

# Online English-medium instruction (EMI) classes. What we have learned so far.

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**Abstract.** The sudden change from face-to-face EMI classes to the online modality, due to the COVID-19 emergency, has raised questions and concerns about the quality of distance education, the students' participation in the educational activities and the strategies to enhance interaction under these circumstances. In the context of the Coronavirus the challenge of engaging students in online courses, which has been an issue of concern since the beginning of distance learning, has played an even more important role. This paper investigates how lecturers addressed such major challenges in English-medium instruction (EMI) degree programmes, which are completely taught through the medium of English. Lecturers of "Medicine and Surgery" and "Nursing" degree programmes from fourteen Italian universities filled in an anonymous online questionnaire during the outbreak. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were carried out to identify barriers hindering students' engagement under these unusual circumstances. From the lecturers' answers and comments, some facilitators have been identified which depend on the lecturers' characteristics, their teaching methods and the modes they chose. Although this study is limited to a medical field, it can provide reflections to tackle issues relating to all online EMI courses and to empower EMI online and in-person pedagogy.

**Keywords:** Engagement, English-Medium Instruction, Emergency Remote Education.

## 1 Introduction

The sudden change from face-to-face EMI classes to the online modality, due to the COVID-19 emergency, has raised questions and concerns about the quality of distance education, about the students' participation in the educational activities and about the strategies to adopt under those circumstances. Student engagement and involvement are considered necessary to successful learning, as they deeply affect the quality of learning and are predictive of educational outcomes [1]. In the context of the

Coronavirus, the challenge of engaging students in online courses, which has been an issue of concern since the beginning of distance learning, has played an even more important role.

As a consequence of the sudden and unplanned shift from classroom to screen, lecturers had to improvise an emergency educational response making changes along the way [2]. After starting the second semester teaching their usual face-to-face classes, all of a sudden they had to carry on with their teaching on platforms such as Zoom or Webex. Soon they became familiar with challenges such as poor internet connection, new channels to convey study contents and new students' needs and difficulties, new required accomplishments, which may have piled on familiar duties [3]. At the same time, students were facing the emergency as well, experiencing difficulties, isolation and stressful situations. In this context, lecturers had to address the challenge of engaging students not only in unplanned online classes but also under circumstances which were affecting both.

Regarding English-medium instruction (EMI) degree programmes, the Covid-19 emergency has been even more challenging. In these courses, completely taught through the medium of English and offered in those university contexts where English is not the L1 of the majority of the lecturers and students [4], [5], the issues of students' engagement and participation in class have not gone unnoticed. Under these unusual circumstances, the stakeholders involved in the learning process had to adapt and get used to the online modality. On the one hand, several barriers to an active participation and engagement in class have been identified in the students' learning experience, such as technical problems, low English and digital skills, psychological pressure due to the outbreak and difficulties related to the students' mobility. On the other hand, a great effort has been required by lecturers to cope with involving, stimulating and interacting with students. Among the most successful facilitators identified by the lecturers involved in this study, there is their positive attitude towards the use of technology and the multimodal approach, which combines different semiotic resources or modes in communicative events such as synchronous and asynchronous classes [6].

This study focuses on the lecturers' experience in online EMI classes during the second semester of the academic year 2019/2020. It aims at identifying barriers to interaction and facilitators to enhance communication and engagement in online EMI classes, which could prove useful to guarantee quality distance courses. First, the methodology and the research question will be presented. Second, quantitative and qualitative data will be discussed to identify barriers and facilitators, which should be taken into account to plan distance learning. Finally, comparing and contrasting the hindering and facilitating aspects, this paper aims at providing insights into possible ways to implementing EMI pedagogy for quality distance learning.

## 2 Methodology and RQ

To investigate how lecturers of EMI degree programmes addressed the issue of promoting student online active participation and interaction during the Covid-19 emergency, a specific research question has been identified:

RQ: What factors affected student engagement and interaction in online EMI courses?

To answer this research question, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from two online questionnaires sent to students and lecturers of two EMI degree programmes in “Medicine and Surgery” and “Nursing”, offered in fourteen Italian institutions. The information about the existing courses were gathered from [www.university.it](http://www.university.it), an institutional portal where it is possible to find all the degree programmes offered in Italy, both the Italian and English-medium instruction courses.

The lecturers’ emails were collected from the institutional webpages. They were contacted by email in June 2020 and asked to participate in the survey. The link to the students questionnaire was shared in online EMI classes and in some university Facebook groups.

For the purpose of this study, only the lecturers’ answers were analyzed whereas the students questionnaire was not taken into account. 736 EMI lecturers from 14 Italian universities were involved in the research; 49 (6%) participated in the survey. The questionnaires included open-ended and closed-ended questions, which were designed by using Google forms. The lecturers’ profiles were given a number 1-49, their answers were analyzed quantitatively, whereas their comments were sorted by using the following keywords “engagement”, “strategy” and “active participation” to gain deeper insight into qualitative aspects. By combining both quantitative and qualitative data we selected the most significant comments and answers and identified barriers and facilitators to engagement and interaction in online EMI classes.

