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What are the benefits and challenges of EMI in (international) study programs at UAS in Austria?

114 – Internationalisierung von Hochschulen – Der globale Diskurs im Kontext der Fachhochschulen

Abstract

In the past years and decades, the European higher education sector has been undergoing significant changes and a process of internationalization. An increasing number of Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) in Austria has therefore internationalized its study programs and curricula. This development has resulted in an exponential growth of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) at UAS in Austria and other non-English speaking countries in Europe. There seems to be little doubt that English has become the most important language of instruction in higher education. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing discussion by focusing on the benefits and challenges of EMI at UAS in Austria. While the advantages and benefits of EMI seem to be rather self-evident, its numerous challenges and limitations tend to be less so. The paper will be concluded by offering some recommendations for organizations and lecturers.

Keywords:

Internationalization, globalization, higher education, Bologna, Englishization, UAS Austria, English as the medium of instruction (EMI), benefits and challenges of EMI

The exponential growth of English as the medium of instruction, hereafter referred to as EMI, at Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) in Austria and other non-English speaking countries in Europe, has given rise to much heated debate in educational circles. Undoubtedly, English has become the most significant language of instruction in higher education, which has been "driven by economic, social and political forces, and sometimes even educational [ones]" (Doiz et al. 2013: 3). Phillipson concludes that "English in higher education has become a global commodity, which inevitably affects the nature and goals of universities" (2015: 22-23).

By studying the latest publications and contributions in this field, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion by focusing on the benefits and challenges of EMI at UAS in Austria. Dearden defines EMI as "[the] use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions

where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English" (2015: 4). While the advantages of EMI seem to be rather self-evident, its numerous challenges and limitations tend to be side issues. After briefly summarizing the benefits of EMI, I will focus on the challenges and limitations of EMI and will conclude with some recommendations. The purpose of this paper is to offer an overview of and some general guidelines for EMI at UAS in Austria. Due to the limited scope of this paper, only the most prominent examples and approaches can be discussed in more detail.

In the past years and decades, the European higher education sector has been undergoing significant changes and a process of internationalization. An increasing number of UAS in Austria has internationalized its study programs and curricula. Compared to other continents such as Africa, EMI is a relatively young phenomenon in European countries (Coleman 2006: 4). Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands were the first to adopt EMI in the 1950s but the trend did not spread to Western and Eastern Europe until the 1990s (Coleman 2006: 6). Since then EMI has grown exponentially, initially in postgraduate courses and then also in undergraduate courses. According to the Austrian UAS Portal, 50 Master's programs and 16 Bachelor's programs at UAS in Austria are currently taught in English (Oesterreichische FHK 2017).

The internationalization of higher education and "the idea of a 'global citizen'" (Clifford 2011: 17) is often the main motivation for EMI. Its introduction and development was furthered by the implementation of the Bologna Declaration (1999) which aims to increase "the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education" (Bologna 1999: 2). Despite addressing "concrete measures to achieve tangible forward steps" (Bologna 1999: 2), the role of languages in general or the role of English as the lingua franca of higher education in particular, are surprisingly not discussed (Phillipson 2015: 27). It does, however, briefly refer to the importance of multilingualism in international higher education (Eckhardt 2005: 56-60).

Although the motives for implementing EMI may vary, most experts and researchers tend to agree on the main advantages and benefits of EMI in a globalized and increasingly interconnected world. These include:

1. internationalization of curricula and higher education
2. attraction of international partner universities and expansion of international networks
3. attraction of international as well as domestic students and staff
4. student and staff mobility
5. participation in international projects and research
6. access to teaching and research materials
7. graduate employability
8. the market in international (and domestic) fee-paying students
9. cultural diversity, intercultural competences
10. foreign language proficiency
11. international reputation and visibility (Coleman 2006: 4, Drljača Margić/Vodopija-Krstanović 2015: 45).

It can therefore be argued that internationalized, English-taught study programs are a prerequisite for students and staff to have access to international higher education and, subsequently, to the international job market. Coleman (2006: 3) concludes that higher education has turned into a highly competitive international market and that students are often regarded as customers.

In addition to that, if UAS intend to employ international staff, attract (additional) funding, boost rankings and raise their prestige by, for example, increasing the number of academic publications in English, they first need to create appropriate conditions (Coleman 2006: 5). Refusing to implement EMI is therefore likely to result in international invisibility.

