

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO EMI: WHERE IS THE LANGUAGE TEACHER?

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Universities in the English-speaking world have been successfully recruiting foreign students for their courses for many years. As far back as 1977, there were 29,000 international students studying in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2016). While this has undoubtedly been partially attributable to the fact that the university systems in the countries concerned generally enjoy a good reputation, it would never have been as successful without the fact that the courses are delivered in the world's second language: English (Ethnologue, 2018). It was only a matter of time before the rest of the world wanted to join in. Limiting your customer base to potential students who are sufficiently fluent in your native language is very restricting, so delivering courses in English makes sense.

Thus, this kind of English Medium Instruction (EMI) was born. It initially took hold in Europe, with EMI programmes increasing by 1,000 % at HEIs between 2001 and 2014 (Wächter and Maiworm, 2014). However, it is now expanding in large parts of the rest of the world. The form of EMI described in this article is mainly seen as an element of an internationalisation programme, usually at tertiary level, and the definition used for this article is as follows:

*The use of the English language to teach academic subjects
(other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions
where the first language of the majority of the population is not English.*

(Macaro, 2018)

Whatever the form of EMI under consideration, thoughts are usually focussed on the course and its delivery. The purpose of this article is to place the course into its context, highlight the importance of the non-course-related aspects of offering EMI courses, and to show how the language teacher can make an important contribution throughout the process.

It is important to understand that any EMI course offered at tertiary level exists both within a context and within a process. The intention is to attract students to your university, presumably to complete a course of study. A properly developed internationalisation programme will also promote opportunities for academic exchanges for both staff and students and enable academics to be involved in international co-operations. It is therefore vital that the environment at the university is conducive to promoting their well-being. This was emphasised by Westbrook in a presentation at the IATEFL conference in Liverpool (2019). Some readers may find it helpful to picture the classic iceberg analogy, with the visible tip representing the course, and the submerged 80% being all the other things necessary to make it a successful programme. A more useful analogy for others might be that of a journey. The reasons for this will be discussed below.

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To understand the range of areas to be considered when planning an internationalisation programme, it is important to place oneself in the position of the visitor, whether student or academic. The choice of institution and course/department will almost certainly take place at a distance. This may involve contact via the university's web site, e-mails, telephone, marketing literature, etc. and with both academic and administrative staff. This constitutes the “Choices” stage in **Ошибка! Источник ссылки не найден.** below. Once a person has decided on a particular course/institution and they have arrived, there are cultural aspects that need to be considered, which in turn imply a need for a support network. This can affect almost any part of the university, from the staff in the student accommodation department to the finance department and academics. This is the “Culture” stage in **Ошибка! Источник ссылки не найден.** The course itself comes next and students and academics alike are then confronted with academic issues. The “Academic” stage in **Ошибка! Источник ссылки не найден.** encompasses themes of an academic nature that need to be dealt with.



Fig. 1.
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Having reviewed some of the areas that need considering if an EMI course is intended to form part of an internationalisation programme, it is necessary to consider these three, non-course, headings in more detail. The choice of institution and of course/department is of the utmost importance. As will be seen later in this article, cultural issues are also of great importance. Institutional culture and any insights into the chosen course will probably only be possible to understand at a distance. However, research in the UK, such as (Christie, Munro and Fisher, 2004), has consistently shown that factors unrelated to what happens on the course itself are most significant in students' decisions to withdraw early from courses. This is clearly unwanted, and efforts should be made to ensure that choices are well-informed. In the research above, it was clear that there are multiple reasons for dropping out. However, two-thirds of students cited poor choice of course, with half of students blaming the institutional environment. This shows how the quality and scope of information available to potential students and visiting academics is decisive in keeping retention levels as high as possible.

Culture is the next stage of the journey. Once the decision is made, the individual arrives in the country and institution selected. Culture shock is a fact of life and will affect almost everybody to some degree. This is not the place for a detailed description of the factors around culture shock, but its effects can be reduced by the existence of support and socialising possibilities. On the other hand, they will be made worse if problems that occur are more difficult to deal with than they need to be. The implications of this are that all areas of the university need to be prepared to deal with people who do not speak the local language. A particular example is IT support. It can almost be guaranteed that everybody at the university will at some point have a problem with the IT system. At that point, they will need to be able to contact somebody who can help them. That can only happen in English. But it is not simply a question of ensuring that language skills are adequate. Culture affects all aspects of who we are, our attitudes and even how much personal space we need to feel comfortable. A lack of sensitivity, on both sides, to the existence of these difficulties can cause misunderstanding and conflict, possibly increasing the effect of culture shock to the point that a student drops out. Geert Hofstede has made a lifelong study of these differences and classified many countries on a six-dimensional system (Hofstede, no date). One example is the “uncertainty avoidance”

dimension. Countries with a high score on this dimension are not tolerant of uncertainty and ambiguity, and this can be reflected in the existence of, and adherence to, large numbers of rules to regulate all aspects of life. Countries with a low score are happy to “make it up as they go along” and do not want more rules than absolutely necessary. Russia has a very high score on this dimension while the UK and China have low scores.

Finally, in this consideration of the context of EMI, it is necessary to look at the academic environment. The effect of this will come into play generally after the start of a course. There are a multitude of potential pitfalls involved in this area, but a few examples are explored now. The first of these is prior knowledge. Any curriculum is designed by making assumptions about what the students already know. Lecturers also make assumptions when dealing with students about their existing knowledge. In a “normal” university course environment, the knowledge from the students’ school career will be known and taken into account. However, school systems in different countries differ in terms of scope and depth. Something that is known in great depth from the Russian school system may be unknown or only covered at a superficial level in the French system. This demands a greater degree of flexibility in the course design and delivery than would otherwise be necessary.

