

# Reflecting on the Role of English in English Medium Instruction Degree Programmes

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## Abstract

In the last decades, the growth of English-medium instruction degree programmes all over the world has been considered an opportunity by many institutions and stakeholders involved, e.g., institutional visibility abroad, increased enrollments and international staff. However, it has also raised questions and concerns about the role played by English in such contexts. Indeed, English-medium instruction is typically described as the use of English to teach and learn disciplinary content in non-English speaking countries where such programmes are offered. Under this view, language seems to be used merely as a medium to convey information and enable exchange. This paper describes the features of English-medium instruction and presents the numerous definitions and labels given to it. Comparisons are made with other educational approaches, namely Content and Language Integrated Learning and Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education, with which it shares the use of a foreign language to deliver subject content but differs in the aims and outcomes. This study identifies possible actions to be put in place to place much emphasis on language matters in English-medium instruction programmes.

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**Keywords:** English-medium instruction (EMI); Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL); Integrating Content and Language in Higher

## Introduction

Over the years, higher education (HE) has undergone major changes to meet the needs for internationalizing the academic settings and educational resources. In Europe, the Bologna Declaration, which was signed in 1999 by several European universities, paved the way for multiple actions aimed at reaching that goal. These included the development of a standardised education system throughout Europe, which would facilitate the recognition of students' academic achievements across borders, the increase of mobility projects and transnational academic networks and ultimately, the enhancement of students' intercultural and soft skills, as possible equipment for the global job market

(Phillipson, 2009; Smit and Dafouz, 2012). The introduction of English-medium instruction (EMI) degree programmes, in countries where English is used as a foreign language (Macaro, 2018; Pecorari and Malmström, 2018), has been identified as an additional and powerful strategy to internationalize HE (Coleman, 2006).

Previous research on EMI has confirmed that one of the main reasons for academic institutions to offer degree programmes completely taught in English is to become more attractive, competitive and international in the global panorama, to obtain more prestige and visibility in university rankings and to increase their institutional incomes (Pulcini and Campagna, 2015; Valcke et al., 2017). As confirmed by Smit and Dafouz-Milne (2012), “[...] internationalization must be taken as one of the main reasons for using English as a medium of instruction across universities in Europe [...]” (Smit and Dafouz-Milne, 2012: 3), first, because it seems to be a concrete way to provide students with a diversified learning experience, with classmates and lecturers also coming from foreign countries, and second, to expand relations beyond national borders (Wilkinson, 2013). Indeed, most students who opt for English-mediated education are often driven by the need to learn in an international environment where they can develop and improve their intercultural and language skills in a natural way (Broggini and Costa, 2017; Galloway and Ruegg, 2020).

Despite its growing success, not only in Europe but in many other countries around the globe, issues and challenges have emerged as regards first and foremost the massive use of a single language, that is English, in several sectors and domains and more recently also in academia, through the provision of both single courses and entire degree programmes in English. Over time, this has clashed with the promotion of multilingualism promoted by the European Union (European Commission, 2018; TAEC literature database report, 2020) and has fostered a form of linguistic predominance over local languages (Phillipson, 2012), possible domain loss and impoverishment of minority languages (Hultgren, 2013). In addition to that, concern has also been expressed about the participants’ limited language skills (Cicillini, 2021; Galloway et al., 2017), especially in those countries where the levels of English proficiency are lower than others (Campagna and Pulcini, 2014; Education First, 2021). Although English entry requirements and forms of language assessment are often put in place, both for students and teaching staff (Cicillini, 2021; Dimova, 2020), previous research has shown that language issues in EMI classes might emerge and undermine the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Drljača Margić and Vodopija- Krstanović, 2017; Hultgren, 2016).

Generally speaking, the success of EMI programmes undoubtedly involves English, being the medium through which subject-content is delivered and its improvement might take place, as expected by most of the students enrolled in such programmes. However, since the focus of English-mediated education is on developing disciplinary literacy through English, it is still uncertain whether students’ English improvement occurs or not. This uncertainty is also noticeable in the various definitions given to EMI and presented in the next section, which do not usually refer to any language outcomes and to the

students' language development.

