

# English Medium Instruction and the English Language Practitioner

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The paper explores the impact of the growth in English medium instruction (EMI) on the field of ELT. Increasing studies report students' language-related challenges and linguistic preparedness to be major barriers to successful implementation of EMI. These challenges, which have accompanied an unfettered growth in EMI provision, impact on practitioners and students and highlight the role of ELT practitioners in providing language support. This paper outlines how EMI is changing the role of ELT practitioners in the internationalized and 'Englishized' higher education sector, who increasingly teach on EAP programmes. EMI research is in a relative stage of infancy, yet a growing body of evidence highlight the importance of academic and language support. Drawing on evidence from recent research, we explore the integral role that ELT instructors have in helping students with their content learning, and make suggestions to facilitate greater integration of ELT within EMI contexts.

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *ELT JOURNAL* following peer review.

The definitive publisher-authenticated version can be found at:

Galloway, N. & Rose, H. (2021). English Medium Instruction and the English Language Practitioner . *ELT Journal*, 75(1).

## Introduction

Educational systems around the world have been rapidly internationalizing in recent decades. As part of this trend, more and more universities have been incorporating the English language into their academic curriculum—in part to meet the growing demand for English, but also to keep pace with its growth as the dominant lingua franca of academia. One area of growth is the emergence of English medium instruction (EMI) across the educational sector, which is most prominent in higher education. Educational models that combine content and language learning are by no means new, however the recent global explosion in EMI provision is an unprecedented educational phenomenon playing out on a global stage. In Europe, Wächter and Maiworm (2014) outlined a ten-fold increase in EMI provision in European universities from 2001 over a 13 year period. Asian countries are also witnessing significant growth in recent years as universities transition to teach in English (Fenton-Smith et al. 2017). As EMI spreads from the traditional EMI hot spots of The Netherlands and Northern Europe (see Wächter and Maiworm op.cit.), we are also witnessing a rising reference to EMI in national education policies that are linked to modernization agendas, particularly with regards to the internationalization of higher education.

The largely unfettered growth in EMI provision around the world has had, and will continue to have, an impact on practitioners working across formal educational sectors, as more and more demand is placed on language teachers to

provide the requisite skills and support for an increasing number of students to not only be able to use English for communicative purposes, but to study through English in academic settings. The language training and support needs of those delivering content instruction in English are also placing demands on English language teachers. In this paper we will explore the changing role of the ELT practitioner in EMI contexts and the integral role of language instructors in ensuring educational outcomes in EMI.

## English Medium Instruction

EMI has been defined as “the use of English language to teach academic subjects other than English itself in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English” (Macaro 2018: 19). Alternative definitions have sought to widen the scope of what is labelled as EMI to be inclusive of Anglophone contexts, given that the rising number of L2 English speakers in such universities have created multilingual educational contexts, although the extent to which such contexts are comparable is still hotly debated.

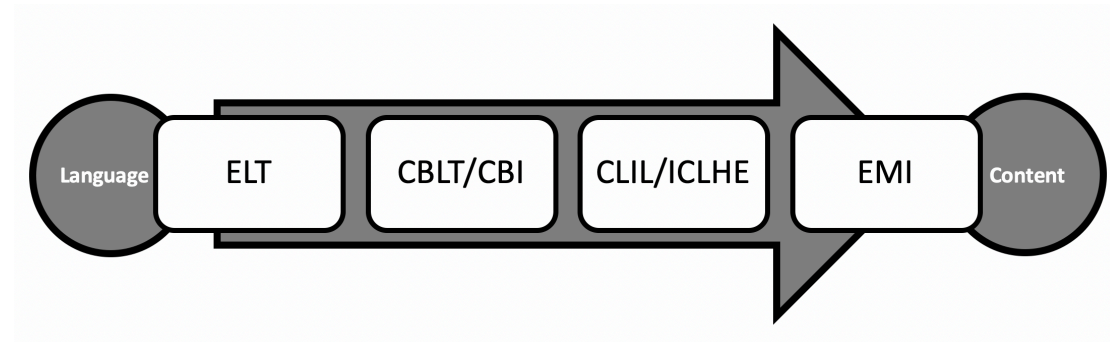
Other terms such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE), Content Based Instruction (CBI), and Content-based Language Teaching (CBLT) incorporate both language learning and content learning goals (Figure 1). Both CBI and CBLT, terms often used in the North American context, hold language learning as the primary objective, despite using authentic content-specific materials as input, whereas CLIL, a term more commonly used in the European context, regards the development of both aims equally, although some educational contexts apply the

