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New insights into the trend towards English as a medium of instruction in European higher education through transdisciplinary participation

Highlights

- New light is shed on the drivers of English as a Medium of Instruction in the European Higher Education Area by engaging in transdisciplinary participation.
- Transdisciplinary participation is here understood as enhancing collaboration between applied linguists and experts on academic governance.
- Three European cases illustrate a link between governance reforms premised on steering at a distance and the rise of English as a Medium of Instruction.
- Transdisciplinary participation highlights how knowledge is shaped by disciplinary positioning.

Abstract

The drive towards English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in universities in non-English-dominant countries can generate heated debates, yet the drivers of EMI are still not fully understood. This position paper argues for transdisciplinary participation in order to shed new light on the drivers of EMI. Transdisciplinary participation is conceptualized as engaging with theories, methodologies and practices in other disciplines in order to approach a topical issue in a new way. We exemplify transdisciplinary participation as bringing together applied linguists and those involved in academic governance to re-theorize the rise of EMI as linked to steering at a distance governance reforms that have swept across the European higher education sector since the 1980s. Showcasing three cases from across Europe, we argue that steering at a distance may shed new light on the drivers of EMI. At a more general level, we highlight how disciplinary positioning shapes the creation of knowledge.

Keywords: transdisciplinary participation, English as a Medium of Instruction, academic governance

1 Bridging disconnects in the field of English as a Medium of Instruction

The rise of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has generated significant – sometimes passionate – debates across Europe and beyond. In the Netherlands, the *Beter Onderwijs Nederland* association (Better Education Netherlands) filed (and lost) a lawsuit against the University of Twente and Maastricht University, demanding them to (re)introduce Dutch as a medium of instruction (Wilkinson & Gabriëls 2021). In Italy, a group of lecturers and researchers successfully sued their university, the Polytechnic University of Milan (Politecnico di Milano), for their decision to implement exclusive English-medium instruction at MA and PhD level (Santulli 2015). (This so-called 2012 Polytechnic of Milan controversy is explored in more detail below.) In France, the passing of a law that legalized English-medium instruction in universities immediately sparked passionate debates in the National Assembly and the media (Blattès 2018). In Turkey, the ideological position against English-medium instruction has been expressed through digital grassroots activism (Selvi 2022). In Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland and Finland, there have been longstanding parliamentary, media and public concerns over domain loss, with a parallel language policy advocated across the Nordic region to safeguard the national languages in university domains (Hultgren et al. 2014).

Meanwhile, in higher education governance, the promotion and adoption of English continues largely unabated as English is core to contemporary university endeavours, such as networking across borders, expanding student recruitment, attracting international staff, climbing university rankings, engaging in knowledge exchange and competing for funding (Wilkinson 2013; Hultgren 2014; Coleman et al. 2018; Dafouz 2021). Sometimes English is actively promoted and introduced

while at other times, it emerges as an indirect, perhaps unintended, consequence of these endeavours. Saarinen (2020) writes about language being invisible in pursuits to internationalize the higher education sector (see also Saarinen & Nikula 2013), while Dafouz and Smit (2020) describe English as a *conditio sine qua non* in university governance (Dafouz & Smit 2020). In short, English is often taken for granted or accorded little importance in policy decisions (Zuaro et al. 2022).

In this position statement, we argue that this apparent disconnect between, on the one hand, those who resist the expanding use of English and, on the other, the activities and priorities in European higher education governance, might beneficially be bridged through transdisciplinary participation, the specifics of which we clarify below. We argue that both those who resist English and those who are involved in activities that promote it would benefit from such transdisciplinary participation and the new insights it would bring forth about why English gains prominence. We return to this in the conclusion. While we do not ourselves take a stance for or against the adoption and use of EMI, we see our task as creating knowledge about some of the lesser-known ways in which it comes about in order to inform debates, raise awareness and bridge disconnects between stakeholders. To achieve this, we advocate and exemplify transdisciplinary participation.