While the above-mentioned advantages seem to be rather obvious, the challenges and limitations of EMI may be less so. Due to the exponential growth of EMI in Europe, there is immense diversity depending on the country, native tongue, legislation, university, curriculum, all parties involved, etc. Killick therefore insists that "there are probably as many models of internationalization as there are institutions of higher education" (2015: 20). Universities in Anglophone countries will, for example, regard the proliferation of EMI as rather unproblematic but will face different challenges. As a consequence, the concept of English as the lingua franca is often considered a side issue or none at all in certain publications (Clifford 2011: 17).

The numerous complex and often predictable challenges and limitations of EMI in higher education include:

1. inadequate level of English language proficiency of lecturers
2. inadequate level of English language proficiency of domestic and international students
3. lack of interest and motivation among students and staff
4. lack of confidence to learn in a foreign language
5. additional workload for lecturers and students
6. lower quality of teaching and lower transfer of knowledge
7. unwillingness of lecturers to teach in a foreign language
8. lack of experts in a specific subject field who can and want to teach in English
9. native-speaker lecturers who are unwilling to adopt to the needs of non-native students
10. possible threat of EMI to cultural identity and the native language
11. problems with organization, administration and infrastructure
12. increased preparation time for lecturers
13. lack of financial resources
14. availability of teaching materials in English
15. fair and transparent assessment for domestic and international students (Coleman 2006: 6-7, Gürtler/Kronewald 2015: 103).

This does not come as a surprise, especially since even the supporters of the "'Englishization' of European Higher Education" (Coleman 2006: 1) have repeatedly acknowledged the complexity of the issue and the numerous challenges faced by all parties involved. Crystal (2015: 14-15) is also highly aware of the risks and dangers of English as the lingua franca of higher education which include forming an English-speaking elite and dismissing or excluding speakers of other languages. Liessmann (2016:

133) also raises the issue of domain loss. He argues that many languages could lose the terminology to express themselves accordingly in fields such as science, economy, law and technology. Since the scope of this paper is limited, I will focus on elaborating selected challenges which I currently find to be the most prominent ones.

It is often assumed that although EMI tends to lack explicit language learning objectives, one advantage of EMI in higher education is that the students' English language proficiency will automatically ameliorate. Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2013: 16) correctly emphasize that this is not necessarily the case in content courses. Coleman agrees by saying that "[f]oreign language learning in itself is NOT the reason why institutions adopt English-medium teaching" (2006: 4). Sometimes, EMI only means changing the language of instruction which is obviously not enough. It is a given that the acquisition of foreign languages is highly complex and requires certain prerequisites and well-trained language lecturers. CLIL (content and language integrated learning) is the only approach that addresses the language-teaching objective explicitly (Londo 2012: 23). It will be discussed in more detail below.

When it comes to the English language proficiency of lectures, one important question arises: How good is good enough? In a survey of 70 European universities carried out between 2014 and 2015, O'Dowd found that "there is a lack of consensus as to what the acceptable level of English should be in order to teach subjects in that language at university level" (2015: 9). According to the survey, 43% of the universities require a B2, 44% a C1 and only 13% a C2 level (2015: 9). Based on my own experience, it is questionable whether a B2 level is sufficient to teach in a Bachelor's or Master's program.

Lecturing in a foreign language at tertiary level definitely requires language proficiency (i.e. fluency, correct pronunciation, knowledge of syntax and lexis) in complex written and oral situations and practices that go beyond general language skills. Undoubtedly, the lecturers' own language skills have an impact on their classroom performance and, as a consequence, the students' learning outcome (Breeze/Sancho Guinda 2017: 11). Although lecturers must have mastery of the language, the requirements may also depend on other factors such as the curriculum, the course contents, the level of difficulty and amount of required terminology, the lecturers' expert knowledge, the learning methods and goals, etc. In short, lecturers are expected to master three aspects: "disciplinary competence, teaching competence and language competence" (Doiz et al. 2013: 17).

Even if we assume that lecturers do have sufficiently good English language proficiency, the challenges are still not to be underestimated. Breeze and Sancho Guinda (2017: 10-11) summarize the complex situation as follows: Lecturers face the challenge of not only having to update their teaching methodology but also having to do it in a foreign language. Additionally, they may also have to choose and implement appropriate assessment tools for domestic and international students.

