

Learners' Views of EMI: Non-Native Speaker Teachers' Competence and ELF in an Italian Master's Degree Programme

Marco Bagni – University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy

Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative study investigating the opinions on English Medium Instruction (EMI) held by Italian students of an EMI Master's degree programme of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. Data for this study were elicited by means of semi-structured interviews and are taken from a larger ongoing doctoral research study of students' attitudes towards English and its pedagogy that combines descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis. Respondents discussed EMI and Internationalisation at Home (IaH) in relation to a number of other topics, including: non-native speaker teacher (NNST)'s competence, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and multilingualism, students' motivation, international students and teachers. Although the majority of the respondents expressed satisfaction with their learning experience, and they all revealed a positive attitude towards EMI, they were also unanimously critical of the communicative competence in English of the non-native speaker teachers (NNSTs) of the non-language courses. Due to the limited number of instances reported, further research is needed to validate the results. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this paper may provide useful contribution to the task of leading to better-informed ways of integrating language and disciplinary content for the internationalisation of academic curricula.

1. Introduction

Although most European universities continue to operate at a purely national level using their local language(s), English medium instruction (EMI) has grown exponentially, especially in the last decade (Jenkins & Mauranen, 2019), and English has now become the lingua franca of academic knowledge

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making and communication within the European-integrated space of internationalisation of Higher Education (HE). The increased prominence of English in the framework of the internationalisation of European HE is, however, surrounded by controversies. Concerns have been raised about the risk of English stifling the vitality of the national languages and leading to the erosion of the national traditions of scientific and academic discourse (Phillipson, 2015, 2009). In Italy, with the sentence of the Consiglio di Stato that, in 2017, ruled against EMI-only postgraduate courses in the Milan Polytechnic, controversies over EMI have also reached the public debate and a host of arguments against *Internationalization as Englishization* have been put forward. A cultural argument against English and EMI ties language to culture and is premised on the notion that languages are first and foremost tools for the expression of thought. In this perspective, the defense of the scholarly tradition in the national language is a question of equality and speakers' linguistic rights (Calaresu, 2011). With regard to EMI, the cultural argument highlights the implications that English as medium of education has in terms of the non-native English speakers teachers (NNESTs)' communicative competence in English. A corollary of the cultural argument is a dumbing-down argument, which expresses a fear that EMI might lead to lowering the standards of teaching and literally dumbing down the academic content.

Jenkins suggested that the controversies that surround the increased Englishization of HE in Europe arise from a failure to acknowledge the existence of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and uphold it as an alternative model to native English (NE) in EMI and internationalisation. As a matter of fact, although HE has been defined as a "a prototypical ELF scenario" (Smit 2018, p. 387), "the spread of the phenomenon of ELF, is often (mis)interpreted to mean the spread of native English" (Jenkins, 2018, p. 92). In her view, by re-conceptualising English as ELF and positioning this within a multilingual and multicultural framework, risks of domain erosion would be reduced and the inequalities in communication between native English speakers (NESs) and non-native English speakers (NNESTs) "would be speedily resolved" (p. 94).

As a matter of fact, the ELF approach foregrounds the instrumental function of language and upholds a notion of cultural identity that is more in tune with a post-structuralist understanding of culture as fluid, contingent,

constructed and negotiated in interaction, which is at odds with the concept of national cultural tradition that is implicit in cultural arguments against EMI (Baker, 2015; Ives, 2006).

Another argument against EMI denounced the practice of investing in English as the medium of instruction in the Italian universities, without much of an international student presence, as a cosmetic operation whose main purpose would be that of climbing the international university rankings (Cabiddu, 2017). The pressure put on universities to compete internationally in an ever more integrated global system of knowledge economy surely is an undeniable fact. It is also true that the term 'International' has become a euphemism for EMI, regardless of the presence of international staff and students. It is also a documented fact, though, that internationalisation in Italy is more outward- than inward-oriented, as it is aimed at offering national students an English-medium experience at home in preparation for future prospects of mobility (Jenkins & Mauranen, 2019). After all, the underlying principle of the Bologna process was that internationalisation has to reach all students and not simply the mobile few.

Though it is important to consider the arguments against EMI here summarized, as a matter of fact, English is now firmly established in its role of lingua franca in an increasingly internationalised academia and, therefore, if only for pragmatic, utilitarian reasons, there seems to be no point in resisting it on principle. The problem thus is not so much one of debating how Italian universities should curb English but one of how to conceive ways of making its impact compatible with the need to preserve the vitality of the national scholarly tradition, on the one hand, and with the respect for the multilingual and multicultural diversity of today's world, on the other. Curriculum change needs to rely on research, and it should arguably be preceded by dialogue with its stakeholders. The students' views of EMI, in this sense, acquire a special relevance, considering that EMI is a relatively new reality in Italian HE, and the attitudes of its stakeholders are still a largely unexplored area.

Interest in students' perceptions of and attitudes towards EMI has, nevertheless, been steadily growing in the last few years, and by offering the learners' views on issues where their voice would otherwise go unheard, this paper also aims to contribute to the task of leading to better-informed ways of

integrating language and disciplinary content for the internationalisation of academic curricula. It reports on a qualitative study investigating the opinions on EMI held by ten Italian students of an EMI Master's degree programme at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. The data under discussion are taken from a larger ongoing PhD dissertation study of students' attitudes towards English and English language teaching (ELT) that combines descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis, and attempt to answer the following research questions (adapted from those of the doctoral research study): What opinions do students hold of EMI? What underlying attitudes towards ELF do their opinions reveal?

