

English Medium Instruction (EMI): Some Observations

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ABSTRACT

The use of English to teach academic subjects raises many issues. Central is the notion of disciplinary literacy, and the role language plays in teaching and learning in a discipline. This article provides an introductory discussion of English medium instruction (EMI). It is organised around nine questions that readers need to know about EMI: (1) What are the reasons for adopting EMI?; (2) What is the nature of EMI?; (3) What are the language demands of teaching in EMI?; (4) What are teachers' views of their primary role and responsibility in EMI?; (5) What are teachers' views of their primary role and responsibility in EMI?; (6) What is the impact of EMI on the teacher?; (7) What is the EMI teacher professional identity?; (8) What is the EMI learner?; and (9) How can students be helped to develop academic literacy? The impact of EMI on teachers' ability to present content in depth is reviewed, as well as its impact on their sense of professional expertise.

Keywords: Academic literacy, English medium instruction,

INTRODUCTION

English Medium Instruction refers to situations for the use of English to teach academic subjects in contexts where a national or local language would otherwise have been used (Macaro, 2018; Richards & Pun, 2022). One context is in post-colonial countries and territories such as India, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Singapore, where English has often been used as a medium of instruction from

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primary to university education. EMI also has a long tradition in university education in the Nordic Countries, Turkey, and the Gulf States. In recent years, EMI has also been introduced as an option in many other parts of the world, including Spain, Italy, Russia, Japan, and China (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011; Wilkinson, 2017). Over 40 universities in China now offer an international MBA taught in English.

WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR ADOPTING EMI?

The reasons for the interest in and adoption of EMI include the following:

1. To provide a common language of instruction in countries with multilingual populations.
2. To develop the skills needed to use English as an academic lingua franca.
3. To enable institutions to attract international students.
4. To increase the prestige of an institution.
5. To promote the competitiveness of universities.
6. To promote economic competitiveness through developing a proficient English workforce.
7. To facilitate regional and international communication.

The adoption of EMI is usually a result of national or institutional language policies that determine which languages will be used in education, how they will be used and when, and how they will be introduced, monitored, and assessed. EMI differs from approaches such as Content-based instruction (CBI), English for specific purposes (ESP), and English for academic purposes (EAP) in that EMI is an approach to the teaching of disciplinary content and is taught by content specialists through the medium of English. In contrast, CBI, ESP, and EAP are approaches to the teaching of English and are normally taught by English specialists. The adoption of EMI reflects the assumption that it will result in the successful learning of both academic subjects as well as English.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF EMI?

Central to the nature and practice of EMI is the notion of disciplinary literacy and the role language plays in teaching and learning in a discipline (Airey, 2011). There are four key dimensions of disciplinary literacy:

1. Each academic discipline is based on a core set of assumptions, concepts, ideas, and theories, together with the processes and modes of thinking and inquiry that define it as a field of study.
2. Learning in a discipline involves participating in the communicative practices and accomplishing the academic tasks that provide the basis for the teaching and learning of academic content in that discipline.
3. Disciplinary literacy in EMI depends on the nature of the discipline-specific genres and text types used in spoken and written academic discourse.
4. Disciplinary literacy encompasses both the literacy skills (reading and writing) and the specialized uses of language that are used in the genres and text types of a discipline.

Language plays a central role in developing disciplinary literacy. In content-based modes of instruction such as EMI, students learn their academic subjects through learning language and, at the same time, learn language through learning their academic subjects. For example, in science, students are expected to use language to describe, explain, and analyse scientific phenomena. Description involves learning to use language as it is used in science to identify, label, name, and specify things or phenomena science (Bruna et al., 2007). Comprehension is facilitated by the teacher's explanation of abstract science concepts with the support of a range of multimodal representations such as tables, graphs, and diagrams (Pun, 2017). During the process, students develop not only the language used for explaining scientific concepts and principles, but also the means of expressing their thinking processes in English, such as reasoning, questioning, problem-solving, and evaluating. Reporting the results of an experiment involves the specialized use of English to inform, recount, narrate, present, and summarize. Evaluating a piece of research requires the learner to be able to judge, argue, justify, take a stance, critique, recommend, comment, reflect, and appreciate. Disciplinary literacy in English thus involves learning the concepts, processes, academic tasks, and genres that characterize the nature of a discipline and how these are realized through English (Clegg, 2007).

WHAT ARE THE LANGUAGE ASSUMPTIONS AND DEMANDS OF TEACHING IN EMI?

A general assumption in many EMI contexts is that if a lecturer has proficiency in English, however that is defined, there should be little difficulty in transferring their ability in English to use it to teach academic content. However, this assumption misrepresents the specialized uses of English needed to successfully teach an academic subject through a second language (Elder, 2001). Academic uses of language are acquired through content-based learning. Academic language is a vehicle for the transfer of information, has a high information load, may be lexically dense, and often requires the use of complex sentence structure (Halliday & Martin, 1993).

