# Navigating the Landscape of English-Medium Instruction: Attitudes, Perceptions and Practices

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## Abstract

English-Medium Instruction (EMI) has gained prominence in higher education as a strategy to foster internationalisation, enhance institutional reputation, and improve students' global professional prospects and competencies. However, its implementation is complex and poses several challenges in terms of educational practices, communication, and interaction. This Special Issue explores the multifaceted nature of EMI through different case studies, primarily in Italian Universities, and is supplemented by comparative analyses from other

countries. The contributions examine lecturers' and students' perspectives by focusing on linguistic, attitudinal, and educational aspects. Key themes include the impact of professional training for lecturers, strategies to enhance teacher-student interaction, and the role of microteaching in improving EMI educational practices. Findings reveal the need for innovative teaching approaches, interactive methodologies, and greater support for students' language and critical thinking skills. The studies included in this Special Issue highlight varied insights, experiences, and needs, including the difficulties related to lecturers' language proficiency, and the influence of cultural contexts on classroom interaction. Case-study-based research and comparative studies shed light on differences in student perceptions of EMI, transcultural interactions, and the role of linguistic backgrounds. This Special Issue underscores the importance of addressing institutional and educational gaps to ensure the effectiveness of EMI. By fostering collaboration between policymakers, educators, and researchers, the studies aim to refine EMI practices while acknowledging the constraints of Englishization on linguistic diversity. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the potential challenges and limitations of EMI by offering practical insights for improving internationalised education in diverse university contexts.

**Keywords:** English-medium instruction, Teacher education, Teacher discourse, Interaction, Students learning strategies

## 1. Introduction

In the last few decades, content learning and teaching through English has spread to such an extent that scholars, practitioners and policymakers worldwide have investigated and evaluated the opportunities and challenges of implementing English-medium instruction (EMI) degree programmes at their universities. Several definitions and conceptualizations have been provided for this relatively new educational practice, and these generally revolve around the use of English as a means of teaching and learning specialized content. Although English is usually a second or a foreign language for most of the stakeholders involved (Macaro, 2018), the focus of EMI classes is generally not on students' language improvement but on delivering and learning subject-specific content in English. In other words, the development of English language skills is not an intended goal but is, at best, expected as a by-product result (Pecorari & Malmström, 2018).

In higher education contexts, this process has been mostly implemented in a top-down manner, often justified on the grounds of the forces of globalization and internationalization (Kuteeva & Airey, 2014), the latter being defined as an intentional incorporation of international, intercultural, and global aspects into the objectives, practices, and functions of higher education (de Wit et al., 2015). Internationalization is associated with several potential benefits for students, lecturers, and institutions. These include the improvement of the institutional profile and ranking on a global scale, networking opportunities between institutions and foreign partners, increased mobility prospects (for both incoming and outgoing staff members and students), higher quality of education and better employability for students (Bowles & Murphy, 2020; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). For policymakers, the adoption of English as the lingua franca of academic communication and education is widely

seen as a first step towards achieving such internationalization goals. This accounts for the boost of EMI programmes worldwide but also implies several potential criticalities and gray areas. Among them, the process of Englishization of higher education (i.e., the increase in the presence, prominence, and status of English in academia) may prove detrimental to the presence and prestige of other languages (Lanvers & Hultgren, 2018) and lead to unequal access to learning opportunities (Wang, 2020). In addition, several case-study-based investigations reveal a mismatch between policies and practices (Bowles & Murphy, 2020), which encompass logistic, infrastructural, and pedagogical problems (Dearden, 2015) as well as a lack of consideration of the attitudes, needs, and proficiency levels of the key stakeholders of EMI teaching and learning, i.e., lecturers and students. Since the settings in which EMI programmes are implemented are inherently different, and so are the backgrounds and affordances of the lecturers and students involved, research on EMI contexts is of utmost importance. For this reason, this Special Issue is devoted to the exploration of qualitative and quantitative case studies into the attitudes, perceptions, and practices of EMI lecturers and students.