2. ELF, EMI and Studies of Students' Attitudes

The reality of ELF has brought to question the traditional theory and practice of English language pedagogy. Based on the assumption that the native speaker target is not relevant for today's learners, the ELF research approach has highlighted the need for an "epistemic break" (Kumaradivelu, 2012, as cited in Galloway & Rose, 2015, p. 208) from native-speakerism and revisit the notion of integrative motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011).

In this perspective of a radical shift, the importance of attitude studies related to the context of ELT has been recognized (Jenkins, 2007; Galloway & Rose, 2015; Galloway, 2017). Language attitude studies can provide a window into the prevailing orientations of teachers and learners towards matters of pedagogical concern, and lead to better informed curriculum design and implementation. Galloway and Rose provided a comprehensive review of the existing literature on attitudes towards English varieties and ELF, including studies, conducted in ELT contexts, of students' and teachers' attitudes. A common finding in all studies is that both NESs and NNEs tend to gravitate towards the native standards of English. More recent studies confirm this general tendency (Fang, 2018, 2016; Griffiths & Soruç, 2019; Tamimi Sa'd, 2018; Soruç, 2015).

Studies that looked at attitudes towards native and non-native English speech also highlighted the complex relationship between attitude and intelligibility and found that prejudice is as much a factor of influence on attitudes as familiarity is. A number of studies highlighted that “intelligibility (...) does not always equate with acceptance” (Galloway & Rose, 2015, p. 183), as NNEs were found to prefer native speaker (NS) accents but consider their own L1 inflected accents as more intelligible. However, other research findings pointed out that if difficulty in understanding a non-native accent may also lead to negative attitudes the opposite is none the less true. That is, a prejudicial negative attitude towards an accent can lead to poorer comprehension, and so make it complicated to determine the root problem (Lindemann & Campbell, 2018). Furthermore, when a prejudicial attitude plays a role in the perception of speech and its rating, negative attitudes lead to poorer comprehension rather than the reverse (Jenkins, 2007).

Other studies involving learners and instructors who shared the same mother tongue have investigated the students' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs. Perhaps not surprisingly, they all revealed a generalised preference for the NESTs, as regards, in particular, pronunciation and spoken communication skills. However, NNEs learners have also noted that they feel more confident when speaking to a NNEST of their same L1 (Galloway, 2017, 2013), in line with previous research findings that concluded that when teachers and learners share the same L1 they also tend to share an ease of comprehension (Fraser, 2006). Partially contradictory results emerged from two distinct studies of students' perceptions of EMI conducted in Italy by Clark (2017, 2018). In a study that investigated the interaction between the NNESTs and NNEs learners (2018) the students who participated overwhelmingly declared that they would prefer NESTs, and while most of the participants in the other study (2017) also expressed preference for NESTs, quite contrary to the expectations, one out of four were found to be totally against the NESTs.

A line of research in attitudes in ELT contexts has had the specific aim of assessing the dominance of NE norms and understanding whether an ELF-informed approach to ELT would find immediate support. A common thread of these studies is that, once more, students and teachers alike show a strong attachment to NE norms. While in some cases awareness of ELF was found to

be rather limited (Jenkins, 2007), it has also been shown that even when the idea of ELF can be conceived, there is a sort of “theory/practice divide” (Galloway & Rose, 2015, p. 189): ELF is accepted in the abstract, but tends to be rejected in the classroom.

Although research into EMI has proliferated in the last decade, a relatively low share of publications focused on Europe (Wilkinson, 2017). Furthermore, research on EMI has focused mostly on lecturers’ experiences and perceptions, and fewer studies have investigated the views of the students. However, interest in the learners’ perspective is growing, and papers that report on students’ EMI experiences have multiplied in the last few years. Jensen et al.’s (2013) study that looked at students’ attitudes to their teachers’ English in EMI, in a major business school in Denmark, concluded that NNESTs’ English language proficiency is a significant predictor of the students’ perceptions of the NNESTs’ general competence and vice versa.

Two noteworthy studies showed that that the use of ELF in EMI is not incompatible with a multilingual approach: Tarnopolsky and Goodman (2012), in Eastern Ukraine, and Kuteeva et al. (2015) in Sweden, revealed that teachers and students alike consider the use of the L1 in the classroom to be a natural function of the need for mutual comprehension, and normally adopt translanguaging strategies in order to ensure effective communication. Doiz et al. (2019) looked at the views on EMI of 145 Spanish students and 145 Italian students enrolled on English-taught programmes, with the aim of understanding the learners’ linguistic demands. Findings showed that both groups favoured language assistance, although they considered that this is not part of their content lecturer’s responsibilities. The data also revealed differences linked to the specific disciplines, which leads to the conclusion that the students’ specialisation has an impact on their perceptions of the EMI experience.

A number of studies were conducted exclusively in Italian universities. Ackerley (2017) surveyed 111 students enrolled in various Master’s degree courses at the University of Padova, finding a generalised satisfaction with the EMI experience. Approximately three-quarters of the participants also highlighted the advantages of improving their English comprehension skills and learning subject-specific vocabulary while studying academic content. The two above-mentioned studies by Clark were also conducted at the University

of Padova. In one of these (Clark, 2017), a questionnaire was administered to 37 domestic and 9 international students enrolled in a two-year postgraduate degree EMI course held at the Department of Political and Juridical Sciences and International Relations. Most participants in this study expressed satisfaction with their EMI experience and the level of their lecturers' English; they also reported that the course had helped improve their English language skills.

