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Form and Function of Teachers' Questions in EMI Contexts: Comparing Practices Across European Countries

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Abstract

Previous literature on engagement strategies in the classroom, especially in EMI contexts, has evidenced that lecturer questions play a vital role in establishing teacher-student interaction, checking and scaffolding comprehension, and supporting students' learning progress (e.g., Costa & Mariotti, 2023; Dafouz-Milne & Sánchez-García, 2013). While the effect of different disciplines on the nature of teacher questions is still controversial, no studies have looked at the probable impact of teachers' cultural academic background related to the country of origin. Drawing on a corpus of 30 EMI lectures from five European countries (Croatia, Denmark, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands), this study analyzes and compares the use of questions as an engagement strategy and offers insights into teacher discourse. The overall results indicate that teachers in different cultural academic contexts use questions with different frequencies and select different question forms to serve particular functions. The study may have pedagogical implications, especially for teacher education programs.

Keywords: English-medium instruction (EMI), Teacher discourse, Interaction, Questions, Question form, Question function

1. Introduction

Over the last thirty years, the goal to internationalize higher education has been high on the agenda of many European universities, which have rapidly started to develop innovative strategies to respond to this call. The shift to English as the main language of teaching and learning at university level, named English-medium instruction (EMI), is considered a major strategy to accelerate the internationalization process of education, promote mobility of students and teaching staff and increase graduates' competitiveness in the global job market. EMI is usually adopted in those countries where English is spoken as an additional or foreign language (Macaro, 2018; Pecorari & Malmström, 2018) and has spread at an unprecedented rate across the globe. Despite its linguistic and cultural richness, this expanding phenomenon is particularly prominent in Europe, where this study is set, and consists of delivering and learning specialized academic content (e.g. law, medicine, economics) through English. The choice of shifting to English in tertiary education has also been driven by the need to boost university prestige and international reputation, intensify academic relationships and attract a higher number of overseas students (Coleman, 2006; Dearden, 2015; Triki, 2022).

The growing trend towards EMI has led scholars to shed light on the multiple aspects of teaching and learning in contexts where English is the instructional medium, with research spanning from classroom discourse (Khan, 2018; Smit, 2010) and student-teacher interaction (Mariotti, 2007; Shohamy, 2013) to the influence exerted by English on the quality of engagement and learning (Cicillini, forthcoming; Macaro, 2020). Indeed, the value of interaction and engagement in class has always played a pivotal role in students' learning progress, regardless of the language of instruction. Engaging in classroom activities fosters the development of the learners' knowledge and critical thinking skills, and so does the interaction between teachers and students, since learning is believed to be facilitated by effective communication and social exchanges (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2024; Vygotsky, 1978). Active participation in classroom activities and social mediation are key factors in the construction of students' conceptual knowledge and interpersonal skills (Dafouz-Milne & Sánchez-García, 2013).

On the basis of this view, teachers' ability to promote students' participation and interaction in class becomes crucial to the development of their cognitive, linguistic, and academic skills. However, previous research has pointed out that some EMI lecturers are not proficient enough to cope with the challenges of teaching subject content through an additional language and might not be equipped with the necessary linguistic skills to engage their students in classroom activities (An et al., 2019; Costa & Coleman, 2013). While it is imperative for EMI lecturers to have adequate language and teaching skills, it is also true that the shift to English to deliver academic lectures calls for a major effort on the part of the instructor.

When it comes to developing new teaching approaches and reframing the disciplinary materials for EMI classes, lecturers might be influenced by their English proficiency and

even by their mother tongue. Given the complexity of delivering subject content in English, effective pedagogical strategies, ideally with a focus on language, are necessary for lecturers, at least for two main reasons: first, to let them feel more at ease when comprehension problems emerge in class – given that EMI is likely to generate stress and uneasiness in teachers (Dang et al., 2021) – and to be ready to mitigate any shortcoming that arises in the classroom; and second, to involve students in the process of meaning-making also by increasing the degree of interactivity of their classes. This means that teacher proficiency, classroom discourse, and effective interaction are intertwined and influence each other (Richards & Pun, 2022).

Previous research into classroom discourse has shown how effective the adoption of multimodal, scaffolding, and interactional strategies in EMI classes are, and has suggested that the adoption of various linguistic features and discourse strategies can facilitate more interactive lecturing styles. These include modality (Crawford-Camiciottoli, 2003), discourse markers (Molino, 2018; Morell, 2004), and questions (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2023; Sánchez-García, 2020; Chang, 2012), to cite a few. Among these, questions are believed to play a vital role in EMI classes for a variety of reasons: they facilitate the students' learning progress, ensure dynamic interaction, and increase engagement in class (Costa & Mariotti, 2023; Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2023). To deal with the different features of questions, different taxonomies have been proposed, which will be presented in section 2.

Although the use of questions as a pedagogical strategy to promote interaction has attracted considerable attention within the field of EMI, most studies have concentrated on single countries and on how this interactive device is employed in single geographical areas. In addition, most comparative studies have focused on practices across different disciplinary fields assuming that disciplines are the main variable shaping EMI classrooms and country differences do not play any role. Given the paucity of comparative studies, this study aims to fill this gap and contribute to this growing area of research by exploring the use of questions in five European contexts where EMI programs are offered. Through a comparative quantitative and qualitative analysis of 30 EMI lectures, we wish to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How frequently do EMI teachers in different European countries use questions in their lectures?

RQ2: What are the preferred question types used in each context?

RQ3: Which functions do those questions play in the lectures?

