments is that they give students practice in receiving constructive criticism and feedback, which they have to incorporate in later work. Not all obligatory tests have to be written: they can also be (informal) reading tests, dictations taken in the seminars (or indeed in the lectures, with the key given afterwards), classification tests, etc.

The choice of a traditional albeit digital school exam 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. However, in the exam given in the spring semester of 2017, the symbols used to indicate

stress and tone-unit boundaries in exercise 1 are partly incorrect (both) and/or are inconsistent (stress mark).<sup>2</sup> Rectifying this should be a minor task.

The grades obtained in the spring semester of 2017 support what is well known: either students find phonetics/phonology incomprehensible and fail (42%), or they understand (and rather enjoy) it and do well: 37.5% were awarded with an A or a B, and 57.1% got a C or better, which means 42.9% of those who passed received a D or an E. These numbers are fairly normal, but the failure rate is quite high. The phonetics teacher(s) might consider having an oral exam rather than a written exam in phonetics; orals seem to improve students' pass rate, possibly because they rehearse and prepare better when they know that a personal encounter with two examiners awaits...

Otherwise, the student evaluation indicates that the course works well and that the instruction given is enthusiastic and of high quality.

#### **4. Use of external examiners**

The University of Bergen's regulations with respect to the use of external examiners are found on the following website: <http://www.uib.no/fremmedsprak/24103/sensur-og-evaluering>. The regulations are meant to ensure that institutions do not develop (a) unfortunate 'in-house' grading habits, or (b) permanent 'links' between a certain teacher and a certain external examiner, as stated in point 6:

Det er vesentleg å sikra eige nivå gjennom å variera samansetjinga av kommisjonane, og på den måten unngå faste koplingar mellom rettleiar og ekstern sensor.

The regulations are quite strict,<sup>3</sup> which is good: usually teachers benefit greatly from working with external examiners, as they bring a different point of view to the table. At the University of Bergen, not all courses are required to use an external examiner, and in these cases, using a *programsensor* may make up for this, as expressed in point 5.<sup>4</sup> External examiners were not used for either of the courses I have looked at for this report; instead, two internal examiners were used. I have therefore considered the exams and assessments in some detail in the foregoing.

#### **5. The role and tasks of the *programsensor***

Points III and V in the *retningslinjer for programsensor* regard "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 quality development prior to this report being written, but I consider this report to *be* part of such a discussion, as it addresses the quality of the courses taught as well as any potential improvements. If the

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<sup>2</sup> The tone-unit symbol used looks like a capital 'I', and makes reading the text (in exercise 1) difficult; it should be 'l' (in the upper left corner of the keyboard, on the same key as '§'). The stress mark is sometimes the correct "", sometimes what looks like a small superscript capital 'I'.

<sup>3</sup> That is, they restrict the use of internal-only examiners.

<sup>4</sup> «5. Det er ikkje noko krav om at eit fag skal bruka ekstern sensor på alle emne. M.a. kan ordninga med programsensorar kompensera for eksterne eksamensensorar. Det skal likevel alltid brukast ekstern sensor ved klagesensur, til munnleg eksamen og ved sensur av masteroppgåver. Til andre eksamenar kan det brukast kommisjonar med to interne sensorar.» <http://www.uib.no/fremmedsprak/24103/sensur-og-evaluering#eksterne-sensorar-til-eksamen>

University of Bergen and the Department wish me to, I am more than willing to participate more directly in such discussions in the future.

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.

## 6. Summing up

Both the courses evaluated here seem to have worked well, both at their intended level and as part of the totality of courses taught on English language. Every time a course is taught, teachers tend to make changes in response to their own experiences and to feedback, including student evaluations. In my experience, there is a high degree of self-monitoring among university teaching staff, because we want our courses to be perceived as relevant and of high quality. Thus, I am sure the teachers will address any less than satisfactory aspects of the courses they teach, if given the opportunity; this is a valid point, as it is the financial status of the Department which determines the number of seminars offered, to take one example.

I have a few suggestions for improvement:

- Provide reading lists in the English version of the online course descriptions, so the students know what to prepare for.
- The course descriptions could be made more explicit with regard to aims and contents. For instance, for ENG115, there could be mention of RP vs. AE, contrastive points (English vs. Norwegian), etc.
- Make qualifying assignments obligatory, so the students have a go at (1) expressing themselves in academic English, and (2) solving practical grammar and phonetics exercises, *before* the exam. Qualifying tests have greatly improved the quality of writing and reduced the number of failures in the exams at the University of Oslo, both in grammar and in phonetics.
- Offer more seminars on exercises and problem-solving, as this is where students feel free to ask questions and have the chance to improve either their English grammar skills or their own pronunciation, through grammar/pronunciation exercises, dictations, and the like. The skills component (as opposed to the knowledge component) of phonetics should not be overlooked.

Oslo, 12 September 2017

Sincerely,



Gjertrud Flermoen Stenbrenden

