Rethinking the roles of ELT in English-medium education in multilingual university settings

Pre-publication version

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The Introduction to the Special Issue on ELT and English-medium education in multilingual university settings provides a picture of the dynamic backdrop to the issues addressed by our contributing writers. We begin with a reflection on the nature of ELT and then move on to a discussion of the specific nature of English-medium education in higher education globally. The Introduction underlines the importance of respecting and drawing on students' multilingual repertoires, and the opportunities this affords for decolonising ELT in university settings.

Key words: ELT, EMEMUS, multilingual turn, translanguaging, decolonising

Introduction

Reflecting the growing numbers of students in higher education institutions (HEIs) across much of the world, along with the internationalisation of university classrooms and programmes under the aegis of globalization and neoliberalism (Gray, O'Regan and Wallace, 2018), this special issue of the ELT Journal aims to rethink and explore critically the possible affordances and challenges that English-Medium Instruction (EMI) can offer ELT professionals working in different sociolinguistic, cultural, educational and geopolitical contexts. While definitions abound, broadly speaking, EMI refers to the use of the English language to teach academic subjects, other than English itself, usually without an explicit focus on language learning or specific language aims (Dafouz, 2021). Against this backdrop, and as a result of the increasing number of tertiary contexts where English is employed as a vehicular language, we take the view here that EMI can undoubtedly benefit from ELT expertise with regard to the pedagogical practices which foreground the importance of language(s) in the process of student (disciplinary) learning. This together with the linguistic and pedagogical (content) knowledge that ELT professionals possess and the theoretical insights derived from the *social turn* in applied linguistics (see discussion below) can be seen as an opportunity to rethink ELT education in present day English-mediated HEIs. We also believe that EMI paves the way to re-examining the roles of English in tertiary contexts, particularly as 'English', far from being a uniform, monolithic construct plays very different roles in such settings beyond the "classic" EFL, ESP and EAP approaches (Dafouz and Smit, 2017). In this regard, we would suggest that twenty-first century ELT professionals working in the tertiary sector, where English is being used as a lingua franca or as an international or global language, need to be sensitive to the sociolinguistic realities of their students' lives. Similarly, we argue that educational development portfolios for the ELT profession (or TESOL as it is also known) will benefit from re-examination in the light of these new teaching and learning scenarios.

From this perspective, we pose what might be called a number of ethical or critical questions, given that EMI presupposes enormous challenges but also potentially significant opportunities for those involved - lecturers, students, educational developers but, most particularly, for the field of ELT itself and those who work in it. While the rise of EMI may have been seen as a threat, more generally the industry has welcomed its growth, seeing it as a business opportunity for training. However, the stance adopted in this special issue eschews both of these perspectives. Thus, rather than viewing EMI simply as a menace or asking how ELT involvement can be monitised, we opt to explore constructively, and at the same time critically, how ELT professionals can contribute to ensuring that academics and students in such settings are not disadvantaged by the contextual constraints in which they may find themselves; how the affordances of local settings can be recognised and realised; and how ELT professionals can contribute to the practice of EMI in ways that are congruent with an overall commitment to the acknowledgement and use of student and lecturer multilingual repertoires and translanguaging practices, as well as to social justice in educational settings more generally. At the same time, we pose these questions in the knowledge that EMI is also likely to evolve perhaps unpredictably, particularly given the current global instability triggered by the on-going (at the time of writing) COVID-19 pandemic and the potential long-term effects on the internationalisation of higher education (HE).

In the following sections, we begin with a reflection on the nature of ELT and its evolving knowledge base. From there we turn to EMI and a consideration of the adequacy of the term when applied to HE settings and propose an alternative label which we consider more fitting. This is followed by a discussion of the potential affordances of these

two areas for one another, concluding with several critical questions and a brief overview of the articles comprising this special edition.

