La didattica delle lingue nel nuovo millennio
Le sfide dell'internazionalizzazione
a cura di Carmel Mary Coonan, Ada Bier ed Elena Ballarin

The Case of the Non-Native English Speaker in EMI

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Abstract Internationalisation of higher education has led to an increase in the offer of English Taught Programs (ETPs) and English Medium Instruction (EMI) in the last few years. While ETPs are gaining consensus they are also generating a series of questions, often interrelated, which are begging discussion. One of these is whether there is an effect – detrimental or otherwise – of the non-native speaker (NNS) of English as the 'sender' or 'receiver' of knowledge. Research into EMI is a growing field, with numerous studies of the lecturer role, with somewhat fewer studies investigating the students' experiences. This paper aims to investigate the interaction between the non-native speaker (NNS) lecturer and NNS student, in order to assess the perceptions of the NNS and how knowledge is negotiated in a language which is not 'owned' by either party.

Keywords EMI. Internationalisation. ETP. Higher Education. Non-native speaker.

1 Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has brought about a swift increase, almost 'explosion', in the number of English Taught Programs (ETPs) being offered, and English Medium Instruction (EMI) in the last few years. ETPs are gaining consensus yet they are also generating a series of questions and considerations which are very often interrelated, and are begging discussion. One of these is whether there is an effect – detrimental or otherwise – of the NNS lecturer as the 'sender' of knowledge and the student 'receiver' of that knowledge (or whether knowledge is in fact a sharing of information).

There has been a rapid growth in degree courses and programmes taught through English, which, as Valcke and Wilkinson (2017, 15) point out, is becoming a "dominant 'partner' within all higher education learning approaches where an additional language medium is involved". The dominance of English, and thus EMI, is linked to political and economic considerations and EMI in countries where English is not the main language

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of communication has become a synonym of internationalisation. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) hope to attract both international students and lecturers and "gain visibility at the international level, thus emulating and even competing with the world's top universities located in Anglophone countries such as the USA and the UK" (Guarda, Helm 2016, 1).

Conversely, some scholars have expressed concern about the widespread adoption of EMI although it offers students and lecturers opportunities to further language and intercultural learning, and mobility for study and employment. This concern regards the risk that internationalisation may lead to education being considered a commodity to be negotiated in economic terms. There is further concern regarding domain loss for local languages, and also the imposition of a Western thinking which, according to Philippson (2006), amounts to a form of 'linguistic imperialism'. Further, the shift towards EMI could become a tool for a form of discrimination leading to disadvantaging students and lecturers who are less competent in English (or who would prefer not to study – or teach – in English) (Coleman 2006).

A key issue in the EMI debate is the quality of the teaching and learning provided. Valcke and Wilkinson (2017) underline the necessity to constantly monitor ETPS in order to maintain the quality of teaching and learning so that EMI students do not risk falling behind those enrolled on parallel programmes taught in the students' and lecturers' L1. It is therefore implied that 'falling behind' is a real risk for students in ETP programmes, although there is little evidence for this.

Interest in internationalisation has led to research into EMI becoming a growing field, with numerous studies investigating the role of the lecturer (see for example Helm, Guarda 2015; Ackerley et al. 2016). Somewhat fewer studies have been focussed on the students' experiences, although this situation is now changing (see for example Ackerley 2017; Clark 2017).

This paper aims to investigate the interaction between the NNS English lecturer and NNS student, in order to assess perceptions of the NNS and how knowledge is negotiated in a language which is not 'owned' by either party. Knowledge transfer could be considered vulnerable in both its delivery (the NNS lecturer) and its reception (the NNS student), and the question is, therefore, whether weak language weakens knowledge acquisition.

For the EMI classroom to work well, the lecturer requires preparation as research has shown (see Klaassen, De Graaff 2001; Cots 2013). This preparation must go beyond linguistic skills to include teaching styles and methodology. As far as the student is concerned, there is usually little 'preparation' other than (sometimes) having a required level of English, and the cultural preparation for different teaching styles is something students are asked to contend with passively.

The role of language in EMI is rarely discussed openly, unless it becomes a problem; it is often considered a vehicle, rather than the driving force of knowledge acquisition. Yet, there is also the commonly upheld notion in

EMI that the NS English is to be sought, imitated and aspired to. Language, nonetheless, is essential to the quality of the EMI classroom and the learning process, and some of the issues which have come up for scrutiny include discussion of language 'competence'. This is intended as the students', and the lecturers', competence in English, given that it is the medium of instruction and is generally not the L1 of either party. Other issues include the assessment and evaluation, testing of students which is a complex area, often not considered, and is especially important given the high stakes of many exams.