2. Approaches to Questions in EMI Contexts

The use of questions in teaching and learning contexts in general, and in the EMI context in particular has drawn the attention of many researchers. Several taxonomies have been suggested which can be grouped under three main types. The first focuses on the functional nature of questions in EMI contexts, and it is the one where many of the recent studies fall (e.g., Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2023; Morell, 2020; Sánchez-García, 2020). Sánchez-García (2020), for example, compared EMI lectures and Spanish taught lectures delivered by the

same teachers. She suggested a taxonomy where *instructional* questions (content related) were separated from *regulative* ones (class management and organization). Her findings indicated that question frequencies in the two languages were quite similar but their functions varied considerably. Morell (2020) analyzed mini lectures in a Spanish context and found that audience-oriented questions (e.g., *display* and *referential*) were more frequent than content-oriented ones. Her results also showed that those lectures used more *referential* than *display* questions, both of which triggered instances of meaning negotiation between teachers and students realized as *confirmation* and *comprehension checks*. Doiz and Lasagabaster (2023) replicated Sánchez-García's (2020) model on a corpus of history lectures. Their results indicated a high frequency of *confirmation checks* followed by *display*, *referential* and *self-answered* questions. They explained the overdominance of *confirmation checks* by teachers' ongoing need to secure understanding and maintain interactions with their students. Yet, little is known about whether and how the academic cultures, within which the lectures were delivered, might have affected the choices made. In addition, the impact of the structural dimension of questions on the engaging nature of questions or their degrees of complexity is explored limitedly.

The second type of studies, either fully or partially, focuses on turn taking initiated by questions. This research line investigates both teacher questions and student answers to give a more complete picture about classroom interaction and the role of teacher questions. Costa and Mariotti (2023) investigated the difference between turns in online and face-to-face EMI lectures focusing on the occurrences of *procedural*, *display* and *referential* questions and the initiation-response-follow-up (I-R-F) sequences. They found that face-to-face lectures used more questions compared to online lectures. They related the differences to "individual style of the lecturer, topic and positioning of that specific lecture within the wider framework of the course" (Costa & Mariotti, 2023: 44). They also argued that the triadic dialogue enables teachers to further elaborate using discourse functions like reformulations and repetitions, which helps create a more explicit and comprehensible input for the students. However, the literature on classroom interaction seems to be critical of the dominant teacher initiated triadic multilogue and calls for more student-initiated turns requesting teachers to expand, clarify and elaborate on their talks or to ask them about opinions and advice (Boblett, 2018; Schwab, 2011). For example, Duran and Sert (2021) take students' initiating questions as a starting point for their conversational analysis of EMI classes in a Turkish context. They performed a microanalysis of the patterns of interaction with a special focus on student information-seeking shaped as multi-unit questions. Their study sheds light on how these types of student questions have several functions including the creation of a smooth and coherent transition from one discussion point to another and the initiation of new discussion topics, especially some of the most delicate or complex ones that cannot be resolved in a single turn. They conclude that student-initiated questions can shape the interactional dynamics of EMI class, contribute to the co-construction of knowledge and resolve knowledge gaps in EMI classrooms.

Compared to the first two lines of research, studies that investigate the syntactic properties of questions in EMI are not numerous. A recent study by Lasagabaster and Doiz (2024) mainly

focused on the syntactic complexity of teacher questions in terms of lengths, coordination, subordination and tense choice. They also analyzed the lexical complexity of word classes classifying them into three levels. Their main conclusion points toward much similarity between teacher questions across soft and hard disciplines. Chang (2012) is another study that proposed a taxonomy integrating the structural and functional properties of teacher questions. Chang categorized questions as either being audience- or content- oriented with the first type enacting five diverse minor functions, and the latter, including two broad ones (see section 3.3.2). For the structural categorization, she used Quirk et al. 's (1985) description of question forms but blended some types together to better fit her model. Chang's results revealed that some structures were not used with particular functions. For example, wh-questions were not used to solicit student agreement or check their comprehension, whereas Yes-No questions were found to serve almost all function types except *solicit agreement*. However, her description of declarative questions is somehow confusing because they refer to sentences followed by a word tag rather than statements that end with a question mark in writing, or a rising intonation in oral language (Quirk et al., 1985). This makes them look similar to tag questions rather than declarative questions. In fact, tag questions behave in a very similar way to comprehension check words such as *right* and *okay*. This is why we will prefer to group them together under the same heading. While we may not comply with Chang's syntactic classification, we still believe that combining the form and the function of teacher questions can bring about fruitful insights into the choices made in class and how they may affect the engaging nature of questions and the degrees of their cognitive demand. Thus, we will argue that the choice of a particular question form can be related to the degree of question complexity which is by nature multidimensional (Bultéé& Housen, 2014; Hu & Li, 2017).

3. Context and Methodology

The main goal of this study is to investigate how teachers' questions across different EMI geographical areas are used at the level of the form and the function. By observing a corpus of English-taught lectures, we identified and discussed the most significant and meaningful examples of questions in real EMI settings.

3.1 Context and Participants

The present research concentrates on the TAEC corpus, which is one of the main outputs of the *Transnational Alignment of English Competences for University Lectures* (TAEC) project, funded through the Erasmus+ program. The entire project lasted three years and involved five European institutions, namely the University of Copenhagen (UCPH), University of Lleida (UdL), Maastricht University (UM), University of Rijeka (FHSS), and University of Turin (UNITO). The principal aim of the project was to identify commonalities and differences of practices in different EMI settings across Europe, and to develop ad-hoc EMI teacher training and language assessment tools for transnational uses.

Thirty EMI teachers participated in the TAEC project and accepted to be video-recorded while teaching. Classes were recorded in the middle of the term in order to gather insights into how classes were being managed a couple of weeks after the beginning. As regards their mother tongue, we identified different languages: Italian (n=7), Danish (n=6), Catalan (n=6),

Croatian (n=6), Dutch (n=3), Afrikaans (n=1) and German (n=1). Concerning English proficiency, the participants' levels range from C2 to B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR); the lecturers working in Croatia, Denmark and the Netherlands are all proficient users (C2, C1+, C1), while among those working in Spain and Italy there are proficient (C1, C1-) and independent (B2, B2+) users. At the time of the data collection, they all had more than seven years of academic teaching experience. To maintain anonymity, the participants were given an identification code, which included a figure from one to thirty, e.g. L1 (Lecturer no.1), the university, e.g. UNITO (University of Turin) and the disciplinary field, e.g. LS (life and medical science). The speakers were assigned IDs according to the order they spoke and the turns they took, which were annotated by using angular brackets, e.g. <S1> (speaker 1, referring to the teacher, who is the one usually starting the class), <S2> (speaker 2), <SS> (speakers in unison). When the speaker's turn ended, we used a slash followed by the speaker ID, e.g. </S1>. When a word or a sentence was unintelligible, we replaced it with (xx).

