

# COMMENT

On  
*English-medium Instruction and the Role of Language Mediation*  
by Claudio BENDAZZOLI

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Claudio Bendazzoli discusses the results of a survey conducted at the School of Management and Economics (University of Turin) based on semi-structured interviews with 45 academics with the aim of gathering information about the use of English for research and teaching purposes. In this brief commentary, I will deal with some issues that emerged in the study in relation to the academic setting, the level of language proficiency of lecturers and students, the perceptions of the EMI experience by the interviewees and the role of language mediation.

*The setting: what future directions for EMI?* The figures reported in Table 1 indicate that the number of international students does not exceed 10%; although the Erasmus population was not factored in, this percentage seems to confirm that EMI mainly responds to the institutional need to stage internationalisation policies rather than to a strong demand from abroad<sup>1</sup>. Considering that in the setting described (as in most other Italian settings where EMI courses are available), lecturers and students are mainly Italian native speakers, the question arises as to what directions EMI should take. On the one hand, as Bendazzoli suggests, the number of international students needs to increase, in order to create a truly international environment that motivates the use of a *lingua franca*. On the other hand, it may be useful to start viewing English as a proper learning objective, as suggested in Campagna, Pulcini (2014). In other words, we should stress the importance of achieving language and communication abilities together with discipline-specific knowledge. This may entail not only setting specific proficiency requirements at the entry and exit levels, but also promoting the development of academic literacy skills and the acquisition of the spoken and written genres that students are expected to produce on the workplace (and outside)<sup>2</sup>.

The first group who will profit from a greater focus on language is that of Italian students. It is well known that Italian undergraduates entering university generally do not possess adequate language skills (see Costa, Coleman 2013; see also the perceptions of the lecturers interviewed by Bendazzoli and reported in Table 5). Simply exposing them to input in English by lecturers whose language proficiency is perceived as not enough to enable them “[to take] part in debates or [have] to make opposing points in a discussion” does not seem the best strategy to prepare the future workforce. Setting proper language learning objectives will not

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<sup>1</sup> As for the domestic population, no information about the number of Italian students enrolled on EMI courses was provided, but it would be useful in order to understand to what extent a greater international profile for Italian graduates is currently demanded.

<sup>2</sup> Paying more attention to language in EMI courses is an option that Italian universities should consider also in the light of the fact that the international population itself often possesses poor language skills in English (see Costabello 2013).

only improve the quality of the educational offer, but will also redefine and possibly strengthen the role of the existing, and indispensable, actors already operating in university contexts, such as *lettori* (i.e. foreign language experts), English Language specialists (i.e. university professors and researchers who investigate the English language as a proper object of study, both theoretically and from an applied perspective) and content lecturers. This latter group of stakeholders, so far the most investigated one, will also benefit from a more language-focused approach to EMI. Content lecturers may become active participants in the consolidation of the students' language abilities through the adoption of an ICLHE model, which will require providing them with appropriate linguistic and methodological support. It is sometimes feared that academics might be reluctant to question their teaching practices; however, the results of Table 5, although not generalizable to every context, seem rather encouraging, as they indicate that, on the contrary, content lecturers would be eager to receive training, as improving one's language abilities and increasing the effectiveness of one's classes are perceived as challenging but potentially very rewarding undertakings. Finally, universities too will gain from a more language-focused approach to EMI and the adoption of proper ICLHE practices, as education quality is probably the best way to improve reputation.

*The EMI experience: classroom size, teaching methodology and domain loss.* An interesting result in terms of teaching methodology is the higher interactivity of EMI classes. As Bendazzoli suggests, classroom size seems to be a determining factor encouraging lecturers to adopt ways of teaching other than frontal lecturing. The smaller size of the audience and the greater reliance on active student participation make the EMI setting in Italy particularly appropriate for the integration of language and contents.

