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English in higher education – English medium Part 2: A British Council perspective

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Introduction

Over the past decade, British Council has been grappling with what a position on English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in the tertiary sector might look like. In 2013, EMI in higher education (HE) was the focus of European Regional Policy dialogues and in 2014 we worked with academics on the publication of our first EMI in HE-focused publication – *EMI: A growing global phenomena* (Dearden, 2014). Since then, British Council has supported or commissioned research looking at EMI in HE in Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan, China, Japan, Ukraine, Brazil, Italy, Thailand, Vietnam, Tunisia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Argentina, hosted policy dialogues, conferences and workshops focused on EMI in HE at country, regional and global level, and trained content lecturers using EMI at institutions in 25 countries. British Council's increasing engagement with EMI in HE as a phenomenon mirrors the substantial and rapid growth in EMI programmes offered at institutes of higher education.

This perspective paper is intended to fulfil both a need to guide and align our approach as an organisation to English as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT), and to clearly communicate British Council's perspective on EMI in HE, thereby managing expectations and preventing misperceptions about British Council and views on the role of English. It is also intended to provoke, open up, and facilitate further discussion around EMI in HE. It is intended as a dynamic document and a 'work in progress' on which we welcome feedback.

In 2019 British Council brought together a group of 25 leading EMI, English for academic purposes (EAP) and English for specific purposes (ESP) UK academics to begin the process of developing a perspective. This meeting resulted in two outputs: the commissioning of a literature review, Part 1 of this paper, (Curle *et al.,* 2020), which provides the evidence base for this perspective; and the commissioning of a feasibility study (Galloway, unpublished) which examined the viability and practicability of a 'British Council Position' on EMI in HE. These pieces and this perspective paper form part of a larger project exploring current evidence, research, policy, practice and potential future trends in EMI in HE, including a global mapping of EME in HE in 52 Official Development Assistance (ODA) eligible countries (Sahan *et al.,* 2021) and an in-depth examination of EME in HE in four institutions in two ODA-eligible countries (Linn *et al.,* 2021).

This is not British Council's first organisational position paper on EMI. In 2019 we published our perspective on English as a language and medium of instruction in basic education (BE) in low- and middle-income countries (Simpson, 2019). The journey toward this position was similarly lengthy and complex, involving research, project activity and stakeholder engagement. This perspective states British Council's commitment to an evidence-based approach, supporting teaching of young students in low- and middle-income contexts in their own or a familiar language, rather than English, and the development of fluency in English through quality English language learning experiences (Simpson, 2019:13). It echoes the position of other international development agencies and NGOs (World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, DFID, Save the Children) who advocate the use of a familiar LoLT in early years and reflects the established evidence base which demonstrates the value of mother tongue-based (MTB) education in BE in low- and middle-income countries.

As Simpson (2019:4,6) points out, EMI and the LoLT debate is 'complicated', 'complex', 'confusing', 'challenging' 'controversial' and 'multi-faceted'. The same is true of the debate on EMI and LoLT in HE, making a British Council position with global relevance difficult and not straightforward. Part 1 (Curle *et al.,* 2020) of this paper highlights some of the complexities in drivers for EMI, decision making and implementation models. EMI is not a unified phenomenon. The drivers for, understanding of, and implementation of EMI programmes are dynamic and diverse, varying not only from region to region or country to country but also from institution to institution within a country. These differences are further complicated by the fact that Language in Education (LiE) policy, whether national or institutional, often does not reflect what actually happens in the classroom. Part 1 also highlights the gaps in EMI research and our understanding of it. As a relatively new field of study, many key issues are under- or inconclusively-researched, with the result that establishing an evidence-based position is difficult. EMI is an area of study which crosses the boundaries of disciplines, and to fill these gaps in evidence requires collaboration between linguists, specialists in higher education and internationalisation, specialists in language policy, and social and political scientists.

A perspective

A force for good or ill?