### Main findings and discussion

According to the lecturers’ answers and comments, engaging students in online EMI classes has been very challenging for several reasons, which were all deeply influenced and affected by the difficulties experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Internal and external barriers have been identified as the main factors influencing the students’ attention and attitudes towards online learning.

The data collected has shown that the **internal barriers** to a successful and positive environment in online EMI classes are tied to the personal feelings and emotions of the participants. During the online EMI classes, 70 % lecturers noticed a change of attitudes and motivations in their students and a deterioration of their wellbeing and mental health. Their students complained about isolation and anxiety due to the historical period and the impossibility to live the campus life and meet their classmates and lecturers regularly in-person. In the lecturers’ opinions, the uncertainty of the lockdown and the loss of physical contacts and spaces negatively affected the students’ active

participation in class (30%), the level of engagement (22%), and the attendance rate (43%) which was difficult to keep under control.

*Some students were absent, physically and mentally and felt isolated (Lecturer 22).  
No proof that the students were really present (Lecturer 2).*

Moreover, in their open comments the respondents complained about the students' limited English skills, already a key challenge in other EMI settings [7], [4], [8], and digital expertise which undoubtedly had a negative impact on the quality of interaction, the flow of the classes and the general satisfaction of the learning process.

*(..) difficult to engage with students, sometimes their English is bad and they are not very confident (Lecturer 31).  
(..) communication was low because of bad knowledge of the platforms we used in online classes (Lecture 24).*

As regards the **external barriers**, the 40% of lecturers complained about many technical issues experienced during their online courses, due to improper functioning of the digital media, internet connection problems and background noise. To enhance the quality of the digital classes, students were often asked to switch off their cameras and microphones and in doing so became virtually invisible, even though this led to additional problems for 47% of the lecturers, clearly expressed in the comments below:

*You cannot check if all the students are following the online live class, as they are asked to switch off the camera in order to avoid slowing the connection (Lecturer 41).  
You cannot see the face of the students, so you cannot check if they are following and understanding the topic explained (Lecturer 1).  
I felt as if I were talking into empty space with nobody listening (Lecturer 30).*

In addition, during the outbreak, many students had to go back to their families and others had to leave Italy to return to their home countries where some did not have a personal computer and had to study through their smartphones; others moved to countries where the time zone was different to the Italian one and could not attend classes regularly.

However, as challenging as it was, ERE has guaranteed a quick and effective response to the emergency. As a matter of fact, 63% of the lecturers taught through online live classes (synchronous mode), 25% offered pre-recorded lessons (asynchronous mode) while 12% recorded their live sessions in order to let the students attend classes whenever they could and needed. Therefore, ERE allowed EMI students to attend multimodal classes and take exams, as the comment below points out:

*Even with some technical difficulties, we had all the classes that we were intended to complete. Sometimes it was necessary to spend some more time, but the availability of the recorded lessons on the institutional platform is very useful for students to listen to*

*them again if they didn't get all the information needed during the live class (Lecturer 1).*

From the lecturers' reflections, some **facilitators** can be identified, which helped enhance students' engagement and motivation and contributed to making EMI emergency pedagogy more productive. They can be related to the lecturers' self-perception, to their teaching strategies and to the modes they chose to introduce study contents.

First, **lecturers' self-perception** such as self-efficacy correlates with a positive opinion about the outcomes of ERE courses. 90% of the lecturers who claimed good English proficiency, effective digital skills and had a positive opinion of online courses result in being satisfied with the quality and the outcomes of their emergency pedagogy. As they lacked experience in teaching online classes, had not had specific training for online teaching and could not plan their online classes in advance, they were aware of the difficulties and possible shortcomings of online classes. However, 58% of them blamed mostly the quality of the internet connection, which could be solved at an institutional level with investments in high- capacity networks to provide students with affordable internet access. Moreover, some encouraging aspects of online pedagogy emerge from their comments, as the examples below show.

*"More students were involved and all of them connected" (Lecturer 4).*

*"Interaction was more effective" (Lecturer 27).*

*"Easy way to cope with the emergency" (Lecturer 23).*

*"No difference in the average scores at exams" (Lecturer 16).*

Second, **teaching strategies** are another key element to encourage students' participation and engagement: to cope with the emergency, lecturers put in place different approaches ranging from communication to class activities. Concerning online interaction and communication they increased the use of *linguistic strategies* such as repetition, which, if compared to face-to- face classes, soared from 60% to 80% during online classes. Among the most common *communicative strategies* to encourage active participation 64% of the lecturers reported questioning, which was widely used also during face-to-face classes. However, lecturers were able to adjust to the new options offered by digital tools. For example, the second most popular way to involve students was the invitation to activate their microphones (49%); other ways to make them participate actively was the request to write something in the chat (38%). Moreover, lecturers reported they started calling their students by name, which is unusual in higher education (27%); this contributed to making them feel closer to their students and creating a sense of community. The unusual circumstances also affected *class activities* and gave the opportunity to experiment new ways of teaching (and learning): to engage their students, lecturers planned more activities and exercises than usual; more group works were organized so that students could interact and class discussions were