### Comparing EMI, CLIL and ICLHE

The practice of using a foreign language to teach and learn at all levels of education has been given numerous labels and definitions, which encompass English-medium Instruction (EMI), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE). The major differences among the three approaches include the language and pedagogy used to teach and the level of education where they are employed.

Starting from EMI, various definitions and labels have been proposed, which highlight the different nuances of the phenomenon and the novelty of this research field but also the lack of consensus among EMI scholars as regards its terminology (Macaro, 2018). The acronym EMI stands for English-medium instruction. Several labels and near synonyms can be found in the literature, as also argued by Macaro (2018), who discussed this instability in terminology and offered a list of terms (Table 1) found in publications on EMI. Following Macaro's work (2018), Table 1 shows an update of the most frequent labels used to refer to EMI.

**Table 1.** List of labels

Labels	
English medium instruction	English-medium programs
English-medium instruction	English medium programmes
English medium of instruction	English as the lingua franca medium of instruction
English as the medium of instruction	English medium content classes
English as a medium of instruction	English-taught programmes
English language as medium of instruction	English-mediated programmes/settings
English-medium (higher) education	English-medium university
English-medium teaching	English-only programmes/degrees
English-medium higher education	
English-medium courses	

As shown in Table 1, some labels differ only in their orthography, for instance: *English medium instruction*, *English-medium instruction*, *English medium of instruction*, *English as the medium of instruction*, *English as a medium of instruction* and *English language as medium of instruction*, which emphasize the role of English as the language of teaching. Other labels focus on the setting where it takes place, that is higher education, e.g., *English-medium (higher) education*; *English-medium higher education*, *English-medium university* or on the programmes and courses where content is taught through that language, as *English-medium courses*, *English-medium programs*, *English medium programmes*, *English medium content classes*, *English-taught programmes*, *English-mediated programmes/settings* and *English-only programmes/degrees*. Similarly to labels, a number of definitions of EMI has been offered to describe the multiple aspects of this approach. The most representative are grouped in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Definitions of EMI

<b>Definition</b>	<b>Source</b>
English-medium instruction is characterized by four main features: 1. English is the language used for instructional purposes. 2. English is not itself the subject being taught. 3. Language development is not a primary intended outcome. 4. For most participants in the setting, English is a second language.	(Pecorari and Malmström, 2018: 499)
EMI is a setting in which English skills are not specified as a curricular outcome, are rarely planned for, and are not systematically taught, but which are nonetheless expected to be acquired.	(Pecorari and Malmström, 2018: 502)
The use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English.	(Macaro, 2018: 19)
EMI implies that content—which is given in English—is the priority. Some incidental language learning is expected due to exposure but without any specific language learning goals. English (language) learning is not assessed.	(Aguilar, 2017: 726)
Teaching content through a language other than that normally used by the students is variously known as L2-medium instruction (in the case of this study, English-medium instruction).	(Costa and Coleman, 2013: 4-5)
(...) [when] English is the medium of instruction rather than studied as a foreign language.	(Tarnopolsky and Goodman, 2012: 58)
English-medium instruction is when non-language courses in for instance medicine, physics, or political science are taught in English, to students for whom it is a foreign language. As often as not, it is also taught by a lecturer who does not have English as a first language (L1).	(Hellekjaer, 2010: 11)

The majority of them emphasise the use of English as the medium of instruction in non-Anglophone contexts, where it is often a foreign or a second/third language. It is the means through which subject content is delivered, mostly but not exclusively at university level where much of the research on EMI is set; to a lesser extent, some studies are also carried out in primary and secondary schools (Pecorari and Malmström, 2018). As regards the language, some scholars underline the instructional role played by English in such classes, where the focus is not on strengthening language skills but on the delivery of discipline-related subject content. Indeed, as claimed by Hellekjaer (2010), EMI lecturers are experts in their field but do not usually have English as their L1 and do not teach the language. Within this context, language development and improvement are not intended outcomes and are not usually mentioned in the course syllabi. However, as Aguilar (2017), Pecorari and Malmström (2018) maintain, although improving students' English skills is not an intended goal, some degree of language development is expected by students, probably because of the long exposure to the language input received in class. This is what has emerged from several surveys that investigated students' motivations to choose English-mediated programmes (Galloway and Ruegg, 2020; Drljača Margić and Vodopija- Krstanović, 2017). Under this view, Aguilar (2017) claims that English learning may take place incidentally and without direct language instruction, a concept discussed in many studies on second language acquisition

(SLA), according to which, if meaningful input is provided, in-class learners may develop their language skills in a natural and uncontrolled way (Krashen, 1981).

