

Session A Key Input: Lecture 2
EMI in Higher Education: Key Driving Forces
Lecture Transcript

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Hello everyone. In this Session, lecture 2, I will explore the key driving forces behind English Medium Instruction and also introduce some of the perceived benefits of EMI (at the national, institutional and individual level).

There are a number of driving forces behind EMI policy in higher education. These include international staff and student recruitment, institutional income, institutional profiles and rankings, staff and student employability, access to a wider range of materials and cutting-edge knowledge – English dominates academia as we know. It is also seen to help facilitate staff and student motivation and mobility, and there is a belief that EMI can help develop English language competencies. This belief relates to developments in English language teaching (ELT) with moves towards communicative methods of teaching English and teaching IN English.

There are many driving forces, and as highlighted in Lecture 1, contexts vary. However, a key point I want to highlight is that in many so-called ‘surging’ EMI contexts, such as Indonesia, EMI is often conceptualised as a pedagogical approach or a way to improve students’ English proficiency – although, as we will see in a later Session, this is not always an explicitly stated goal, which is highly problematic.

This ‘learn English through English’ ideology purports this belief or myth that simply switching to teaching university degree subjects through the medium of English will necessarily improve students’ English proficiency, even on programmes where entrance requirements are ambiguous and no academic and language support is provided, something we explore in a later session.

As noted, this ideology is related to developments in English language teaching with the movement towards communicative language teaching, but it’s also related to basic education policies. In Latin American for example, bilingual school policies have led to increased interest in EMI at higher education level.

Similar trends have been shown in Saudi Arabia, where English for academic study is prominent in primary and secondary education. These moves to bilingual education in basic education clearly have implications for higher education. An overview of the driving forces behind EMI can also be found here in this short overview video.

[British Council Video summary: <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications/case-studies-insights-and-research/english-higher-education-english-medium>]

EMI, then is like Aladdin’s magic lamp, that can lead to enhanced English skills and, therefore, enhanced career prospects and a more promising future. As Rose et al note, there exists a ‘widely purported benefit of EMI is that it kills two birds with one stone... [and] students simultaneously acquire both English and content knowledge’.

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This bright future is imagined for not only students, but also for the university and also the nation as a whole. Students will be skilled in both their subject area and in the English language, which will be advantageous for the development and competitiveness of the nation.

There is, however, mixed evidence on the effectiveness of EMI for English language development and very little research overall in fact.

As explored in a later Session, there is also often limited support available for students to address their language-related challenges on their EMI programmes – something that is very concerning if the goal of the programme includes English language proficiency goals.

Growing research with key stakeholders in EMI also provides insights into the perceived benefits of teaching and learning through English. What we see is that this English-only ideology, or this myth in learning English through English, also appears to be shared by the student body. Some studies have found that improvement of English is listed as the main reason students enrol in EMI programmes and classes and therefore, both top-down and bottom-up forces are clearly at play with global moves to EMI.

It is clear then from this Session that when exploring the growth of EMI and the driving forces behind, and the perceived benefits of, EMI, it is important to consider, the varied histories with English around the world and the varied government priorities associated with the English language.

In many post-colonial contexts, for example, EMI was imposed by colonialists and in places such as Hong Kong and Singapore, this is further influenced by the complexities of having a multilingual society. In other, more emerging or 'surging', EMI contexts, EMI is related more to globalisation and efforts to internationalise higher education – and of course it's links to English proficiency goals – we see in places such as China, Japan, SE Asia, etc. for example.

In Europe, the spread of EMI is connected to institutional level policies, as well as macro-level policies such as the Bologna Process, related to enhancing student mobility.

In all contexts though, the internationalisation of higher education is a key driver, but definitions of internationalisation also differ - internationalising the curricula, establishing international partnerships or collaborative degree programmes, publishing in international journals, promoting international staff and student exchange, improving institutional rankings, and generating income – they key point is that EMI policies are context-specific.

However, what has become clear is that in non-Anglophone contexts, internationalisation has very much become synonymous with the Englishization of higher education with this transition towards EMI. AND in some contexts, one of the key motivating factors behind student enrolment is improved English proficiency.

EMI is also related to basic education policies that introduce bilingual education in some contexts and also to movements in English language teaching towards communicative, and immersion methods – this belief that English is best learnt through English.

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There is, of course, some resistance in some contexts and recent years have seen some studies explore the negative effects of EMI, as well as research on social inequality. We certainly see a more critical agenda emerging on the dominance of English in higher education viewing EMI as harmful, yet on a global level, policy implementation is still very much on the rise.

EMI is growing as both a phenomenon and a field of research and key findings from the growing number of studies will be drawn upon in subsequent sessions. However, a key point I want to end with this Session with is that EMI contexts differ. EMI is also subject or discipline-specific, a point I will also return to later. Thank you for listening.

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