Critical Issues in English –
Medium Instruction at University
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Edited by Jennifer Valcke, Amanda C. Murphy, Francesca Costa
Indice

Introduction
EMI – A Tool for the Internationalisation of Higher Education
Jennifer Valcke, Amanda C. Murphy, Francesca Costa

What are we Changing when we Teach in English?
Views from the Schools of Economics, Mathematics and Physics, Engineering and Linguistics
Round table moderated by Prof. Simonetta Polenghi, Professor of History of Education, Head of the Department of Education

The Introduction of English as an Academic Language in a Faculty of Physics and Mathematics in Italy
Francesca Costa

Teacher Development for Teaching and Learning in English in a French Higher Education Context
Joanne Pagèze, David Lasagabaster

Have we got the Lecturing Lingo?
Elizabeth Long

Metadiscourse in EMI lectures: Reflections on a Small Corpus of Spoken Academic Discourse
Susanna Broggini, Amanda C. Murphy

Adapting to EMI in Higher Education: Students’ Perceived Learning Strategies
Robert Wilkinson, René Gabriëls

Students’ Outcomes in English-Medium Instruction:
Is there any Difference Related to Discipline?
Francesca Costa, Cristina Mariotti

Beyond the Classroom: the Impact of EMI on a University’s Linguistic Landscape
Francesca Helm, Fiona Dalziel
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The Round Table was set up to provide a variety of answers to the same question: What are we changing when we teach in English? Representatives from four different disciplinary areas took part, three from Milan – Management, Engineering and Linguistics – and two – Maths and Physics – from Brescia. The issues that were brought up overlap to some extent, but each disciplinary area pointed out something original, indicating areas for future research. The speakers’ contributions have been edited slightly, but some elements of spoken discourse have been preserved for the sake of authenticity.

Stefano Baraldi – professor of Management, Università Cattolica, Milan

The first thing I would like to say, in all honesty, is that I’m far from being an expert on EMI. I’m a Professor of Management, so my field of interest embraces subjects like Accounting and Budgeting, and other such matters. I’d like to recount what we learned from the experience over the last six years of developing an English taught programme within our School of Economics.

In 2008, not a single course was offered in English by the School of Economics to our 9000 students. In 2017, more than 40 courses entirely taught in English will be offered by our School within the Bachelor’s in Economics and Management, and the Master of Science in Management. In my capacity as coordinator of the latter, I will summarise our experience and focus on what we did and didn’t change when we decided to teach in English.

To start with the postgraduate programme, before 2009 there were 4 programmes in Milan, all taught in Italian: in Economics, which attracted 200 students, Economics and business legislation – 150 students, Business Markets and Strategies – 100 students, and Business Management – 300 students. In 2009 a small number of new courses taught in English were introduced in the Business Management programme and the students enrolled in this programme were allowed to attend some of their courses in English. The proportion of English taught programmes was very small: 9 out of 114 courses were offered within Postgraduate programmes, accounting for about 8% of our courses. One year later, two distinct curricula were introduced in the programme of Business Management and Economics to provide students with the opportunity to complete their track by attending only English taught courses, which meant an increase in our English taught courses. By
2013, 28 out of the 125 courses offered by the School of Economics within Postgraduate programmes were taught in English, accounting for 22% of our overall programmes.

Not surprisingly, a considerable number of students took the opportunity to enrol in an international curriculum, particularly in the programme of Business Management. For this reason, two years ago the School of Economics decided to launch a new Postgraduate programme, the Master of Science in Management, entirely taught in English, for a maximum of 100 students. At present, 32% of the courses offered by the School of Economics (42 out of 131) are taught in English. The Master of Science in Management accepted 100 students, both in 2014 and 2015, and received twice as many applications. Every now and then, my Dean asks me “Stefano, why don’t we double the capacity of the programme? Let’s think it over, it’s a good idea” and so on. So that’s our story.

What did we change on this journey that has brought our School to increase its English taught programmes from 0 up to 32% of its courses in the last six years?

