

Reflections on Going Global 2020’s “English Medium: during and post-COVID-19”: Takeaways for Future Research

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1. Introduction

The British Council’s *Going Global 2020* event was originally scheduled to be an on-site conference held on 29-30 June in London. However, due to precautions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference was transformed into a series of live virtual events, blog posts, and digital posters. Its theme—*Global Learners, Global Innovation*—was meant to help various stakeholders in different parts of the higher education sector share their ideas on how to improve international further and higher education for all. With live virtual panels on most weekdays during the month of June, the move online created a consistent professional development opportunity for participants worldwide, most of whom would not have been able to attend an in-person event in London. Expert panels discussed topics such as: *What is the future of higher education?*; *How do universities ensure quality teaching online?*; and *Diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education*. Needless to say, *Going Global 2020* covered quite a lot of ground. As we write this, after the last of 17 recorded panel discussions has ended, we reflect on one panel in particular that we feel holds strong implications for those in IATEFL’s *ELT Research* community.

English Medium: During and post-COVID-19 took place on 16 June and shined light on current and future impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on English medium instruction (EMI) in higher education. The event was chaired by Roy Cross of the British Council’s English for Education Systems team and featured experts from the University of Edinburgh (Nicola Galloway); University of Oxford (Heath Rose & Kari Şahan); University of Bath (Reka Jablonkai); and University of Manchester (Jenna Mittelmeier). The speakers discussed potential impacts of COVID-19 at the micro/classroom level, meso/institutional level, and macro/country level. In what follows, we summarize emergent topics from the discussion and link those to what has increasingly become, but arguably not enough, a discourse of overlapping interest for researchers and practitioners in EMI and ELT.

Cross begins by introducing some implicit intertextuality to an earlier EMI event at *Going Global 2014*, where Ernesto Macaro, among other presenters, discussed controversies associated with EMI. One participant questioned Macaro’s stance that the implementation of EMI should be research-informed and not imposed top-down without evidence to support its effectiveness. The participant mentioned the need for his university to *internationalize* within five years, leaving little time to wait for researchers to recommend best practices. And so Macaro’s often-cited analogy of EMI as “an unstoppable train” which “has already left the station” was realised (Macaro, 2018, p. 12).

Six years later, at the start of the 2020 event, Cross adds that EMI is not just a train but a bullet train that has not only left the station but is now traveling at top speed; therefore, it is difficult to trace its route, exact speed, and/or whether all of the staff and passengers are prepared for the journey. These are important ideas to unpack for the seemingly elusive construct which Macaro (2018) has controversially defined as “[t]he use of English language to teach academic subjects (other than English

itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English” (p. 1). What can be said, however, is that many similar issues can be found in the discourse describing the spread of ELT and English more generally (see Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; Rose & Galloway, 2019). Issues abound regarding what variety of English(es) to use in EMI, who should be teaching it, and what role English language proficiency plays for both teachers and students in EMI settings. It is therefore no surprise that in the 2018 special issue of *TESOL Quarterly*, *At the Crossroads of TESOL and English Medium Instruction*, Pecorari and Malmström (2018) call for a cross-pollination between ELT and EMI, each having insights that could potentially benefit the other. This is the perspective we take in our coverage of the event, which begins with Cross’ first question:

Q1. What was the immediate impact of the pandemic for EMI? I.e., what did universities have to do straight away to take their teaching online?

Jablonkai begins her response by discussing obstacles to learning, highlighting how multichannel/multimodal communication has been used by many instructors to overcome communication challenges. Chat functions in many online platforms have proven invaluable during this time, as instructors are able to type anything that may be unclear much easier than would have previously been possible during a face-to-face lesson. Students are also able to utilize chat functions; slow down and/or re-watch pre-recorded lectures for better understanding; and express their feelings instantly during a lesson using just one word or an emoji in the chat.

Therefore, despite the inherent challenges, many students have reported that they understand lectures better and find communication with both teachers and other students easier. Jablonkai notes that some teachers even reported that students were more proactive during lessons by using these online features. Galloway adds that if universities are willing to adapt, the move toward pre-recorded lectures followed by online discussion, for example, could be seen as a new opportunity rather than an emergency remote teaching protocol. However, she sees potential student dissatisfaction with online learning as a possible concern of which to be aware.