3.2 The Corpus

The TAEC corpus provides a useful account of classroom language use in different EMI contexts by offering a comparative perspective. It comprises the transcription of 30 EMI lectures, six per country and each taught by a distinct teacher, which were video-recorded by the scholars involved in the project. All lectures were held in English by L2 English-speaking lecturers and ranged from one hour and a half to two hours. Both undergraduate (n=17) and postgraduate (n=13) classes were included in the corpus, which encompassed three main subject areas: life and medical science (LS), social sciences and humanities (SH) and physical sciences and engineering (PE). Overall, the corpus (Table 1) contained around 341,000 words with a certain variability among classes, ranging from 5,129 to 19,446 words (Molino, 2023).

Table 1. Description of the TAEC corpus

	Croatia	**Denmark**	**Spain**	**The Netherlands**	**Italy**
L1	11937	11092	10060	13232	11518
L2	10450	6840	12226	18722	9384
L3	10430	12379	8305	11274	19446
L4	9481	15932	5129	16634	8637
L5	10320	6746	10676	9674	10805
L6	6870	14130	10931	10566	18066
Total	59488	67119	57327	80102	77856
Total			341892		

The annotation process followed specific guidelines, designed on the basis of a set of rules

previously adopted for three well-known spoken corpora, namely the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus, and the English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings corpus (ELFA). Transcription norms included different aspects of discourse, for instance, speaker turns, pauses and the alternation of languages, in the forms of code-switching episodes (TAEC Corpus Report, 2019). Since the focus of the TAEC project was on teacher discourse, students were not microphoned and, as a consequence, the content of their involvement in teacher-student interaction was difficult to trace in the transcriptions.

3.3 Data Analysis

The corpus was uploaded to Sketch Engine and an automatic search for all questions was run based on the use of question marks. Results yielded a total number of 6,434 hits reflecting the actual number of questions in the whole corpus. As there were no software tools that would permit the automatic tagging of the structures and functions of questions, we opted for manual annotation of a randomly generated sample representing ten per cent of all hits, that is (n=644). We made sure that the sample was representative of all the disciplines and universities in the original corpus. We then downloaded the excel file with enough pre- and post-contexts for a manual annotation.

To code the sample, we worked separately on the concordance lines, and we tagged each example for (1) its lexico-grammatical features and (2) its functional properties. We drafted a tagging manual, and we updated it with decision criteria each time we came across ambiguous cases or instances of indeterminacy. Each rater then randomly retagged 20% of the concordance lines of the other rater, then we discussed and dealt with inconsistencies to reach a satisfactory level of consistency.

3.3.1 Lexico-grammatical Properties of EMI Questions

- ***Question form***

The form of questions gives an idea about the logic of interrogation in an EMI context as the choice of a particular form at the expense of another could reveal teachers' intentions behind asking the questions and the functions these different questions play to ensure content comprehension and student engagement. While tagging the sample for these forms, we also further specified their grammatical correctness, the type of verbs used as well as tense and modality features. In this paper, we will quantitatively report on two structural properties, namely the type of questions (Yes-No, w-h, declarative, tag) and the pattern of questioning (one question at a time versus multiple successive ones). We will refer to the other syntactic properties to enrich the qualitative discussion in section 4.4.

Yes-No questions: Typical interrogative Yes-No questions for which a short answer could be a yes or a no. These also include indirect speech acts where the answer to the question is not supposed to be yes or no.

Wh-questions: All questions starting with a wh-word, such as who, why, how much, where, and how often were classified to understand the nature of the interrogation involved.

Declarative questions: These are questions marked by a rising intonation at the end of the clause or phrase but do not involve the usual subject operator inversion. In the TAEC corpus they are marked by a question mark at the end of the sentence.

Tag questions: Under this label, we grouped the traditional or canonical question tags, together with tag words (also referred to as progression markers in some studies (Johnson & Picciuolo, 2020) such as *okay, right, yes, you know* (Westphal, 2021).

- ***Question cluster***

We added this feature because it helped further emphasize the degree of complexity of the question. Particularly, we looked at whether the successive questions were related or unrelated, that is, whether two or more successive questions were about two or more answers or whether they all required one single answer, in which case the successive questions provide further hints or options to facilitate students' understanding of the question.

Single: a question that is not immediately preceded or followed by another question.

Sequence: a question that is immediately preceded or followed by one or more questions.

3.3.2 Functional Properties of EMI Teacher Questions

We opted for Sánchez-García's (2020) taxonomy because it provides a fine-tuned categorization of question functions that are relevant to the EMI context. The taxonomy (Table 2) consists in a first categorization of questions based on whether they are *instructional* questions about the content of teaching or *regulative* ones serving classroom procedure and organization.