From my standpoint, the best way to provide you with a comprehensive and hopefully insightful map of the many changes we experienced is to focus on two programmes, the programme of Business Management and the Master of Science in Management. They have a lot in common: they are general management programmes, they both provide students with the opportunity to specialise in different areas – such as Accounting and Finance, Marketing, Human Resources and so on –, they both address the same employers – business organisations –, they are taught by the same faculty, and, previously, even shared the same coordinator – me.

The former is taught in Italian and the latter is taught in English, so any difference between the two is necessarily due to what we changed when we started teaching in English.

In my opinion three major differences, in addition to language, can be found between these two twin programmes.

a. The first difference is a matter of target and markets. The two programmes basically target different markets: the Master of Science in Management has been intentionally designed to enrol and attract international students, namely those students – either Italian or not – who are looking for a multicultural learning environment. In this way we plan to increase the percentage of students coming from other countries up to 40% in the next three years: we are now near 25%. So, without being obsessed like many in the world of business with customer centricity, customer intimacy, and customer loyalty, we strongly believe that this makes a great deal of difference. If you are targeting different markets, you have to meet different needs, satisfy different customers, compete with different players, develop and deliver a unique value proposition, and ultimately offer different programmes.

b. Second, the structure of the two programmes is quite different. Within the Master of Science in Management, the final thesis accounts for only 12 credits instead of 24, and no credit is granted for the development of linguistic or IT skills. On the other hand, all the students are intensely involved in the so-called Business Labs, which are, in my view, one of the most distinctive features of the programme. A Business Lab basically
What are we changing when we teach in English?

consists of a set of field work activities accounting for 28 credits, and focuses on a specific
business setting. For the time being, we have five Business Labs – consulting companies,
multinational companies, luxury and fashion, small and medium enterprises, health
care organisations. The reasons for introducing a Business Lab into this programme
are twofold: on the one hand, to give students the opportunity to gain a thorough
understanding of a specific business setting, and learn how to be a good manager in
different kinds of business organisations. On the other, to give students the opportunity
to put theory into practice, and gain practical experience by working side by side, day by
day with a group of leading companies.

c. Each Business Lab works as follows: first of all, three leading companies act as partners in
each Lab. These range from Ernst & Young to Gucci, from Piaggio to the privately-owned
hospital Humanitas. Second, not more than 20 students are admitted to each Lab so as to
promote active learning, stimulate team work and close interaction with the partnering
companies. All the students admitted to the Business Lab attend an introductory course
in which about 50% of classes are held on site, jointly by managers and professors. 40%
of the students’ final grade refers to a group assignment commissioned by one of the
companies participating in the Lab on different subjects, such as The adoption of a new
performance measurement tool at Piaggio, The development of a corporate academy for
Comau, and The positioning of Pirelli’s employer brand. Lastly, in each Lab some students
are selected for an internship in the first or second company, while the remaining students
are included in the team responsible for delivering a project commissioned by the third
company.

d. The third area of difference refers to the overall learning experience of the students.
In this regard, I would say that the Master of Science in Management benefits from a
higher faculty-student ratio, 50% higher than the faculty-student ratio that we find in the
Business Management programme. The MSc students also benefit from an increasing
number of visiting professors, and the emergence of what I call internal, international
faculty, namely a group of usually young professors who are more than willing to focus
their teaching activities on the courses taught in English. They also benefit from a course
calendar organised in terms of quarters, not semesters, where each course accounts for 60
hours, eight hours a week for eight weeks, with one empty week for the mid-term test.
Finally, they also benefit from the support of a dedicated team consisting of five Business
Lab owners, two people who coordinate the internships and field projects, one person
responsible for the learning environment, and administrative staff. This, in a nutshell,
is what we learned from our experience with the Master of Science in Management:
teaching in English is far more demanding than teaching in Italian.
It's a difficult question for us to answer, because we don't yet have a programme run only in English. We are thinking about a Master’s programme in English for Physics, but we are in some doubt about it, and I will try to explain why.