The contributions in this Special Issue focus on linguistic, attitudinal and pedagogical aspects of EMI at tertiary level mostly investigating EMI in Italian universities, and in some cases taking a comparative stance by analyzing data from other countries. They delve into teachers' and students' attitudes towards EMI through surveys and interviews aimed at showcasing perceptions and triggering debate and future action. The studies concentrating on teachers' perspectives offer insights into ongoing teachers' professional training and suggest measures for improvement, by considering the needs of both educators and participants. Lecturers' pedagogical training and the need to equip them with a comprehensive methodological background and more effective pedagogical resources are amongst the main concerns that emerge in many of the contributions. These may help lecturers tackle the challenges of teaching specialized content through a second/foreign language (Dimova & Kling, 2023; Lasagabaster, 2022) and promoting classroom interaction and student engagement (Rose, 2021). This Special Issue also reports on students' views of learning in EMI settings with some of the research combining and comparing local and international students' attitudes towards EMI. Attention is dedicated to learners' perceptions of interaction and learning dynamics, individual experiences within the university community, and the diverse learning ecologies that characterize EMI classrooms. As the trend of choosing educational degree programmes in English is likely to increase in the future, it is necessary to provide an updated account of how students view their experience of learning in EMI settings, including the challenges they face and how they overcome any possible shortcomings. This may prove fruitful in maintaining high-quality standards and improving these programmes.

The Special Issue focuses also on teaching practices in EMI settings. The adoption of EMI entails several complexities in this respect. Teaching and learning experiences through English differ from educational practices carried out in the lecturers' and students' first language. Teaching methods, content delivery, assimilation, and interaction are influenced by the switch to English and this may have both positive and negative effects. This calls for a reflection on educational practice and potentially boosts the adoption of innovative teaching

methods, improved engagement strategies, and assessment approaches. In this light, this Special Issue aims to contribute to the increasing body of research on educational practice in EMI settings (e.g., Molino, 2018) by delving into the qualitative and quantitative analyses of case studies from different countries, involving students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Authors reflect on discursive and metadiscursive practices, with a focus on the effectiveness of communication, teacher-student interaction, student engagement and competencies, and critical thinking assessment. For example, the use of English can jeopardize – rather than increase – the clarity of communication in class exchanges in cases where lecturers' and students' language competencies are not sufficiently developed. This can also affect aspects related to the teaching and learning of subject content, thereby influencing the mastery of student's knowledge. For this reason, in this Special Issue, the effectiveness of microteaching in testing and teacher training is evaluated in the context of EMI education. Moreover, the crucial role of lecturers' questions as engagement and elicitation strategies to stimulate in-class interaction is explored, by linking the frequency and type of questions to subject specificities and lecturers' backgrounds. In addition to lecturers' pedagogical practices, students' proficiency levels are investigated in relation to the development of critical thinking skills. These lines of inquiry serve as a starting point for the development of professional training and guidelines directed at EMI practitioners as well as policy-makers willing to integrate good practices into the implementation of English-based curricula.

## 2. An Overview of Current Trends in Research

### 2.1 Lecturers' Perspective and Educational Initiatives

A first set of contributions in this Special Issue delves into the EMI lecturers' perspective, also from the lens of the planning of EMI lecturers' training.

The study "Lecturers' Experiences of EMI: Analysis of a Questionnaire on the Impact of a Training Programme at a Northern Italian University" by Francesca Costa and Cristina Mariotti analyses the teaching practices of lecturers who participated in a training programme on EMI organized by their own institution. The course dealt with many aspects of EMI and included two different subgroups for lecturers in the Humanities or in STEM disciplines, together with a final microteaching activity. The post-training questionnaires reveal that the course led the lecturers to better comprehend the interaction between content and language. Nevertheless, most lecturers resorted infrequently to interactive teaching methods. The findings emphasize the need to focus on strategies to promote teacher-student interaction and on student-centred lecturing approaches in training actions offered to lecturers involved in EMI.