2 Conceptualizing transdisciplinary participation

In this section, we discuss, in turn, each of the two components of *transdisciplinary participation* and what it might add to current understandings of the drivers of EMI. We do this by exemplifying work from our ongoing, interdisciplinary project ELEMENTAL,¹ which stands for ‘English as the Language-of-Education Mechanisms in Europe: New Transdisciplinary Approaches in Linguistics’. In terms of the first component (transdisciplinarity), “[t]ransdisciplinary work challenges the entire framework of disciplinary thinking and seeks to assemble new approaches from scratch, using materials from existing scholarly disciplines for new purposes” (Bernstein 2015: 7; see also Klein 2017 for a typology of interdisciplinarity). Specifically, when it comes to understanding the drivers of EMI, transdisciplinarity consists of borrowing conceptual, theoretical and methodological frameworks from political science, and more specifically, also higher education studies, public administration and organization studies. We suggest that understandings of the drivers of EMI have been hampered by a failure of applied linguistics to sufficiently engage with academic governance. To date, research on EMI has predominantly been a monodisciplinary undertaking conducted within the purview of applied linguistics. As Macaro and Aizawa put it: “the EMI research and development field has been appropriated by academics with an applied linguistics focus” (2022: 1).

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The fact that building up the EMI knowledge base has largely been a monodisciplinary undertaking – notwithstanding the contributions of various sub-fields within applied linguistics, be it TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), ICLHE (Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education), ELFA (English as a Lingua Franca in Academia) – may have diverted analytic attention away from some aspects of European higher education that may turn out to be key in order to understand what actually drives EMI. One such aspect is the dramatic restructuring of higher education governance which has taken place over the past few decades.

Many European nation states have, since the 1980s, embarked on extensive reform programmes that have fundamentally reconfigured the governance of higher education. Although these reforms vary in form and extent across Europe, and differ in both rhetoric and reality, in the main, they have been premised on granting higher education institutions greater autonomy through implementing *steering at a distance* to the governance of higher education. Steering at a distance is an approach to governance that centres on strategically loosening the grip of the nation state over public sector institutions while putting into place comprehensive accountability mechanisms. These reforms have been both ideologically and economically motivated (see Eurydice 2012 and Wright et al. 2019 for arguing this point in the context of higher education). Ideologically, there was growing disillusion with and distrust in etatism – the authority of the state over the individual citizen – possibly influenced by the Reagan/Thatcher era in the US and the UK, and a resultant emergence of an economically motivated philosophy that the perceived inefficiency of public sector institutions should be remedied (Krüger et al. 2018; Broucker et al. 2019). Economically, at least in the higher education sector, there was increasing financial pressure on the system as a result of massification (Trow 1973). Our hypothesis is that steering at a distance has increased, or at least paved the way for, the use of EMI by compelling higher education institutions to operate in a global, competitive and commodified marketplace in which a shared language (de facto English) is a must. This is a starting hypothesis which can be empirically tested as the three cases below illustrate. By reframing the push for EMI as linked to steering at a distance, we endeavour to “think out of the box of disciplinary methods” and aspire to the idea that “[n]ew concepts reveal new realities” (Aldrich 2014: 72).

However, truly engaging with other disciplines is not an easy task, and actual attempts at doing so are few and far between. This is why participation is a crucial second component of our transdisciplinary approach. Participation refers to two things: 1) that we collaborate with political scientists who hold theoretical and methodological expertise on governance, and 2) that we redirect attention to research participants who are centrally involved in academic governance. Each of these forms of participation is discussed below, in turn.

Firstly, in order to empirically test the hypothesized relationship between the implementation of a steering at a distance approach to governing higher education and the rise of EMI, we use the methodology of process tracing, a method borrowed from political science, and also used in fields such as psychology, business studies and others, but only rarely in applied linguistics. Theoretically framed within critical realism (Bhaskar 2016), process tracing is a qualitative, case-based research method that seeks to trace, in a rigorous manner, the mechanisms between a hypothesized cause and an outcome, in a way that can be likened to detective work, collecting data to empirically assess the validity of the hypothesized cause (Beach & Pedersen 2019). This novel methodological work is supported by a political scientist with expertise on the particular method of process tracing.

Secondly, our project redirects attention to those who are centrally involved in academic governance in order to understand their activities, practices and priorities. This includes high-level research participants such as ministers of higher education, directors of higher education organizations, internationalization strategists, university rectors, faculty deans, and so on. This focus on high-level decision makers in academic governance represents a marked departure from most applied linguistics work on EMI, which, for understandable reasons, has tended to focus on lecturers and students as research participants. Additionally, we also engage in transdisciplinary participation with three international organizations involved in higher education governance (Academic Cooperation Association, the European Students' Union and the British Council). To sum up, what characterizes our approach as transdisciplinary participation (rather than simply transdisciplinary) is that it goes beyond a mere re-theorization of a given issue and the use of a novel methodology. What takes it further is that it involves key individuals as collaborators and research participants. We gain from our collaborating political scientists academic expertise in the theory and methodology of governance and process tracing while we gain from our research participants (higher education ministers, institutional decision makers and leaders of higher education organizations, etc.) in-depth understandings of the priorities and activities of those centrally involved in academic governance on a professional basis. Both these groups of individuals thus bring transdisciplinary expertise on the theory and practice on governance (in general) and academic governance (in particular) that has the potential to significantly advance current understandings of the drivers of EMI in higher education as held by applied linguists.