I have some personal experience, because two years ago I decided to teach 20 hours in English of a 60-hour course. The first thing I noticed is that I was much slower than normal, so I could say fewer things. This can be an advantage, because too much material is dangerous in Maths and Physics. But the other problem I encountered, which is my greatest worry, is that we don’t just explain formulas, we have to transmit the ideas behind them. The formulas and the reasoning is already written in the notes – the students could, in principle, only learn the notes. But we have to transmit ideas, and bridge the gap between us and the students, and for that we need words, we need a common language, not only a specific language. It’s not a matter of writing or saying “Square root of x, y or z”. The students understand things like that in a moment. The problem is when you have to make a comparison, or explain why a definition is said in a certain way and not in another way. That’s difficult and that’s when I noticed that the students were asking each other “What did he say?”. They were not concerned about the meaning of what I said, but by the words – they wanted to understand the words first. Then other words came into play, and so they lost the ideas in the end. Sometimes I had to repeat the same thing in Italian during the next lesson to see whether they had understood the ideas. I teach Applied Mathematics, things like fluid dynamics, elasticity – and you can explain a viscous fluid only when you have examples – I have to make a bridge with everyday life and ordinary ideas.

So, the first thing that I noticed was a reduction in speed, which can be good, and a certain lack of expressions, words, and metaphors that I think we’ll need in the future if we want to teach Mathematics and Physics in English.

From another point of view there’s also the problem of pronunciation, of how we are teaching. Are we also teaching English, or only concepts? I don’t like to teach mistakes, even if they are in English, and if I have to speak with Italian accent, I don’t think that this is the right thing to do with a student, because otherwise we will all become like our Prime Minister Renzi! Joking aside, I am convinced that sooner or later we will have to teach almost everything in English, but then the problem will be how. Now, it’s good to have everything in English, because English is still English, but in ten years I am convinced there will be an English A, English B, English C, and people will choose the university by the level of English that is taught, because students also want to learn English; it must be not an obstacle.

From the positive point of view, I must say our students read books in English naturally. Sometimes I also put French or German books on the booklist. That can cause some problems, but not many, because when you read the formulas, the ideas can be deduced. But the big problem is understanding speech: I think that our teachers need to receive training in that. It cannot only be a matter of intention, of good will on the part of the individual. There must be a teaching programme for university teachers, otherwise I think sooner or later we’ll have serious problems.
My first experience was in Germany, where I taught Advanced Engineering in Mathematics for Master students in Automation and Robotic Engineering. I don’t know how to evaluate this experience, because English was a common language between the students and me, because they came from countries like India and Pakistan. My experience in Italy comes from the University of Verona which has a Master’s course in Mathematics, taught in English where my course was in Differential Geometry. At the time, I taught the same course in Italian at the University in Brescia, so I had the same level of students with exactly the same course and the same programme. At the end of the course I realised at the exams that the students in Verona were weaker than the students in Brescia, although they had the same background.

In principle, I think that it is a good idea to start teaching in English, but it depends strongly on the subject. I agree with what Alfredo said, that it is not sufficient to just explain formulas, but we have to explain concepts besides formulas, and in some parts of the course I have difficulty explaining this, and this may reflect on the level of understanding of the subject among the students. Even if the teachers know English very well, the students may not, so either way, something may get lost of the concept.

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Francesco Ballio – Professor of Hydraulics at Milan Politecnico (Polimi) and Rector’s Delegate for International Relationships with Iran and Gulf countries

I started teaching my first course in English ten years ago, and since then I’ve always taught at least one or two courses in English, and the others in Italian. A few years later I designed and then ran a new Civil Engineering course completely held in English at the Politecnico. Now I spend more time on the perspective of internationalisation, promoting our courses, but I still teach.

My intention is to provide some hints of my own experience both as a teacher and head of a degree course. To start with, a few numbers to provide an overall perspective on Polimi, the Politecnico.