In his quest to 'find a reasonable starting position' for a British Council perspective on EMI in HE, Knagg (2013:25–6) takes the middle ground, stating that EMI is in itself 'neither positive or negative' and something which the British Council 'sometimes' believes in. LoLT in HE and the role of English in HE is still hotly debated to this day. EMI in HE is often introduced or expanded as a result of beliefs about English and EMI. English, as a common, shared, uniting or neutral language among speakers of other languages enables the exchange of ideas and people, international collaboration and networking in research and educational programmes, and the internationalisation of HE. English, as a language of academia, science and technology and corporate transnational business, empowers and opens up opportunity and access for individuals, institutions and nations educationally, economically and socially. EMI expands learning and helps develop English language proficiency alongside content or subject knowledge, providing skills for success in a globalised and interconnected world.

The arguments on the opposing side are equally compelling. The dominance of English is said to lead to a lack of linguistic diversity, the Englishisation of HE, domain loss in and the displacement and devaluation of local and other languages. EMI encourages the importation of Anglocentric and Westernised educational models at the expense of local and national paradigms. Rather than creating opportunity, English in HE exacerbates inequalities, supporting existing power structures and acting as a gatekeeper to education, advancement and social mobility. It excludes students with strong content knowledge skills but weak or insufficient English skills. EMI is a cause and outcome of the commercialisation of HE. EMI hinders learning by inhibiting the transfer of knowledge between content lecturers using EMI and their students.

The field of EMI in HE research is relatively new, meaning that many of these beliefs are not comprehensively supported by evidence in all EMI contexts. A strengthened evidence base is needed to inform better policy, implementation and personal choices. The fact remains that English, driven by geo-political forces, as Part 1 of this publication (Curle *et al.,* 2020) highlights, , plays a central role in HE, particularly internationalised HE, around the world. EMI has rightly been labelled a phenomenon which is 'unstoppable', and it is this reality which must be addressed.

British Council work in English is based on the beliefs that English provides young people with skills for employability, better access to networks and personal and professional opportunities. It follows that we do not protest or resist the existence of EMI in HE; nor, equally, do we promote 'more' EMI. This would often mean endorsing the poor policy and implementation which lead to many of the negative impacts outlined above. British Council work in the area of EMI is intended to promote better quality EMI which improves or, at the very least, maintains outcomes for students, content lecturers, language specialists, institutions and educational systems. The next sections will look at factors which we believe help to do this.

English-medium education

Part 1 of this publication (Curle *et al.,* 2020) explored the various labels used to describe the use of English as a LoLT, the most common being English as a medium of instruction, EMI. 'Instruction', however, falls short of describing the complex, full picture of what EMI means in practice. 'Instruction' implies a narrow focus on the classroom and is teacher-centric. The use of English as a LoLT has impacts beyond the classroom walls. At an institutional level, it impacts on every aspect of university life, from faculty to administration. It impacts on all parts of the education system, from curriculum to materials to assessment. An 'alternative notion', English-medium education (EME), itself a shortened form of 'English-medium education in multilingual settings' (EMEMUS), has been proposed by Dafouz and Smit (2016) as a conceptually and semantically wider term, 'inclusive of diverse research agendas, pedagogical approaches and different types of education' (Dafouz and Smit, 2020:3). By referring to 'education' rather than 'instruction', it 'embraces both teaching and learning' (ibid) and situates EME as a social phenomenon, within the theoretical frameworks of sociolinguistics and ecolinguistics (Dafouz and Smit, 2016).

We will use the term EME rather than EMI from this point forward, as British Council's 'preferred term', reflecting the need for a more holistic approach at macro (or systems), meso (or institutional) and micro (or classroom) level.

Basic and higher education

In distinction to LoLT in BE, few international development organisations or NGOs have a mandate for HE and none have a defined position on EME in HE. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed by United Nations world leaders in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development set out in Target 4.3 the ambition to 'ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university'. The few international development organisations (UNESCO, USAID) which do have a mandate for HE are largely silent on the issue of LoLT in tertiary education, focusing instead on broader issues of quality. Indeed, the SDGs which guide the priorities of the international development sector make no specific mention of language in their educational targets for primary or secondary education either. Aside from the role LoLT plays in equitable access to education, language also plays a significant role in the quality of education and the omission of language from the SDGs has been labelled 'unacceptable' by some (Milligan *et al.,* 2020:116).