The results also revealed differences between domestic and international students, the latter tending to be less critical of their NNESTs' language competence, except for pronunciation, and between first-year and second-year students. Interestingly, first-year students were more critical of their lecturers than second-year students and, unlike the latter, they showed a tendency to use language as a measure of the overall quality of a lecture. These findings led Clark to suggest that, over the two years of EMI, students were able to reflect on the idea that successful communication and the effectiveness of a lecture are not merely a question of proficient language use, but depend in great measure on the teaching methodology and the lecturers' ability to stimulate discussion in class. Clark's subsequent study (2018) was part of the wider LEAP (Learning English for Academic Purposes) project, an initiative of the University of Padova Language Centre aimed at supporting lecturers required to teach in English. 75 EMI Master's degree students, of which 48 were from the social sciences and 27 from a science department, responded to an online questionnaire in which they were asked to evaluate their EMI experience. As previously mentioned, the participants in this study declared overwhelmingly that they would prefer NS English lecturers, thus confirming the findings of other studies of learners' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs.

Costa and Mariotti (2017) administered a questionnaire to 160 graduate EMI students from the Economics and Engineering Departments of three universities located in northern Italy, finding that one of the most important reasons for enrolling on EMI programmes is that these can lead to an equal or better learning of the subject matter compared to traditional Italian-medium courses. The participants also stated that there was room for improvement as far as their lecturers' competence in English was concerned. In a more recent study (Costa & Mariotti, 2020), the same authors explored how linguistic di-

versity in internationalised Italian universities is dealt with by the institution and by the students, and how it affects the learning process.

Rowland and Murray's qualitative study (2020) involving twelve students (and six lecturers) of an EMI Master's level programme in Biomedical Sciences indicated that flexible attitudes towards the use of the students' L1 was an important determinant of the widely reported learners' satisfaction with the EMI experience. Other recent studies involving Italian students were conducted by Guarda (2018), who combined qualitative and quantitative measures to investigate the perceptions of students enrolled on a variety of English-taught programmes, and Costa (2017, 2018). Costa 2017 pointed to NNESTs' pronunciation as the area on which students tend to be more judgmental, although some may also feel relieved to see it as an attainable target model. Costa 2018 reported on one of the few cases in which the decision-making process behind the implementation of an EMI programme had been documented: the pre-feasibility study includes an interview with the Dean, and a student questionnaire, which once again revealed that students had a positive attitude towards EMI.

In brief, positive attitudes towards EMI are a common finding in all the studies conducted in Italy; the small-scale size of most of these, however, prevents further generalisations. There is clearly a need for more research that suggests measures to facilitate the effective implementation of EMI degree programmes. While it is difficult to generalise from the results of context-specific single-case studies, it is hoped that this paper can provide a valuable contribution to this task.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants for this study were selected through convenience (non-probability) sampling (Given, 2008). They were all students of the Master's degree programme in Languages for Communication in International Enterprises and Organization (LACOM), managed by the Department of Studies on Language and Culture of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. One (S10)

was in her first year, the other nine were in their second year, and all were female, aged between 21 and 26; nine were NS of Italian, one (S1) an Italian and French speaking bilingual. All of them had a background in foreign language studies, had studied at least another language besides English since middle school, and had at least one study or work experience abroad, both in an ENL and an EFL country. One student (S5) had also previously earned another EMI Master's degree from another Italian university, whereas for the remaining nine, LACOM represented the first EMI experience in Italy.

3.2 Setting

LACOM is a two-year EMI Master's degree programme that offers all its courses in English, with the exception of two courses that are held in another language of choice (French, German, Spanish), one in Italian, and elective one-year language courses in Chinese and Russian. LACOM has an emphasis in international communication, economics, and law, and it clearly has a multilingual and multicultural vocation. Within this framework, the English language is understood as a *lingua franca* of international communication, and throughout the two years of the programme the learners' awareness is raised on variation in English(es) and on ELF. All English-medium courses attended by the participants had been taught by NNESTs, with the exception of one course that had been taught by a visiting NEST.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

This study utilised the in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interview, an instrument characteristic of direct approaches to attitude studies (Garrett, 2010) and Folk Linguistics research (Niedzielski & Preston, 2003), that generates data from elicitation by the researcher of consciously formulated opinions, beliefs and judgements. The semi-structured pattern allowed, on the one hand, to guarantee consistency between the interviews and ensure coverage of the key themes, while preserving their free-narrative structure, on the other. The interviews covered a number of themes, all related to the participants' personal experience with English and its teaching, according to the research objectives of the PhD dissertation study.

In the ten interviews that were selected for this study, the students were invited by the researcher, at some point in the process, to evaluate their personal experience in an EMI degree programme and express their opinions on the use of English as a language of study. The interviews had been set to last approximately 45 minutes. However, some interviewees manifested a desire to speak at greater length and, so as not to interfere with the participant's narrative, and because of time constraints on either the researcher's or the participant's schedule, three interviews (S7, S8, S9) had to be interrupted and were resumed at a later time. In addition, one participant (S10), who had taken part in a pilot interview that had not included any question on EMI, was contacted again for a follow-up, after a substantial number of LACOM students took part in the research and the topic of EMI gained prominence. In total, four interviews were conducted in two stages.

All the interviews selected for this study took place between April and May 2020 and, due to the restrictions imposed in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown (from March to June 2020), they were conducted at a distance via Skype and Google Meet. They were conducted in Italian, in order to make the participants more comfortable and avoid the risk of limiting discussion.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed. The interview transcription conventions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Transcription conventions. Adapted from Niedzielski & Preston (2003) and VOICE Project (2007).