CBI term in broadly similar ways to CLIL. CLIL (and ICLHE) programmes often specify a requisite language outcome on graduation and thus have an explicit language learning aim as well as a content learning one. However, unlike CLIL, most definitions of EMI make no explicit mention of language-learning aims, although some do use English proficiency tests for graduation, even when they do not offer language support. Further, despite the lack of explicit language learning goals, the desire to use and improve English is often one of the reasons students enrol on EMI programmes (Galloway and Ruegg 2020) and language-learning aims are often assumed by policy makers.

In many contexts, EMI is being pushed alongside government goals to improve English language proficiency and EMI has become synonymous with the 'Englishization' in many universities around the globe. This relates to the prevalence of English-only ideologies and the role of language exposure in second language acquisition, although it is promising that a large body of work is highlighting successful translanguaging practices in EMI classrooms (see Curle et al. 2020 for a summary of research on L1 use in EMI settings). There is mixed evidence on the effectiveness of EMI for English language development, yet a 'widely purported benefit of EMI is that it kills two birds with one stone... [and] students simultaneously acquire both English and content knowledge' (Rose et al. 2019: 2). Also, unlike CLIL, which grew out of subject and language educational practices in European schools, EMI has been driven by top down and bottom up educational forces with little consultation with language learning experts, and sometimes little emphasis placed on language planning implications. As a result, EMI programmes have often emerged in separation of

language programmes, which has resulted in a number of noted language-related challenges.

Figure One: Continuum of approaches to language and content teaching



### Language related challenges

A growing number of studies report students' language-related challenges and linguistic preparedness to be major barriers to successful implementation of EMI (see Curle et al. op.cit. for an overview). Several studies highlight issues with students' English proficiency, which has been reported to have detrimental effects on their educational outcomes and sometimes leads to students falling behind or perhaps changing courses. Student difficulties are, of course, context dependent and also discipline specific. Students have been reported to encounter problems comprehending lengthy lectures as well as with the volume of reading assigned (Taguchi and Naguma 2006). In a study in South Korea, for example, less than a third of students felt they could understand 80% of the subject matter (Kim 2017). Challenges often relate to students having insufficient academic English skills (such as difficulty in writing academic papers in an appropriate style) and a lack of mastery of discipline-specific academic vocabulary (Evans

and Morrison 2011), highlighting the need for academic and discipline-specific language support.

### Provision of language support in EMI

Many of the challenges associated with learning through English have been met through the provision of language support systems. Galloway and Ruegg (2020) state that the emergence of EMI has seen greater rise in the provision of pre-sessional and in-sessional EAP courses, and self-access support services to help students with their language and/or academic skills-related problems, which has given rise to the expansion of the roles that many ELT practitioners fill in such contexts. Their study of 702 students in EMI programmes in China and Japan indicated that compulsory EAP classes were common, but the type of support varied greatly from one programme to another. Only one university provided tailor-made materials, where the students reported the most satisfaction, and many faculty members and students in other universities criticised the relevance of support programmes. This finding concurs with a lot of the research emerging from EMI contexts that points to the importance of language provision in the form of discipline-specific classes aimed to meet the specific needs of students in specific programmes. The language needs of EMI students vary drastically from discipline to discipline, necessitating the need for different types of language planning (Kuteeva and Airey 2014).

### Calls for more language support in EAP

EMI research is in a relative stage of infancy in terms of understanding how to confront students' academic and language-related challenges, yet a growing body

of evidence has highlighted the importance of integrated academic and language support programmes for students. One study conducted by Rose et al. (2019) in a business faculty in Japan highlights the importance of specialized EAP classes in ensuring students' success in EMI. The study investigated the impact of EAP course performance, language learning motivation, and general English proficiency on the grades obtained in 146 students' first EMI business course subject. Result indicated that motivation had little impact on EMI subject learning, and that general English proficiency accounted for a good deal of success on subject exams. The largest predictor of success, however, was performance in their EAP courses. Given the nature of these EAP classes, which were specifically targeted to teach the skills needed for studying the subject matter in English, the authors conclude that 'language support might best be operationalized in the form of specific classes which target the vocabulary, language, and academic needs associated with the subject area' (p. 10).

