



WEBINAR: ENGLISH AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION (EMI): PHILOSOPHIES AND POLICIES¹

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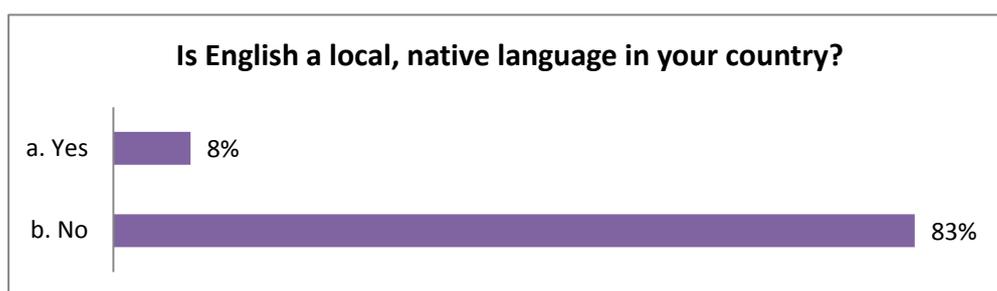
16 June 2014, 16h00 Paris (France) time

HIGHLIGHTS

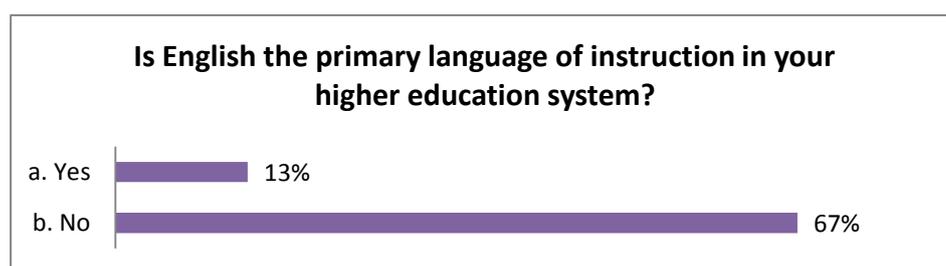
Introduction

The presenters of this webinar aimed to raise awareness on current trends related to English as a medium of instruction (EMI) and some of the philosophical issues these trends pose in policy decision-making. They conducted a 90-minute session with a presentation (available separately), poll questions and open-ended reflection questions to maximise audience interaction.

Before the presentation, participants were polled² regarding the language of their countries and the language of instruction in their higher education systems. With two exceptions, everyone was from a country where English is not the native language.



Only the participants from countries where English is the native language reported that English is also the primary language of instruction in the higher education system.



1. Note: This paper is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.
2. Some participants did not respond to some of the polls. The charts in this document reflect only the answers received.

What is EMI?

EMI essentially refers to the teaching of a subject using the medium of the English language, but where there are no explicit language learning aims and where English is not the national language. In France, this is typically observed in higher education institutions (HEIs) where the sciences, social studies, business, etc. are taught in English. EMI can, however, be conducted in secondary and even primary schools, depending on the context.

Open question to webinar participants:

If you know people who use EMI, what adjectives would you use to describe their attitude towards EMI?

Participants answered: pragmatic, insecure, inventive, creative, lacking resources, enthusiastic, excited, doubting their skills (faculty).

A note on terminology

Applied Linguists often discuss EMI in relation to Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), a language teaching methodology that emerged in the mid-1990s, with “situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language” (Marsh, et al., 1994). Although academics continue to debate where and how to situate EMI among language methodologies in general, and indeed whether it even qualifies as part of the realm of language teaching methodology, there is the idea (Lyster and Ballinger, 2011) of visualising a continuum with language instruction goals on one end and content communication goals on the other, where EMI would be situated on the content-heavy side. It is also worth noting that CLIL teachers often have formal training as language teachers, while EMI teachers usually do not.