implemented. Despite the difficulties, ERE seems to have encouraged lecturers to experiment new approaches to teaching: being worried about students' lack of participation, they shifted their attention from the transmission of knowledge to students' engagement and took a chance to find ways to involve them, which could be useful also for the next semester, as the comment below shows.

*I think we need to change the way of presenting lessons, with more clinical cases and stop the lesson to allow more interactions. (Lecturer 6).*

Finally, to respond to different needs our respondents adopted a **multimodal approach**, combining different semiotic resources or modes [6]. Indeed, lecturers experimented different ways of delivering contents using different approaches and modes ranging from slides explained during online live classes (synchronous mode) to recordings of online live classes, which were uploaded onto institutional webpages to be watched in asynchronous mode, as the comment below underlines.

*Online classes can be recorded, students can watch them over and over whenever they want and this may help avoid misunderstanding (as it may occur when you just take notes) (Lecturer 37).*

Moreover, aiming at meeting their students' needs, 29% of the lecturers experimented new channels to convey contents, such as video lessons, presentations with audio comments, or forums.

## Conclusions

After being forced to shift almost overnight onto digital platforms, the educational system has proved to be resilient and provided a quick response to the emergency. In this sudden transition from the classroom to the screen, one of the main issues of concern was the students' engagement. However, despite the difficulties and possible shortcomings teachers and lecturers experimented new tools and new strategies to engage their students. In this study, which focuses on the lecturers' perceptions of Emergency Remote Education in EMI classes, barriers and facilitators of student engagement have been identified and discussed, which could help improve EMI pedagogy for both distance and in-person courses.

In the lecturers' perceptions, the **barriers** hindering students' active participation in online EMI classes could be attributed to factors involving mainly students. The majority of them were not familiar with virtual classrooms and could not rely on digital routines and the relating netiquette. Moreover, they were facing unusual and stressful circumstances, digital divide and technical issues such as poor Internet connection. If compared to the other colleagues and other educational contexts, EMI lecturers had to

face a further challenge: the presence of many international students in EMI degree programmes. Indeed, some of them flew back home during the pandemic and attended lessons despite being in a different time zone, making them feel distant or even cut off.

So, according to our respondents' opinions we suggest different strategies which may be applied to overcome barriers to communication and engagement in online EMI courses. The institutions may offer specific training to lecturers and students in the use of digital tools; additional institutional funding may be of great help for those who can't afford the purchase of electronic devices and educational materials, even though it may become too expensive; more students' grants and discounts may be helpful under these particular circumstances. Lecturers may be more flexible and collaborative by teaching in synchronous and asynchronous modes and providing video-recordings and extra materials to their students.

Despite the difficult circumstances, lecturers managed to involve their students through their screens in several ways. From their answers to the questionnaires **facilitators** of students' engagement can be identified, which can be attributed to the lecturers' characteristics, their teaching strategies and their multimodal approach. Data underlines the key role played by the lecturers' action in motivating students during ERE: if they face the experience with a positive and confident approach and use effective tools and strategies they can make the difference. Although students remain at the centre of the teaching and learning process, this puts the focus back on the lecturers. Therefore, specific training on how to use digital tools and teaching strategies for digital learning should be provided to enhance the experience of online learning and teaching.

Moreover, the contribution of distance learning to higher education during the lockdown has showed once and for all that lecturers cannot be replaced by technologies: their characteristics, their support to students, the strategies they choose make teaching and learning happen. So, they are at the core of the learning and teaching process along with their students and should embrace with no fears the possibilities offered by technologies. Even though this study is limited to lecturers of "Medicine and Surgery" and "Nursing" degree programmes, its outcomes can be extended to EMI courses in general.

Even if this study is limited to a small sample it helped us identify barriers and facilitators to engagement and interaction in online EMI classes and shed a light on the central role played by lecturers in their students success, which in these unusual circumstances has proven to be even more crucial than usual. Further research is needed to measure the efficacy and the affordances of the facilitators we have identified and to possibly introduce others we have overlooked. Moreover, more attention and research should be devoted on training for lecturers in order to establish contingency plans and

resources to prepare and support the teaching staff to implement new teaching strategies involving digital technologies.

To sum up, we have learned so far that EMI lecturers are able to adapt to new circumstances and engage students despite the difficulties. Even if more research is needed, ERE has paved the way to possible improvements which in the end could provide students with better and more effective education.

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