### The expanding role of the ELT practitioner

While much of EMI research on practitioners focuses on EMI content lecturers, the impact of the rapid growth in EMI on the ELT practitioner has often been overlooked. With growing numbers of EMI programmes on a global level, there are increasing opportunities for ELT practitioners to specialize. In many contexts, pre-service ELT practitioners are entering the field as EAP or ESP practitioners in EMI programmes. Many in-service ELT practitioners also find job opportunities shifting as several general English courses are being replaced with discipline and academic specific courses. Much has been written on the

need for training for content instructors as they transition to teach their subject through the medium of English, often in internationalized classrooms. However, ELT practitioners may also find that the traditional training they receive in language acquisition and pedagogy does not prepare them to teach on, and often design, specialized EAP classes. ELT practitioners may also find themselves having to work closely with content instructors, who do not feel their role is to provide language support, so it is up to the ELT practitioner to make the links between the language and content needs of a programme. As such, recruitment advertisements in EMI contexts are increasingly asking for ELT teachers with a background in a subject area, such as science for example, to support students in their understanding of content. Thus, the rapid spread in EMI raises questions as to who is the most qualified teacher to provide language and academic support to students on an EMI programme, as well as how we should be preparing our future ELT practitioners in education programmes.

### EAP and ESAP

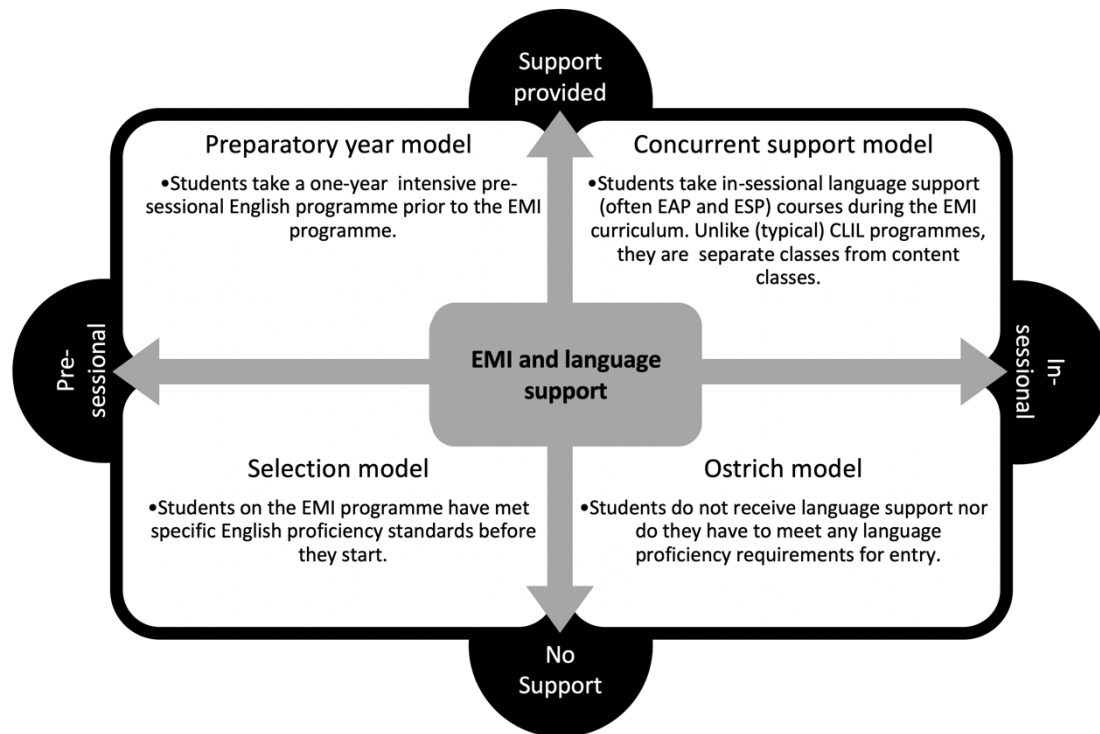
More and more EMI programs—especially those in rapid growth areas—are accompanied with EAP courses to equip students with the general academic language and literacies needed to undertaking study in English (Flowerdew 2016). These are sometimes taken before students begin their degree, as in the *preparatory model* (Macaro 2018) (Figure Two), in the form of pre-sessional EAP. Increasingly, however, and often in contexts where English proficiency is assumed to be higher, these programmes, are becoming embedded in EMI degrees, as in the *institutional support model*, in the form of in-sessional EAP, which is reduced over time. Of course, in some contexts, the *pre-institutional*