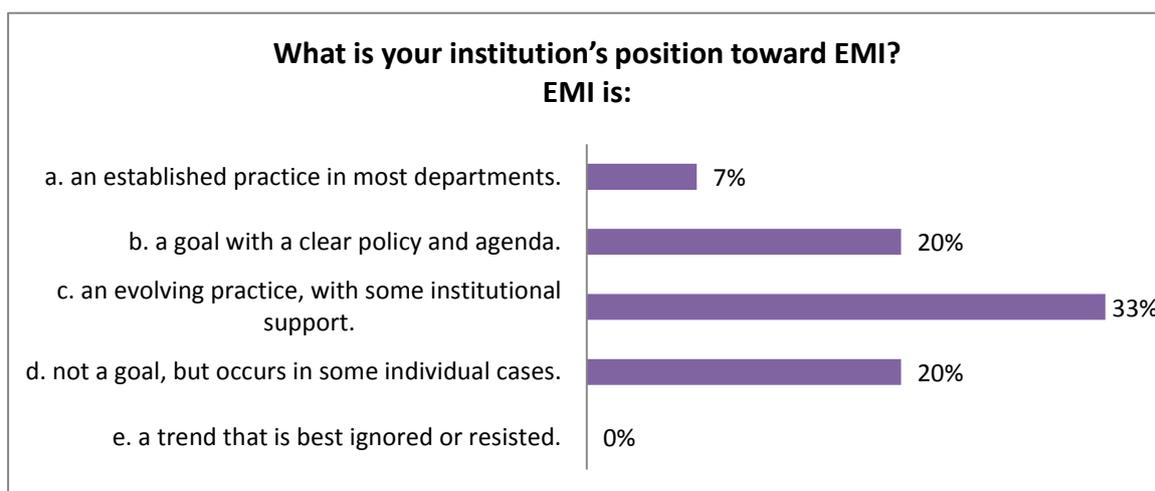
Comment from a webinar participant:

At the University of Luxembourg we have four media of instruction. Study programmes either have English as one of two official languages, or otherwise make recourse to English as the sole medium as a pragmatic default. English instruction is particularly preferred by instructors.

Why this topic? Why now?

EMI is not a new phenomenon. Nor is it undesirable. Nor is it neutral. What is new is the galloping trend of higher education institutions seeking to offer fully English curricula or bilingual options for courses. Recent data show as many as 60% of post-graduate courses in Europe are taught through EMI (Macaro, 2013). Private institutions that are able to offer their faculty more competitive salaries and intensive language support enjoy highly successful implementation of EMI; one case in point is NOVA Business School in Lisbon, which now offers a fully English curriculum with only a few remaining courses taught in Portuguese. The story is quite different for other institutions.

Participants of the webinar apparently agreed that EMI is an important trend. Most reported that EMI is an evolving practice with some institutional support. Twenty percent reported that their institutions had set a goal with a clear policy and agenda, while the same percentage said their institutions had set no goals with regard to EMI, but the practice is taking place regardless. No one said EMI is a trend best ignored or resisted.



EMI has substantial implications for staff recruitment and mobility options among academics. EMI also raises the fundamental question of a new professional order in higher education, where the role of (and potential struggles with) language occupy centre stage. This sharp shift in the internationalisation of higher education is documented in the literature, with a majority of studies so far coming from Asian countries, which have been experiencing the EMI drive since the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98 and with it international competition becoming much more of a core value (Pillier and Cho, 2013) and a factor in policy decisions.

Participant comments on EMI policy:

The University of Helsinki has a policy statement: EMI is one of the choices. English, Swedish and Finnish are the three options.

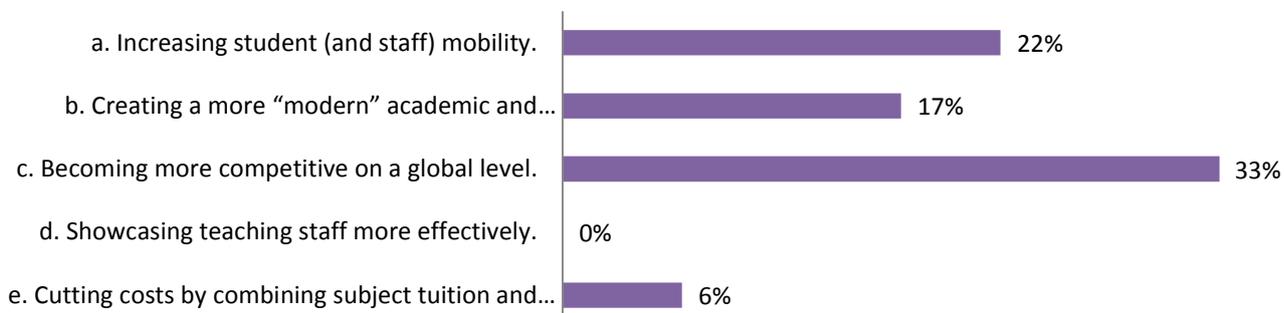
The policy of MESI [Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics] is described as “we have to teach in English if we would like to join the international education world”.