Table 2. Functional classification of EMI teacher questions (based on Sánchez-García, 2020: 32)

Macro functions	Micro functions	Description
Instructional questions	Display	Question whose answer is known by the teacher
	Referential	Question whose answer is not known by the teacher
	Repetition	Question seeking repetition of the last word, idea, utterance
	Language	Questions seeking assistance about language matters
	Confirmation Checks	Questions aimed at ensuring understanding of the topic/lecture
	Retrospective	Questions requiring students to recall previous information

	Self-answered	Questions immediately answered by the teacher
	Rhetorical	Questions to which no answer is expected
	Indirect	Questions not uttered to get a response but to exemplify some situation
Regulative questions	Procedural	Questions which refer to the development of the lesson and do not focus on the content/language, but on the lecture itself or a particular activity
	Off-task	Questions referring to a topic that departs from the main subject

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Questions in the Corpus: General Findings

The corpus yielded a total of 6,442 questions (18.84/1000 words). The highest density is found in the Croatian context with 27.42 questions /1000 words followed by Denmark and Spain with a density of 21.49 and 19.49 respectively. The lowest density is recorded in Italy with less than 10 questions /1000 words and the Netherlands with 16.27/1000 words. More interestingly, the variation across countries proves not to be random. Repetitive log-likelihood tests indicate that those observed differences are statistically highly significant ($p < 0.0001$) across all countries. The highest significance is recorded between Denmark and Spain (LL= 531.91) and between Denmark and Italy (LL= 309.53) while the lowest ones are recorded between Croatia and the Netherlands (LL = 19.68) and between the Netherlands and Italy (LL = 7.72, $p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Frequency of questions/answers across countries

Country	**Teacher questions**		**Student answers**	
	Raw	**Per/1000**	**Raw**	**% per total**
Croatia	968	27.42	183	18.90
Denmark	668	21.49	82	12.28
Spain	1572	19.49	232	14.76
The Netherlands	1561	16.27	292	18.71
Italy	1673	9.95	101	6.04
Total	6442	18.84	890	13.82

Although the primary focus of this study is on teacher questions, a mere quantitative look at the frequency of student answers can shed more light on the interactive nature of these questions. Interestingly, the results point out that the pattern of interaction does not always

parallel the frequency of questions. As table 2 shows, the percentage of student answers are higher in Croatia and the Netherlands, where about 19% of questions received an answer from students followed by Spain (roughly 15%). Denmark and Italy rank below the average percentage in the whole corpus but with the percentage of Italy (6.04%) being half of that of Denmark (12.28%). The asymmetric correspondence between teacher questions and student answers has also been reported in the literature and it may relate to various internal and external factors such as the nature of the classroom (labs, seminars, lectures), teachers and students backgrounds (including English language level) as well as the general academic teaching culture of university settings in each country.

4.2 Structural Properties of EMI Teacher Questions

In addition to the variation in frequencies, teachers from the five countries also used different types of questions with different frequencies (Figure 1). Similar to many other studies (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2023; Sánchez-García, 2020), tag words and questions realizing *confirmation checks* are the most frequently used (39%), wh-questions represent 36% of all questions while Yes-No questions and declarative ones amount to less than 30% together. Compared to the distribution of some of these types across disciplines (Figure 2), our findings suggest that there is more variation resulting from the academic cultural backgrounds than variation determined by the disciplinary fields. This finding confirms previous studies such as Chang (2012) who found that the percentages of wh- and Yes-No questions were almost similar across disciplines and also Lasagabaster and Doiz (2022) and Doiz and Lasagabaster (2023) who did not find any significant differences between the frequencies and functions of questions across disciplines. Teachers in Croatia seem to have a clear preference for wh-questions (more than 57%) which are also the first ranking question type in the Netherlands and Denmark but with lower frequencies (roughly 35% in each). Teachers in Italy and Spain, however, appear to have similar choices with comprehension checks ranking first and a clear higher percentage of declarative questions compared to the other countries. This relatively higher presence of declarative questions might originate from the L1 in each country where both Italian and Spanish mark the interrogative mood relying on a rising intonation at the end of the sentence rather than changing the word order or adding an auxiliary verb (Gili-Fivela et al., 2015).

