

COMMENT

On
English-medium Instruction and the Role of Language Mediation
by Claudio BENDAZZOLI

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The data detailing the perceptions of English-medium Instruction by UniTO's lecturers (mainly from the Department of Economics) presented by Claudio Bendazzoli reflect and confirm opinions recorded in previous surveys, e.g. at the Politecnico di Torino (reported in Pulcini, Campagna 2015). Indeed, many university professors have near-native competence in English and can lecture in this language with no problems at all. However, as this mode continues to spread, this is not always the case. Data reveals that many lecturers who teach courses in English are not entirely confident about the use of this language, especially as far as pronunciation is concerned¹. Bendazzoli's data shows that there is widespread awareness that English-only scientific and technical education and training will cause 'domain loss', i.e. Italian students will not acquire terminology and academic knowledge in their field of specialization in their own mother tongue. Moreover, the use of a foreign language for teaching will bring a moderate negative effect on its quality (underperformance, simplification of contents), although this impression comes from lecturers that have no experience in EMI. Contrary to expectations, many professors would welcome linguistic support and methodological training to improve their teaching style and performance.

Bendazzoli's paper does not focus on the political debate (*Is it right to adopt English-medium Instruction?*) which has raised so much concern among Italian scholars in general (and is discussed in my paper in this section of *RiCOGNIZIONI*). Rather, it emphasizes the linguistic and pedagogical implications of English-medium instruction in contexts where EMI may be imposed for political reasons without adequate prerequisites. In this respect, we argued (Pulcini, Campagna 2015: 85) that:

As we believe that internationalization also means keeping high language profiles, we propose that EMI should become ICLHE [Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education] and be gradually introduced in the Italian higher education system, with a parallel maintenance of Italian-taught courses. At the same time, language instruction should continue throughout the students' curriculum, to strengthen their general and ESP competence. Support should also be provided to lecturers who wish to adopt English-medium instruction, [...]

¹ A typically Italian pronunciation error which is often heard in the oral production of competent speakers of English is incorrect stress placement, e.g. *management instead of management ['mænɪdʒmənt], *open access instead of open access ['əspən 'ækses], *development instead of development [dɪ'veləpmənt], *performance instead of performance [pə'fɔ:məns]. Such errors, which can be easily corrected by listening to their correct English pronunciation in an online learner's dictionary (e.g. www.macmillandictionary.com) are likely to reduce credibility of academics and graduates when they communicate in English.

Elsewhere in Europe, EMI has been monitored and studied by educators and linguists. The literature in this area has been growing over the past decade (see, for example, Dimova et al. 2015). In 2010 the ICLHE Association was set up to deal with Integration of Content and Language in Higher Education and promote exchange of opinions, experiences, initiatives and research in this domain (<http://www.iclhe.org/>). Worth mentioning is also EMI Oxford, the Centre for Research and Development on English Medium Instruction at the Department of Education of the University of Oxford (<http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/crdemi-oxford/>) which aims to promote research into the extent and effects of EMI and provide consultancies for institutions already introducing or intending to introduce EMI. It is evident that EMI is a new educational challenge for non-English speaking countries and at the same time big business for English-speaking institutions and providers of English language tuition and training.

This leads to a final, important question: *What is the role of English Language lecturers in this new political and pedagogical dimension?* The role of English Language professors, language experts as well as trainers, lab technicians and the like is becoming crucial and indispensable in this process. Equally essential is the activity of Language Centres for providing facilities, resources and research opportunities (discussed by Vittoz in this section of *RiCOGNIZIONI*). Those of us who were already working in Italian universities in the 1980s witnessed the achievement of academic independence of English Language from English Literature and the national institution of a separate scientific and disciplinary sector (L-LIN/12)² (see Prat Zagrebelsky 1991). This change in the Italian university system was motivated by the view that “the study of a foreign language should free itself from its subordination to the study of literature and stand on its-own feet in terms of aims, contents and methods” (Prat Zagrebelsky 1991: xiv). Redressing the ‘historical imbalance’ between the literary and historical dimension of English Studies and its non-literary present-day reality in academic and professional settings was also demanded by the growing number of students of English not only in the Humanities departments but also in Science, Medicine and Social Sciences. Another founding principle is that the study of non-literary English³ in higher education goes far beyond the acquisition of communicative competence. University students need to develop specific study skills as well as written and oral academic skills both in their L1 and in the foreign language that they have chosen to study or that is part of their curriculum. Apart from learning specialized terminology, adult learners who aim to be trained in various ESP subject areas need to become familiar with the rhetoric and conventions of their own field of specialization.

To conclude, as English is more and more used for teaching and research in Italian academia, the role of English language professors and language experts will be fundamental to provide linguistic and pedagogical input. The label *inglese “veicolare”* used in this seminar, mainly for want of a better term, seems to belittle the great task of learning and teaching the complexities of the English language for academic purposes. On the contrary, the linguistic and pedagogical challenges posed by foreign languages, by English in particular, are very serious

² The L-LIN/12 sector is described as follows: “Comprende l'analisi metalinguistica della lingua inglese nelle sue dimensioni sincroniche e diacroniche, nelle sue strutture fonetiche, morfologiche, sintattiche, lessicali, testuali e pragmatiche, nonché nei diversi livelli e registri di comunicazione orale e scritta; comprende inoltre gli studi finalizzati alla pratica e alla riflessione sull'attività traduttiva, scritta e orale, nelle sue molteplici articolazioni, non letteraria, generica e specialistica e nelle applicazioni multimediali (fra cui la traduzione e interpretazione di cui all'art.1 della L.478/84).” (Ministerial Decree, 4 October 2000).

and need to be monitored and dealt with knowingly if Italian universities want to become truly competitive and international.

REFERENCES

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