

Why shouldn't we study American textbooks?

Mieke Donk

Marc Brysbaert and François Dumoulin argue that there are several reasons for lecturers in Dutch-speaking countries to adopt Dutch textbooks instead of English (American) textbooks in undergraduate courses, in particular in introductory courses (Brysbaert & Dumoulin, 2007). They present three arguments to support their case. First, they point out that, relative to Dutch textbooks, English textbooks enhance the workload of students, which they believe is undesirable. Second, they claim that language switching associated with the use of an English textbook brings with it unwanted costs. Finally, they state that English (American) textbooks are too oriented towards the American culture at the expense of the Dutch-speaking part of the world.

Even though the arguments outlined by Brysbaert and Dumoulin are sound, I am not persuaded by their arguments for using Dutch textbooks. This is not based on an unfounded preconception against Dutch textbooks (on the contrary, I know there are several very good ones among which one written by one of the authors!) but on the notion that the current Western world, particularly the sciences, heavily relies on English as a major language of communication. Moreover, I believe that the arguments brought forth by the authors favouring the use of Dutch textbooks can actually be adopted to favour the opposite view.

First, the authors claim that using English rather than Dutch textbooks enhances the workload of students. I believe the authors are right in pointing this out. However, the authors proceed by claiming that this extra workload is undesirable. I do not agree with this statement. Recent figures from the *Studentenmonitor 2005* (2006) show that on average psychology students spend only about 29 hours/week on studying. (*Studentenmonitor 2005* does not report the results

Correspondence to: Mieke Donk, Department of Cognitive Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Van der Boerhorststraat 1, NL 1081 HV Amsterdam, e-mail: w.donk@psy.vu.nl

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for psychology students separately, instead these students are categorised as students in the area of Human Behaviour and Society and the figures given here are for this total category of students). This is dramatically less than the average study time of students in areas such as agriculture (39 hours/week), medicine (36 hours/week), or technique (35 hours/week). More important is the finding that only 2% of all psychology students report the workload to be too high. These results demonstrate that psychology students are working far below their capacity rendering any measure that decreases the workload undesirable in my opinion.

Second, Brysbaert and Dumoulin claim that the use of an English textbook is associated with switching costs, for example, when students are required to learn from an English textbook and take a Dutch exam. Indeed, performance is expected to be higher if both textbook and exam are in the same language compared with different languages. In a similar vein, you may also increase exam performance by using the same letter point size and font in the exam as in the textbook. However, do we want students to be tested on their ability to retrieve information from memory on the basis of various content-irrelevant retrieval cues? I do not believe so. In my opinion, the possibility to use content-irrelevant retrieval cues in an exam should be excluded as much as possible. One way to achieve this is by using an English textbook and a Dutch exam.

Finally, Brysbaert and Dumoulin argue that American books are too strongly biased towards the US preparing Dutch-speaking students less than optimally for their future jobs. Even though this might indeed be true for some students, for others, in particular those who will get a job in the academic world or in international business, using an American book may even be advantageous. Nevertheless, the authors do have a point when they state that Dutch-speaking students using an American book will end up with only limited knowledge about psychology in their own country. One possible solution to circumvent this drawback would be to use an English translation of a Dutch adapted textbook. However, I am not sure whether publishers would queue up for such a project.

References

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