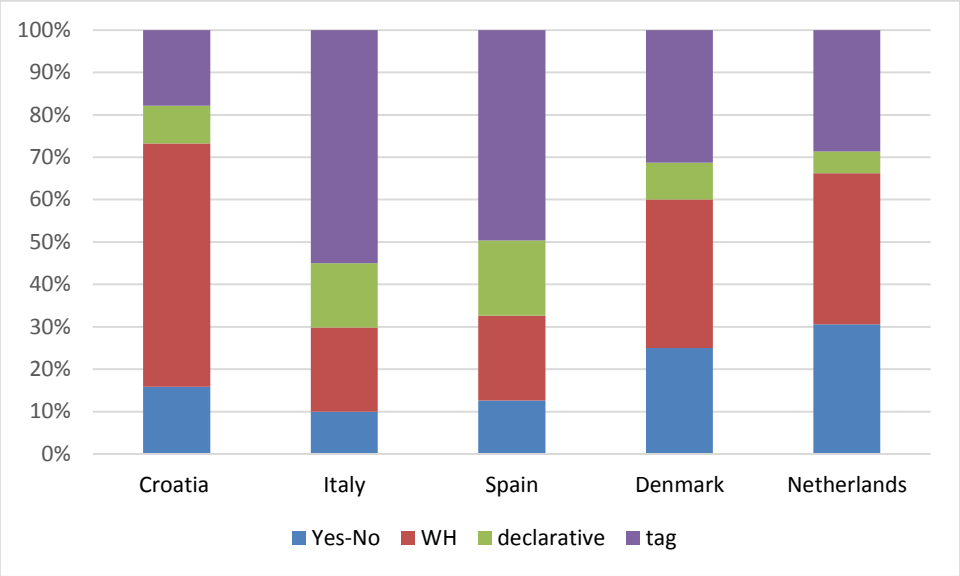

Figure 1. Question type across countries

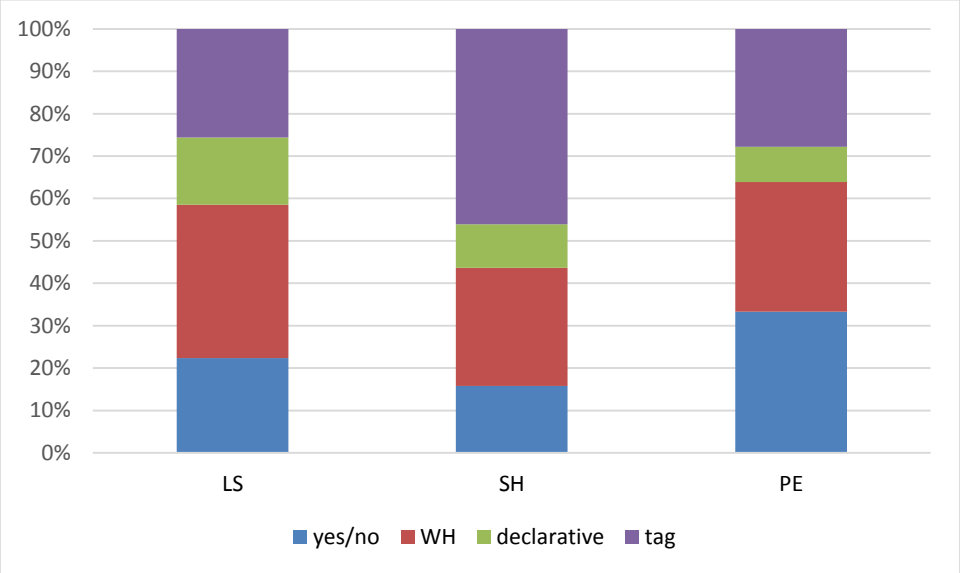

Figure 2. Question type across disciplines

The choice of each type of question has important implications for both teaching strategies and student learning outcomes. Teachers choose them based on their instructional goals, the type of engagement they expect from the students as well as the nature of the content delivered. In terms of complexity, wh-questions are often considered the most challenging ones for students as they are open questions that seek specific information and they require deeper cognitive processing (Ginzburg & Sag, 2000). Specifically, with questions involving ‘how’ (example 1) or ‘why’ (example 2), teachers require that their students be capable of connecting pieces of prior knowledge and modeling them into a potentially plausible answer. This is perhaps why ‘how’ and ‘why’ together represent less than 23% of wh-questions, 50% of which are used equally by Italian and Croatian teachers versus 12.5% by the Spanish ones. Regardless of whether teachers provide answers at some point or not, students are directly

stimulated as they start to decode lecture related content in order to find the right answer and justify their thinking. This may lead to multiple individual responses and to fostering classroom interaction in case students outspeak their thinking or to internalized deep reflections or doubts in case oral or written answers are not provided.

1. <S1> if you would double basically the money that I give you, you would also have double the risk, **so how does it actually work?** </S1> (UM_SH_L23)
2. <S1> you have the diagnosis and this you have to talk to think to the causes **why?** my patient has this **why?** </S1> (UNITO_LS_L30)

Yes-No questions might be easier to understand and answer as they often involve closed and lower-order thinking questions, a fact also proven in early language acquisition where Yes-No questions "minimally require assent or denial, whereas wh-questions require that the answer contain specific pieces of information" (Casillas et al., 2016: 7). Additionally, because of their closed nature, Yes-No questions can impede the construction of triadic dialogues because the Feedback turn is often not required. Nonetheless, those questions play an important role in securing a smooth and quick flow of teaching while guaranteeing constant checking of student attention and maintaining teacher-student interaction. In some cases, particularly in indirect speech acts such as 'do you think', the expected answer is certainly beyond the polarity feature of yes and no. This is why they are convenient to seek student opinion or to mitigate the degree of difficulty and directness of the more congruent wh-forms as illustrated in examples 3 and 4.

3. <S1> this is the rule. this is the basic principle. that I'm talking about yes please **do we know why (that is)?** sorry? **do we know why (that is)?** </S1> **(**FHSS_LS_L5)
4. <S1> the overall question that we're gonna discuss is **are there any principled reasons?** </S1> (UCPH_SH_L10)

Another additional layer that might affect the dialogic aspect of teaching is whether the questions are single, isolated ones, or clustered into sequences of two or more questions. Figure 3 shows that the general tendency is to ask one single question at a time, except for the Croatian and Italian contexts where both types are almost equal. The corpus shows that it is common for teachers to repeat the same question more than once to further highlight it or to fill in the silent moments while they wait for answers.

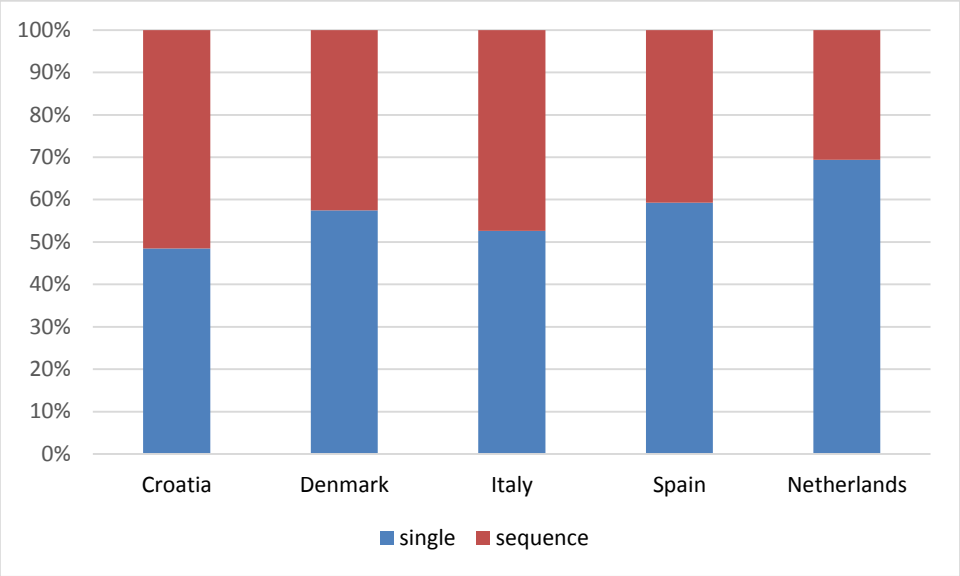

Figure 3. Clusters across countries

Consecutive questions, on the other hand, are used for different reasons. In some contexts, they help elucidate, narrow down or scaffold the information sought in the initial question, as in example 5, where the teacher starts with a general wh-question then chooses to break it down by giving a multiple choice Yes-No question, unpacking, as such, the linguistic complexity of the initial question (Riccardi et al., 2020). In other contexts, they can have the opposite effect in case teachers use a cluster of *display* or *referential* questions, each of which requires deep cognitive processing (example 6). They might also serve explanatory functions by problematizing a content related idea through a series of *rhetorical* questions that target the various aspects of the concept discussed (example 7).