As EMI has expanded in Italian HE, the question of the language proficiency of lecturers and students has not followed suit, and until recently it has not been a major concern for policy-makers and HEIs. Similarly, the question of revising and reviewing teaching methodology has rarely been investigated until recently. In the last years, more HEIs have recognised the need to provide specific training and support services for lecturers. However, specific training and support for students has been less available and despite the success of internationalisation being measured in terms of the capacity to attract international students (Grin 2010; Clark forthcoming) there is little research investigating how students cope with EMI.

2 EMI in Italy

This study regards the NNS English issues which are typical of HEIs in Italy where EMI in Higher Education (HE) is relatively new (Costa, Coleman 2013) compared with northern European countries. Since the first introduction of EMI in the early 2000s, which was then reinforced by legislation in 2010, Italian HEIs have moved fast, and competitively, in introducing EMI at graduate, and more recently undergraduate levels. In 2016, 55 universities offered 245 ETPs, of which 19 were at undergraduate level (Guarda, Helm 2016). This is an extraordinary increase of over 70% on the previous year.

EMI in this context could be considered a form of Internationalisation at Home (IaH) as defined by Crowther (Crowther et al. 2001) and elaborated further by Knight (2004, 11) as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimensions into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education". In any case, internationalisation – even if 'at home' – is challenging and implies supporting lecturers so that they can capture intended internationalisation in learning outcomes, plan assessment, and design learning environments that enable students to achieve intended learning outcomes (Beelen, Jones 2015), that is, their learning outcomes should be the same (if not better) than students following a parallel course in their L1.

In the Italian University context, the more common scenario in ETPs is that of NS Italian lecturers and mainly NS Italian students communicating

in their L2 English with a small proportion of International (IN) students from a variety of countries. This situation is very different from ETPS in many northern European countries where we find a greater number of NS English, and NNS lecturers with a variety of L1s, teaching classes which might include some NS English students and a high proportion of NNS English students with a variety of L1s, as well as the domestic students.

The sample of students studied at the University of Padova, include 60 who were NNS English, all of whom were L1 Italian, the L1 they shared with all but 2 lecturers on the course. There were also 14 NNS English international (IN) students whose L1s include Spanish, Portuguese, English, Vietnamese, Russian, Rumanian, Kyrgyz, Greek, Czech, and Hindi. There were also 2 NS English students, both from Canada.

Table 1 shows the distribution of students and lecturers in the EMI context typical of most Italian Universities. It should be noted, however, that the numbers of IN students is increasing, while the number of IN and NS English lecturers is slower to increase.

Table 1. Numbers and L1s of students and lecturers

	Student NNS eng (IT)	**Student NNS eng (IN)**	**Student NS eng**
Lecturer: NNS eng (IT)	60	13	2
Lecturer: NNS eng (IN)	0	0	0
Lecturer: NS eng	0	0	0

This paper is concerned with the delivery of education, and the language/content interface between lecturer and student, and the presumed vulnerability of content in EMI, that is, whether some form of 'dumbing down', or diminishing of learning outcomes is inevitable. One of the factors which regularly arises when discussing EMI is the effect of NNS English, that is, how and whether the concept of NS affects the classroom, rapport, and learning outcomes.

2.1 The LEAP Project

The present study regards ETPs at the University of Padova, which has been participating in EMI since the first courses in 2009-10. At the time of writing there are about 2,000 international students enrolled in 30 ETPs, while a further 400 individual courses are offered.

The study is a part of a wider project: LEAP (Learning English for Academic Purposes) organised by the University of Padova Language Centre. The project is now in its 3rd year and provides various types of training for lecturers who are expected, or required, to teach in English. With a

view to monitoring and maintaining a high quality to the courses, lecturers are offered free blended language courses and monthly workshops with invited experts, which provided varied and hands-on participant-centred workshops. Further, lecturers can access the lecturer support service which offers one-on-one opportunity to reflect on and to discuss language problems related to EMI. The LEAP project also offers as series of guest speakers, seminars, roundtables.

This branch of the project involved a sample of 75 master's degree students comprising 48 students of the social sciences and 27 students from a science department who all responded to an online questionnaire which asked 32 questions (multiple choice or Likert scale ratings). These were followed by an open question. The questionnaire was drawn up with the aim of asking EMI students to evaluate their course in terms of the role of language and its possible effect on their studies, and like many, was very much based on perceptions.