S1, S2, ... , R	Speakers (numbered according to date) and researcher (R)
[name1][place1]	Anonymization (aliases are numbered consecutively)
[Overlapping utterances
]	End of overlap (if duration is not represented by size)
=	Linked or continued utterances
(.)	Brief pause in speech (less than one second)
(3)	Approximate length of pause in seconds
:	Length (repeated to show greater length)
.	Falling (final) intonation followed by pause
,	Continuing (list) intonation
?	Rising intonation (question)
<?> molto numerose </?>	Final rising pitch ('uptalk' intonation pattern)
CAPS	Emphatic or contrastive stress
(.hhh) (hhh.)	Breathe in and breath out
()	transcriber doubt / incomprehensible word(s)
io (non ci rientravo)	guess at the word(s)
sono (im-)	guess at some part of the words
ing-	abrupt cutoffs and false starts
@	Laughter (one @ symbol for approximately one syllable)
<@> ovviamente sì </@>	Utterances spoken laughing
<LNen>proficiency</LNen>	Utterances not in speaker's L1 (en = English)
<low key> okay </low key>	Speaker modes (open list)
<clears throat>	Speaker noises (open list)
{talking to somebody}	Contextual information is added between curly brackets

According to the research questions above, this study focuses on the extracts from the interview transcriptions in which the participants discussed their personal experience with EMI. However, care was taken not to lose sight of the overall picture provided by each full interview, and so, when necessary, reference is also made to other parts of the interview that help contextualise the participants' views on EMI.

Qualitative content analysis was the strategy adopted for the data here presented because it was thought that it would provide deeper insights into the underlying attitudes that underpin the participants' overtly expressed

opinions. Qualitative content analysis aims to seize “the underlying deeper meaning of the data” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 246); it is an approach that deals not only with the surface content, but also with the way in which the content is constructed in discourse. Data analysis was conducted first by focusing on the referential content of the participant’s arguments, and subsequently on the forms in which the interviewees articulated their arguments. In order to familiarise them with the referential content, the interview transcripts were coded according to the themes that emerged and a separate corpus of extracts where the participants discussed their EMI experience was created. These extracts were subsequently coded again, in order to categorise a finer-grained set of themes that were then organised in a hierarchical order. Finally, the focus of analysis was turned to the linguistic choices and the prosodic features in the speech of the interviewees.

4. Results

While the interviewees confined most of their comments to LACOM, they also made generalisations and brought up topics of a wider scope. Two main thematic categories were initially identified, as the participants discussed their personal experience in terms of advantages and problems. The interviewees’ comments on the perceived advantages referred to two main themes: integrated content-and-language method and internationalisation at Home (IaH). By far the most prominent topic, the NNESTs’ competence in English was unanimously identified by the participants as the problematic aspect of their degree programme. After the extracts were re-analysed for a second time, a third category labelled ‘ELF and multilingualism’ was identified. All the themes are included in the framework (Table 2).

Table 2 – Analysis framework for transcriptions of interviews

ADVANTAGES OF EMI
Integrated content + language method
Internationalisation at home (IaH)
PROBLEMS OF EMI
NNESTs' competence in English, pronunciation and intelligibility
Justification for perceived NNESTs' deficiency
Dumbing down of academic content
ELF AND MULTILINGUALISM
EMI and multilingual education
Cultural load of English
ELF communication problems

Due to limitations of space, the full extracts from the transcriptions are not reported here. Although each thematic category is dealt with separately, the themes that were identified from the analysis often overlap and interrelate in the interviewees' arguments. For this reason, the interviews are cross-referenced for different themes.

Turning to the data, a clear pattern emerged: all the participants except one (S3) expressed satisfaction with LACOM, although they also had some reservations. All participants, however, revealed an overall positive attitude towards EMI, at least in principle, although not without ambivalences as regards its realisation.

4.1 The Advantages of EMI

4.1.1 Content and Language Integrated Method

Speaking of the advantages of EMI, six participants referred to the method of integrating the learning of content and language in the curriculum. S8 and S10 referred to it in the terms of an added value (*“valore in più”* and *“valore aggiunto”*, respectively). S8, in the specific, said she saw the integration of language and content as an added value for two reasons: because it is a beneficial “full immersion” experience, and because the English language makes academic content more interesting and motivating. A similar argument for the benefits of EMI was also put forward by S4, who remarked that LACOM is very smart (*“molto intelligente”*) because in its curriculum languages are applied to fields that are useful on the international level, such as economics and law. The motivating factor was also mentioned by S2, when she commented that, in consideration of the role of English as a lingua franca, studying subjects of non-linguistic discipline areas in English also allows one to see different viewpoints (*“punti di vista differenti”*) and different systems (*“sistemi diversi”*).

Interestingly, S10 observed that the integrated learning method does not necessarily have to assume native-like competence on the part of learners. She remarked that, if the level of learning (*“livello di apprendimento”*) of the students is respected and language skills are gradually improved by teaching something more, little by little (*“insegnando qualcosa in più poco alla volta”*), EMI can be a constructive teaching method (*“un metodo costruttivo insomma di insegnamento”*). Like S8 who highlighted the benefits of the full immersion experience, S1 and S6, each speaking of her personal reason for the choice of an EMI programme, valued the integrated method as a way of maintaining and possibly improving one’s English language skills.

In brief, the perceived advantages of integrating language and content relate to both sides, and it is perhaps not surprising that students with a background in foreign language studies show such a positive attitude towards English as a language of study.