Chiara Polli addresses the needs of EMI lecturers working at a northern and a southern Italian university in the paper "A Comparative Analysis of English-Medium Instruction at the Universities of Messina and Trento: Lecturers' Opinions, Goals, and Concerns". The comparison of the two universities is particularly interesting given the differences in EMI environments between North and South of Italy (Pulcini & Campagna, 2015). The data collected from lecturers of the two universities via questionnaires mainly converge but reveal that teachers of the northern institution tend to be more aware of difficulties students face in

EMI courses. As in the paper by Costa and Mariotti, the results show that lecturers mainly conceive EMI as an internationalisation opportunity rather than a means to teach innovatively and to promote more interactive and student-oriented methodologies.

The paper "Mapping the status of EMI courses at the University of Messina: The EMI@UniMe Project" by Rosalba Rizzo, Chiara Polli and Mariavita Cambria reports the EMI lecturers' opinions regarding institutional and pedagogical aims, teaching practices and learning assessment methods. The study discusses the lecturers' data from a twofold perspective: on the one hand, the data contribute to the ongoing debate of Italian EMI lecturers' needs and beliefs, on the other, they highlight the importance of lecturers' perspectives on the planning of continuing professional development initiatives. In this respect it is interesting to note that most respondents found no particular concerns related to the use of English of their students. This, on the one hand, is encouraging, but on the other it may also indicate that some lecturers were either unable or unwilling to identify students' difficulties or reluctance to communicate in English.

Alessandra Molino and Slobodanka Dimova in their paper "Discourse Structuring Metadiscourse in EMI Microteaching Lecturer Test Performance" focus on an aspect which so far has not received much attention in EMI research: microteaching activities included in lecturer education. The authors examine the suitability of such a pedagogical technique to reflect on classroom discourse. For this purpose, metadiscourse markers, a key factor to enhance clarity and coherence, produced by lecturers in videorecorded online microteaching carried out within the Test of Oral English Proficiency for Academic Staff (TOEPAS) developed by the University of Copenhagen, were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The results suggest that simulated lectures elicit a range of forms and functions of metadiscourse. The ability to convey metadiscourse meanings, ensuring both lexico-grammatical as well as functional variation, is related to language proficiency. This finding, among others, sheds light on how microteaching activities provide useful grounds to reflect on EMI and shows that they deserve more prominence in research.

Stefania Cicillini and Nesrine Triki's study is entitled "Form and function of teachers' questions in EMI contexts: comparing practices across European countries" and the authors investigate the form, function and frequency of teachers' questions in videorecorded EMI lectures carried out in Croatia, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. The comparison among teachers' questions in lectures held in these five countries reveal variation in frequency and functions of questioning, and that the cultural context may affect questions in EMI classes. For instance, similar tendencies emerge among Italian and Spanish teachers as well as among those from the Netherlands and Denmark.

## 2.2 Students' Needs and Learning Strategies

A second group of papers in this Special Issue examines EMI students' perspective and highlights issues such as students' need, competencies and learning strategies.

Bruna Di Sabato, Bronwen Hughes and Ernesto Macaro, in their contribution "Studying Content in English from School to University: A Transitional Survey on Students' Awareness

of their Pre-acquired Skills and Knowledge", address the transitional effect between CLIL and EMI by investigating the learning strategies of Italian students who experienced the former at school and the latter at university. The findings show that learning strategies are not necessarily transferred from CLIL to EMI: for example, peer interactions based on cooperative and collaborative dimensions, present in CLIL teaching methodologies, are not incorporated into EMI. Reflections that emerge from such findings show that it may be useful to provide students with awareness-raising strategies to enable them to exploit better the transition from CLIL to EMI and to apply competencies acquired at secondary level to the new context, in tertiary education.