There are clear differences between BE and HE which impact on LiE policy and practice. In broad terms, BE is generally compulsory, serving a local community and often directed by a central government Ministry. Within HE, although the broad agenda may be set by a government department – usually not the same government department responsible for BE – institutions are likely to have some degree of autonomy over LiE policy and practice. The degree of autonomy they have from government is often linked to how much state funding they receive, creating differences between private and public universities. It should be noted, though, that 'HE' is not a homogenous grouping: institutions even within a given context will be vastly different and classrooms within these institutions will be different again. HE is not compulsory and students attend voluntarily. In addition to their local community, HE institutions also usually play a role in wider national and international communities.

Despite these differences, national systems of BE and HE are interlinked and interdependent on one another. The LoLT in one system influences and impacts on the other. The growth in EME in HE creates pressure on Ministries of BE and schools to prepare students for studying in English, perhaps influencing the LoLT and the provision of English as a subject, and its curriculum and assessment in BE. HE needs to respond to how well BE prepares students for studying in an EME environment. If the approaches to LoLT in BE and HE are incoherent and disjointed, this creates problems in equitable access to HE and hinders quality. From the perspective of learners who transit through the education system, smooth and supported transitions to a different LoLT through BE and into HE are vital.

Although there are important differences between BE and HE which need to be acknowledged, British Council would argue that BE and HE need to be viewed as parts of a single system, and the interplay and interdependence between LoLT in BE and HE needs to be acknowledged. This may be particularly relevant in low- and middle-income countries. The global mapping study (Sahan *et al.,* 2021) which forms part of the British Council's wider EME in HE project shows that a high proportion of students studying on EME programmes appear to be 'home' or 'local' students who have transited through l ocal education systems, rather than international students. We would also argue that the important role LoLT plays in assuring equitable and quality education across both BE and HE needs to be recognised within international development agendas.

Languages and Englishes

Most HE environments are multilingual, that is places where more than one language is used. The internationalisation of HE - which has connected people and processes, increased staff and student mobility and opened up possibilities for intercultural exchange and learning experiences - has contributed towards a more multilingual HE sector, enabled by advances in technology and the ease and accessibility of travel. Alongside internationalisation, policies which widen access to HE for marginalised groups, often linguistic minorities, have also increased the linguistic diversity on university campuses. This 'glocalisation' of HE, the integration of local and global, creates diverse and complex multilingual and multicultural environments. The growth of English as a language of academia, particularly in scientific fields, means that even where internationalisation or widening participation is not a priority, students and staff come from culturally and linguistically homogenous groups. Where English is not a LoLT, English is still needed to access cutting-edge knowledge, creating a type of multilingualism. By their nature, as environments where English is used as a LoLT among populations where the majority language is not English, EME environments are multilingual. Dafouz and Smit's concept of EMEMUS acknowledges this.

Multilingualism, the ability to use languages flexibly and the skills to communicate in intercultural environments are increasingly seen as assets in a globalised world. Despite this, and despite the innate multilingual nature of HE and EME contexts, multilingualism is often ignored or problematised within EME in HE. The reasons for this are complex. Part 1 of this publication (Curle *et al.,* 2020) highlights the multifarious relationship between English and internationalisation in HE. Reflecting on the impacts of internationalisation and globalisation over the past few decades, many academics have been critical of the way in which these movements have developed in practice, failing to fulfil their potential for mutual cooperation, partnership and exchange. They argue that an 'American-led globalisation grounded in European heritage' (Marginson, 2021) creates an environment where languages, cultures, countries and universities are not perceived as equal and diversity of language and culture is not valued or encouraged, resulting in a 'subtractive multilingualism' where English dominates as a high-status and valuable language at the expense of other languages. These debates are likely to continue, particularly given the growing awareness of race, equality, identity and the decolonisation of HE which has gripped the world following the death of George Floyd.