4.1.2 Internationalisation at Home

Four participants related the benefits of EMI to the international experience “at home” offered by an EMI degree programme. Expressing an outward-oriented view of IaH, S9 said she chose an EMI programme because she thought it would prepare her to find a job abroad or work with foreign markets. S5 also highlighted the value of EMI as an IaH experience for the students who cannot afford to go on a study abroad programme, and also referred to the presence of international students as a motivating factor. The advantage of studying in an international environment was also pointed out by S10, who argued that EMI makes a degree programme more accessible (“*più accessibile*”), as it also invites international students and that these, in turn, contribute to creating a more constructive and motivating environment (“*un ambiente accademico più costruttivo in sé più e: invogliante*”). Like S5, S8 valued EMI as an opportunity for national students who cannot afford a study abroad programme.

Throughout her interview, S8 also spoke enthusiastically of the visiting NEST she had had in her first year, comparing her teaching method and her way of building rapport with the students with the approach of her Italian instructors. S8 highlighted the constructive (“*formativo*”) value of introducing home students to different teaching methods and perspectives: it is a great thing (“*è BELLO*”), she argued, especially for a student who has never had the opportunity to study abroad because it’s actually “the overseas that comes to her home” (“*in realtà è l'estero che viene: a casa sua*”). Aside from S8’s clear preference for NESTs, which is considered further on (see 4.2.1), it is worth observing, at this point, that she regarded inward mobility of international teachers as a factor for motivation and quality improvement of IaH. S10, as well, pointed out the value of being introduced to new methodological approaches by the international instructors.

Summing up, aside from the personal instrumental motivations behind the choice of an EMI programme, the students who mentioned the advantages of IaH seem to agree that the potential appeal of an international degree programme depends on more than the mere fact of offering courses in English. This is also not surprising at all, given the multilingual and multicultural vocation of LACOM and the students’ personal academic background.

4.2 Problems of EMI

Although all the participants expressed a positive opinion of EMI, they also had reservations about its realisation in practice. All the interviewees held a deficit view of their NNESTs' competence in English. Five of them were more specific and described it in terms of pronunciation, while seven participants in total discussed the theme of NNESTs' proficiency in relation to intelligibility, and three also spoke of its implications for the quality of teaching and content. Despite their negative judgements, the participants' attitude towards NNESTs' competence in English seemed to be less straightforward than their negative judgement let on, and eight participants also mitigated their claims by offering justifications for their NNESTs' perceived deficiency.

4.2.1 NNESTs' Competence, Pronunciation and Intelligibility

S4 referred to the competence in English of her NNESTs of the non-linguistic disciplinary areas in rather contradictory terms. After having stated that communication in the classroom is anyways successful (*"la comunicazione avviene (...) per carità"*), she observed, in a very assertive tone, that her NNSTs were not up to the task (*"essere all'altezza"*) of communicating academic content without making errors that sometimes break down the communication (*"sono proprio errori che IMPEDISCONO la comunicazione talvolta"*). Although she stressed that that was a huge problem (*"è un problema ENORME"*) that she had constantly come upon (*"che puntualmente: ho riscontrato nel corso di questi due anni"*), S4 did not specify what type of errors she was referring to.

Arguments that discuss the NNESTs' competence in terms of pronunciation and relate this to intelligibility provide perhaps the most interesting insights into the students' underlying attitudes towards native and non-native(-like) speech, and point to the complex relationship between attitude and perceptions of intelligibility. S7's words were particularly revealing in this regard. She introduced the topic of NNEST's competence by saying that it was often not easy to understand some of her NNESTs, that they were very hard to follow, and one had to pay extra attention in class, or else one would often lose the thread. To illustrate her argument, S7 offered the example of one of her NNESTs who is from the same area in Italy as she is. S7 observed that the particular accent in this NNST's speech that she recognised as familiar would

make her lose focus in class, and she repeatedly (four times) remarked that she could not even explain to herself how that happened (*“non so come spiegarlo veramente”, “è una cosa che ancora non so spiegare bene”, “non so come spiegarlo ancora non me lo so spiegare veramente”*); all she could say was that the teacher's particular inflection would make her miss the last word of his phrases (*“fa terminare (.) le frasi (.) in un modo che quasi da f-fa sì che io perda l'ultima parola del discorso”*). By stating clearly that it is a matter of loss of concentration on her part, she seemed to imply that the problem with the NNEST's speech was not exactly a matter of unintelligibility per se, that is, of not being able to process the meaning of the (mis)pronounced words.

In the end, S7 is well familiar with the accent she detected in her teacher's speech and she herself described the problem as one of prosody: he made his sentences end as if in a minor tone (*“un tono minore”*). Her words seemed to suggest that her loss of concentration may have been a matter of attitudinal factors: indeed, she was trying to account for an unconscious reaction to the teacher's accented speech. As if to soften her claim, S7 pointed out that there were also NNESTs who have lived abroad and are more confident with their English, that were very clear in their delivery, and, as if to further distance herself from her negative judgement, she added that other students felt the same way about the less proficient teachers. With a final remark: *“quasi (ti verrebbe da) dirgli oh senti dimmelo in italiano perché così facciamo prima”* (you'd like to tell him hey, listen tell me in Italian, it's quicker), she revealed impatience on the part of the students while pointing to an effort made on the part of the NNEST.

A clear preference for NESTs has been previously pointed out in S8's argument for inward mobility as a way of improving the quality of her Master's degree course; in all the participants' accounts of poor NNESTs' competence, the same native-speakerism preference seems to exist, albeit with different orientations. An ambivalent attitude to non-native speech was revealed by S2. After having observed that EMI is more of an advantage than a disadvantage, she argued that the fact of not receiving EMI in the best possible way can become a disadvantage (*“può <@> diventare uno svantaggio </@>”*), and added that the English of some of her NNESTs was rather deficient (*“c'è un po' un deficit forse da parte loro”*). The use of verbal hedges and fillers (pauses,

“cioè”, “diciamo”, “insomma”) in her speech suggest that she was carefully weighing her words, while laughter signalled her embarrassment: after all, she must have felt that her position as a student demanded a certain degree of deference towards her teachers.