5. <S1> what is value added tax? is value added tax, refundable or non-refundable for the companies? </S1> (FHSS_SH_L1)

6. <S1> again why I show this this picture? what is in this picture?, that is_ what is the key, eh part of this picture? </S1> (UNITO_LS_L25)

7. <S1> how fruitful are these fruits? do we actually have a cluster develop inside the winter bud? the primordials? are they there? eh have you been thinning most of them off or not? what's our pruning job? what have you done here? how many of these buds </S1> (UCPH_LS_L12)

4.3 Functional Properties of EMI Teacher Questions

As Table 4 shows, *instructional* questions are much more frequently used than the *regulative* ones across the five countries, a finding consistently reported in previous studies (e.g., Dafouz-Milne & Sánchez-García, 2013; Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2023; Sánchez-García, 2018, 2020). Another recurrent finding puts *confirmation checks* as the most frequent questions across all countries except Croatia where they rank third. The highest percentages are found in the Italian (57.31%) and Spanish (48.15%) contexts, representing around half of the questions. *Display* and *Self-answered* questions have a relatively similar frequency in the

whole corpus, but much variation is observed across the five countries. *Display* questions rank first in Croatia where they represent about a quarter of the questions, they rank second in Italy and share the third position with *rhetorical* questions in Denmark, but they hold only a fourth position in Spain and the Netherlands. Likewise, *referential* questions are not evenly distributed across the countries with the highest frequencies found in Denmark (16.25%) and Spain (14.81%) marking them the second preferred question choice, while the lowest frequency found in the Italian context (3.51%). The general pattern is similar to the one found in Doiz and Lasagabaster (2023) for the Spanish and Danish contexts, but not for the other countries where *self-answered* questions outnumber *referential* ones.

Table 4. Functional frequencies of questions across countries

		Croatia		**Denmark**		**Italy**		**Spain**		**The Netherlands**		**Total**	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Instructional	Conf.Checks	17	16.83	24	30	98	57.31	65	48.15	57	36.31	261	40.53
	Display	25	24.75	11	13.75	26	15.20	7	5.19	14	8.92	83	12.89
	Self-answered	21	20.79	3	3.75	22	12.87	6	4.44	29	18.47	81	12.58
	Referential	14	13.86	13	16.25	6	3.51	20	14.81	13	8.28	66	10.25
	Rhetorical	5	4.95	11	13.75	8	4.68	4	2.96	23	14.65	51	7.92
	Repetition	4	3.96	2	2.5	2	1.17	6	4.44	3	1.91	17	2.64
	Indirect	4	3.96	1	1.25	5	2.92	6	4.44	1	0.64	17	2.64
	Retrospective	4	3.96	0	0	0	0.00	2	1.48	7	4.46	13	2.02
	Language	0	0.00	0	0	4	2.34	1	0.74	1	0.64	6	0.93
Regulative	Procedural	4	3.96	9	11.25	0	0.00	14	10.37	9	5.73	36	5.59
	Off-task	3	2.97	6	7.5	0	0.00	4	2.96	0	0.00	13	2.02

The use of the four remaining *instructional* functions is quite limited in the corpus, as they represent less than 8.5% of all questions. Across countries, minor differences are observed that mark teachers' use of *retrospective* questions in the Netherlands lectures as well as *repetition* and *indirect* questions in the Spanish sub-corpus, frequencies that do not exceed 4.5% of question functions in each cultural context. This limited frequency also applies to the *regulative* questions that account for 7.61% of all questions in the corpus. *Procedural* questions in particular are more frequently used by teachers in Denmark and Spain where they respectively represent 11.25% and 10.35% of all questions in each country.

Clearly, the pattern of frequencies in a single country rarely matches any other pattern in

another country, which entails that academic cultures can be an influencing factor affecting teachers' choices. Moreover, putting *confirmation checks* aside and considering the three most frequent functions (*display*, *self-answered* and *referential*), we cross-examined the frequency of occurrence of these functions against the question types discussed in the previous section (Yes-No, wh-, declarative, and tag questions). Results revealed a significant statistical association between question type and question function (χ^2=21.3613, *p*-value = .000268 at $p < .05$) indicating a correlation between *display*, *self-answered* and *referential* questions and the choice of wh-structures. Owing to this form-function correlation, we might argue that the cognitive demand of *display* and *referential* questions (Sánchez-García, 2018) are heightened by the choice of the more linguistically complex wh-structures. These observations will be further emphasized in the qualitative examination of question functions.

4.4 Usage and Implications of Question Functions

Our analysis of the TAEC corpus revealed that the majority of questions posed to students were those related to the content of teaching, namely *instructional questions*. Within this wide group of questions (see section 4.3), *confirmation checks* were the most commonly used, usually aimed at ensuring and checking the students' general understanding of what is being taught (Sánchez-García, 2020). In our corpus, the Italian, Spanish and Dutch teachers made extensive use of *confirmation checks*, favoring a variety of question forms such as *okay* (56%), Yes-No questions and diverse interjections like *right*, *eh*, *mm*, as can be seen in examples 8, 9 and 10. Generally, these diverse tags behave grammatically similar to the usual question tags and can actually be used as incongruent forms of the canonical tag questions which are very frequent in native speakers' oral language (Westphal, 2021). In the corpus, some comprehension checks serve as a way to foster teacher-student communication and interaction as in example 8, where they are followed by a sequence of questions that stimulate the students' attention and participation. However, in many other cases, comprehension checks are used as filler expressions that do not necessarily require an answer, as in 9 and 10. In these cases, questions are part of the teacher's flow and explanation; little time is given to students to reflect and answer, probably because no reply is expected.

