



English as a Medium of Instruction in two state-funded Brazilian higher education institutions from an English as a lingua franca perspective: policy in practice

Introduction and objectives

The adoption of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is a world-wide phenomenon as part of the internationalisation strategies of higher education institutions. In Brazil, there is a growing trend towards offering courses of different subject areas in English, and little research has been done to understand the policies, attitudes and practices of academics engaged in these initiatives. This study addresses the theme from the perspective of research on English as a Lingua Franca, i.e., by questioning what is understood by “English” in contexts where it is not the native language and serves as a means of communication among speakers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

This qualitative and exploratory project aimed to address the policies, attitudes and reported practices of EMI in two Brazilian higher education institutions (HEIs) with similar trajectories. Drawing on questionnaires, focus groups and individual interviews with administrators, postgraduate lecturers with some involvement with EMI and their students, the study addressed six research questions:

1. What is the institutional (implicit or explicit) language policy in relation to English?
2. How does EMI fit into the institutional language policy? What kind of institutional support is given to EMI?

3. What language ideologies are informing the EMI institutional initiative? How do they relate to ELF?
4. What are the lecturers and students' attitudes towards EMI? Is EMI a source of (dis)empowerment?
5. What kind of challenges do lecturers and students identify in relation to the implementation of EMI? What solutions are suggested?
6. What is the role of English and Portuguese in the classroom? What do they reveal about the language skills required in this context?

Methodology

In order to address the six research questions, data was collected through the following procedures:

Phase 1	internationalisation and language policy documents were collected and analysed with the help of a list of guiding questions focussing on language policies in relation to English and EMI.
Phase 2:	two online questionnaires were submitted to contribute to research questions 2 to 6. The first questionnaire was submitted to key stakeholders in both institutions and the second questionnaire was forwarded to lecturers by the postgraduate programme coordinators.
Phase 3	semi-structured interviews and focus groups were carried out with content teachers engaged with EMI and postgraduate students in order to contribute to research questions 2 to 6.
Phase 4	validation workshops. A preliminary analysis was prepared and presented at two validation workshops in both institutions. Research participants and other members of the community were invited to attend. Additional focus groups were carried out.

Although classroom observations were outside the scope of this project, we were able to attend two classes and one workshop which contributed to the data interpretation.

Key findings

In terms of policies, both institutions produced officially approved documents stating their internationalisation and language policies. These documents were a response to demands by external agencies, which shows the importance of funding in policy implementation and the influence of external agencies on incrementing the use of English by the academic communities. They subscribed, in various degrees, to multilingualism, with greater emphasis on English as the language of the international university. In the case of one of the institutions, the explicit endorsement of ELF suggests that some understanding of this perspective on English has been at least officially named.

While there are some policies in place to regulate EMI in the two HEIs, the EMI activities are still grassroots, driven by willing academics and postgraduate researchers, often motivated by their positive previous experiences abroad, where they researched or taught in English with international colleagues. Such experiences seem to play an important role for positive attitudes towards EMI.

Despite the flexible views towards English, correctness and classroom communication, our research has shown that there are still some underlying ideological positions in their discourse about EMI. We have identified four of them: a) the “native speaker ideology”, the pervasive understanding of the native speaker as the norm or point of reference for correctness; b) miscommunication being the result of linguistic “errors”; c) “English only” or “one language at a time”, with the use of the local language to be avoided at all cost, and used only as a last resort; and d) “English as the natural language of science’ and the “natural language of internationalization”, so it is “natural that EMI is English” and that “everything starts with English”.

With a few exceptions, we also found a general lack of critical understanding towards the phenomenon of EMI as a whole, the impact it has on the contexts and the institutions and the language ideologies it may contribute to. Therefore, both empowerment and disempowerment were perceived by the research participants. It empowers when one considers its potential to harness participation in international academic circles. EMI is therefore more than content delivered in English, it is socializing students into academic cultures and showing them that participation is possible (“it’s not rocket science”). On the other hand, EMI would be a source of disempowerment when it excludes people or places them in embarrassing situations. It would also be a source of disempowerment for students when they are afraid of not understanding the content being taught or when they feel insecure or afraid of participating in class.

Two main challenges were identified. The first challenge is about language proficiency which is perceived not to be enough for EMI courses and create barriers and difficulties. The second one relates to institutional support. The participants reveal a feeling of frustration because in their perception, the institutions are not supporting the EMI lecturers and their initiatives to run classes or workshops in English.

An initial analysis of practice (some classroom observations and reported practices in interviews) shows that English-only classrooms are still believed to be the best way of doing EMI and the role of other languages is seen as compensatory, a last resort.

This project has allowed staff, students and stakeholders to voice their views on EMI, address challenges and suggest solutions. From the academic point of view, the study provided insights into the definition of EMI as a way of socialising into English-dominant academic cultures. The results suggest that ELF-awareness may help overcome obstacles by focusing on EMI as communication-oriented rather than language or content-oriented.