Q2. What materials are available that may help EMI instructors cope with online teaching?

Galloway and Şahan recommend a new global network for EMI researchers and practitioners ([Teaching English and Teaching IN English in Global Contexts](#)). On this growing online space, researchers and practitioners can share materials and experiences; see how their subject is being taught in different contexts; and glean ideas for their own work. Şahan, who runs the network’s webinar series describes how the webinars have evolved from an early focus on research to a new, additional focus on practitioners, by inviting instructors to share ideas in an online format.

Q3. What might be some of the lasting consequences of the pandemic?

Şahan starts the panel’s collective response by saying that the pandemic may have an impact on national EMI and language policies, and that it can affect classroom practices. She takes a positive stance on the issue by viewing this situation as an opportunity to reconsider challenges that EMI brings and rethink the pedagogical approaches applied in EMI settings. This way, the EMI community can work to overcome existing challenges (e.g. English language proficiency) as well as new challenges as they arise. She believes that online teaching can serve as a tool for developing new teaching and learning strategies to enhance students’ outcomes.

Mittelmeier adds that moving classes online can be invaluable to introducing *internationalization at a distance*, stressing that people no longer have to be present physically in other destinations for an

exchange of knowledge and ideas to take place. Nowadays, knowledge is mobile and, as a result, students have the opportunity to take up studies at many universities around the world without ever leaving their home countries. Thus, she expects a “big boom” of online EMI courses—a process she anticipated previously but feels may be sped up due to emergency remote teaching during the pandemic. This, in turn, may lead to increased competition between “home” and “overseas” institutions. With students having more choices, institutions in both contexts must carefully consider how they support students in EMI programs (specialized English language support is one such means); otherwise, some courses may become unsustainable.

Rose echoes this view and adds that online teaching has been largely stigmatized, and that the effects of the pandemic situation can be taken as an opportunity to lessen the stigma and utilize online platforms to their full potential. He is unsure if previously popular study abroad destinations such as the UK will continue to attract the large number of international students they have been financially relying on in recent years. This may lead to growth in both onsite EMI programs (internationalization at home) and online EMI programs (internationalization at a distance).

Q4. What is the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in alleviating language-related challenges in future EMI education?

Şahan states that if language is simply a barrier to overcome, then AI technology may be seen as a possible solution. However, she—rightly—argues that through EMI, many stakeholders expect English language proficiency to improve as a byproduct of studying through the medium of English, and that we must remember the need for students to be able to use English effectively without AI upon graduation. Galloway affirms this point by reminding listeners that the aims of EMI vary in different contexts. In some contexts, EMI is closely aligned with incidental language learning, while in other contexts, the purpose is more closely related to content knowledge development; practitioners must strike a careful balance to ensure these aims are met.

Q5. Moving forward, where should the focus of research be?

The panel’s final remarks can be summarized as such: 1) building on the extensive research currently available on challenges in implementing EMI (often language related) future research could focus on how best to mitigate these challenges in specific contexts; 2) best practices in terms of strategic support for students; 3) multidisciplinary and comparative research on the effect of the medium of instruction on learning outcomes; and 4) how best to build diverse and inclusive programs in higher education.

To sum up, it is important to remember that with the start of the pandemic we bid farewell to the old normal and have been forming what could potentially be “new normals” within both EMI and ELT. In reflecting on the discussants’ shared experiences, we see an even stronger need for EMI and ELT researchers and practitioners to come together. As Thompson and McKinley (2018) note, there is no shortage of teaching approaches that have emerged in recent decades that call upon some degree of content and language integration, such as content-based instruction (CBI), content-based language teaching (CBLT), and content and language integrated learning (CLIL). And while EMI does not typically have the same dual pedagogical focus on content and language, there is an implicit dual-aimed outcome in that both content knowledge and English language proficiency will develop as a result of EMI. However, “many students still need language support in order to study the content effectively” (Rose & Galloway, 2019, p. 196); researchers and practitioners on the ELT side may be able to provide insight, assistance, and/or relevant empirical findings to help provide the English language support that is needed. As Pun and Thomas (2020) note, although we live in our own immediate realities that differ among contexts, we

must continue to strive for an idealized reality where content and language experts work in collaboration for the betterment of all stakeholders involved.

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Biodata

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