ELT – the nature of the field

For historical reasons linked to British colonialism, US political hegemony in the period following the Second World War and, more recently, the neoliberalising of the world economy, English has become the default global lingua franca. As a consequence, HEIs in non-Anglophone countries increasingly offer more and more of their courses in English on the basis that they purportedly enhance their international status and their ability to participate in the global knowledge economy. This is far from straightforward – access to linguistic resources is unevenly distributed, and winners and losers are the inevitable result. Given the profound imbrication of English in the capitalist world-system, within which universities are embedded, it is necessary to consider what is referred to as the *political economy* of English. Political economy refers to the ways in which 'social institutions, their activities and capitalism influence each other' (Block, Gray and Holborow, 2012: 2) and, in this case, to the ways in which English is implicated in this dynamic. O'Regan (2021: 7) characterises English as a 'free rider' on global capital, a term which seeks to capture the symbiotic way in which 'English has given succour to the expansion and accumulation of capital, and capital has given succour to the expansion and accumulation of English'. It is against this background that the field of ELT emerged in the mid-twentieth century and flourished from the last quarter of the century onwards. And it is to the evolving nature of this field that we now turn.

ELT can be understood as a Janus-faced phenomenon – on the one hand it is a multimillion-pound edu-business in which the profit motive is paramount and whose products (e.g., textbooks, tests, teaching and training courses) have tended to privilege English monolingualism as well as endorsing (certainly in the case of textbooks) the values of consumerism and neoliberal individualism. But on the other hand, it is a field of enquiry and practice with an academic base in an increasingly interdisciplinary and critical applied linguistics. This ongoing recalibration of the knowledge base of ELT is generally understood under the heading of the *social turn* and dates from the 1990s. It is characterised by an awareness of social context as a key element to consider with regard to classroom practice, the ways in which language, when viewed from a sociocultural theory perspective, functions as a symbolic tool in mediating in teaching and learning and the need for greater sociolinguistic awareness and sensitivity in teaching. More recently, and specifically under the influence of sociolinguistics and critical education studies, the field has begun to consider how the ELT curriculum can be decolonised and made more inclusive – and it is here that we see specific points of contact with the topic of this special issue.

The thrust of much of this recent work has recently been brought together in an important edited volume by Macedo (2019) under the heading of *Decolonizing Foreign Language Education: The misteaching of English and other colonial languages*, featuring contributions from leading figures in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics with a specific interest in ELT and languages in education more generally. Collectively, the contributors may be said to seek to steer a course between what Pennycook (2019) refers to as the dystopianism of the linguistic imperialism thesis and the utopianism of the World Englishes and ELF positions. With regard to ELT, and as part of the argument against the notion of separate languages hermetically sealed off from one another (see Li, Ting this issue), Pennycook argues:

> We do not actually "speak languages"; we are not, in fact, "native speakers" of things called "languages". Rather we engage in language practices [...], we draw on linguistic repertoires, we take up styles, we partake in discourse, we do genres. Indeed, languages can be seen not as pregiven entities but as sets of possibilities that emerge from practices, registers, discourses, and genres. From this point of view we can start to see language education in terms of multimodal semiotics, principled polycentricism, and the need to develop resourceful speakers (Pennycook, 2019: 177).

Crucially, such a perspective on ELT sees it as language *education* and not simply as *instruction*, or as Said (1993: 39) lamented, a technical activity 'stripped of expressive and aesthetic characteristics and denuded of any critical or self-conscious dimension'. It also goes beyond a critique of the privileging of monolingual pedagogy and an overturning of linguistic hierarchies in the classroom, viewing language education as perforce a form of critical pedagogy. The concept of the student as a resourceful speaker (as opposed to the ideal of the native-speaker) as the aim of second language teaching – to which we would add the notion of the resourceful teacher - is one that we see as having specific relevance to those HEI settings where content is delivered though English.