Following the concept of incidental learning, the use of English for educational purposes is seen by many as an opportunity to develop skills unconsciously and almost effortlessly. However, some doubts may arise first of all, because in EMI classes, language outcomes, even if often expected, are not part of the curricula, no direct language teaching is provided and lecturers are not often in the position to provide language support to their students. In addition, few studies have focused on the role of EMI in students' proficiency and on the extent to which incidental learning may take place in EMI and in which forms. Indeed, little is known about the aspects of the language that may have a positive impact on subject learning. This might be in the forms of direct teaching of *English as a Foreign language* (EFL) or of *English for Specific Purposes* (ESP), which would concentrate either on the basics of the language or on more specialised aspects, such as disciplinary discourse and technical terminology (Costa and Mastellotto, 2022).

In addition to EMI, other terms can be found in literature to refer to a foreign language used for instructional purposes (Table 3), as “content-based instruction” (CBI), used especially in North America, CLIL and ICLHE, predominantly but not exclusively adopted in Europe. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, there are some differences to be considered and addressed.

**Table 3.** Definitions of CLIL and ICLHE

Definition	Source
“CLIL is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language”.	(Coyle et al., 2010: 1).
“CLIL is an umbrella term to refer to diverse methodologies which lead to dual-focused education where attention is given to both topic and language of instruction”.	(San Isidro and Lasagabaster, 2019: 2)
CLIL “refers to situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language”.	(Marsh, 2002: 2)
“The CLIL acronym suggests an integration between language and content”.	(Costa, 2016:16)
CLIL “refers to any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language, thus not usually the first foreign language of the learners involved, is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content ...”	(Coyle, 2008: 97)
CLIL “(..) integrates language and content along a continuum, in a flexible and dynamic way”.	(Pérez-Cañado, 2012: 318)
“(..) ICLHE in which, alongside the disciplinary course objectives, there are also some secondary linguistic goals”	(Costa, 2021: 7)
“Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE) is more used with respect to the type of pedagogy adopted and its specific features”.	(Costa, 2009: 85)
“CBI is a teaching approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information that	Richards & Rodgers (2001: 204).

students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus.	
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Most of the definitions of CLIL highlight its dual function of integrating content and language in class, where different teaching methodologies are employed to combine the two; part of the school curriculum is usually taught through a foreign language, which is developed along with disciplinary content. Under this view, instructors can exploit teaching opportunities for encouraging students to notice certain language features. The medium of instruction is not fixed, it is not usually the participants' L1 but a foreign language that students should partially know and develop while learning other subjects. This distinguishes CLIL from EMI, where the "E" of the acronym makes it clear that English is the language of instruction. Nonetheless, previous studies have emphasised the predominance of English over other languages in CLIL programmes (Coleman, 2006).

As a consequence, language and content development are pivotal to the success of CLIL programmes, as well as in content-based instruction, where there is even greater interest in language development (Continuum of EMI, Thompson & McKinley, 2018). In general, CLIL is often referred to as "a set of educational classroom practices in the different contexts of the European continent [...]" (San Isidro and Lasagabaster, 2019: 2), employed to achieve the final objectives. Unlike EMI, in CLIL contexts, explicit language objectives go hand in hand with disciplinary ones.

The educational settings where CLIL generally takes place are primary and secondary schools, in which learners often share the same L1. This is confirmed by Doiz and Lasagabaster (2020), who maintain that CLIL is used more at pre-university level as compared to EMI, even though this is not always the case. In higher education, instead, the ICLHE approach often replaces CLIL (Smit and Dafouz-Milne, 2012), with which it shares the direct teaching of content and language and the use of an additional language. However, differences exist between the two as for the level of education and the type of activities and teaching strategies employed, as also claimed by Costa (2009: 85), who maintains that "ICLHE is more used with respect to the type of pedagogy adopted and its specific features". Comparing it to EMI, some common traits can be identified which regard both the university setting where they are employed and the type of students, who are both international and local using the language of instruction as the medium of communication and exchange. Instead, the main difference lies in the outcomes, which in the case of ICLHE also include learning and improving the language of instruction, while in EMI this is rarely mentioned.

