

Conference Report

BALEAP PIM: EMI in Higher Education: The Challenges and the Opportunities – University of Southampton, 11 June 2016

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For many EAP tutors based in the UK, the need for a BALEAP PIM on the subject of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and its precise relevance to EAP might not have appeared immediately apparent. However, interest in this area had been aroused by Professor Rebecca Hughes' comments at the BALEAP Biennial at the University of Leicester in 2015 that EMI is a field that will become increasingly relevant to EAP provision and 'a growing global phenomenon'. The BALEAP PIM at Southampton, organised by Mary Page and her team, brought home the importance of the relationship between these two fields.

Dr Kristina Hultgren of the Open University gave the opening plenary entitled 'EMI in Higher Education: Implications for EAP'. In what was an excellent overview, Kristina began her presentation by defining what she understood by the term 'EMI', distinguishing it from Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and EAP. The difference, she argued, was based largely on geopolity and educational level in range i.e., while EAP is English-dominant and global and essentially operates at a tertiary level with regard to geopolity and level respectively, EMI is non-English-dominant and global and operates at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Kristina stressed that EMI should not be regarded as a 'threat' to EAP practitioners, but on the contrary should be seen as an opportunity for collaboration between subject and language teachers, between EMI and EAP communities and between EAP decision makers, practitioners and researchers. She also argued that EAP has the knowledge base for successful EMI implementation and that coupled with the continued growth of EMI 'there will be a lot more – not less – for EAP to do!'

The subsequent sessions I attended addressed the practical issues related to the relationship between EAP and EMI. The first, given by Anna Nunan of University College, Dublin, was entitled 'Managing the Balance between Language Knowledge and Subject Knowledge: "EAP to Precede EMI"'. Anna argued that while EAP tutors have the expertise to scaffold student learning and help students acculturate to the academic environment before entry onto their course, subject specialists are best placed to evaluate students' understanding of the knowledge and research in a specific field. Referring to a specific example of where EAP tutors and subject specialists had worked successfully together on a pre-sessional at University College, Dublin, she concluded that EMI as a direct approach to the teaching of an academic subject through the medium of English should follow EAP preparation, rather than replace it.

Similarly, Chris Foggin, from the University of the West of England, discussed one of the potential difficulties related to the relationship between EAP and EMI, namely 'Addressing and Assessing the Differences in the way EAP Tutors and Subject Specialists Assess Student Writing'. In his presentation, Chris made the observation that while both EAP tutors and

subject specialists endeavoured to assist students with their writing, there is often a mismatch with regard to the type of assistance each group provides. Citing Ursula Wingate, he highlighted the misconceptions that some subject specialists had about their role with regard to academic literacies, and suggested how such misconceptions could be alleviated through closer collaboration with EAP tutors.

In the afternoon I attended an online presentation by Alexandra Reynolds of the University of Nantes. Her session, entitled ‘English as a Medium of Instruction in France’, presented an empirical study that she had conducted involving interviews with 164 academics which questioned how they positioned their professional identities in relation to the use of English for professional purposes. Her findings were very interesting. She discovered that English is more than a medium of instruction but also a medium of academic identity, and that to a degree the term EMI is a misnomer as academics and students participate in bilingual English medium contexts. The EMI observations at Nantes also revealed that despite concerns, subject specialist credibility was maintained and linguistic knowledge was negotiated.

Irina Kyulanova, of Sofia University, presented on ‘Teaching Ethical Engagement as a part of EAP/EMI Instruction’. Arguing that although EAP/EMI often focus on controversial issues in order to replicate the nature of academic debate, and while the objectives of such discussions in terms of language and analytic skills are often well mediated, issues involving an ethical element are perhaps less well navigated. Using examples from her own teaching on a first-year undergraduate module on EAP and EMI, she highlighted some of the challenges and potential risks that may arise from the lack of a methodology for teaching ethics. In her conclusion, she cited Foucault and argued that EAP/EMI classes should be meta-spaces that allow for a legitimisation of an ethical perspective – an ethical perspective that should be habitualised regardless of discipline.

This review touches upon only a handful of the themes that were discussed at Southampton. Other presentations included such topics as assessment (Jane Richardson, Heriot-Watt and John Slaght, Reading); the training of EMI teachers (Paul Roberts and James Chantry, York); and the experience of EMI in Japan (Samantha Seiter, Oxford and Cathy Benson, Edinburgh) – all of which give an indication of the breadth of EMI and its potential for the future.

Many of the presentation slides and the conference programme are available on the BALEAP website. A Storify of the event is also available on Twitter via @baleap, together with commentary by @baleap @GoldLinguist @BellaReichard and @EmmaVictoriaLay, among others.

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