However, she was also clear in pointing out that a wrong (“sbagliata”) pronunciation conveys a wrong message. Earlier in the interview, she had introduced the topic of pronunciation by saying that it is very important for proficiency and that a native-like accent is particularly valued. Nevertheless, later on, she had shifted her position, arguing that pronunciation is important only to the extent that it is functional to intelligibility and adding that it is fair for one to preserve her/his identity of NNS of English in speech. Very interestingly, she related the issue of pronunciation to what she referred to as the ambivalence (“ambivalenza”) of ELF, that is the contradiction of a culturally neutral link language that one still feels pressure to use in a culturally appropriate way, by approximating NS standards. That ambivalence is reflected in her conflicted attitude towards native and non-native accents, and it is suggested here that by “wrong pronunciation”, she may have been actually referring to deviations from a recognised standard that do not necessarily impede intelligibility, although she claimed the contrary. In other words, her perception of unintelligibility may have more to do with attitude than with an actual problem in processing the NESTS’s message.

Similarly, the idea that attitudes to non-native speech may be based on prejudice was hinted at by S5’s own words, when, recounting her previous EMI experience in another university; she said that she had been initially worried about the quality of the teachers’ English, though in the end, everything went well. Other interviewees expressed a less negative judgement of NNESTs’ competence. S1 said that, despite their rather deficient vocabulary (“un po’ carente”), NESTs are nevertheless intelligible (“you understand”). S9 commented that sometimes NNESTs may have been imprecise with their grammar and pronunciation but their intelligibility was never compromised; she also made it clear that she accepted code-switching¹ to Italian in the classroom

1 The term *code-switching* is here preferred to *translanguaging*, because it seemed more appropriate to define the act of switching from English to Italian in the classroom, for purposes of clarifications.

as a strategy for negotiation of meaning, a view shared also by S10. Earlier in the interview, S9, had also argued that pronunciation is important only to the extent that it is functional to intelligibility and that it is not necessary to be taken for NSs (*“essere scambiati per parlanti nativi”*).

4.2.2 Justifications for NNESTs' Competence

As if to distance themselves from their claims that their NNESTs did not seem to be up to the job, eight interviewees also rationalised their NNESTs' poor competence in English with justifications.

S2 offered an excuse for her NNESTs' deficient competence by remarking that they had not studied (foreign) languages (*“non hanno studiato lingue”*), with the implication that they could not be expected to have a native-like pronunciation. The same argument that one cannot expect an instructor of non-linguistic disciplines to be highly proficient was also made by S1 and S8. S3, the only participant who said she was not completely satisfied with her degree programme, after observing that her personal experience had shown that the realisation in practice of EMI is problematic, she exonerated her NNESTs from responsibility for their inadequate English by suggesting that the NNESTs may have had no choice in the matter of teaching in English. She referred to *“questa cosa di doverli erogare in inglese”* (this thing of having to offer them in English), whereby the modal verb of obligation points to a demand imposed upon the NNESTs, while other features of her speech (hedges, fillers and prosodic features) revealed that she adopted certain discursive strategies that distanced herself from her own negative judgement. In particular, she made her personal opinion sound like an objective, matter-of-fact reality, by claiming that NNESTs' are deficient for obvious reasons (*“ovvi motivi”*).

A similar argument was made by S4 and S7, who suggested levity on the part of the university in managing the academic staff and concluded that their university may not have been quite ready to offer EMI. The idea that this gap between principle and realisation is nevertheless inevitable, was expressed by S5, who claimed that *“inevitabilmente (.) è più difficile trovare professori (.) e:h che sappiano bene l'inglese”* (inevitably, it's more difficult to find professors who are proficient in English), thus ascribing the problem of NNESTs'

competence to a matter-of-fact reality, though without further expansion on the topic.

S10 too excused her NNESTs by offering both kinds of justifications that have been reported above: the fact that as non-language experts they cannot be expected to be highly proficient in English, and the idea that they may not have been given a choice in the language of instruction. Like her fellow students, she was also very cautious in articulating her negative judgement of NNESTs' competence, by making a conspicuous use of verbal hedges and fillers, to the effect of making her statements less assertive, and also by remarking that her view was a shared opinion among her fellow students.

Finally, S7 also added a psychological explanation to justify her NNESTs' poor English-speaking skills, suggesting insecurity in speech delivery stemming from the teacher's anticipation of the students' reactions to a non-native-like competence.

4.2.3 Quality of Teaching and Content

Three participants argued that the NNESTs' inadequate competence leads to lowering the quality of teaching and content. S3, however, hedged her claim by stating that that was "a feeling" she had and by suggesting that it was an inevitable consequence, through use of the adverb *ovviamente* (obviously): "*ho l'impressione che questo poi (...) vada a discapito ovviamente della qualità*". A similar view of inevitability was expressed by S5, who argued that it is inevitably more difficult to find NNESTs who are proficient in English.

In her argument that the deficient NNESTs' competence leads to dumbing down the academic content, S6 was more specific, as she referred to vocabulary as the level of language in which her NNESTs were found lacking. She also suggested that if an instructor's proficiency in English is poor, dumbing down the academic content is somehow inevitable. Like all the other participants who rationalised their teachers' deficiency, she also excused her NNESTs through a careful choice of words, indicated by the pauses, fillers and hedges, and made her negative judgement of NNESTs' English sound like an objective and self-evident fact, while also suggesting that her NNESTs actually excel in their disciplinary field.