Work on ELEMENTAL is ongoing and so the three cases on which we report below are in the early stages of being empirically investigated. At this relatively early stage in our work, there are questions over the strength of the causal relationship we are proposing. It may be, e.g., that steering at a distance created a renewed need for a lingua franca, and this language happened to be English, rather than it creating a need for this lingua franca to be specifically English. However, from what we know more widely about the spread of English as a global language, and as Marxist linguist

John O'Regan (2021) has argued, the global spread of English has enjoyed a 'free ride' on the back of the global spread of capitalism. Within the somewhat narrower domain of higher education, we suggest that steering at a distance, similarly premised on a neoliberal philosophy, may have perpetuated an existing push for English which originated several centuries earlier. O'Regan's work highlights the importance of studying the spread of English within the context of the political economy, a case which we espouse on ELEMENTAL and which has also been made by other applied linguists (see, e.g., Gal 1989; Park & Wee 2012; Block 2017). In the three sections that follow, we exemplify ELEMENTAL's transdisciplinary participation in three selected cases: the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey.

3 The Netherlands: key performance indicators and EMI

The Netherlands provides the first example of how governance reforms granting higher education institutions autonomy might lead to English-taught programmes. In 1985, the white paper *Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality*, HOAK for short, spearheaded the concept of steering at a distance in the Netherlands, increasing the autonomy of higher education institutions (de Boer & van Vught 2016). The governmental micro-management that had prevailed until that point entailed "stringent regulations and extensive control mechanisms" (de Boer & van Vught 2016: 25). With the HOAK policy, however, this highly regulated form of steering was abandoned in favour of the government stepping back and allowing the higher education institutions more room to make their own decisions. However, because steering at a distance is underpinned by a neoliberal philosophy of incentivisation, it is sometimes accompanied by the introduction of key performance indicators (Minassians 2015). This new performance culture was also reflected in how public universities were funded. Up until the 1960s, Dutch universities had simply been allocated funding on the basis of their declared spending, but over time, as neoliberalism tightened its grip over the sector, funding became partly contingent upon the attainment of targets in both research and teaching (Jongbloed & Salerno 2003).

One university, in which we have analysed institutional documents and interviewed key decision makers of the 1980s, was under a parliament-imposed target to recruit 6,000 students by 1990. Although it is unclear whether the target was directly linked with the government funding model, it may have come about in parallel with the introduction of the new performance-related funding models. The pressure to recruit students comes out clearly in interviews with those involved in the management of the university. Although there was no requirement that recruitment should be international, university leadership believed that the Dutch-speaking student market (which included those in the nearby region, other Dutch provinces and Dutch-speaking students from Flanders in Belgium) had been exhausted, and

so it was decided to seek to attract students from neighbouring French-speaking Belgium and Germany. This could only be achieved by implementing programmes with English as the course language.² Thus, the university's first EMI programme was launched in the late 1980s and was possibly among the first in the Netherlands and Europe. The programme in question was a first-degree programme in International Management, offered by the Economics Faculty, which would lead to an MA in Economics (see Wilkinson 2013 for a fuller account). Reflecting on the significance of the new climate of key performance indicators, a member of the University's Executive Board at the time remarks:

This [key performance indicators] was extremely important. At the time at the end of the 1980s/1990s the university had to satisfy to the Second Chamber a key performance indicator which was that there should at least be 6,000 students. [...]. Very early it became clear that that would not be the case because one had insufficient numbers of Dutch-speaking students. And so I think the English part was really essential in getting to that target and 6,000 students was achieved in 1991, I think, or even before. (Member of the Senior Leadership Team in the 1980s.)

In the case of the Netherlands, then, there appears to be at least some evidence of steering at a distance reforms and, in this particular case, the introduction of key performance indicators having influenced decisions to introduce English as a language of teaching.