In order to investigate the effect of the NNS of English on the learning process, it is necessary to establish students' level of English as a point of departure. Some concern has been expressed by scholars and HEIs generally about the literacy levels of students, which have been carried over to include NNS English students. Students enrolled in masters ETPs at this University are not required to pass an English test, although they are expected to have at least a B1 level and to pass a B2 level test[1] during their course, or to attain an internationally recognised certificate.

The student participants were asked to evaluate their level of English, and this evaluation was generally high. There was little difference between the evaluations of IN students (generally with a long experience of EMI, going back to primary school in many cases) and IT students, although the IN students were generally harsher in their self-evaluations, and were also prepared to admit to occasional language difficulties. They also rated their skills slightly lower than IT students.

Saarinen and Nikula (2013) point out that a B2 level is generally required for successful participation in EMI, yet despite these positive self-assessments, this study found that generally, many EMI students had difficulty passing the CEFR[2] B2 level writing, which was incongruous with the same participants' declaration that they felt ready to write their theses in English. It was also found that a C1 level was rare, and only IN students had international certificates attesting this level.

Regarding general language proficiency, some scholars (for example Maiworm, Wachter 2002) have argued that lecturers – like stu-

1 This test is a very rigorous test of all four skills – reading, listening, writing and speaking – and is administered by the University Language Centre.

2 Common European Framework of Reference.

dents – should hold some form of certification, including language skills. (a proposal that student participants agreed with). However, as Pilkinton-Pihko (2013) points out, the CEFR levels and structure appear to be inappropriate to the EMI context.

While very few students evaluated their own language skills as *low*,[3] surprisingly, 75% of students declared that their level of writing was *high* or *very high*, which is very similar to the result for the passive skill of listening. As expected, less than 10% of students declared that their level of reading was *low* or *medium*. On the other hand, for the productive skill of speaking, just over 50% of students rated their capacity as *high* or *very high*.

Within these results, it is interesting to note that when specifically asked about listening, IN students expressed greater difficulty. It could be hypothesised that this may be due to not being used to the Italian accent and intonation of the lecturers (who, except for two, were all L1 Italian). When asked specifically about reading materials, the results were inverted, with IN students expressing less difficulty than IT students.

2.2 Different Language Levels in Class

Regarding the relationship between language capacity affecting the success of lectures (see, for example, Gundermann 2014; Clark 2017), which was also a concern of many lecturers, all respondents claimed that there was definitely a difference in level across the class – as one student noted: "an important part of the students have problems with the language as well" (IN2-02). It is possible that the calibration of the levels (as outlined by the CEFR) may not be sensitive enough, or that intercultural competence may play a part, or, as Dafouz and Smit (2014, 4) point out, the "language code which functions as a tool for […] teaching and learning" may not "encapsulate discursive and other social practices". Language level (B1, B2, C1 etc) was not a useful predictor of student satisfaction with courses or perceived quality of EMI.

Several studies have hypothesised that the different levels of language of students participating in the same lessons may affect the success of that class in terms of learning and knowledge acquisition. For example, Sert (2008) found that students may be prevented from developing critical thinking skills if they are uncertain about their ability to grasp the academic content clearly. Gundermann (2014) also discussed the situation, common to EMI contexts, of different levels of language capacity, and implied that learning may be compromised.

3 Students were asked to evaluate themselves on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *low* to *very high*.

Students participating in the questionnaire were asked first whether they perceived different levels of English in the class, and more importantly, whether this affected their perceptions of learning.

As expected, students agreed that there were great differences in level. At the same time, however, they also felt that discrepancies in level did not greatly affect the success of lectures. In this study, more than half the respondents declared that the 'success' of the class was not affected by mixed language abilities – where success was intended as achieving goals and lessons which flowed smoothly without stops and starts due to having to negotiate language-related problems. It is interesting to note that the students who were less sure of their own capacity and were more critical of their own level of English were those who described the differences in level across the class as 'vast', although not all agreed that this vast difference in levels affected learning outcomes or the success of the class. Generally, the IN students pointed out that differences in level had little effect on the class as a whole, thus suggesting that other factors may be important to consider, or that difficulties in language may be seen as a problem for the individual student.