From EMI to EMEMUS

While the opening lines of this introduction employ repeatedly the term EMI to refer to the use of English for

educational purposes in tertiary settings, it is noteworthy that neither 'education' nor 'higher education' appear explicitly in the acronym. In light of this paradox, this section aims to redefine the object of study – EMI – by drawing specifically on the ongoing recalibration of the knowledge base of ELT described above and by going a step further to include a *multilingual turn* (May, 2011) as well. We will first begin by drawing attention to the limitations of current defining criteria; and second (as stated above) by proposing an alternative term which reflects more accurately the complexity, dynamism and socio-political nature of this phenomenon.

While it is certainly not easy to offer a comprehensive definition of EMI, Pecorari and Malmström (2018: 499) have usefully extracted four core criteria from the literature which are used to describe what they refer to as 'prototypical' EMI settings:

1) English is the language used for instructional purposes.
2) English is not itself the subject being taught.
3) Language development is not a primary intended outcome.
4) For most participants in the setting, English is a second language (L2).

However, as they themselves point out 'in practice each one involves certain complexities' (p. 499), and it is precisely the need to address such complexity that is our concern in this introduction. If these four defining criteria are applied strictly to HEIs around the world offering EMI programmes, we find that many interesting non-prototypical EMI experiences and practices are excluded from the outset. Addressing these in order, criterion number 1 uses of the term "instructional" which, it could be argued, downplays the dialogic nature of knowledge construction that takes place between teachers and students. Viewed this way, teaching is a monologic process in which students have little agency and teachers largely employ a transmission model with regard to content. The influence of sociocultural theory in ELT and second language pedagogy, referred to above, and its focus on the co-construction of knowledge, teacher and peer scaffolding and interactional student-centred approaches more generally, mean that ELT has much to offer here. Criterion number 2 foregrounds the fact that English is not the object of study in EMI programmes. This understanding, however, artificially separates thinking from language, and concurrently, ignores the role of language as a meaning-making tool. As Mercer (1995: 4) puts it, language is 'not just a means whereby individuals can formulate ideas and communicate them, it is also a means for people to think and learn together'. Moving on to criterion number 3, EMI in theory does not aim at English language development. But in actual practice, English proficiency is one of the main reasons why many participants enroll in these programmes and why many HEIs and national governments around the world choose to teach through English. In addition, although students enter universities with very different proficiency levels and/or varieties of English, they may reasonably expect to improve their English as they access complex disciplinary content though it. This need has triggered the rise of provision of pre-sessional and in-sessional EAP courses, and self-access support services along with the expansion of the roles that many ELT practitioners fill in such contexts. Finally, regarding criterion 4, while English is indeed an L2 for most EMI participants, at the same time, we should bear in mind that such L2 learners create new intercultural third spaces where their respective L1s, multilingual repertoires and translingual practices may be used to navigate complex conceptual knowledge and, at the same time, enable them to bond emotionally and interpersonally with their peers.

It is precisely because of the diversity, complexity, tensions and richness of current HEIs, reflected in the multiple languages, policies, ideologies and teaching and learning practices that come into play in these contexts, that we propose here the label 'English-medium education in multilingual university settings' or EMEMUS (Dafouz and Smit, 2020) in lieu of the more extended but restrictive EMI. EMEMUS, we argue, portrays more accurately and specifically the growing multilingual reality of current internationalised HEIs, the multifaceted and highly situated roles that English plays in relation to other national and local languages, and the importance of interpreting education as a social-cultural process. From this view, English is not necessarily an inhibitor but a *potential* enabler of multilingualism. Moreover, the term EMEMUS will allow HEIs to re-examine comprehensively the range of activities that respond locally to global phenomena, from policy issues to university practices, including not only teaching and learning processes whether onsite, online or hybrid (see Helm, this issue) but also teacher professional development initiatives (see van der Walt; Jones, McKeown and Littlewood this issue) and diverse research practices, as for instance, publishing. Ultimately, such a comprehensive, sociolinguistic and multilingual conceptualisation of EME can also enable us, as advocated in this special issue, to rethink the (new) roles that the ELT profession can develop in this growing educational setting. The next section will offer some examples of the affordances of EMEMUS for the ELT profession, without losing sight of the challenges as well, and will finish with a number of critical questions that undoubtedly require further scrutiny.