Cummins (1991) described the specialized uses of English needed to accomplish academic tasks as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). CALP refers to the language used to support academic learning, including the academic vocabulary, grammar, and modes of thinking and analysis used to express abstract concepts and thinking processes. Cummins compared this with BICS – basic interpersonal communication skills. This term refers to everyday non-academic uses of language when it is used for social interaction rather than learning. BICS can be understood as the language students use at home or outside of the school or university campus, whereas CALP refers to the language they need to learn to master their academic subjects.

In EMI settings, some students may have developed fluency in BICS before they commence EMI; however, this does not mean they can rely on the language and skills that characterize social uses of language as a basis for academic learning through English. Successful learning through EMI requires the learning of new ways of using English (Brown & Kelly, 2007). A student's apparent fluency in English does not necessarily correlate with his or her ability to use language for learning academic content, for which different language skills are needed. The same is true for EMI teachers.

WHAT ARE TEACHERS' VIEWS OF THEIR PRIMARY ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY IN EMI?

Teachers may differ too in the extent to which they feel the need to adapt their teaching to facilitate the learning of both English and academic content. If they see EMI as paralleling CLIL in its aims (e.g., to improve students' English language

skills), they may make use of language-supportive strategies that link content learning and language learning. They may spend more time on lesson preparation and making use of slides and scripts. However, content teachers may also feel that helping learners with their English is *not* their responsibility (Tan, 2011). One math teacher observed by Tan in Malaysia commented on his approach to grading students:

I'll only look for facts. The language is the secondary part there. So we don't really bother.

Similarly Costa (2012) found that EMI lecturers in the Italian higher education context focused on teaching their academic subjects and did not see learners' language improvement as a priority in their teaching, findings similar to those reported by Airey (2012) in the Swedish higher education context.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF EMI ON THE TEACHER?

The requirement to teach in EMI can influence teachers' views of their own effectiveness or self-efficacy – that is, the ability to perform well as a teacher of their subject, to achieve their goals and potential, to maintain their commitment to teaching in spite of difficulties they may encounter, and to provide support for students' learning. The extent to which an EMI teacher is positively or negatively affected by having to teach their academic subject through English may also be influenced by their proficiency in English, the teaching context (e.g., heterogeneous or homogeneous groups), their academic discipline, the level of the class they are teaching, as well as their teaching experience (Vu & Burns, 2014). For some teachers, making a switch to teaching their subject in English does not negatively influence their ability to provide quality instruction, and some teachers feel it is the natural medium to use for their subject.

Teachers in a Danish university interviewed by Mees et al. (2017,) appeared to accept EMI as a good thing:

I never really reflected on it. If students are invited from abroad to study, it's obvious that we need to teach them in English.

I haven't questioned it. I don't think: "Would I like to teach this in Danish?" This is the way it is. It attracts international students and that's the name of the game.

I have benefited from the opportunity to practice my oral English.

I think it is completely natural to use English at the university level because it has been the language of science, language of publication for years. In that regard is completely natural it is all in English.

However, some EMI teachers report that teaching in English has a negative impact on their teaching and that they would teach better in their mother tongue. Studies on EMI teachers' concerns about their ability to deliver academic lectures in English report that teachers sense a lack of details and depth in their explanations of content and reduction in their ability to improvise and respond spontaneously, which are important ways of establishing rapport with students. A Korean teacher cited in Kim (2017) commented:

I received my PhD in the United States and have taught for more than 10 years. But I have to admit that I can convey only 70 to 80% of my knowledge when I lecture in English.

EMI teachers in a Spanish university described some of the stress that resulted from EMI teaching as a result of the need to be seen by students and colleagues as equally competent compared to non-EMI teachers and the need to demonstrate a high level of proficiency in English.

WHAT IS THE EMI TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY?

Teacher professional identity is shaped by the teacher's explicit or implicit understanding of themselves as a teacher, of teaching in their discipline, and of those features that uniquely define them as a teacher in the context in which they work. Teachers may see their professional identity as linked to their discipline, each having its own specific pedagogies. Content and language teachers may have very different understandings of teaching, as seen when a teacher says, "I'm a geography teacher. I teach differently from the way history or English teachers teach." Consequently, teachers may resist advice given by teachers in other disciplines, such as when subject and language teachers work collaboratively.

In the case of the EMI subject teacher, a number of issues arise related to the teachers' sense of their professional identity. For example:

1. Do they view themselves primarily as a subject teacher whose expertise and status depends on disciplinary knowledge rather than English language competence?
2. Do they see their role as including to develop the students' proficiency in English?
3. Do they view their ability in and knowledge of English as constituting a core part of their professional identity?
4. Do they feel that teaching in English enables them to fully realize their sense of authority and expertise as a teacher?

The experience of teaching through EMI may also require the teacher to rethink the nature of their teacher identity and to highlight different aspects of their professional identity in the EMI context than would be realized in a non-EMI class (Volchenkova & Bryan, 2019). Because of the unique nature and dynamics of an EMI class, particularly an international class, more "identity work" may be needed to help the teacher realize the sense of academic authority that they have when teaching in their L1, and to be accepted by their students as a competent university lecturer.

WHAT IS THE EMI LEARNER?

