

# English-medium Instruction through the lens of discipline and culture: Lecturers' beliefs and reported practices

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*In the last few decades, English-medium Instruction (EMI) has been the focus of a rapidly increasing body of research. While such research has tended to cover certain aspects of the phenomenon extensively, others still remain under-researched. For example, in focusing primarily on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines, EMI investigations have devoted limited attention to the potential relevance of disciplinary differences. Similarly, while EMI has been noted to differ from context to context, the practical implications of cultural differences in EMI implementations continue to be overlooked. The present study aims to shed some light on the role played by disciplinary and cultural specificities via an investigation of beliefs and reported practices of 13 Italian lecturers. The lecturers were selected to represent a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and individually interviewed about their experiences as teachers and scholars. The interviews were subsequently subjected to a thematic analysis. The results reinstate to an extent the influence of disciplinary culture; however, they also point to an important role played by the local culture in shaping both beliefs and practices. Additionally, the results also reveal a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges of EMI among these participants, stressing the need for more attention to cultural mediation in international higher education.*

**Keywords:** English-medium Instruction, internationalization, academic culture, disciplinary culture, higher education, Italy

## 1 Introduction

The diffusion of English-medium Instruction (EMI) in universities all over the world has marked a change in the composition of many learning environments, contributing to the need for a reevaluation of tertiary education students' and staff's needs. Characterized by a speedy increase, EMI implementation has been observed to “outpace empirical research” (Galloway et al., 2020, p.1), a situation that an increasing body of research has been seeking to remedy. In the last few years, efforts have been made to take stock of the overall progress made (e.g., Bowles & Murphy, 2020; Kuteeva, 2018; Macaro, 2018), and research has expanded its horizon to include the language policies that accompany EMI implementations (e.g., Soler et al., 2018), the professional identity of EMI lecturers

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(e.g., Ploettner, 2019) and the specifics of EMI teacher training and development (e.g., Sánchez-Pérez, 2020). In this article, I turn my attention to some lesser investigated aspects of EMI, namely the role of academic and disciplinary traditions in shaping lecturers' practices and beliefs about EMI.

Lecturers continue to be at the forefront in EMI research and are considered by some the "key participants or stakeholders in the EMI process" (Macaro, 2018, p. 71). Previous research has focused extensively on lecturers' perceptions around EMI (e.g., Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012; Broggin & Costa, 2017), often in an attempt to finalize a 'pro/against' categorization of attitudes that has so far largely remained unattainable (Macaro, 2018). Nonetheless, there are still aspects that have not been investigated in-depth. For example, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Belyaeva & Kuznetsova, 2018; Dafouz et al., 2018; Kuteeva & McGrath, 2014; Roothoof, 2019), EMI research has shown a tendency to focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) disciplines, often excluding other subjects entirely. Rather than out of deliberate exclusion, this likely stemmed from the idea that it is indeed in the science and technology domains that the "current dominance of English as an international language of academic publication" (Ferguson, 2007, p. 10) reaches its apex. Nonetheless, other studies (e.g., Dafouz & Smit 2020; Kuteeva & McGrath, 2014) seem to indicate a shift in this situation, or perhaps a need for a more detailed investigation that factors in disciplinary specificities within the macro-areas of Humanities and Social Sciences.

One aspect that remains particularly under-investigated in EMI research is the part played by the local culture, despite its clear relevance in education (e.g., Hyland, 1994). In the context of higher education (HE), the "complex of shared understandings" that constitute a culture (Stenhouse, 1967, p.17) is often broadly addressed as "academic culture" (e.g., Okamoto, 2016; Peterson & Spencer, 1991). Nonetheless, the view of one monolithic academic culture is inaccurate: global academia does share universally acknowledged values, such as academic freedom and autonomy (Sporn, 1996); however, it is also influenced by the cultural background of the specific environments, which is local and particular. This distinction is sometimes made in the literature via the use of "academic tradition" (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Hamilton, 2001) to stress the situatedness of certain practices and beliefs.

Similarly, if the local culture is understood to be constitutive of the different academic traditions, then we can conclude that its influence extends to the micro level of disciplinary culture. Disciplinary culture theory finds its pivot in the idea that different disciplines exhibit distinctive practices and approaches to knowledge construction (see Becher, 1989; Clark, 1987). However, while the study of a certain discipline will feature consistent epistemological characteristics across different academic traditions, it may also feature ideological and methodological specificities that connote its connection to the local culture and academia. This is reflected, in the literature across disciplines, by mentions of "approaches", "traditions" or "schools" (e.g., Faucci, 2005; Frese & Zapf, 1994; Gangneux et al., 2002). In the present paper, when referring to specific schools of thought within the broader set of a disciplinary culture, the term "disciplinary tradition" will be adopted, to minimize terminological heterogeneity.