Overall, what emerges from the data is that most of the *confirmation checks* are not actually used to verify the students' understanding but are part of teachers' linguistic repertoire and serve in many cases as discourse markers. They are often mechanical expressions and proper of teacher discourse; they do not elicit any response from the audience and do not necessarily fulfil any pedagogical goal, as also noted by Doiz and Lasagabaster (2023). The fact that *confirmation checks* are the most frequent questions in the TAEC corpus may be ascribed to the low degree of complexity of such questions, as regards the level of both their cognitive and syntactic complexity (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2024). Indeed, the great majority of them appear in the form of tag questions and interjections and are not aimed at receiving any feedback from the audience.

8. <S1> most of us prefer to watch programs whenever we want. not when they are being run... you know in specific time **right?** am I right? do you watch TV a lot? like regular TV? </S1> <S2> [no the news] </S2> </S1> (UdL_SH_L13)

9. <S1> information is the patient that doesn't know anything about the problem **eh?** for which is searching you as a doctor **okay?** tabula rasa **eh?** not being a tabula rasa but having some or a lot of information </S1> (UNITO_LS_L25)

10. <S1> that means they are packing very tightly together, that eh it is hardly possible to eh get rid of them. **eh?** then you see these protein plaques as we call it or deposits for instance in degenerative diseases like Alzheimer. **eh?** </S1> (UM_LS_L22)

Display and *self-answered* questions occur frequently in our corpus. *Display* questions are more consistent in the lectures given in Croatia, Italy and Denmark. The answer to these questions is usually known by the teacher. They are often used to provide factual information about the content delivered and to verify whether the learners have understood the main concepts. They promote interaction and brief exchanges between teachers and students (Sánchez-García, 2020); indeed, short answers are expected and lecturers may decide to guide the students to formulate the correct answer, as in example 11, where a limited number of answers is expected, which refer to the names of some mobile phone brands. As a consequence, it emerges that the degree of complexity of the students' answers to *display* questions is quite low and restricted to a few words. Interestingly, the teacher's move from the wh- 'what was' to the Yes-No 'do you remember' question in the subsequent question enables a progressive move from structurally and cognitively more complex interrogatives to ones that are much simpler and easier to process and respond to. This corroborates the findings of Costa and Mariotti's study (2023), in which they argue that *display* questions often have a limited number of correct answers or even a single one. They are employed to evaluate the students' knowledge and performance, and stress the instructional role of teachers in the educational process. Therefore, given the simplified nature of this type of questions, they can be employed as a pedagogical strategy to foster interaction and overcome the possible students' unwillingness to engage in classroom activities and discussions. This can be facilitated by scaffolding the content, asking and reformulating questions and involving students in the co-construction of knowledge.

11. <S1> also sorry Motorola also (xx) okay but okay what before Nokia **what was before Nokia? do you remember the brands?** </S1> <S2> Siemens (xx) </S2> <S1> there was Alcatel </S1> <S2> Alcatel </S2> <S1> **some other brands?** </S1> (FHSS_SH_L4)

Self-answered questions are usually part of long explanations, often in the form of teacher monologues, where little or even no space is given to interaction because immediate answers and explanations of what is being asked and discussed are usually provided by instructors. An example of *self-answered* questions can be found in 12; by giving immediate responses, the teacher seeks to explain the content in detail and facilitate the students' understanding. In example 13, the teacher uses the interrogative pronoun 'why' to involve the students and make them reflect; however, the absence of pauses and the teacher's immediate answer prevent them from answering and actively participating in the discussion. What we can observe in these examples is the teachers' guiding role and control of teacher-student interaction according to the goals and pace of their lecturers. This type of question may be

viewed as a way to stimulate the students' attention on key passages or new topics, since learners are not encouraged to answer but to stay focused and reflect on the prompts given.

However, the categorization of certain questions encountered in the corpus was more challenging, especially when more than one typology seemed acceptable. Example 14 shows how a question may belong to different categories. The teacher asks a sequence of questions, whose answers are known by him (*display*), and to which he gives immediate answers (*self-answered*), without providing enough time for students to reflect and reply.

12. <S1> now what are **_what influences the crystal field splitting parameter?** well there's several things. and I wanna write them down. so the in the_ eh the crystal field splitting parameter is </S1> (UM_PE_L20)

13. <S1> or to have false eh, activity like acupuncture but there are so many others is different the effect is very different **why?** because the direct human experience is very different to take a pill is a very simple, gesture </S1> (UNITO_LS_L25)

14. <S1> a legitimate target, but these are_ then we look what is happening, well a little bit of killing but not a lot. **why not a lot?** because this is should be a cell recognized. **so why are these cells not killed very well?** the eh answer relies in the absence </S1> (UCPH_LS_L09)

Referential questions are often structured as wh-forms or as indirect Yes-No speech acts. They are usually posed by teachers to explore the students' thoughts, express their opinions freely and share personal experiences and anecdotes. The answer to these questions is not usually known by teachers and varies from student to student and according to the context. In our corpus, EMI teachers make use of a variety of stative verbs, which stimulate personal thoughts, emotions, and opinions, such as the verbs 'think', 'feel', 'believe'. In examples 15, 16, 17, for instance, the Danish and Dutch teachers ask several questions to involve the students and invite them to think. Through the use of multiple questions, teachers try to stimulate the learners' thinking skills and leave space for personal reasoning and thoughts. Indeed, *referential* questions seek to create a connection between lecturers and students and to guarantee a "safe space" where students can express themselves by exploiting their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Costa & Mariotti, 2023; Sánchez-García, 2020). However, these questions are likely to be challenging for many students since they are encouraged to produce authentic and complex output and possibly negotiate meaning in front of the entire class as in example 18. This can be even more challenging for those who are reluctant to speak up in class and for those who are less proficient than others in English. In fact, research on EMI contexts has confirmed that the issue of students' language proficiency is a major cause of low participation and interaction in class (Cicillini, forthcoming; Macaro, 2018).