Part 1 of this publication (Curle *et al.,* 2020) highlights that research into the use of other languages in EME is in its early stages. Research so far has largely focused on attitudes towards other language use in EME contexts and the ways in which other languages are used in the EME classroom. Further evidence is needed to assess the impact of other language use in EME contexts on learning outcomes, but it appears that the meaningful and principled use of other languages in EME is a useful aid to understanding and may help to validate other languages. Achieving a more multilingual form of EME requires, among other things, a conceptual shift in perceptions of multilingualism in the sphere of HE from one which largely problematises to one which recognises that students studying on EME programmes are multilingual, values the full linguistic resource of students, faculty and wider institutional staff, and appreciates the opportunities multilingualism presents. Language policy decisions and practical implementation often reflect an atomistic understanding of multilingualism, one which views languages as separate, fixed and independent of one another. This is reflected in the binary choices between English and other languages, 'English-only' approaches to EME, and the separation of languages on bilingual programmes. While these approaches may be successful in certain contexts, there is increasing evidence that a more holistic approach to multilingualism, one which views languages as intertwined and fluid, better reflects the way in which multilingual speakers process language. Within this approach, multilingual practices, such as translanguaging, are natural, legitimised and acceptable.

Linked to this area is the question of 'which English'. The global use of English has resulted in the diversification of English. Various conceptualisations have been used to describe this global use and diversity, including 'World Englishes', 'English as a global language', 'English as a lingua franca' and 'English as an international language'. We will use the term Global Englishes (Rose and Galloway, 2015), as an inclusive term incorporating all these concepts. In his examination of current and future English trends, Graddol (2006) predicted a shift in the prominence, importance and acceptability of 'native speaker' models of English to Global Englishes. While English is now used 'fluidly within and across geographic contexts', and 'native English is now in minority usage on a global scale' (Rose *et al.,* 2020:157), 'native speaker' models still predominate in English language teaching (ELT) materials and assessment and, given the close links between EME and ELT, EME. As Part 1 of this publication (Curle et al., 2020) points out, many of the international assessments which establish goals for language learning and determine access to EME programmes are based on 'native norms'. The curriculum and materials used within English support programmes for students may also reflect 'native norms' and, in some contexts, 'native speakers' are recruited and highly prized as content lecturers on EME programmes. 'Native speaker' English remains highly marketable and the idea that 'non-native' speakers are deficient in English continues to be widespread.

If the goal of EME is to cultivate and nurture successful communicators who can use their linguistic and intercultural abilities and skills to navigate a globalised world, other languages and Englishes need to be considered within EME policy and implementation. British Council advocates an inclusive approach to EME: the creation of EME environments in which students and staff feel empowered and are encouraged to use their full linguistic resource dynamically, environments where language variety and diversity are visible and integrated through the acceptance of multilingual practices such as translanguaging, for example.

Good practice

EME contexts are diverse, individual and complex, demanding context-specific and tailored responses. Recent work has been done to build frameworks for understanding EME, such as Dafouz and Smit's (2020) ROAD-MAPPING, which is designed to enable analysis across different EME contexts, and the frameworks for quality assurance outlined in Part 1 of this publication (Curle *et al.,* 2020). Part 1 of this publication (ibid) also outlines how research has identified common broad solutions for common problems in EME contexts. However, as with any situation, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach guaranteed success in every context. Globalisation has created a competitive HE environment where policies and practices are mimicked, with EME models taken from one context and transplanted into another in the hope of 'quick wins'. British Council believes that to ensure successful learning outcomes models of EME - and the solutions to issues brought about by EME - need to be contextually situated, taking into account the needs, rights and desires of stakeholders.

Decisions and changes

The drivers for decisions about LoLT are complex, often rooted in and influenced by history, socio-economic or political factors. A decision to implement EME, for example, may be the by-product of a national or institutional strategy to globalise or internationalise. In competitive HE environments where parents and students have choice and often carry a large share of the cost of HE, societal views may also exert considerable pressure. Confronted by this combination of bottom-up and top-down pressures, decision makers may have little agency to exercise in decisions about LoLT and EME.

Opinions vary as to the efficacy of developing a written language policy for HE either at national or institutional level. While policies can provide clarity and standardise practice, they can also limit, exclude and infringe on the autonomy of institutions and classrooms. HE environments are dynamic environments which change year on year, making the formulation of truly representative policy difficult. Much depends on context, but any language policy put in place should be valid, fit for purpose, achievable, flexible, responsive and negotiable, and allow stakeholders to exercise agency. Good EME requires a 'language' policy which describes the role of both English and other languages, rather than just an 'English' policy. Recognised 'good practice' in language policy highlights the importance of consultation, understanding the needs and desires of stakeholders, and formulating policy through top-down and bottom-up processes.