4 Italy: EMI, university reform and resistance

The Italian context offers a complex example of the hypothesized relationship between governance reforms and the increase of EMI in higher education (HE). The case we discuss here is the aforementioned 2012 Polytechnic of Milan controversy and its connection to the 240/2010 reform, which sought to grant Italian higher education institutions greater autonomy. The reform was promoted some ten years ago by the then Education, University and Research Minister Mariastella Gelmini, whose name was given to the reform. In the wake of the Gelmini reform, the Polytechnic of Milan announced a drastic increase of EMI, which in its interpretation fell in line with the recently promulgated reform. This announcement, however, sparked controversy and led to the Milan litigation, a lawsuit brought by lecturers against their institution for excluding Italian as the language of education. This suggests that the Gelmini

2 The programme was actually initially trilingual, offered with components in Dutch, French and English, but gradually the former two were dropped in favour of English (see Wilkinson 2013 for a full account).

reform's promotion of a deregulated type of governance appears to have created particularly favourable conditions to further the spread of EMI, and in doing so laid the foundations for the controversy that was to come. While the Milan litigation case has been analysed in Law and Linguistics literature before, the role played by the possible connection between public governance and language policy remains largely unexplored. We outline this process next.

If the first steps towards 'autonomous' HE institutions in Italy were taken starting from the 1980s, it was not until more recently that the country saw a more substantial reform of the university system hinged on that principle. Introduced in 2010, the law 240/2010 was meant to represent a breaking point with the continental bureaucratic-oligarchic tradition (Braun & Merrien 1999), promising to renew a system that was suffering from a reputation of inefficiency (e.g., Donina et al. 2015; Capano 2018; Donina & Hesevendic 2018). The law intervened significantly in the internal structures of the university and appeared to promote the adoption of a steering at a distance paradigm by placing emphasis on external stakeholders, funding allocation and competition among institutions. At the same time, although in rhetoric it spearheaded steering at a distance, in reality, the law was accompanied by much debate and, ultimately, deemed to have failed to decentralize the governance of higher education (Donina et al. 2015).

The contradictions between the aims of the Gelmini law and its implementation and outcomes show that reforms are interpreted, appropriated, embraced, resisted and subverted in often unpredictable ways in different nation states and by different social actors (Wright et al. 2019; Dougherty & Natow 2020). On the one hand, like other European contexts, Italy has been receptive to the current changes in HE; this is testified, for example, by the increase of EMI programmes in the last ten years (e.g., Costa & Mariotti 2020). On the other hand, Italy is one of the countries in which existing cultural, institutional and bureaucratic structures may intrinsically oppose transnational reform pressures. In other words, Italian HE may resist fundamental departure from the status quo partly because of a basic lack of compatibility between transnational pressures and the national civil service laws (Dobbins & Knill 2017).

We argue that the Milan litigation is in fact one example where such basic incompatibility is made particularly explicit. The case saw a clash between the Polytechnic of Milan's decision makers (i.e., the Academic Senate and the Rector) and part of its own academic staff, due to the Polytechnic's announcement of a drastic increase of EMI, which in its interpretation fell in line with the recently promulgated Gelmini law. However, detractors of the strategy were able to resort to national authorities (including the Local Administrative Court, the Council of State and the Constitutional Court), which eventually denied the legitimacy of the decision to offer courses exclusively in English (see Murphy & Zuaro 2021; Zuaro et al. 2022).

Therefore, not only was the Gelmini law, at least partially, the trigger for a substantial EMI increase at the Polytechnic, similarly, when the legitimacy of such EMI

implementation was questioned, the reform, too, was placed under scrutiny. This suggests a close relationship between the positioning of EMI in HE institutions and the adoption of steering at a distance types of governance. Based on the discussion above, we posit that to truly unravel the nature of such relationship an interdisciplinary approach involving conceptual and methodological tools from the field of higher education governance needs to be adopted.

5 Turkey: deregulation, privatization and the rise of EMI

If governments in the Netherlands and Italy have retained some degree of control over their higher education systems through steering at a distance, Turkey appears to have taken its deregulation one step further and opened up its doors to a vast number of private higher education providers. Perhaps this is one reason why Turkey has witnessed a particularly explosive growth of EMI.

Despite a strong centralized tradition coordinated through the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), established in 1981 following the military coup with Law No. 2547 (Saglamer 2013), Turkish higher education has over the last 20 years witnessed a trend of neoliberal transformations. The CoHE has been active in restructuring the academic, institutional and administrative aspects of HE; however, tight central control is retained over the curriculum, financing and staff and student recruitment.