Affordances, challenges and questions for the future

If it is accepted that contemporary university classrooms are increasingly multilingual spaces which are rich in frequently untapped and unrecognised linguistic resources, then it is evident that ELT professionals can be seen as having much to offer and also much to gain from their involvement in such educational settings. Three key areas of teachers' professional knowledge are immediately apparent as relevant: (1) knowledge about language, (2) knowledge about (language) pedagogy and (3) knowledge about pedagogical materials. Beginning with the first of these, knowledge about language (not only in terms of syntax and structure but also, about actual language use in communication) means that ELT professionals are in a position to collaborate productively with content specialists in co-developing language-sensitive syllabuses that support disciplinary literacies in the construction of complex epistemic knowledge (see Ting; Richards and Pun, this volume). In addition, drawing on their knowledge of language learners and their understanding of discourse as social practice, ELT practitioners are ideally qualified to advise on the ways in which language(s) can be used in the classroom to facilitate teaching and learning. Such close collaboration, moreover, if well-planned, can help to overcome significant challenges such as the theorization of disciplinary literacies largely from the language perspective rather than from the much needed disciplinary one.

With regard to knowledge of pedagogy, ELT professionals are particularly well-equipped to share their pedagogical expertise with content lecturers who often do not receive this type of training and yet report finding it highly valuable (Deignan and Morton, this issue). Thus, knowledge of classroom discourse, the nature of teacher talk, patterns of communication, interactional competence, scaffolding, elicitation, and managing feedback in multilingual settings are key aspects of expertise which can be drawn on to enhance teaching and learning. In addition, from the perspective of teacher professional development, the growth of EME can also promote the creation and design of courses that explicitly address pedagogical content knowledge as essential for good learning and that view teaching and learning through English as a process that necessarily goes beyond a focus on English proficiency only, and that also includes students' multilingual repertoires. Furthermore, such a view can enable professionals working in this area to include activities and practices that promote and help to embed sociocultural understandings of learning.

Finally, concerning knowledge of pedagogical tools, ELT professionals bring a wealth of expertise with regard to materials in terms of their development, evaluation, supplementation and adaption. That pedagogical materials are cultural artefacts as well as curriculum artefacts is now well established in ELT (Gray, 2010), and with this in mind, it is clear that the ELT professionals can collaborate in the creation of appropriate materials – whether primary or supplementary – to scaffold the learning of disciplinary content. These can also be multilingual and multimodal – in fact, necessarily so. In this way, if translation and glosses in L1s are incorporated, the English-only bias can also be challenged as well as the linguistic hierarchies it often presupposes and has hitherto upheld.

By way of conclusion to this introduction, we address the issue of challenges by posing a number of critical questions that we believe require further consideration and to which there are no easy one-size-fits-all answers. Given the multilingual perspective we have adopted, one of the main questions that arises is how can ELT practitioners practically support content professionals working in EMEMUS in viewing their students' (and potentially their own) use of the L1s and their translingual practices as a valuable resource for teaching and learning rather than as an English language deficit? Likewise, how can content teachers deal productively with the diversity of multilingual repertoires that emerge in these classrooms, given their general lack of pedagogical and linguistic training? How can they counteract the linguistic hierarchies that consciously or unconsciously may appear, and in which they and some of their students, as well as their institutions may be ideologically invested? And, in this line, how do we build effective and enduring interdisciplinary collaboration between ELT and content professionals? How can we overcome uneven power relations often reported by ELT practitioners so language-sensitive pedagogical materials and practices can be developed and implemented? How can we approach key issues in education (and more particularly in EMEMUS) such as the role of language(s) in student assessment in a disciplinary-specific manner?