*selection model* is used, where students' English is assessed prior to enrolment and they receive little or no support during their content studies. Such an approach to EMI is concerning in contexts where an English language proficiency grade (higher than on entrance) is required for graduation, as is the *ostrich model*, where no entrance requirement is required and no support is offered and 'managers and teachers simply bury their heads in the sand and pretend that [language-related] problems ... do not exist or will go away if they are ignored' (Macaro 2018: 233). In such programmes, students may find themselves auditing classes taught in their L1 and/or seeking additional academic and language support, from ELT professionals, in their own time.

The role of the ELT practitioner clearly differs depending on the type of EMI support model a university adopts. They may find themselves being recruited to teach on pre-sessional EAP courses, or in-sessional EAP courses alongside content classes, or in the case of the *pre-institutional selection model* and the *ostrich model*, they may be sought by students seeking self-study to support them on their EMI programmes, particularly in the area of academic writing.

Regardless of the way in which EMI is being implemented, the exponential growth in EMI in higher education institutions around the globe and the resulting need for pre- and in-sessional courses, and self-study, creates new opportunities for the ELT practitioner. The shift towards institutional support has seen a need to position the role of EAP teachers more internally alongside degree programs. However, in many institutions, such courses are often housed in separate language departments that are structurally, and often physically, distanced from the departments delivering content, making the task of providing

the right type of support all the more challenging. This marginalization of language and academic support is perhaps the single greatest structural barrier for teachers to prepare their students for EMI studies.



**Figure Two:** Approaches to language support in EMI (adapted from Macaro, 2018).

To best support EMI students, an urgent role that English language practitioners need to fill is in teaching *English for Specific Academic Purposes*. As Flowerdew (2016: 7) explains, while general forms of EAP are ‘concerned with the provision of English for students in all fields of study, ESAP is focused on the needs of students from specific disciplines’. In EMI contexts, ESAP classes are much more closely tied to the disciplinary content being learned by the students, as well as specific academic needs such as academic tasks and writing genres. ESAP requires teachers to develop their ‘own subject knowledge and competencies; teachers need to investigate the specific epistemology, language, and practices of the target discipline and its community of practice, perhaps themselves

contributing to the research literature' (Flowerdew *ibid*: 10).

ELT practitioners may find themselves working with specific texts and genres for the different disciplines they are working with and their role may be to help students with subject-specific language features, such as vocabulary and other forms of specialized language use. This does present challenges to those teaching in unfamiliar disciplines. While a shift from EAP to ESAP might require a deal of effort on the part of ELT practitioners to come to grips with unfamiliar disciplinary needs, Flowerdew (2016) argues that it might lead to teachers having greater respect within the university, and can combat the recent marginalization of EAP departments by making them more central to the academic degree subject.

### Collaboration and bridge building

The utilization of ELT practitioners within EMI program structures can also help to facilitate greater collaboration between ELT practitioners and content instructors, which has been identified as a major challenge to successful and sustainable EMI policy implementation. Albeit rare, Galloway and Ruegg (2020) have recommended that such collaboration is urgently needed for consistent and focused EMI programs. Their study, which raised questions over who should provide language and academic support, as well as what training is required for instructors (both language and content) reported a lack of clarity over who is responsible for helping students with their language-related needs. Students felt that those teaching content should also have a duty to help students with their language-related needs, although some would argue that this is beyond their skill set and they also lack knowledge of language pedagogy. EMI certainly raises

questions as to how English practitioners can not only play a vital role in supporting students in EMI programmes, but also supporting EMI lecturers through sharing their expertise in language education via professional development programmes.

