

English Medium Instruction in European Higher Education Institutions: how do the objectives and outcomes compare with the situation worldwide?

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Abstract: A developing trend, and in certain contexts an exponentially growing trend, English medium instruction (EMI) in higher education is more than an educational approach; it has become an impact factor on work, social and cultural global relations. With many advocates and, perhaps, just as many opponents, it has become a career building choice which competes with the established L1 medium instruction in higher education. This paper sets out to outline the principles and objectives which underlie EMI in higher education institutions, starting from the more familiar and well documented European perspective and comparing it with EMI in quite different contexts: closer to Europe, such as Turkey, or farther away, such as China. The expected outcomes and the 'not-so-expected' consequences of implementing EMI programmes in tertiary education are also focal points of the present paper. The conclusion shows that, although an eclectic picture, many principles and objectives run across the board, no matter how different the local situation is. But in the same time, many negative consequences run across the board. Acknowledging them and analyzing their causes can benefit all stakeholders in EMI programmes all over the world.

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Introduction

Higher education in Europe has undergone profound changes triggered originally by the Bologna process, and constantly catalyzed by the ever-changing needs of the EU labour market, which is ultimately the beneficiary of skills and qualifications students acquire in higher education institutions (HEIs). Universities and other HEIs compete for students, for recognition and appreciation of their programmes. To become more and more competitive, HEIs have developed multilingual programmes which allow participation of students from a wide range of countries. Although multilingual programmes in tertiary education are not exclusively European, it is Europe where in the early 2000s, after Bologna, a bilingual trend in tertiary education, English Medium Instruction (EMI), mushroomed. This trend has grown exponentially with number of programmes, student enrolment and content offered (ACA reports 2002, 2008). Shortly after the break of the new millennium, other countries reported new developments in EMI in tertiary education (Hu&al. 2014, Lo&Lo 2014, Wächter&Maiworm 2008, Doiz&al. 2012, Gu 2014) with objectives, outcomes, drawbacks or specific relations with the L1 medium instruction which surface a complex image of how different societies and different educational management authorities envisage the role of tertiary education in local and global contexts.

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The broad picture

Which English?

English medium instruction refers mainly to the situation in which English is the language of education in countries where English is not the first language or one of the national languages. In European higher education institutions, English medium instruction runs usually as parallel programmes or only courses to the mainstream L1 medium instruction. Increasingly, discussions on EMI in HEIs across Europe have pointed out that the local context is one in which non-native speakers of English teach various subjects to non-native English speaking students, learning content through English. Hence, it has been claimed that English as a lingua franca (ELF) should be explicitly named as the language of EMI in Europe, rather than just English, which most often is taken to mean English as a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL). The implications for the role of English in European educational systems, and more broadly for social and economic life include aspects such as de-emphasizing the English native speaker as a model for learners and lecturers in EMI contexts (Graddol 2006), creating a communication system of more inclusive nature where other ELF users become models for other ELF users in specific similar social, professional, economic contexts, bringing ESP closer to language and content learning (CLIL). In linguistically diverse contexts such as post-Bologna education in Europe, ELF is “a vehicular language spoken by people who do not share a native language” (Mauranen, 2003: 513). Acknowledging this trend, linguists, discourse analysts and socio-linguists have set out to analyze and describe ELF used in EMI context in order to supply theoretical and practical background to the fundamental communication system on which a significant share of educational programmes enroll the future workforce of Europe. Although a detailed account of such enterprise is beyond the scope of the present paper, mention should be made of research projects especially in Nordic countries which brought significant contributions to the understanding of ELF and of ELF in the academia in Europe. ELFA (<http://www.helsinki.fi/englanti/elfa/>), SELF (<http://www.helsinki.fi/englanti/elfa/self.html>) and the CALPIU (<http://calpiu.dk/ruc/Home.html>) projects are such notable examples, as well as the research centres at The University of Copenhagen (<http://cip.ku.dk/english/certification/>) and at Coventry University (the Engineering Lecture Corpus <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research-bank/research-archive/art-design/engineering-lecture-corpus-elc/>).