In the collection of case studies published as part of British Council's wider EME in HE project, Linn *et al.* (2021:24) conclude that an optimal EME environment includes 'being EM from the beginning'. This conclusion reflects the complexities and difficulties in changing LoLT. A change to EME is not just 'business as usual' but in another language, it has far-reaching impacts both inside and outside the classroom. Good-quality EME requires commitments of time and resource, both to the decision-making process and to its implementation. Most significantly, as we will look at in the next section, it requires properly funded and resourced support structures for lecturers and students. The impact of EME at a wider institutional level often requires support too, although this appears to be overlooked in most EME implementation.

Teachers and learners

Part 1 of this publication highlights the body of research which has identified the classroom challenges faced by content lecturers and students in EME contexts: simplified content, problems accessing materials, problems with building rapport, mismatched expectations, and affective challenges. Although there is some consensus and clarity around challenges, there is less clarity about how best to deal with these challenges. Support systems for students and content lecturers are seen to go some way in providing solutions to these problems, but the answers to the key questions around the knowledge, abilities and skills needed to succeed in teaching and learning in an EME environment and the optimal format and content of support structures are less clear-cut. Needs-based and contextualised solutions to both content lecturer and student challenges are required for successful learning outcomes.

In most EME contexts, English language proficiency is focused on as the prerequisite for EME teaching and learning. This focus on English proficiency often eclipses other important skills needed to successfully teach and learn in EME contexts. These include affective factors, and intercultural, communication, pedagogical and academic skills. For content lecturers, there is a growing body of research showing the important role pedagogy plays in creating successful EME environments. Developing pedagogical skills through support structures, however, may be challenging. Traditionally, as is still the case in most contexts, university lecturers do not require training or accreditation in pedagogy to teach in HE contexts; discipline expertise is sufficient. Many of the pedagogical techniques and skills highlighted by research as important in lecturer support systems focus on language: the use of language-aware pedagogies, scaffolding and accommodation strategies, and basic language teaching skills. However, research has also suggested that content lecturers do not perceive their role to be teachers of English. In many EME contexts, language and content are separated, with language specialists, often EAP or ESP teachers, responsible for supporting the development of students' English and content lecturers responsible for teaching content. Research has highlighted that collaboration between content and language specialists in EME contexts may be beneficial, but offers less clear answers as to the form this collaboration can take and what ingredients are needed for effective and successful collaboration. If support systems for content lecturers are to be effective, the more fundamental questions around professional identity, status and the relationship between content and language need to be addressed.

Part 1 of this publication discusses the various potential elements of student support systems in EME contexts. Support structures are vital, particularly for students whose BE experience may not have fully prepared them for academic study in English. Systems which provide ongoing support for students, as well as systems which facilitate access to EME programmes, play an important role in encouraging equitable access to EME programmes. While these systems should be there to support students in their studies, they also support students in acquiring and developing the skills they need beyond university.

Conclusion

To summarise, British Council advocates:

- A greater focus on the importance of LoLT in quality, equitable education

- A holistic approach to EME which recognises that EME in HE impacts on the whole education system, institution and curriculum

- EME policies and practices which enable and encourage the development of multilingualism

- EME which is context-specific, adequately funded and resourced

- Decision-making processes around LoLT in HE which are inclusive and recognise the complexities in moving to EME

- Valid, fit-for-purpose, achievable, flexible, responsive LiE policies built through bottom-up and top-down consultation

- Needs-based support systems for content lecturers using EME, focused on developing not only English proficiency but also pedagogical, intercultural and communication skills

- Greater collaboration between language and content specialists in EME contexts

- Needs-based support systems for students which widen access to EME and develop skills relevant both for study and for future employment

This perspective on EME in HE is still very much a 'starting position' and moving beyond this stage will require further insight through research. To progress this perspective further, research into EME in low- and middle-income countries and research into EME and issues of equality and gender will be especially important for British Council, as an organisation involved in responsible international development.

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