2.3 Does EMI Mean Learning Less?

Regarding students' perceptions of whether they may be learning less in the EMI classroom compared with a non-EMI classroom, nearly 60% of students said that they felt that they would not have learned more had the lessons been in their own L1, whether Italian or another language. That is, they were satisfied that learning in another language was not 'short-changing' them. However, nearly 25% per students felt that they were learning less because of the course not being in their own language. It was interesting to note that the IN students, in general, felt they were learning less, despite having a higher level of English generally. This could be due to the high use of Italian, and the effect of accent whereby IT students and their lecturers share the same linguistic background, and thus share the same 'problems', and also strong points, with English. Many lecturers also 'helped out' at times in Italian, which obviously does not advantage the IN students.

2.4 English vs L1

The question of the effect of the native-speaker in the EMI classroom is also evident when considering the linguistic traits which contribute to a satisfying lecture, that is, one where the student leaves the lecture feeling that he or she has benefitted from it, and has acquired some knowledge.

For about 75% of students 'fluency and clarity' (that is, limited stops and starts or repetition, complete prosodic units, and good logical structure) was seen as the main contribution. This was followed by 'pronunciation' and 'vocabulary' (both less than 10%), while for 6% of students, all IT, 'grammar' was considered to be the greatest contributor to a 'good' lecture. Interestingly, this finding does not correlate with the converse situation, that is, what 'irritates' most in a lecture. There was less concern with fluency, and a greater concern with grammar, that is grammar mistakes contribute to a 'bad' lecture.

This finding is important as it does not correlate with lecturer's views about their own language. Lecturers participating in the LEAP project frequently reported their concerns about bad pronunciation and accent, and grammatical mistakes as being weaknesses that they felt students would become aware of (see Helm, Guarda 2015). Gundermann too (2014, 124) suggests that pronunciation and accent are key to comprehension and thus it was expected that students might share this concern.

2.5 Learning Outcomes

Some scholars have suggested that the quality of education, and hence learning outcomes, must inevitably be lower in the EMI classroom (Troudi, Jendlhi 2011; Al-Bakri 2013). It is implied that the use of a language which is not the students' or teachers' L1 must hinder learning. In this study, it was found that only 13% of students (all IT who rated their own competence as *high*) thought that their learning was probably slower. The disadvantage could manifest itself in taking longer to learn, slowing down knowledge acquisition, not receiving an optimum level of knowledge acquisition in their lectures, or over-taxing the working memory having to work in two languages.

Until now there has been little evidence to indicate that EMI compromises students' learning and knowledge acquisition, and empirical research is particularly scant, although two studies have found interesting results. Airey and Linder (2006) analysed from a linguistic point of view 22 physics students in Sweden learning in Swedish and English. The students reported little difference between the modes of instruction. Doiz et al. (2014) and Dafouz et al. (2013) adopting a statistical analysis of three different degree courses in Spain come to a similar conclusion, that is knowledge appears not to be related to language proficiency, although EMI seems to have a positive effect on listening and vocabulary skills, but not on speaking and writing abilities.

Participants in this study stated that they very rarely left a lecture without having understood all the content, and it was the IN students who were more likely to have difficulty understanding content. Again, this could be

due to their unfamiliarity with L1 Italian speakers' accents and 'errors'.

As well as being satisfied with the more linguistic aspects of lectures, about 50% of students, both IT and IN were satisfied that their EMI lecturers encouraged participation, discussion and exchange of ideas. Where students felt there was a high level of interaction between lecturers and the class, there was a high correlation with having understood the content thus implying that more interactive lessons contribute positively to students' perceptions of greater learning outcomes.

Of greater concern is the remaining 50% of students, who felt that lectures, generally, provided only limited opportunity for participation, discussion and exchange of ideas. Students with high self-evaluation were the most critical of classroom atmosphere, and what they felt was a lack of debate and discussion. It becomes clear that further, more empirical investigation is necessary to evaluate further this correlation, and whether it is a result of language issues, or teaching strategies as discussed by Guarda and Helm (2016).

Terminology is an essential element of the EMI classroom and often the source of difficulty for students. Participants in this study were extremely satisfied that they had been able to learn the necessary terminology, and did not see language as creating difficulties, although it was the IN students who were less confident.