The study "Testing and developing critical thinking in an ICLHE context: correlations between language competence and critical thinking skills" by Christopher Liam McDonnell and Marco Mezzadri investigates the potential correlations between pre-university students' competences in critical thinking and foreign language for academic purposes. the framework under investigation is that of ICLHE (Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education). Results indicate that while critical thinking instruction was effective, no clear correlation was established between critical thinking and L2 performance, in this case Italian as a vehicular language. However, certain trends in the overall development of the students' language competencies suggest a potential connection between critical thinking and receptive language skills, despite the gap between the students' L1 and the vehicular language.

The paper "Addressing Engineering Students' Needs in EMI Contexts: A Focus on Comprehension and Pronunciation" by Jane Johnson and Mariangela Picciuolo investigates intelligible pronunciation and its relation to comprehension, more specifically whether non-native English-speaking lecturers' pronunciation proficiency influences students' comprehension in EMI lectures. Findings reveal that while most students reported minimal difficulty in understanding lecturers' pronunciation, some subgroups faced more problems. These included both those with lower English proficiency and students with limited EMI experience. The study highlights the multifaceted nature of students' perceptions of EMI lecturers' language performance and how their level of comprehension is influenced by different factors, notwithstanding the competencies of lecturers in English, including their pronunciation.

The contribution "Learning Ecologies and Transcultural Interaction in EMI Classes: A Comparison of Student Perceptions in Italy and Taiwan" by Sharon Hartle, Jane Lu, Roberta Facchinetti, Elena Borsetto and Daniela Vescio delves into students' perceptions of transcultural issues of EMI in Italy and Taiwan. The comparative findings suggest that Italian students assess language and culture diversity, transcultural interactions, and group learning more positively, while students from Taiwan are more drawn by the practical applications of the vehicular language. Moreover, in both samples, students of linguistic disciplines declare to take more advantage of EMI courses than peers attending non-linguistic courses.

Finally, the essay "First-year students in an EMI program. Developing international mindsets?" by Olivia Mair and Gabriele Cantaluppi deals with Psychology students' perceptions of the internationalization of the curriculum, in terms of nine dimensions. The

pragmatic aspects are ranked as most relevant by students, as they involve students' professional careers directly. This is also influenced by institutional communication and families' expectations. The analysis shows that students also perceive positively EMI affordances related to value-based issues, such as intercultural and global learning opportunities and pedagogical aspects.

## 3. Conclusions and Future Perspectives

The contributions in this Special Issue collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of EMI in higher education, while also offering some insights, such as those in relation to CLIL, which are relevant to lower levels of instruction. They offer valuable insights into the perspectives of both lecturers and students, exploring among other issues how attitudes, perceptions, and practices shape the implementation of EMI across diverse contexts. From examining the pedagogical challenges faced by educators to analyzing the experiences of students navigating EMI environments, the findings emphasise the need for quality training initiatives and enhanced continuing professional.

The studies underscore the importance of fostering effective communication, interactive teaching methods, and inclusive strategies to address linguistic and cultural diversity in EMI contexts. Furthermore, they reveal the complexities of balancing content delivery with language development and the critical role of institutional frameworks in ensuring successful EMI programs. While the emphasis on the internationalization of higher education through EMI is often highlighted, one cannot ignore the other potential benefits of EMI, to which prominence is not always given.

As the global trend towards EMI continues to grow, the research presented here provides reflections for future investigations and practical applications. It calls for ongoing collaboration between policymakers, educators, and researchers to refine EMI practices, ensuring they meet the evolving needs of internationalized higher education. By addressing current gaps and leveraging innovative approaches, EMI can contribute to fostering academic excellence and intercultural competence. Nevertheless, within this scenario, one cannot ignore developments related to the Englishization of higher education and the constraints that this may have on other languages. The papers in this volume therefore invite readers to engage critically with the results presented and to reflect on them in the light of the educational context in which they are involved.

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