Participant from Brazil: Unfortunately the official position of my institution is that EMI is not fundamental for internationalisation. My personal position is the opposite.

In addition, U.K. institutions are beginning to offer training courses on teaching in English to faculty (both locally and internationally) who intend to use EMI. Jenkins (2014), in a recent public debate, commented on the irony of teachers who have never taught in a second language instructing other teachers how to do so. She argued that general intercultural training for all involved would be more desirable in moving towards further internationalisation, as opposed to focusing on specific language imbalances. The English Language Teaching publishing industry is also showing substantial interest in the opportunity to create training material for teachers who use EMI.

When webinar participants were asked about the benefits of EMI, most cited the boost in global competitiveness. Several people noted the benefit of increased mobility and the creation of a more “modern” academic and professional culture. In one case, the perceived benefit of EMI was a reduction of costs.

What is perceived as the most beneficial thing about EMI within HE institutions?



Comments from webinar participants:

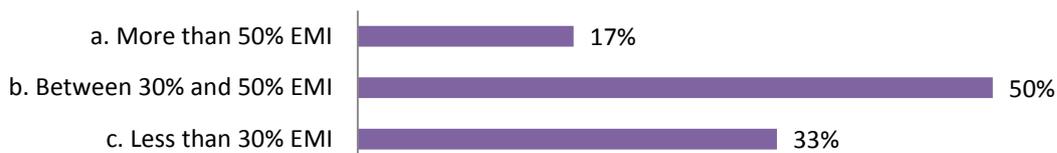
In Brazil, EMI could mean putting an institution on the map as a destination in the international scene.

One of the benefits [of introducing EMI] could be educational: having an international student body brings something extra to the learning compared to a mono-cultural/mono-national student body.

It is not possible to [generalise about benefits of EMI] because it so much depends on the local context and the need and practicalities of each situation.

When participants were asked if EMI should mean an English-only environment in HEIs, they were unanimous: no, it should not. Half of the participants said that 50% of courses should be taught in the home language, while the other half should be taught in English. A third of the participants said less than 30% of courses should be taught in English and 17% said more than half of all courses should be taught in English.

If EMI should NOT mean an English-only environment in HEIs, what should the proportion be between EMI and “home language” courses?



Comments from webinar participants:

EMI should not replace courses in the local language. For both nationals and foreign students it is very important to keep the local language up and sound.

In Brussels, if you do a Master’s taught in English you have between 10 to 30% of your courses taught in French. Some Master’s are 100% in English, 2 multilingual Master’s taught in 3 languages.

In Helsinki, there are also programs where the teaching language is English but the students can use English, Finnish or Swedish in exams.

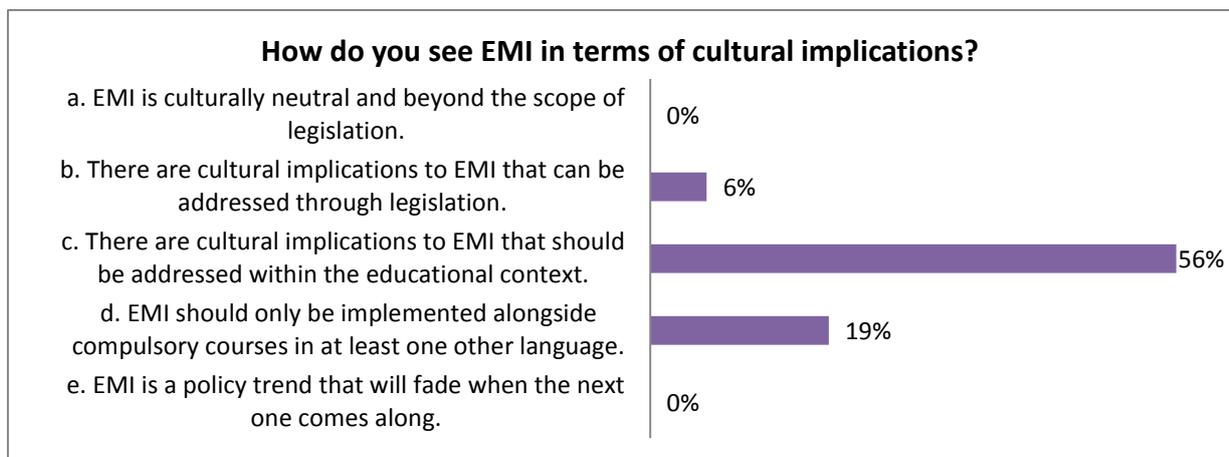
[In Russia] there is much pressure to teach and also to publish in English, although most universities are not