The grading system to be used in an EMI course is also much more problematic than in a conventional course. There are norms and expectations related to academic writing in every country. There is a difference between the expectations in Australia and the UK, for example, two English-speaking countries. The ways in which Chinese, British and Russian students are expected to write will be completely different in terms of style and structure. When an academic comes to grade a piece of writing on an EMI course, which writing style and what criteria will be used and how will they be communicated to the students? Is a visiting academic expected to apply their own criteria or those of the country they are visiting? Or a completely separate set of criteria? On first consideration, this may seem overly pedantic, but particularly in an academic environment, written texts are judged quite severely against accepted expectations. It would be perfectly easy for a text that would be acceptable in China to be failed in the UK, simply due to the rules governing style and structure. This aspect needs to have been considered, communicated to all concerned, and those involved in grading student work trained accordingly.

Given the last point, the attentive reader may be wondering about the second part of the title of this article. Where is the language teacher in this scenario? The focus has been moved from EMI as a teaching concept to the larger context of internationalisation within which EMI sits. This does not, however, reduce the importance of the language professional. In fact, it opens up a much larger range of activities where these people can be of significant importance.

The EMI element is still important. Content lecturers still need to be effective in an EMI environment. Language teachers have much to offer in the way of support to provide content specialists with a range of techniques and approaches that will enable them to provide supportive teaching and mechanisms to monitor understanding. Their intercultural communication competence is also important, and many language professionals are also well-qualified to train their content colleagues in this area as well.

The non-teaching areas mentioned above are still areas that language professionals can have an active role in improving. It is clear that the initial choices made by students and visiting academics will be made at a distance. Much of the information collected will be via the institutional web site or downloaded information. They may find it necessary to gain further information by e-mail or telephone. The language professionals can play an important role in making sure that written communications are clear and that they include the kind of information the target audience would need and expect to find. Contact points within the university will need to receive training in dealing with enquiries by e-mail and telephone. This will involve not only language training but also intercultural communication awareness training.

The impact of cultural differences on individuals can be extremely significant. Making those individuals aware of the differences they will find is one way to make the initial stages of studying at a foreign university less stressful. Ensuring that local staff are also aware of these differences is equally as important to prevent misunderstandings. Language professionals can be involved in training that improves the quality of communication, ensuring that staff are aware of how intonation, directness and modality can change the message being transmitted, for example. Textual information can also be checked to ensure the necessary information is provided in an appropriate manner.

Within a fairly short period after beginning a course, those involved will be confronted with the academic environment which they are involved in. Academics will discover that assumptions they can make about local students may no longer apply. Students will discover that the relationship they expect to have with their lecturers has changed. Much like many of the factors discussed above, good information can go a long way to smoothing this transition and making it as painless as possible. However, one fundamental area does not allow itself to be solved quite that easily.

Academic systems are very culture-specific, and it would be quite unlikely to find an academic course that did not involve any testing or assessment. It could be said that testing and assessment are the most important aspects of any course. Without fair and reliable assessment, the quality of the course itself is almost irrelevant, as there is no way of accurately judging the knowledge or abilities of the students. But what criteria should be applied? For local academics, it will obviously be convenient to assess work in the way they have always done. If that is the chosen approach, how will visiting academics be trained to work in the same way? The students from outside the country will also need to understand the difference between what they are used to and what they now have to take into consideration when they produce work for assessment. An alternative is to produce “neutral” criteria for the specific EMI context. This is not without its own complexity though, as this would imply training all parties in a system that is not natural to any of them. Academics would need thorough training, while students would need clear information as well as training in the academic norms necessary for success. On the other hand, for work produced in English, it may be advantageous to all concerned to gain experience in a style, particularly of writing, that would be useful to a future academic career or for being published in academic journals.

Of course, given that this is a necessary process, in the context of the title of this paper it is very positive, as the language community is well-placed to advise and train on those aspects of the process that relate to language and culture. They should also be involved in the provision of information in the same way as has already been discussed.

It is clear that the provision of EMI at the tertiary level involves considerably more than simply translating an existing course. On the assumption that the institution is interested in recruiting students from around the world to participate in their EMI offering, and also taking advantage of the other benefits of a successful EMI programme, a holistic approach must be followed in order to ensure that the time and money invested in developing and running such a programme is not wasted as students drop out early and visiting academics lose interest. While this may initially appear to relegate the language community to a lower importance in the process, this is not necessarily the case. Much of the holistic approach to EMI relates to communication of some kind. Language clearly lies within the core competencies of a language teacher, but many in the field will also have knowledge about intercultural communication and differences in academic systems. The approach also widens the client base for language teaching, involving a wide range of administrative departments such as admissions, IT support, finance and accommodation. In addition, there is a profusion of written material that needs to be provided with sufficient content in appropriate language.

EMI has been described “as a ‘galloping’ phenomenon now considered ‘pandemic’ in proportion” (Chapple, 2015:1). While an increasing amount of evidence casts doubt on some of the claims for its benefits, it is likely to continue to grow as long as universities are motivated to compete for students and its staff wish to be involved in the international academic world. Some language professionals are already fully equipped to contribute to the process of internationalisation of which EMI is a part. For others, it should be seen as an opportunity to upskill and develop so that they can also provide the full range of language-based skills that this process demands.

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