We started an internationalisation strategy in 2003, and since then international students have increased, as have courses taught totally in English. At present, most of the Bachelor courses are taught in Italian, but we have three courses in the architectural field which are taught in English. At the Master of Science level, we have 30 Masters of Science taught in English (which is the majority of the courses), while at PhD level 100% of our courses are in English. In terms of student numbers, 25% are international students at the Master of Science level, and 30% at the PhD level. All in all, we are talking about 4000 international students enrolled at Polimi, and 1000 more exchange students. On average, between the Bachelor, Master of Science and PhD levels, we have about 12% international students.

To come to my experience. Imagine that you are teaching a class in English to students you taught last year in Italian, so there are just Italian students, no international students. The first point is teacher-student and student-teacher communication, as mentioned previously.
Of course, there are some difficulties, things which I will never be able to learn in English, like a multiplication table – I can’t say my tables in English, I have to translate them into Italian, and I’m not able to say my phone number. It’s like nursery rhymes – you learn nursery rhymes in your native language, and that’s it. But there is also a problem with technical vocabulary. When I teach my courses in English, students then do not know how to say certain things in Italian, which is not exactly an ideal situation. But apart from the basic communication skills, these things can be overcome.

Another thing is that you are less intelligent in languages that you know less, because you are not as quick. I worked in Germany for a year while I was learning German, and I can still feel the embarrassment of being stupid, because I didn’t speak the language fluently. It’s difficult, sometimes impossible to live in English what you live in Italian, but on the other hand, that’s exactly what we want to push our students to do, to learn how to overcome these difficulties. So, although it is a difficulty, the difficulty is also part of our intention.

Another thing that changes is the class dynamics. If you have very few students, it doesn’t matter, because in that case you speak with them individually or in small groups, but for the average class, for what we call a small class (which is about 30) the dynamics change. The students are shyer, for one thing. It’s not nice to make mistakes in English, but on the other hand my English is international English. There are two different languages, and I speak international English, I don’t speak English.

Another difference regards resources. For example, I like to call non-academics to give seminars in my courses, and teaching in English reduces this possibility, because many people from companies wouldn’t speak English, so the possibility of selecting a seminar is now also filtered by language skills. This is not a big issue, but it is an issue.

This is an imaginary scenario of teaching in English to a class of Italians that you have already taught in Italian. But what happens when you really do have 50% international students, or even 90%, as might happen in the future? Then you face new problems, and real changes. First of all, heterogeneity increases, and there are two kinds of heterogeneity. The first is entrance competencies. I know what to expect from Italian students because 75% of them come from the first level degree at Polimi, and most of the others are Italian students coming from an Italian system, which is more or less equivalent, while foreign students really arrive with different competencies. They have already studied many things, but in a different way, while they have not studied things that you would expect them to have studied. If you think you should select only students who have equivalent entrance competencies, you can forget foreign students, simply because you don’t know or you do not understand what they have done. If you look at the names of the exams they have taken, what does that tell you? I have had to select students in the past, and it is very difficult to understand what their level is.

The second point is the heterogeneity of the approach. I typically adopt the central-European deductive approach, top-bottom, from general principles to rules, and then to problems. Most of these students will either come from English-speaking countries or Eastern countries which have adopted a bottom-up approach: they start from problems, and then move onto formulas, solving the problems, and sometimes they elaborate some general concept. That’s not the same.
What often happens is that I teach my lesson, and after ten minutes they say “No result yet? Come on, are you teaching me something or are you just talking?” That’s their type of approach, and it’s not easy to deal with because I’m not happy with it: they just like to find the formula and produce a result which looks adequate for that kind of problem, but that is not the point for me. This is a big difference, but it’s relevant to Engineering, not all subjects, and I cannot tell what it would be like in Philosophy, for example.