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National and institutional context of EMI programmes in HEIs

EMI in European HEIs translates into English-taught courses or entire programmes, such as Bachelor degrees, Master degrees or PhDs. Although in the past five or six years, to the best of my knowledge, there are no comprehensive studies of the up-to-date situation of EMI in European HEIs, the 2002 and 2008 studies under the umbrella of the Academic Cooperation Association (Wächter&Maiworm 2002, 2008) offered a very detailed picture of how this trend in education took off and developed.

Wächter&Maiworm 2008 overview was much more comprehensive than the one in 2002, covering more countries and looking at how and why EMI spread and established in European HEIs. The study covered all countries of the EU where English was not L1 or one of the national languages, so excluding the United Kingdom, Ireland and Malta. A limitation of the study was the fact that it took into consideration only entire programmes taught in English, long-cycle programmes (such as those ending with a graduation degree), and Master degree programmes, excluding, short-cycle qualification courses, PhD programmes and mixed-medium programmes (where L1 and English were both used in teaching). Moreover, the overview investigated only recognized HEIs (that is, institutions whose programmes were accredited by a higher academic authority in the respective country) and accredited programmes.

Despite the fact that these criteria left out a wide range of other academic courses and programmes taught in English, the picture offered by Wächter&Maiworm (2008) is most illuminating. The number of programmes grew from about 700 in 2002 to over 2,400 in 2008. The regional distribution however remained similar, with a concentration of EMI in North-East Europe and less or no programmes in the South. An exception is Cyprus, which fared on top in 2008 but was not investigated in 2002. In concreted figures, the leading provider country is the Netherlands, with 774 programmes, followed by Germany (415), Finland (235) and Sweden (123). If the different sizes of higher education systems are taken into account, the Netherlands are still the leading provider country, followed by Finland and Cyprus.

A strong correlation seems to become obvious between the size and academic objectives of the institutions and the number of EMI programmes they offer. The typical HEI providing EMI in Wächter&Maiworm (2008) study is large, multi-disciplinary and offering PhDs. The trend they

observed was that the larger the HEI, the more likely it was to offer EMI programmes. Hence a correlation between number of students enrolled and number of EMI programmes can be made. The other correlation the authors observed is the fact that large universities also aimed at attracting international students and implementing EMI was part of the internationalization strategy. Wächter&Maiworm also add that ‘this is probably explained by the fact that institutions in some countries with less-often spoken languages – and a lower international enrolment as a consequence – very often use English-medium education as a counter-steering strategy’ (2008:11).

To complete the picture, Wächter&Maiworm (2008) show that engineering programmes have the highest frequency (27%), followed by business and management studies (24%), and by the social sciences (21%), although the profile of the institutions offering the most EMI programmes is one with a wide subject range (general), aiming to promote research (PhD programmes).

Most of the institutions offering EMI charge tuition fees (70%) and target international enrolment.

Let us now see how these data compare with the picture outside Europe. Comparatively comprehensive overviews outside Europe are not available to date. The data coming from mainland China, Hong Kong and Turkey, although limited in time span and number of institutions investigated, as well as lacking a general statistical objective, can still provide good ground for understanding the EMI trend in non-European academic contexts.

China started introducing EMI in its higher education institutions, such as colleges and universities, in 2001. Ever since, the trend has been rising with number of programmes and courses taught in English as well as with international student enrolment (Hu&al. 2014). Among the most important reasons which have contributed to EMI growth in China are:

- the fact that EMI introduction in higher education is considered among the methods of improving quality;
- the fact that EMI is seen as ‘an important strategy to gain access to cutting-edge knowledge and to enhance national competitiveness in innovation and knowledge production’ (Hu&al. 2014: 22).

- the fact that EMI is seen as a competitive advantage in the competition among Chinese universities for governmental incentives and financial support (Hu&al.2014).

In absolute numbers, by 2006 a number of 132 had run EMI courses/programs, with an average of 44 courses per university (Hu&al. 2014).