Learners commencing EMI courses may have very different profiles in terms of proficiency in English. Some may be transitioning from secondary schools where they have developed varying levels of proficiency depending on the context. For example, secondary learners in Nordic countries might well have developed reasonable fluency in spoken English by the end of their secondary education, and it may be assumed that they can transition to EMI at university with little difficulty. This would be very different from secondary learners in countries such as South Korea, China, or Japan who would experience far greater challenges in transitioning to EMI. One might assume, therefore, that entry to EMI should be dependent on students achieving a threshold level of communicative ability in English and that English proficiency should be a factor accounting for learners' ability to cope with and their subsequent success in learning academic content through EMI (Aizawa, & Rose, 2019). However, strong motivation for academic success may compensate for limited proficiency in English. A teaching approach may also reflect culturally-based norms related to the nature of classroom

teaching. He and Chiang (2016) comment on the perceptions of international students in EMI courses in China, who found that Chinese students often view learning as dependent on listening, note-taking, and studying the textbook with the teacher seen as an information provider and the students as information receivers.

The relationship between language proficiency and academic learning in EMI has been investigated in various studies (Woodrow, 2006; Yen & Kuzma, 2009). Some of these studies have found a correlation between scores on IELTS and TOEFL tests and academic achievement in EMI. Others, however, have not confirmed such a correlation, suggesting that other factors, such as motivation and academic preparedness, may be involved (Krausz et al., 2005).

HOW CAN STUDENTS BE HELPED TO DEVELOP ACADEMIC LITERACY?

Developing academic literacy involves understanding the core concepts and thinking processes of a discipline, completing academic tasks, and understanding and producing the genres and texts in a discipline. Language plays a central role in developing academic literacy, whether the context is learning through the learner's L1 or through EMI. However, in the case of EMI, the learner is a developing language learner and faces the challenge of mastering academic literacy through the medium of a language in which he or she may have restricted capacities and skills (Evans & Morrison, 2011). In this situation, the responsibility lies with the subject teacher firstly to recognize and understand the special challenges facing the EMI learner, and secondly to accommodate his or her teaching to the challenges learners face in learning through EMI.

Effective teaching in EMI involves the teacher providing careful scaffolding and support to clarify the nature and demands of tasks. Over time EMI students develop a repertoire of productive knowledge and skills that are needed to accomplish familiar academic tasks in English and what the learning strategies, resources, and other requirements of tasks in particular disciplines are. This also involves learning how the language used to prepare a written report differs from that used in a personal recount, or how a written report in geography differs from a written report in a science class (Hafner & Miller, 2019).

In order to provide focused language support during EMI lessons the teacher first needs to preview the language demands of their lessons. While these may differ for different students depending on their language proficiency as well as extent to which they have prepared for the lesson (e.g., by completing assigned readings

from the textbook or other sources), planning any EMI lesson, activity, or task, involves the questions such as these:

1. What learning arrangements, such as lecture, group work, or individual work, will be involved?
2. What cognitive demands are involved, such as classifying, problem-solving, or evaluating?
3. What productive and receptive language skills are involved?
4. What kinds of specialized uses of language may be involved, such as the use of passive voice, sequence markers, or technical registers of vocabulary?
5. What kinds of preparation will the learners need to accomplish the linguistic demands of the task, such as learning lists of keywords or completing concept maps or other aids?
6. How will the procedures needed to carry out the activity be clarified, such as through a written template, through demonstration, or through watching a video?
7. What resources will help students manage the linguistic dimensions of the task, such as a checklist of language features to be incorporated in a writing activity or a template showing the stages to be used in preparing a science report?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Developing an understanding of the language demands of academic tasks is obviously a long-term process for the EMI teacher. Providing specific language support to scaffold language development in EMI takes a great deal of planning and can also benefit from collaboration between EMI teachers and teachers of English. Over time, the EMI teachers' experience of the difficulties their academic subjects and tasks pose for their EMI learners serves as a source for the development of strategies they can use to improve the effectiveness with which content and language are integrated and supported in their lessons.

FURTHER READING

Breeze, R. & Carmen, S.G (2022). *Teaching English-medium courses in higher education: A guide for non-native speakers*. Bloomsbury.

This book focuses on the pedagogy of teaching in EMI, focusing on issues experienced by “non-native speaker” lecturers. The book would, in fact, be equally relevant to lecturers who are native speakers of English. It provides a comprehensive account of how to deliver effective instruction in EMI including lectures, interaction with students, and approaches to assignments and assessment.

Macaro, E. (2018). *English medium instruction*. Oxford University Press.

This influential book offers a comprehensive overview of EMI, covering the history of EMI, how it is understood and implemented, and its impact on teachers and learners. Each chapter provides a critical survey of key research findings and identifies issues and problems that EMI raises. The book provides a masterly account of EMI and is essential reading for researchers and advocates of EMI.

Richards, J.C. with Pun, J. (2022). *Teaching and learning in English medium instruction: An introduction*. Routledge.

This is the first book to offer an introductory textbook for use in graduate TESOL and other programs. While the topics covered are similar to those in Macaro, the book aims at a more general audience, assumes no background in applied linguistics, and contains discussion questions and follow-up activities related to each topic.

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