4.3 ELF and Multilingualism

4.3.1 EMI and Multilingual Education

S4 pointed to an overfocus on English as another, though absolutely secondary, negative aspect of her EMI degree programme, claiming that there ought to be more courses in other languages, and mentioning Chinese and Arabic, which, in her opinion, are very much needed (*“ce n’è assolutamente bisogno”*). Similarly, S2 argued that in spite of the advantages of EMI (4.1), given her Master’s degree programme’s multilingual and multicultural profile, an overfocus on English is rather limiting. Although she regretted that her degree programme did not offer the same EMI courses in other languages, she pointed out that there are practical constraints to multilingual education: in her words, *“un insegnante dovrebbe essere plurilingue”* (a teacher ought to be multilingual).

Although she did not explicitly refer to EMI as too limiting, S5 also expressed a favourable opinion of multilingual education. However, in the same vein as S2, she also remarked that such a model of internationalisation of the curricula is possible only in theory, and pointed to practical constraints, observing that a multilingual model of internationalisation would not be cost efficient. The same pragmatic reasons to uphold EMI against a multilingualism model of internationalisation were adduced also by S10.

4.3.2 The Cultural Load of English

S8 commented that she did not see the emphasis on English to the detriment of the other languages as a problem, first of all, because she believed that English is more useful than the other languages. In addition, she remarked that studying certain subjects in English gives one the idea of the more advanced aspect of the subject (*“quell’aspetto: come posso dire? più: u:hm uhm più avanzato de della materia”*), thus making an implicit association between English and modernity. The fact that she was trying to find the words to rationalise her feeling, confirmed also by the prosodic features in her speech (hesitations, false starts, pauses and other fillers), can arguably be interpreted as proof that her view of English as more appropriate to communicating a specific academic content has no basis in empirical facts.

Besides her clear preference for English and how this influences her view of EMI as more motivating, however, an indication was found, in her words, that English is loaded with cultural values. Further on, she returned to the same topic, claiming that Marketing is quintessentially an English-medium subject (*"il marketing penso che è proprio la (.) non lo so la materia: pe- per antonomasia no? dell'inglese"*) and that it was natural for her to associate it to the English language and the US culture. She repeatedly remarked that receiving the same academic content in her second language of choice (Spanish) would have sounded strange to her (*"mi suonerebbe tanto tanto strano", "mi farebbe strano", "mi suonerebbe tanto strano", "mi suonerebbe tanto tanto strano"*) and, therefore, would have been less motivating (*"ci andrei più con: una mentalità distaccata"*). Expressing a negative attitude towards translating certain technical terms from English to Spanish (*"la (trovo) una cosa oscena"*) she further confirmed that she saw a perhaps inextricable link between certain disciplinary fields and the English language. In this sense, she projected English as a culturally loaded language. More than that, the fact that she also seemed to be aware that her view of a close association between certain subjects and English may just be based on prejudice (*"è u:n un'idea probabilmente che io ho che deriva da <@> dei pregiudizi </@>"*) shows that she was not unaware of the attitudinal underpinning of her own opinions.

4.3.3 Problems in ELF Communication

From the comments of three interviewees, another problematic dimension in ELF communication emerged. Although S10 expressed a clear view that the use of ELF facilitates international communication, by referring to occasional communication breakdowns having occurred between international students and NNESTs, she noted that communication in English between NNESs who do not share another common language may not always be smooth.

S8 similarly hinted at the fact that the use of English may not put everyone on an equal footing, especially in the classroom context, between a NNES learner and a NEST. Referring to her experience with the visiting NEST, she said that learners had been encouraged to speak freely in class, although, she observed, one might have felt judged, even subconsciously, because the instructor was a native speaker (*"anche <@> inconsciamente </@> perché lei ovvia-*

mente è madrelingua”). A tacit assumption of S8’s argument seems to be that the NNES learner is expected to meet the target of a native-like competence, and, in this sense, it seems that the term “*inconsciamente*” (subconsciously) is key, as it suggests how deeply entrenched native-speakerism is in the NNES learner’s mind and how this latently drives her/his linguistic behaviour.

The theme of inequality in communication was spontaneously addressed also by S5 in relation to the use of English as the lingua franca of international academia, when she expressed a concern for the use of English by NNESs causing a drop in the quality of research work. Although she revealed a positive orientation towards multilingualism and the respect of linguistic diversity, she also justified the use of ELF on pragmatic grounds, referring once again (4.3.1) to a matter of cost-benefits.

4.4 Discussion

An important finding of this study is the participants’ confirmation that IaH is more than just EMI. As defined by Beelen and Jones (2015) “Internationalization at Home is the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments”, therefore, “simply providing a programme in English is insufficient for it to be considered an internationalized curriculum.” (p. 69). Although some participants highlighted the integration of language and content learning as the added value to their Master’s degree programme, other motivating factors were also pointed out, namely the presence of international students and teachers. However, if inward mobility is recognised by some participants as a factor for improvement of their EMI programme, the outward-oriented view of EMI expressed in some comments confirms that, even without an international population of students, IaH is recognised as having an inherent value.

Turning to the negative aspects of EMI highlighted in the interviews, it is important to emphasise that a view of intelligibility being compromised by the perceived low proficiency of the NNESTs was not shared by all participants. Most importantly, a deeper analysis of the interviewees’ comments revealed that the underlying attitudes towards NNESTs’ competence in English were more ambivalent than the initial negative overt opinions let on. In par-

ticular, since in the majority of the interviewees' comments competence was discussed mainly in terms of pronunciation, the study suggests that perceptions of non-intelligibility may depend, at least in part, on an underlying negative attitude towards non-native accents.