If I have a Serbian or a Russian or a German student, there’s no problem, they will have the same mentality as we have. But with a student from New Zealand or China or Vietnam or South America, there really is a different approach. This is the big problem in my opinion and it has consequences. Of course you have to try to use this diversity as a value, not only as a problem. For example, if you increase the amount of group work you do with these students, then the diversity can be a value when you make students interact with each other. But you must be able to do group work, and not have a class of 100 students. Other minor problems to be mentioned are the fact that when you speak to an international group, your case studies cannot only be Italian. If you speak about legislation, Italian legislation means nothing to them. So you need to adapt a bit, and this requires study.

I’d like to make two more points: expectations from students differ for many reasons, but one big difference is the fact that for Italians the nominal duration of the degree course is two years, but it could be three, depending on how the exams go. For the international students, it’s not the same, they expect to pass the exam the first time, and the idea that you may repeat it doesn’t go down well. This has to be handled somehow. In the end – here I perfectly agree with my colleague – you lose a bit of your evaluation criteria, otherwise it won’t work. Whether your teaching effectiveness is lowered depends on how much you have worked on the list of problems that I’ve mentioned, but the evaluation criteria will be a bit lower, otherwise you have a real problem.

Finally, something about the structure of the degree course. Speaking as the head of a degree course, I can say that you need to design courses that have some flexibility. You also have to work hard with your colleagues and convince them that it’s a good idea to teach in English despite all these problems. Most of them will not see the big advantages which Rectors and Deans sometimes try to depict, sometimes not. You can have better PhD students, but the course needs to be very attractive, which also means providing scholarships; this way you will be able to really select good students.

Giovanni Gobber, Dean of the School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, and Professor of General and German Linguistics

How can the content of my lesson change according to a change of the language I use? I feel there is a different approach to the subject.

When using English, you first have to make clear what the connections are between the parts of your discourse. I find it quite interesting to investigate the fact that when you use English you are, in a certain way, forced to make explicit what can remain implicit in another language. The relations between chunks of meaning, what you call utterances or parts of
texts, should be made explicit, and this is important for the text itself, for the audience, and for you, the speaker, because the speaker is forced to have a clear idea of how the text is built up.

So you have to build up a coherent whole first, and to me this is a considerable advantage that using English can have. On the other hand, I feel a bit uncomfortable when using English because I am forced to concentrate on the content, on the rational part, more than on the emotional part. Emotions are less expressed in a second language, and so the attitude towards the audience, and involving the audience can become more difficult. You must be comfortable with the language you are using in order to establish a deeper relationship with the audience.

One should develop this ability, which is not only a matter of language, but a matter of how comfortable you feel with the language. English cannot be used as a kind of foreign language, like a huge list of expressions that you are able to put together. This is of course important when you first approach another language, but no matter how developed your lexical or your grammatical competence is, the most important thing, in my view, is that you feel comfortable with the language in general. Oral competence should be developed, because it helps you develop your attitude. This has to do with individual experience.

I notice that the audience becomes aware of this; those who participate in the lesson become aware of your involvement with the language, and this creates a deeper involvement in the matter. In order to get people to understand what I’m saying, the element of emotion is quite important. It’s also really important that the audience can interpret what is implicitly communicated, and a part of this implicit communication has to do with your attitude towards the subject, the audience and towards the language in a very general sense. This is a part of communication.

When we use our first language, we may not be aware of this, because the implicit components are part of the common ground of the audience and of the speaker. When using a language that is not the first language of the participants, such as English as a common language, it becomes a kind of bridge between different common grounds. There are implicit components in this common ground. So apart from the content of the text, there are dimensions of communication that are implicit, and are part of a common ground, such as that which is shared by the people participating in the communication. This part is of great importance for mutual understanding.

Different languages have different ways of looking at the world, but when communication occurs one person meets another, which is what is called intercultural communication. I prefer to call it interpersonal communication, because when we meet other people, we have to try to understand them. That’s a task for all teachers, in any language, whether your first or your second. If you are not ready to meet other people, the audience, the lesson can go badly, even in your first language. So perhaps more than concentrating on English, the point should be how we communicate with others. Using another language can be interesting, because you can become aware of this fact, that communication is about meeting other people, meeting others.