Is it therefore safe to say that native-speakers of English are to be preferred to non-native speakers in EMI classrooms? Given the complexity of good teaching in international classrooms, the answer to this question can and must never be simple. Breeze and Sancho Guinda quote previous research which has proven that "good communication skills and a principled approach to teaching are more important than […] native-like pronunciation" (2017: 10-11). Indeed, research has shown that many factors contribute to positive learning outcomes which, apart from the English language proficiency of lecturers, include:

1. the structure and organization of courses and curricula
2. classroom management and teaching philosophy
3. careful lesson planning and selection of content
4. the teaching methods

5. the learning methods and goals
6. an adequate learning pace
7. the motivation of lecturers and students
8. clarity in teaching situations
9. student-centered learning
10. use of sufficient repetition, enough examples and pauses, visual aids
11. thorough pronunciation (Doiz et al. 2013: 13-15, Breeze/Sancho Guinda 2017: 11-12).

In the case of EMI, it is important to point out that no competency appears in a vacuum. Instead, "they are intertwined and feed into one another in a circular relationship" (Breeze/Sancho Guinda 2017: 4).

When it comes to the issue of how content is delivered best, most experts and researchers agree that student-centered learning is to be preferred to teacher-centered learning. Apart from the new roles of lecturers and students, new technologies, blended learning, L2 motivation and additional skills such as critical thinking, creativity, motivation and autonomy must not be underestimated in the classroom of the 21st century (Breeze/Sancho Guinda 2017: 1-13).

The challenges may be numerous but so are possible approaches and solutions. Bearing in mind that good teaching is one of the most important prerequisites for EMI, the question as to what can be done on an organizational and individual level to support lecturers needs to be considered. According to Drljača Margić and Vodopija-Krstanović (2015: 43), reforms tend to be implemented too rapidly without reasonable consideration and sufficient preparation time. For this reason, they argue that certain prerequisites such as "financial support, workload modification, and language assistance" (2015: 43) need to be fulfilled in order to meet the above-mentioned challenges. After the assessment of their language competencies, internal and external lecturers need to have access to (additional) language training, methodology courses, workshops, supervised feedback, proof-reading, sufficient material and equipment. If feasible, free of charge. O'Dowd recommends developing "specific language policy documents and programmes […] which are intended to guide the implementation of teaching through English" (2015: 6). Furthermore, intrinsic and/or extrinsic motivation of lecturers and students is also necessary (Breeze/Sancho Guinda 2017: 13).

Additionally, the support of mentors and supervisors, who can help with issues ranging from language problems, foreign language materials to lesson planning and methodology, is regarded as very helpful. Moreover, it is recommendable to reduce or at least modify the lecturers' workload and administrative tasks (Drljača Margić/Vodopija-Krstanović 2015: 54) to provide them with sufficient preparation time. An alternative would be to recruit additional staff. In this case, adequate English language proficiency should definitely be a recruitment requirement. It goes without saying that these innovations require certain organizational and administrative conditions and the financial and moral support of the UAS.

Like the lecturers, students also face a double challenge: They are not only expected to learn new content in a foreign language but they also need to improve their English language proficiency, learn new terminology in a given field and become familiar with different registers. The key to this challenge may be the implementation of the so-called CLIL (content and language integrated learning) courses which focus both on studying a specific content area and learning the foreign language (Londo 2012: 7-8). This approach would certainly require more resources and an intensive collaboration between content and language lecturers (Doiz et al. 2013: 16).

Although predicting the future of languages as a whole is not feasible in today's dynamic and highly complex world, it seems very unlikely that the significant role of English in education will diminish in the (near) future (Crystal 2015: 121). According to Dolmanitz (2015: 35), higher education institutions in Austria still lack a clear direction. Instead, they seem to rely on singular, seemingly uncoordinated actions and initiatives to internationalize their study programs and to implement EMI. For this reason, UAS in Austria need to pay greater attention to the issue of how to implement EMI successfully and permanently and how to support their lecturers and students accordingly.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the sensitive and complex issue of how to cope with the numerous challenges and limitations of EMI needs to be further discussed. Although there have been some interesting publications on the role of EMI at UAS in Austria (f.ex.: Dolmanitz 2015) in recent years, there are still numerous open questions, room for improvement – and research.

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