## Discussion

The increase in methodological approaches that use a foreign language for instructional purposes at all levels of education is a recent phenomenon that has evolved in the last decades in many parts of the world, including Europe, where it has rapidly increased soon after the Bologna process in 1999. The input to internationalise the academic environment has encouraged most of the



European universities to develop innovative strategies to respond to the need of internationalising higher education. As a result, one of the most common ways to achieve that goal has included the implementation of EMI programmes at university level, considered by some as “the only ways towards accomplishing the Bologna goals” (Ljosland 2007: 339). Actually, offering English-mediated education has considerably increased the number of foreign students and lecturers and fostered a multicultural and multilingual environment within the universities involved.

Among the main pros and cons of promoting education through a foreign language, concern has been expressed about its role in classes, especially like EMI ones, where no reference is made to its functioning. This has also been argued by Macaro (2019: 263) who claims that: “the role of language in an EMI context is an extremely complex one and it is possible that it is even more complex in a higher education (HE) context (Doiz, Lasagabaster, and Sierra, 2013) than in a secondary school context which is the educational phase usually (but certainly not exclusively) associated with CLIL”. Indeed, while in CLIL contexts, students usually have similar language competence, age and a common mother tongue, in EMI this is not always the case. This is firstly because, although access to EMI programmes is usually regulated by English entry requirements set at a specific language threshold (Cicillini, 2021; Dimova, 2020), students admitted to the programmes often have different English levels and language backgrounds. Actually, dealing with different degrees of in-class language proficiencies may be challenging and may require a careful and strategic planning of lessons and activities. Secondly, while CLIL settings are usually homogeneous in terms of students’ literacy, age and L1, EMI is populated by a number of both international and local students, who bring to class multiple social, language and cultural backgrounds. Lastly, in CLIL classes at school level, language teaching is part of the curriculum together with other subjects, often taught in the form of English as a foreign language (EFL), which consists in teaching the standard norms of the language to non-native English people (Jenkins, 2006). On the contrary, at university level, since the rationale behind EMI is not based on the learners’ language development but on the use of English as a means of communication, students are not provided with any direct language instructions.

In light of the above considerations, the complex role of English in EMI classes should be recognised and discussed further in future research. Although English language objectives are neither mentioned nor considered in the EMI syllabi, developing linguistic skills is among the major motivating factors to undertake a university programme in English, probably because of the extensive exposure to the language and the lecturers’ input. For this reason, different actions could be put in place for ensuring high educational standards, which may encompass: the shift from EMI to ICLHE, in which subject content and language are integrated and equally developed; the inclusion of precise language goals in the syllabi to be achieved by the end of the programmes; the identification of students and lecturers’ needs as regards their language proficiency; and the provision of language support and direct language teaching, possibly offered by

language experts who could cooperate with their content colleagues. This might also include a focus on various aspects of the language used in the disciplines studied, for instance, by providing the students with English for specific purposes (ESP) classes (Costa and Mastellotto, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

This research set out to describe the main characteristics of EMI and of similar methodological approaches – CLIL, ICLHE, CBI – especially with reference to the language aspect. English, which is usually the medium of instruction in those settings, plays a central role in the organisation and success of the degree programmes and in the learners’ academic performance and progress. Especially for students, English is not just a means through which learning takes place, but it is a subject and a competence to develop and strengthen, other than being one of the main motivating factors to choose English-mediated education.

As a consequence, since the provision of EMI programmes is likely to increase in the future, careful planning of more detailed language goals within the academic syllabi is necessary to meet the students’ expectations and needs and to guarantee high-quality education. Moreover, as research on the language factor in EMI is still limited, future studies should concentrate more on the impact EMI has on the acquisition of subject-matter expertise, on the ways language improvement may be supported by both content and language lecturers, and on feasible teaching strategies to adopt in such educational contexts.

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### **Competing interest statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Additional information**

No additional information is available for this paper.

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