well prepared to do this and the competence of staff to teach is limited. One needs to ask the question--WHY is teaching in English an advantage to universities that have little prospect to attract international students in large numbers?

Towards a responsible research agenda

In the West, the main drivers of current EMI policy are the British Council and the University of Oxford, which have just set up an EMI Research Centre, with the purpose of establishing a sustainable evidence base for future policy decisions. The two-month old Centre seeks to collaborate with institutions worldwide.

Most webinar participants thought EMI should be addressed within the educational context rather than through legislation. Almost 20% said English instruction should be balanced out against compulsory courses in another language.



There is a gap in the data on EMI relating to the fundamental question of learning outcomes. To date, there is no evidence of students learning more or less efficiently through the adoption of EMI. Institutions rarely provide a clear policy statement insisting on EMI, which means the trend is developing in a fairly “organic” manner. This very naturally raises the question of the quality of the classes that are taught in English, and how these changes can be most effectively scaffolded by professional development opportunities within institutions.

In Europe, there is little strategy linking this particular facet of internationalisation to the implications it will carry for secondary education. If undergraduates are eventually expected to begin their higher education with a sufficient level of English to navigate an English-language curriculum, how will this affect the teaching and assessment (and teachers) in schools?

Comments from webinar participants:

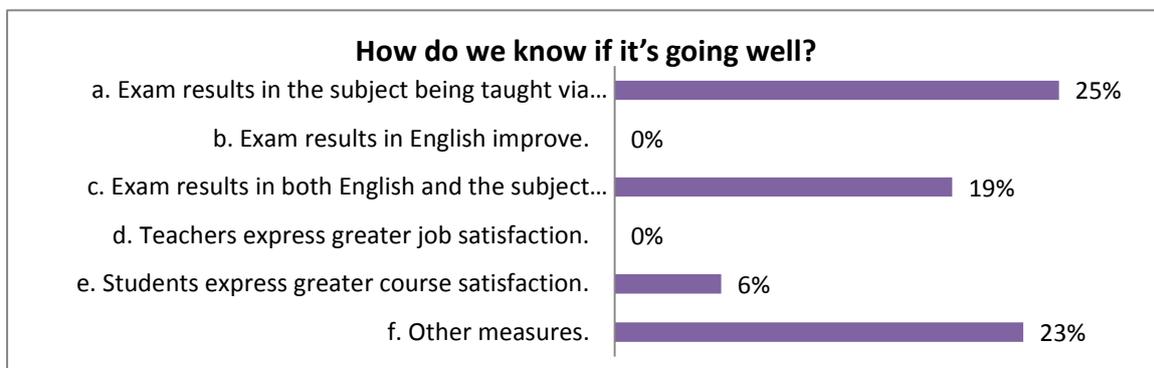
There are still cultural barriers [to EMI], mainly in Latin America. Here most of the population does not know English and there are no effective public policies to change this situation. Plus, the identification between “American imperialism” and poverty among university intellectuals is very strong.

When interacting with one another, the actors face challenges: they have to adjust to different academic cultures, etc.

Obstacles to EMI: the cross-cultural differences, the different reflection of objective reality in various languages... the list of obstacles is long enough.

In the recent Science without Borders program it became clear that English was the real bottleneck!