Thinking beyond the classroom setting, there are several questions that, we argue, need to be posed, related not only to the language requirements students need to meet during their time at university but also in their subsequent working lives. For instance, how does the multilingual and translanguaging stance advocated here align with the linguistic constraints within which institutions, countries (see van Der Walt, this issue) and their citizens have to operate? What are the language requirements graduates may face on seeking employment? What, we might ask, would a lingua franca English look like in professional settings, and how might it be developed? And how does this lingua franca align with the growing understanding that biliteracies and pluriliteracies are needed so that twenty-first century citizens and professionals can operate both locally and globally? Wallace (2002: 105), for instance, has made the case for the development of 'literate English' by which she means 'a supra-national global English which does not necessarily emanate in any direct way from the centre' as one option. More recently, Pennycook (2019: 176-177), has advocated a 'polycentric approach', which 'rather than seeking a model of English that assumes we can accommodate the diversity of English within a single framework, we need to turn our focus instead on how people manage to

communicate in contexts of diversity. This is not so much a model, therefore, but a form of principled polycentricism'. While finding ourselves in agreement which the thrust of Pennycook's argument, it could be argued that this does not enable us to address the all-important issue of writing in what has been described as an increasingly *scripturient* age – that is, one in which more and more people are compelled to express themselves through writing. What, we have to ask, are the implications of this for ELT and EMEMUS?

These questions are not solely for ourselves and our immediate disciplinary circles but questions that need to be put to institutional policy makers, and ultimately, to governments. In this respect, transposing the points made by García et al. (2021: 20) with regard to the case for translanguaging, we agree that research on its own 'will not lead to the kinds of social transformations that may be needed.' However, such research may hopefully create 'ripples that can contribute to broader salutary effects'. That at least can be regarded as an important starting point.

The articles that follow explore many of these questions range from the broadly theoretical to the implications for teacher education and research into the specifics of individual educational settings. Li Wei begins by arguing the case for translanguaging as necessarily entailing a political and decolonising stance with regard to the use of multiple languages in educational settings. Similarly, Sian Preece makes the case for a pedagogy which draws on students' multilingual resources, crucially focusing on HEIs in Anglophone settings which are not normally included within the remit of EMI. Teresa Ting also makes the case for student-centred translanguaging tasks within the context of the tertiary STEM subject area where Italian is the predominant L1. Tom Morton and Tim Deignan turn their attention to the important issue of appropriate training and professional development for EMI lecturers in Spain, while Christa van der Walt examines the language policies operating in South Africa and argues for a multilingual content and language integrated learning model to improve teacher education in this multilingual country. Jack Richards and Jack Pun focus on the Hong Kong setting and ways in which EMI teachers adapt their pedagogical practices to meet the challenges EMI presupposes, in addition to outlining a set of goals for professional development. Wayne Jones, Kara McKeown and Suzanne Littlewood address the challenges that lecturers and students face in the United Arab Emirates and report on the successful implementation of collaboratively-designed materials for an Art and Design course. Responding to the challenges presupposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Francesca Helm describes the way in which a face-to-face English language course in Italy moved online and the ways in which students' multilingual repertoires were drawn on in community building. Finally, Jim McKinley, Heath Rose and Sihan Zhou report on a research project investigating ELT support offered on EMI programmes at eight Chinese universities. Three types of unevenly distributed structural support are identified, in addition to grassroots efforts by individual content teachers to draw on students' multilingual repertoires. While, collectively these articles paint a very diverse picture of widely differing challenges and affordances for content teachers and ELT professionals, running throughout the articles is the shared recognition of students' multilingual repertoires as a valuable resource in learning and teaching in all these HEI settings.

Before closing this introduction, we would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to the editor and the peer reviewers for their support and helpful comments in the production of this special issue. We would also like to thank all our contributors for their thoughtful and thought-provoking articles. Without them this special issue would not have been possible.

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