S7's comment on this issue was foregrounded to illustrate this point. Although it would take a dedicated study to fully investigate the psycho-social dimension of S7's unconscious reaction to her teacher's accented speech, it has been suggested here that her concentration problem may have to be attributed to attitudinal factors. If so, the root cause of S7's problem may arguably lie precisely in her familiarity with the NNEST's inflection. It may thus be the case that S7's expectations of a teacher of an EMI class had been upset by the perceived familiarity of the accent, and that that particular accent was so much at odds, to her ears, with the formal and also international, cosmopolitan dimension of the EMI class. As previously pointed out (section 2), expectation of unintelligibility of an accent sometimes prevents an unbiased judgement on the actual intelligibility grade (Lindeman & Campbell, 2018). In this sense, the fact of S7 losing her focus may seem to prove that negative attitudes lead to poorer comprehension. By the same token, all the other participants' judgements of unintelligibility of their NNESTs would have to be taken with a grain of salt.

When S7 suggested that insecurity leads to self-consciousness and this, in turn, leads to inhibition and hesitation in speech, and when S8 spoke of fear to be judged by a NNEST, they also hinted at the important role attitudinal factors play in ELF communication. Furthermore, the participants' ambivalent attitudes suggest that ELF-informed overt beliefs may coexist with a deeper-seated negative attitude towards non-native and non-standard pronunciation. In this sense, this study's findings seem to be in line with the results of the earlier research examined above (section 2), which concluded that ELF is accepted in theory but resisted in practice. Although, in principle, all the participants who addressed the theme agreed that pronunciation is important only to the extent that it is functional to successful communication, it also seemed that, in the formal learning context of the classroom, considerations on the primacy of intelligibility are overridden by the expectations that learners have of their instructors, regardless of their NNEST status. In other words, from the

learner's perspective, it seems that the EMI class demands that teachers adhere to the prestigious NE norm.

As these findings show, some participants actually regarded EMI as a way of improving English language skills, and it is suggested here that the fact that the participants in the study were enrolled on a language degree programme (and not just on any EMI programme) may have affected their perception of their lecturers' competence, in the sense that they may have had higher expectations of the proficiency of their lecturers, who may be seen, consciously or not, as models of language use. These higher expectations, in turn, may have affected their attitudes towards ELF vs adherence to NE norms. As pointed out above (section 2), previous research suggests that students' area of specialisation affects their perceptions of the EMI experience, and, in this sense, research conducted on EMI programmes in other departments than that of Languages may be expected to yield different results regarding student expectations. As a further consideration, it must be pointed out that the participants' comments also seem to prove that, however deeply they may be entrenched, negative attitudes towards non-native speech can be changed.

Considering the multilingual and multicultural vocation of LACOM, it was perhaps highly predictable that the participants would show a marked sensitivity towards multilingualism and the respect of linguistic diversity, although they all also seemed to safely assume that English can easily function as a culturally neutral international lingua franca. Even those interviewees who showed awareness of the controversial issues of domain loss and inequalities in communication between NESs and NNEs accepted ELF on pragmatic grounds.

To conclude, it is important to observe here that the ambivalences inherent in some of the participants' attitudes towards EMI and ELF seem to derive from the uncertain status that is still attributed to English, a language that is used as a lingua franca of international and intercultural communication, but which is also still associated to culturally specific native-speaker normative models and, as S8's comment on the cultural load of English suggested, to specific cultural norms and values.

5. Conclusions

This paper has suggested the importance of carefully considering the attitudinal component of communicative competence on the one hand, and hinted at the advantages of upholding an ELF-informed approach to EMI and internationalisation, on the other.

The ambivalence detected in attitudes towards ELF suggests that native-speakerism still exerts a considerable influence on learners; NSE, after all, is a powerful gatekeeper in educational contexts. Without structural change, the “harsh realities of gatekeeping” (Kafle, 2013, p. 68) will understandably influence both students’ and teachers’ orientations and prevent real attitudinal change. However, the importance and effectiveness of raising students’ awareness must not be underestimated, and the findings presented here suggest that awareness and first-hand experience of ELF can lead students to question their own prejudicial views of English.

In addition, the positive attitudes towards the use of the students’ L1 as a strategy for meaning-negotiation in the classroom suggest that effective communication may not necessarily assume a monolingual model, and so code-switching – alternatively defined as multilingual negotiation (Canagarajah et al., 2012) or translanguaging, as in recent post-structuralist reconceptualization of the notion (Kafle, 2013) – ought to be recognised as a viable approach to facilitating meaning-making in a multilingual classroom. Within such a framework, NNESTs may come to be accepted regardless of their non-native like accents and may arguably gain more self-confidence in speech delivery.

In the end, the participants’ cautiousness revealed in their judgement of NNESTs’ inadequacy suggests that their own position as students may have invited prudence, although the researcher’s position as a postgraduate student, besides the terms of confidentiality of the interview, may have encouraged them to be open and speak freely. All things considered, the in-depth semi-structured format of the interview has yielded abundant data and it has arguably proven to be a useful instrument to investigate the stakeholders’ views and orientations towards matters of concern in research on EMI and ELF.

5.1 Limitations

Given the limited number of students involved and the single EMI degree programme considered here, the findings of the present study are not conclusive and cannot be generalised. In particular, the attitudes and orientations of students enrolled on EMI courses in departments other than Foreign Languages remain to be investigated, as these may have different expectations as to language learning and the proficiency of their NNESTs, on the one hand, and lower awareness of ELF, on the other.

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