Whereas greater interactivity is perceived as a positive outcome, most interviewees believe that the adoption of English is detrimental to Italian, particularly to the retention of specialised terminology. While such awareness is a good starting point for further reflection at the individual and institutional levels, I wish to suggest that the discussion on domain loss should go beyond the risks of terminological 'deficit' and consider how the adoption of English may affect local ways of teaching (and therefore of learning), which are strictly related to specific academic traditions, identities and epistemologies. Moving to English is not a neutral practice, and embracing EMI does not simply entail changing the language of instruction, but also considerably revising one's communication practices in the classroom<sup>3</sup>. We should therefore pay attention to the implications of introducing new teaching habits in English and the risks of promoting monocultural and Anglocentric models of knowledge dissemination and assessment.

*Language mediation: some considerations on skills and services.* As regards language mediation skills, I will briefly comment on the interviewees' perception that pronunciation inaccuracies and mistakes are inconsequential due to the non-native status of most participants in scientific gatherings. In the best of cases, mispronunciation may not affect understanding, but it may be perceived as lack of competence and affect credibility, even when communication is apparently successful. Of course, in the worst case, pronunciation shortcomings may affect intelligibility. If lack of concern for pronunciation accuracy is the standard attitude, one may wonder why lecturers would deem it necessary to change their speaking practices in front of a student audience. Here, the risks of such an attitude will involve not only speaker authority, but also the transmission of inadequate language input to students; in addition, when the audience is composed of listeners who are not familiar with the L1 background of the lecturer, their disciplinary knowledge may not be enough to resolve misunderstandings or ambiguity (contrary

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<sup>3</sup> See Costa, in this issue of *RiCOGNIZIONI*, for a survey of teacher training courses in Europe showing that the use of English requires a renegotiation of lecturing strategies.

to what may happen in expert-to-expert communication). Therefore, raising awareness of the importance of pronunciation seems crucial and we should stress that oral skills are not limited to phonological precision, but also include the correct placement of stress and the effective use of intonation for pragmatic purposes<sup>4</sup>.

As regards the use of language mediation services, the survey indicates that only a minority hires professional translators and that proofreading is more sought-after. In addition, some interviewees complained about the inadequate preparation of professionals, mainly due to “the translator’s lack of acquaintance with economics and other subjects” leading to a “not sufficient command of LSP”. This result is in line with the data obtained by Pérez-Llantada et al. (2011: 25) who also report that scholars relying on translation are generally unsatisfied with the quality of the service. These opinions suggest that although the recourse to academic translators could contribute to the writing-for-publication process, much should be done to equip professionals with the appropriate tools to deal with specialised terminology; however, it is also vital to make them aware of the more discursive aspects of academic communication, promoting a genre-based approach to translator training and rising awareness of the ideological issues involved in academic translation (see Bennett 2013).

A final remark regards the suggestion of exploiting interpreting services for EMI. Survey participants reported that they feel competent in dealing with discipline-specific terminology but experience difficulties when it comes to style and rhetorical devices. Bendazzoli, therefore, argues for greater reliance on interpreters, who may be a useful resource to enhance the ability of academics to express themselves fully. However, he also advocates increased awareness by both lecturers and professionals of the reciprocal needs and abilities. The arguments in favour of the recourse to interpreting services are intriguing and deserve consideration; the use of interpreters seems particularly suitable for guest lectures or short conference cycles by international experts. However, some concerns may be expressed about resorting to interpreting services for entire EMI courses, as the constant presence of a language mediator may not only be economically unsustainable, but it may affect the interpersonal dimension of teaching, which seems to be a rather positive asset of small-size EMI classes (see Bendazzoli in this issue: 151).

## REFERENCES

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<sup>4</sup> In the Technical Report on the development of the Test of Oral English Proficiency for Academic Staff (TOEPAS), by the Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language Use (University of Copenhagen), the lecturer’s pronunciation is required to “be intelligible and precise and [...] not [to] cause strain for competent listeners or impede effective communication” (Kling, Stenius Stæhr 2012: 13). A five-point assessment scale is illustrated in the document, and the following are some examples of the descriptors at the levels 1 and 4: “Pronunciation is marked by features that may be understandable only to those familiar with the speaker’s L1” (level 1 – the lowest level); the lecturer “[p]roduces almost all phonological contrasts with good accuracy; Places stress correctly, and uses intonation to convey a range of pragmatic meanings” (Kling, Stenius Stæhr 2012: 27).

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