

# COMMENT

On  
*English-medium Instruction Teacher Training Courses in Europe*  
by Francesca COSTA

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The delivery of EMI teacher training courses, intended as “self-reflection on the pedagogical approach” (Costa in this issue: 121), is a service to higher education whose importance cannot be overestimated. This is even more so in contexts such as Italy, where lecturers are often assumed to know how to teach and rarely receive any support in developing their teaching skills even in the mother tongue, as was pointed out by some of the participants in the seminar *L'inglese “veicolare”: esperienze e confronti per una didattica consapevole* (Turin, 19 June 2015)<sup>1</sup>. The reasons why Italian lecturers are not offered training courses in their native language probably range from educational and cultural traditions to the likely unavailability of funds to guarantee cross-the-board tutoring. However, there has been very little debate on the need to enhance university teaching standards through *ad hoc* instruction or support. This apparent lack of interest seems to reflect a “sink or swim” (Allison 1996: 89) attitude, whereby academics are expected to deal with the linguistic and methodological issues related to university lecturing by themselves. This approach affects not only lecturers, especially younger ones, but most crucially students, i.e. the recipients of teaching. If the same attitude is adopted to the delivery of EMI programmes, in the long run it may become a serious threat to the provision of high-quality education.

Francesca Costa offers an overview of some existing EMI teacher training courses in Europe and notices that a common trait is helping lecturers to deal with both linguistic and methodological issues. This dual focus is crucial to avoiding the risk of conceiving of EMI classes as mere ‘translations’ of source language lessons or, worse, the reading aloud of slides written in English. It is interesting to note that the methodological ‘box’ in Figure 1 includes aspects that reflect a genre-based pedagogy, such as asides, use of humour and signposting. Thanks to the attention paid to text structure, language forms and functions, interaction and context, genre analysis seems particularly useful; in addition, as Dalton Puffer (2011: 193)

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the university reform in Italy, in order to be appointed *Professore Associato* (‘Associate Professor’) a candidate had to sit a competitive examination in which s/he had to demonstrate teaching abilities by planning and delivering a lecture in front of an evaluation committee. Today candidates tend to be assessed, among other things, considering their teaching experience as stated in their Curriculum Vitae but practical demonstrations are rarely required, although there may be some exceptions. As for lecturers whose academic position is that of *Ricercatore* (‘Researcher’), no form of official assessment of, or support to, teaching has ever been in place in the Italian system because *Ricercatori* are not supposed to teach, even though in fact they often hold curricular courses. In addition, although the new position of fixed-term research assistant (*Ricercatore a tempo determinato*) specifically requires candidates to carry out teaching activities, no formal teacher training is offered.

observes, it is “a much sought-after analytical tool that captures content-and-language integration”.

The focus on methodology is also highly advisable because the use of a non-native language raises not only linguistic, but also cultural and epistemological issues. In dealing with academic writing in English, Cadman (1997) suggested that a major cause of difficulty rested in the different epistemologies in which students had been educated and in which they had constructed their identity as learners. Similar issues are likely to arise in the EMI classroom, which requires that lecturers take into account the variety of backgrounds of their students in dealing with as many aspects of the course as possible, from the design of the syllabus to the selection of materials, from the style of delivery to the form of assessment.

While regarding training courses and forms of support to teaching as essential components for the success of EMI programmes, I should clarify that this does not mean giving unconditioned support to the spread of English-medium instruction. Although the trend is undeniably on the rise, we should consider that in many cases, the implementation of EMI programmes is more a “signal of internationalization” than a “response to a demand by domestic students for a specific linguistic profile in the labor market” (Gazzola 2012: 148). In addition, local languages might risk losing their status as languages of culture and knowledge, as discussed in many studies (see, for example, Carli and Calaresu 2003 for the gradual disappearance of vernacular genres in Italian medical discourse). Therefore, while advocating the diffusion of EMI teacher training courses, we should also encourage the implementation of policies in favour of the local language and its users, such as running parallel university programmes in two languages<sup>2</sup>, as well as policies for the development of other linguistic abilities, not necessarily in English<sup>3</sup>.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>2</sup> The University of Copenhagen is an interesting example of an institution supporting multiple language development through the Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language Use (mainly Danish and English language courses) and by promoting the acquisition of foreign language skills other than English (see the 2016 Strategic Plan, available online at: <http://www.e-pages.dk/ku/623/>, accessed 10 January 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Gazzola (2012: 148) reports the results of a survey entitled *Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise*, carried out by The National Centre for Languages (CILT) of the UK Government. The study showed that “the sum of demand for skills in languages other than English (e.g. German, Spanish, French, Chinese, Arabic, etc.) is greater than the demand for English itself, both for SMB [Small and Medium Businesses] and large companies”. Consequently, as Gazzola suggests, developing multilingual competences may be more strategic than only focusing on English.