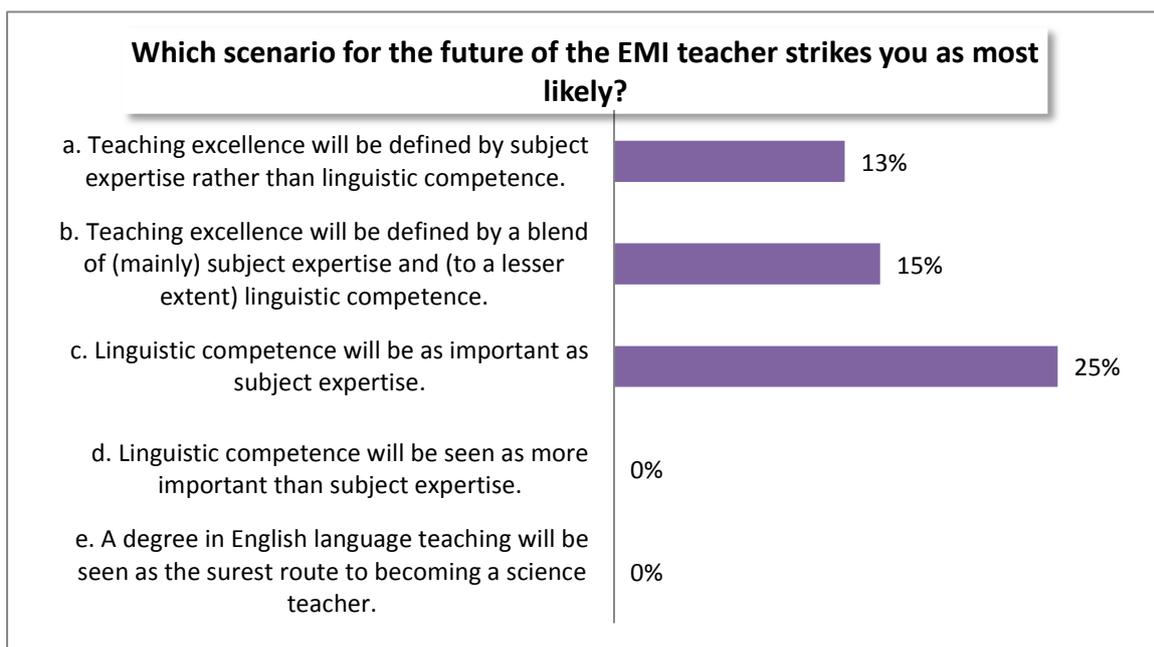
According to a quarter of the webinar participants, the success of EMI should be measured by exam results in the subject being taught. Nearly as many thought that exam results in both English and the subject matter would reveal the level of success.



Participants who responded “other measures” wrote in their suggestions, including:

- Student learning outcomes.
- Students’ confidence in English, improved subject-specific terminology, and greater motivation.
- Students demonstrate subject knowledge and self-confidence in English.
- More foreign students choose your institution and more of your students go abroad for a period of time.
- More students go abroad to continue their studies.

More than half of the participants thought that EMI teacher profiles are likely to change over time. Of those who responded to the poll, most assume that linguistic competence will become as important as subject expertise. Several people expect teaching excellence to be a blend of subject and linguistic expertise, while others think linguistic competence will remain less important than subject expertise. Depending on how important EMI becomes to an institution, the relevant competences expected of professors will shape careers and define options in different ways than in the past.



Open questions for future reflection

Before closing, the presenters shared some questions that might have clear answers, such as:

- Do students learn better with EMI?
- Do students perform differently in assessment with an EMI course?
- Will EMI foster a more inviting environment for international students?
- Will home students perceive a benefit to increased exposure to the English language?
- Can teaching staff adapt to this change?

The webinar then concluded with open questions that might not have such clear answers, such as:

- Is EMI placing teacher expertise at risk?
- Is EMI shifting the standards of educational excellence? Who will shape these standards, and how?
- What is the “soft power” of EMI through the medium of the “local” teacher?
- Language is said to be inseparable from ideology. But whose ideology does EMI on a worldwide scale represent? And what language will EMI be in practice?

References

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