The foundation for these neoliberal changes was built in the previous decade. Changes in the HE Act in 1992 allowed the establishment of foundation – private – universities in Turkey to meet increasing demands for higher education. Marketization, privatization and internationalization all contributed to the massification of HE (Onal 2012; Cosar & Ergul 2015). Massification is evidenced in the gross tertiary enrolment ratio in Turkish HE, increasing by almost 90% since 2000 (World Bank 2023). Similarly, the number of international students enrolled at Turkish universities has quadrupled since 2013, reaching 224,048 in 2021. The increase in international students is largely due to a policy change at the government level starting in 2011 which introduced a *Türkiye Bursları* (Turkey scholarships) programme to increase international students (Aras & Mohammed 2019).

The growth of higher education in Turkey through marketization, privatization and internationalization may have contributed to the rise of EMI, although in fact the origins of EMI in Turkey can be traced even further back. The foundation of Middle East Technical University in the 1950s marks the beginning of EMI HE programmes in Turkey. Supported by a modification in the HE Act in 1996, which allowed any university fulfilling some infrastructure rules to open new EMI programmes, a new trend emerged. In 1999, there were 345 EMI programmes offered by 71 universities,

which increased to 1452 programmes in 192 universities by 2019. The increase in twenty years has been 420% and 270%, respectively (Yuksel et al. 2022).

More recently, starting in November 2014, with the appointment of a then-new president, CoHE initiated a new plan of action, i.e., a governance reform process, with the label New CoHE (CoHE 2019). This process essentially involved decentralizing the steering of the HE system by “transfer[ring] the powers and duties to HE institutions” (CoHE 2020: 1). To this end, CoHE “authorise[d] the relevant boards of HEIs in determining the courses, curricula and credits in their teaching programmes” (CoHE 2020: 2). This process can be a form of steering at a distance strategy because it transforms CoHE from “a regulator position to a coordinator position” (Bagcioglu 2017: 204) by facilitating modifications in HE laws and regulations to give autonomy and accountability to the HEIs regarding their academic and governance issues.

We argue that the HE Act modifications in 1992 and 1996, the massification of the HE in Turkey as a government policy with the goal of one (public) university for each city in 2006 (Mercan 2016) and increasing the number of international students at Turkish universities starting from 2011 (Durak et al. 2022) all paved the way for the increase in the number of the EMI programmes in Turkey. We might speculate, and will seek to further explore, that EMI is going to be further propelled by the recent initiative to grant further autonomy to higher education institutions.

6 Conclusion

We opened this paper by highlighting a current disconnect between different groups of stakeholders in the area of EMI and have made a case for transdisciplinary participation as a way of bridging that disconnect. If EMI is at least partly an unintended consequence of imperatives and activities in contemporary academic governance, it seems important to raise awareness of how those activities engender EMI. At the same time, part of the reason why there is so much controversy around EMI may be that the academic decision making that leads to it remains obscure to those who resist EMI. Transdisciplinary participation is understood here as bringing together disciplines, theories, methodologies and people, who would not otherwise necessarily engage with one another, in order to yield new understandings on a specific issue in applied linguistics, in this case the rise of English as a Medium of Instruction.

By reframing the rise of EMI as linked to governance reforms centred on the implementation of steering at a distance, we showed how in the Netherlands the introduction of key performance indicators, as one form of steering tool, might have impacted on the decision at one university to offer an English-taught programme in the 1980s. In Italy, similarly, the attempt to introduce steering at a distance through the Gelmini law might have led to the Polytechnic University of Milan operationalizing this as EMI, suggesting a relationship between the governance

reforms and the rise of EMI. In both the Netherlands and Italy, then, we have been able to make a case through some preliminary findings for at least a tentative relationship between governance reforms and EMI. In Turkey, however, the evidence of this link is currently not as strong, as the introduction of EMI from the 1950s and onwards appears to pre-date by several decades the introduction of steering at a distance; however, this partly depends on how steering at a distance is defined. While acknowledging the variability across contexts in the nature of reforms, their timeline and the success of their implementation, as well as the challenges in teasing out causal processes and establishing which event led to another, we hope to have shown that engaging in transdisciplinary participation might prompt us to look at EMI in new ways and consider alternative or additional explanations for its rise. By re-framing the push for EMI as linked to steering at a distance, we have endeavoured to “think out of the box of disciplinary methods” (Aldrich 2014: 72). While we illustrated a transdisciplinary approach to the particular question of what drives EMI, we would suggest that similar thinking out of the box may at a more general level open up new areas for research in applied linguistics, shed new light on longstanding questions and prompt new questions. Thus, engaging in transdisciplinary participation can reveal how knowledge is shaped and constrained by disciplinary positioning and contribute to a richer understanding of key issues in applied linguistics.

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