2.6 Language of Assessment

Many lecturers participating in the LEAP project expressed concern about the possibility of allowing students to choose the language for assessment purposes, and implying that students might be penalised for their inability to express themselves adequately.[4] The option of choice would clearly disadvantage IN students who do not share their L1 with lecturers. This question was discussed by lecturers participating in the LEAP project, who considered this question to be one of the most important regarding EMI (Guarda, Helm 2016). It was therefore interesting to discover that 75% of participants felt strongly that no choice of language should be offered, and were totally satisfied, and at ease, with exams being held in English only. Only one student (IN) suggested that students should be allowed a choice. This satisfaction with assessment in English seems to suggest also that students feel at ease with the content of the course, the terminology and the learning outcomes, although further study on a more empirical level is necessary.

4 Most University exams in Italy are oral.

2.7 Language Support for Students

The university, aware of the difficulties that students might face with EMI, funded free 50-hour language courses with classes limited to 15 students. Initial interest was extremely high, but unfortunately, did not continue. The low number of students completing the courses led to the discontinuation of the project. Most students who regularly attended the course had a B1 certificate and declared their level to be B2. An online questionnaire was submitted to all students who had attended 75% of lessons, towards the end of the course. One of the interesting findings was that not all of the 136 respondents felt that their English had improved greatly due to the course, and not all felt ready to approach an EMI course. Students found the speaking opportunities offered to be the most valuable part of the course, followed by grammar, listening and writing. Similar numbers of students stated that Listening (42%) and Speaking (37%) were the skills most important to following an EMI course, while Writing (11%) and Reading (7%) were considered less important – despite the obligation of preparing a final thesis in English.

3 Conclusion

There has been recent discussion about the role of the NS of English in EMI in terms of linguistic supremacy. Gundermann (2014) found that both lecturers and students believed strongly in the authority and superiority of the NS of English, and consequently that the NS is in a position linguistically, and possibly socially, superior to the NNS. Jenkins (2014) too states that «native English […] is widely seen as the most acceptable kind of English» and IN students in particular seem to subscribe to the ideology that 'native English is best' which is widespread in EMI. Ideology that permeates most of English medium HE. It was therefore no surprise that the students participating in the present study declared overwhelmingly that they would prefer NS English lecturers (which is clearly not feasible in the Italian context).

Recent studies (Helm, Guarda 2016) involving lecturers in the same project, as well as other research, have found that lecturing in the EMI classroom is not a case of simply changing the language of presentation, or translating one's slides. Rather, the lecturer must also review lecturing styles and methodologies in order to guarantee that learning outcomes do not suffer.

The study was aimed at assessing the perceptions of the NNS English student and to discuss how EMI might affect learning outcomes. The survey found that the 75 EMI students involved are satisfied and confident of their language levels, and level does not appear to compromise their perception of content acquisition. Further, there was little difference between

the responses of IT and IN students. This in itself suggests a 'levelling' of language issues in that no particular language groups appeared to be advantaged or disadvantaged by the EMI classroom. This hypothesis is obviously limited to the classes involved and cannot be applied to all situations.

It was also interesting to note the non-correspondence between some of the lecturers' concerns (pronunciation and grammar, offering assessment in Italian, for instance) and those of students.

Concerning learning outcomes, EMI students were generally satisfied that they had understood content, readings and terminology. They rarely reported finding themselves in difficulty understanding classes in terms of language, for example the lecturer speaking too fast, or being incomprehensible. Students were also unanimous in their views about assessment of EMI being in English. Whether this can be translated into learning outcomes being unaffected by the language of tuition is dubious. Certainly students were unaware of any shortcomings, and were not concerned that they were being deprived of the content element of the course.

This study has several limitations which include the use of a survey as an instrument. It is obviously difficult to 'measure' knowledge and student perceptions measured by a survey cannot be considered particularly reliable. Further, the complexity of the variables and the limited number of students from only 2 ETPs must be considered a limiting factor. Research currently underway aims to resolve this by involving other ETPs in a more intensive longitudinal study. However, there is a factor which must be taken into consideration, and that is the possibility that student satisfaction may, in fact, be the result of reduced content and diminished learning outcomes.

The speed with which internationalisation, and as a consequence EMI, has progressed in the last five years has inevitably led to a 'rush' in research to confront the many issues arising. However, there are still areas of the process of internationalisation which need to be assessed; for example, we have seen the investment in the preparation of lecturers for this new type of classroom environment, yet further investment is necessary to provide support for administrative staff. We have seen the numbers of IN students increase, yet there has not always been the necessary support services available to these students once enrolled. In the process of internationalisation various issues have emerged that were not predicted, but it is important that they are not ignored.

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