Previous research has espoused the benefits of team-teaching, which involves both types of teachers in the same classroom (Doiz , Lasagabaster, and Pavón 2019). ELT practitioners can draw on their language and language pedagogy expertise and content lectures on their subject expertise. The latter may have more subject-specific vocabulary knowledge of their disciplines, but the former may be able to offer insights into other subject-specific features in the disciplinary specific texts, thus enhancing the overall educational experience for students. Such collaboration may also help avoid reducing content covered and/or depth of coverage. Collaboration is key and should entail policies and concrete efforts to foster communication with the central aim to tailor language support curricula to the specific needs of EMI students taking specific content courses.

In addition to the language and academic support needed for students on EMI programmes, the availability of quality teaching materials in English has been identified as one of the challenges inherent in EMI (Jiang, Zhang and May 2019). This is a further challenge for the ELT practitioner as they may be presented with having to design discipline-specific materials despite a lack of background knowledge in the students' discipline. While many EMI programmes adopt

foreign curricula, the irrelevance of such materials for local contexts is increasingly criticized in EMI research, with calls for more context and subject-specific materials. While all good curricula should begin with a needs analysis, for the ELT practitioner working in an EMI context, this may require examining the subject-specific needs of students in order to prepare them for their content classes. The creation of tailor-made materials based on a detailed needs analysis, the need to learn about an unfamiliar discipline, collaboration with content instructors, as well as additional training/advice for content instructors may place additional burdens on the ELT practitioner. Much of the EMI literature focuses on the increased burden EMI places on the content lecturer, but we hope to have highlighted some of the increased demands this places on the ELT practitioner.

## Future directions

The internationalization of Higher Education Institutions is a global phenomenon. While this takes many forms, it is increasingly involving a transition to EMI in non-Anglophone contexts. By definition, EMI may have no language learning goal, but it is clear that it is increasingly being implemented to improve the English proficiency of university graduates to create a globally-competitive English-speaking workforce. It is, however, implemented in diverse ways and often without consultation with language acquisition experts.

Increased provision has also not been accompanied by empirical research and there is a scarcity of research investigating the impact of EMI on students English language proficiency, the role of language and academic support, and the impact

of this on ELT.

It is clear from the research that students require support, yet opinions vary on who should provide such support. Much of the literature to date also centres on the lack of systematic support systems for content instructors (see eg. Fenton-Smith et al. 2017), yet more research is needed on the role of ELT practitioners in this growing global phenomenon.

In addition to the role of ELT practitioners in providing support for students and working alongside content instructors, whether that be in a team-teaching capacity or to design the curriculum, debates over the need for language training for content instructors also impact on the ELT practitioner. Discussions on English proficiency are clearly controversial, yet the oft-cited language-related challenges of content instructors impact on the role of the ELT practitioner at the institutional level, where there are calls for language and language pedagogy training. Language courses are increasingly being offered to EMI instructors. In China, for example, Hu and Duan (2019) report that EMI faculty perceived to have insufficient English language proficiency completed a 240 hour English language training programme. However, as accomplished academics, often publishing in their fields, this is a complex matter and we would suggest that the focus move from English proficiency, particularly from the notion of 'native' speaker competence, to pedagogy. There have been calls for training in language pedagogy for content instructors (Jiang, Zhang and May 2019) and Roothoof's (2019) study in Spain with 59 EMI instructors from five universities found that the majority focused only on content when teaching, but those that had received some CLIL training focused on both content and language.

EMI clearly presents challenges for both types of instructor, but what is clear is that it is placing the ELT practitioner more centrally within the university where they can offer support to both students and staff. Coupled with the additional burden of learning the students' subject area, this places extra stresses on ELT practitioners in making this transition, but also comes with greater rewards in terms of meeting students educational needs, and raising the academic profile of language teaching. While team teaching may not always be possible, more research is needed on how the two types of teachers can work together and draw on their mutual expertise. Overall, we call for more research on the role of the ELT practitioner in EMI programmes to identify what support they need and more research on what forms collaboration can take to ensure successful learning outcomes for students.

*Final version received October 2020*

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