Just as a note, Lo&Lo 2014, describing a comparative study on the effects of using English as the medium of instruction in secondary education in Hong Kong, point out that even with the two languages (Chinese and English) governmental policy, English remains the medium of instruction of all tertiary education. Hence, although theoretically addressing the same recruitment pool - Chinese as well as international – Hong Kong tertiary education has an ‘advantageous’ start compared to mainland China, with continuing to use (only) English as the medium of instruction in HEIs.

Moving away from the Asian context, Turkey stands at the crossroads between Europe and its neighboring countries, not only geographically, but also in terms of promoting and implementing EMI. In Turkey, as in many European countries, there are instrumental and integrative reasons for introducing EMI in HEIs. For these reasons, although not a member of EU, Turkey was included in the ACA 2008 report by Wächter&Maiworm. A total of 79 investigated institutions reported a total number of 96 English-taught programmes (p.23) in 17 HEIs. This summed up to a maximum of around 4% of all tertiary education programmes in Turkey.

Why EMI in higher education?

Reported objectives

The first question that arises when EMI is considered in any HEI is: what objectives are to be reached with this type of education? Although, perhaps, local considerations may provide a rather eclectic picture of EMI in countries across Europe and elsewhere, some objectives are recurrent and can be found in almost all statements that form the basis for implementing EMI.

Asked to list the most important reasons for introducing EMI in HEIs, the institutions investigated by the Wächter&Maiworm 2008 report, provided the following picture:

- internationalization; foreign students would not enrol in a programme taught in the domestic language (84% of Institutional Coordinators and 81% of Programme Directors);
- better preparing the domestic students for European/international labour markets (84% and 75%);
- providing a more attractive profile of the institution in comparison to others in the country (77% and 75%).

European HEIs also mention reasons such as facilitating inter-university student/staff exchanges and mobility programmes (Erasmus, Grundtvig, etc.).

Outside Europe, places such as mainland China provide a very similar picture, although the order of priority for the above mentioned reasons may differ a little. In mainland China, EMI introduction in HEIs became in 2001 a component of a national policy for becoming more competitive in terms of quality education, research and access to development resources in tertiary education. As mentioned above, HEIs were stimulated to implement EMI programmes as quickly as possible being given various incentives (Hu et al 2014). Internationalization remains the key priority but objectives such as access to cutting-edge knowledge and increased national competitiveness in innovation and knowledge production (Hu 2007) feature on top of the reasons to implement EMI.

A recent study on EMI in Turkish tertiary education, Basibek et al 2014, points to internationalization as the main ground for introducing EMI, adding also the fact that, in Turkey, it is ‘generally considered as a tool which differentiates one university from the others’ (p. 3).

Expected and ‘no-so-expected’ outcomes

Comprehensive comparative studies that show a direct relationship between the introduction of EMI and significant increase in the number of international students, better employability and sharper competitiveness of HEIs that introduced EMI are not available yet (a comparative situation was only presented in the ACA 2008 report for the period on 2002-2007). Individual institutions in Europe report the number of enrolled international students regularly and present periodic statistics which can give a glimpse of how EMI contributes to institutional development. However, because such direct causality can be established only after these programmes have run

for a sufficient number of years to become relevant figures, perhaps we have to wait some more to have comparative results of ‘before EMI’ and ‘after EMI’ all across Europe to be able to claim in favour or against EMI. Until then, beneficial observable results have often been reported in Europe in the field of student and staff mobilities, competitive advantage on the job market of EMI graduates and competitive advantage of HEIs which have EMI programmes as compared to HEIs which do not.

Outside Europe the situation is more complex, in the sense that, in the absence of large comparative studies, individual researchers reported particular aspects, as expected outcomes or just as effects of implementing EMI.