15. <S1> no matter what the other dimension has to do with input, so, **are you sensitive to facts?** to actual concrete limitations in the society, or **are you insensitive to that?** do you try **to think** with the context </S1> (UCPH_SH_L08)

16. <S1> what the article said. but if I would ask you just in very general okay? I would

ask you okay, **what's your thought?** do you **think** that, a potential promotion can be an incentive for you to work harder? </S1> (UM_SH_L21)

17. <S1> do you **feel** proud and responsible because you are helping a society and you are making the world better and greener place? or no feelings? </S1> (FHSS_SH_L4)

18. <S1> **what is** the most probable **cause** that **you thought** happened?me? or or the-your group eh no we are eh <BACKROUND_NOISE> say it **say it so everyone can listen can hear**. </S1>(UdL_SH_L18)

Regulative questions were less frequent than *instructional* ones and were used with much greater frequency by the Danish and Spanish lecturers. Precisely, *procedural questions* were by far the most common type of questions among the regulative ones, usually posed by the EMI teachers to lead and manage their classrooms (e.g. organization of classes, assignments, exams, or technical problems using digital devices and equipment). Most of the examples consisted of a sequence of questions aimed at eliciting short answers, head nods, or gestures from the students. Overall, in our corpus, procedural questions were used to fulfill various functions: to check the students' assignments, as in 19; to solve technical issues, as in example 20, where a student replies briefly to the teacher; and to find an agreement between the teacher and the students as regards the timing of a future class, as can be seen in example 21. The studies of Costa and Mariotti (2023) and Doiz and Lasagabaster (2023) reported similar results, underlining the fact that this type of question is likely to lead to brief exchanges where the student output is limited or even absent and is often replaced by facial expressions and body gestures.

19. <S1> is about cytotoxic T cells and how cytotoxic T cells work. yes? so what was known at the time? **did anybody read the paper?** maybe? </S1> (UCPH_LS_L09)

20. <S1> you can see it right? but I make it bigger, maybe the light is too strong, no it's okay yeah they yeah just a (xx) </S1> <S2> too low? </S2> <S1> I don't know I'm okay are you okay? is it okay for your camera? </S1> (UdL_SH_L13)

21. <S1> not four hours. so my question to you is, is it best to meet at one and then end at four, or **should we meet at two and end at five?** ... that's a hopeless question. yeah? I would definitely prefer to meet at one okay **yea?** I was </S1> <S3> I would definitely prefer to meet at one </S3> (UCPH_SH_L08)

5. Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the use of questions in five European countries through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of teacher questions in the TAEC corpus. The data revealed significant differences in question use across the five countries. As for the general frequency of questions, results show that, for example, in a country like Croatia, teachers use questions almost three times more than those in Italy. Yet, the overall majority of these questions remain unanswered (more than 86%), a fact that reflects the limited interaction between teachers and students and the content-oriented rather than audience-oriented EMI teacher questions (Johnson & Picciuolo, 2020). Moreover, the type of interrogative structures

adopted and the sequencing patterns reveal interesting differences between the teaching styles in the countries considered, and highlight some intriguing similarities regarding the choices made by the Spanish and Italian teachers as well as those made by the Danish and the Dutch ones. Such tendencies might find roots in the shared socio-cultural backgrounds, including L1 language families (Romance languages for Italian and Spanish, and Germanic for Danish and Dutch). Question forms are constrained by the functional intentions of teachers resulting in an association between the structurally simple tag and Yes-No questions working in favor of the less demanding functions like *confirmation checks*, whereas the more complex wh-forms being favored for the more cognitively demanding functions like *referential* or *display* questions. Accordingly, encoding and decoding various degrees of question complexity may also be restrained by the form of the question and its clustering with subsequent and or successive ones.

When the functional orientations of teacher questions were scrutinized, data revealed that unlike the consistent patterns found across disciplines in other studies, the order of functional types was not the same across the five European countries. For instance, teachers in Croatia asked more *display* and *self-answered* questions than *confirmation checks* while in Italy and Spain *confirmation checks* accounted for more or less half of the questions in each context. Some possible reasons for these variations may have originated from the teaching practices in each country, the size and nature of the teaching activity or the student population. Such findings do not align with studies like Kuteeva and Airey (2014) or Sancho-Guinda (2023) who argue that disciplinary practices are the main variable affecting EMI practices and not the country or culture context. While other empirical studies have found that disciplines do not actually shape teachers' choices of questions, neither at the level of question functions (Chang, 2012; Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2023) nor their degrees of lexical and syntactic complexity (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2024), our data may suggest that the cultural context in its general sense (e.g., L1, teaching culture) may be one of the intervening factors affecting the use of questions in EMI classes.

Together, these findings can be collectively adapted and applied to EMI teacher education programs regardless of their disciplinary focus. Relying on some illustrative examples from the study, teacher educators can help guide and illustrate how EMI teachers can strategically deploy particular forms to convey specific purposes. They can raise awareness about the myriad of functional options available and their expected impact on the course content, course organization and progression and on the students. Finally, we acknowledge some of the methodological limitations of our study which might have profited from some additional insights had students' full answers (rather than a simple reference to a student intervention) been integrated in the original corpus. The fact that only six lectures were considered to represent each country makes it wise not to overgeneralize the conclusions. These could be further substantiated by more case studies for each country. The study might also benefit from a more in-depth analysis of clausal and phrasal complexity within questions to corroborate the form-function associations.

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