An interesting discussion on the latter can be found in Hu et al (2014). They join in the somehow generally accepted opinion that EMI contributes to increasing the students’ language proficiency due to ‘a favorable language learning environment created by EMI, for example, extensive exposure to English in naturalistic settings’ (p. 23). However, they critically observe that the adoption and spread of EMI in mainland China preceded studies on its feasibility and effectiveness. Reservations on this expected outcome were also expressed, when the idea that EMI created a type of student with the competitive advantage of being fluent in her professional discourse in English, a type that tended to resemble an elite share of the student population. The door to separatism open, Hu et al report the opinion of respondents in their study who thought ‘that only a small number of privileged students would have the opportunity to work for transnational corporations or to study abroad’ (p.31).

Such responses underlined that there is little proof of a link between EMI and better work prospects, but rather that EMI has an instrumental role in creating that belief and contributing to growing elitist populations of students who are favoured in a professional competition only due to the social/political prestige associated with EMI programmes.

Trade, economic and social reasons were reported as reasons for the adoption of EMI in Turkey, too (Basibek et al 2014). The increasing popularity of English led to the first EMI programme in tertiary education introduced by Middle East Technical University (METU) in 1956. With such a long tradition, EMI in HEIs in Turkey competes with L1 education and, not surprisingly,

has stirred hot debates over the advantages and disadvantages of having higher education delivered in a foreign language.

One of the main cons raised by educators in Turkey is the opinion, raised also in China and elsewhere, that EMI is the ground for creating an elitist class (Hu et al 2014, Basibek et al 2014, Mutumba 1999). Opponents of EMI in Turkey also brought forward other arguments such as:

- EMI has been observed to reduce students' ability to understand concepts.
- A consequence of the above is that EMI students show lower levels of competence in the subjects they study.
- EMI is much more time consuming. Language problems lead often to misunderstanding, to superficial grasp of ideas and concepts, which force lecturers to stop and offer extensive remedial explanations which slow down the teaching process. In order to keep the pace with curricula, then, lecturers sometimes have to 'water down' content: 'The focus on language production influences the lecturer's didactical skills in the sense that they are less flexible in conveying the contents of the lecture material, resulting in long monologues, and a lack of rapport with students, humor and interaction.' (Basibek et al 2014: 1821).
- The low language proficiency discourages students to participate to classes, creating a feeling of alienation and isolation, and ultimately leading to low class attendance.

The negative consequences of introducing English-taught programmes reviewed from the Turkish perspective above are in no way singular and, as mentioned, have been discussed in both European and non-European contexts. However, because EMI is adopted in contexts where English is not a national language, and because the idea that English is instrumental in gaining access to state-of-the-art is widely accepted, language practice in professional contexts remains one of the most important gains of introducing EMI in HEIs. To quote again the Turkish perspective, very representative for most contexts where EMI has been introduced in tertiary education: '[EMI is] an artificial environment where students are required to communicate in English because of the few opportunities outside of school to practice the language in everyday communication and adds that it is an appropriate model as regards the current situation in Turkey where there are no other proposed alternatives.' (Basibek et al 2014: 1821).

Conclusion

A clearly growing phenomenon, English medium instruction in higher education in Europe has changed and continues to model the landscape of tertiary education in Europe. If, perhaps due to a common policy and convergent objective, European tertiary EMI has developed in a more coherent manner, local variation cannot be disregarded. A comparative view showed that, despite the favourable trend, large areas are still reluctant in introducing EMI or at least in providing it with opportunities to compete with education in the national language. According to the two ACA reports (2002,2008) discussed here, this is the case of Southern Europe (with the notable exception of Cyprus) which still lags well behind Nordic countries who are on top with both number of EMI programmes in general and EMI programmes compared to total number of HEI programmes. Even from the rather austere statistical viewpoint one can intuit how complex the whole European picture is. What surfaces is the fact that certain parameters run across the board. The present paper only highlighted aspects such as using ELF as the medium of instruction in HEIs, the common objectives and outcomes, together with certain negative consequences observed and reported in most contexts where EMI in HEIs has been implemented. The situation in China and Turkey used here a term for comparison and contrast has lead us to believe that EMI in HEIs is a global trend with local specificity but global impact and that learning from the successful as well as less successful experiences can improve the quality of EMI education and of education in general.

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