Given the nature of EMI, at once multicultural but also contextually bound, consideration of cultural elements must be kept at the forefront, with regards to both academic and disciplinary tradition. Previous research has discussed

differences in disciplinary cultures: it was evidenced that soft disciplines (see Becher, 1989) appear to focus on “creativity of thinking and oral and written expression” (Neumann, 2001, p.138, drawing from Hativa, 1997) in comparison to the more mnemonic and methodology-oriented hard disciplines (Smart & Ethington; 1995); similarly, humanities are reported as more “language-sensitive” (Kuteeva & McGrath, 2014, p. 371), contrary to more numerically-based disciplines (e.g., Dearden & Macaro, 2016); humanities are also observed to make larger use of oral assessment (Warren Piper et al., 1996) and soft disciplines to be more prone to changes in teaching style in international environments (Sawir, 2011). However, differences pertaining to disciplinary traditions have not been investigated in equal detail and, thus, also their impact on multicultural education has been neglected.

The necessity to focus more on disciplinary differences (Airey et al., 2017) and the potential influence of disciplinary culture on lecturers’ beliefs has certainly been identified in EMI research (Roothoof, 2019). In combination with the calls for further research about soft disciplines (Becher, 1989), a clear research gap is delineated. The present paper aims to address this gap by combining the following two aspects: the inclusion of traditionally underrepresented disciplines (e.g., Law and Art) and the focus to the potential role played, beyond the different disciplinary cultures, by the specific disciplinary traditions in lecturers’ beliefs and practices. The study is set in Italy, a context that is not only one of the less explored EMI environments in Europe, but also where education research in general “seem[s] to remain largely invisible – at least in quantitative terms – on a European or international landscape” (Knaupp et al., 2014, p. 86). Previous education research has identified some of the distinctive features of the Italian academic milieu in its “tradition of literary, theoretical and philosophical thinking and debating” (Knaupp et al., 2014, p. 89), as well as in the high relevance placed on orality, particularly evident in examination settings (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Bowles, 2017; Degano & Zuaro, 2019). These specificities and their characteristic prominence in Italian HE make Italy a productive environment for the aims of the present study.

With the above in mind, the present article aims to answer three main research questions:

- What beliefs and reported practices are identifiable among EMI lecturers in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences?
- How do the local academic and disciplinary traditions manifest themselves in the lecturers’ practices and beliefs?
- How do the lecturers’ reported experiences problematise contemporary implementations of EMI?

As described in detail in Section 2, in order to address these research questions a sample of lecturers currently employed at three Italian universities were interviewed. The interviews were then analysed with a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to unveil patterns of meaning in the data collected.

### *1.1 Italian academia and EMI*

The tradition of Italian academia dates back to the University of Bologna, first in the Western world. This long-standing tradition has consolidated over time,

developing its own set of values and practices, directly intertwined with the local culture. However, while “on Italian university much has been said and quite frequently continues to be said<sup>2</sup>” (Paleari, 2015, p. IX), as mentioned, research on Italian pedagogy often remains confined to the national borders, partly because of publication practices (Knaupp et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, despite its many complexities, the Italian education system is considered one of the most influential institutions of the country, constituting an “acquis of very different norms, [...] rituals, experiences and ambitions, with direct and indirect effects on the daily lives of the citizens<sup>3</sup>” (Cellerino, 2012, p. 15). Despite its culture having deep roots, Italy has only relatively recently reached its formal unification, and is left with a history marked by internal divisions. As a result, education represents one of the strongest centripetal, or unifying, forces of the Italian society.

Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that Italian education presents unique features that hold a very secure position. Italian academia subscribes to the general values of academic culture; however, it is also characterized by a distinctive academic tradition that, across disciplines, holds philosophical thinking (Knaupp et al., 2014), orality (Anderson, 1999; Bowles, 2017; Degano & Zuaro, 2019) and language in general<sup>4</sup> in particularly high regard. In addition, within certain disciplinary cultures, Italian academia has consolidated specific disciplinary traditions, that can differ significantly from Anglo-American scholarship, for example in terms of “positioning within the [...] discipline, philosophical foundations and conceptual categories” (Maran & Leoni, 2019, p. 7).

The advent of multicultural education practices such as EMI has arguably made the need for taking into account cultural differences even more evident. Italy is a good example of how the introduction of exogenous pedagogical practices, without sufficient reflection on the implications, can provoke strain: the Milan litigation of 2012, during which the academic staff petitioned in court against the Milan Polytechnic’s decision of offering English-medium only education at MA and PhD level, is a frequently discussed example<sup>5</sup> (e.g., Pulcini & Campagna, 2015; Murphy & Zuaro, 2021). Overall, at Italian universities EMI courses have been on a slow increase in the last decade (Costa & Mariotti, 2020; see also Ackerley et al., 2017; Costa & Coleman, 2013). The legal framework in the country officially complicates the position of these courses, as the implementation of entire degree programmes in a foreign language was, in past legal proceedings, ruled incompatible with the Italian Constitution. Additionally, English proficiency can be considered uncommon in this country, which scores in the bottom ten in Europe in the EF English Proficiency Index (2019). Thus, in EMI, Italian students can be considered to have the same needs as other non-Anglophone foreign students (Costa & Mariotti, 2020), although often with lower starting proficiency (Clark, 2017). Furthermore, as mentioned, Italian HE is characterized by academic and disciplinary traditions sometimes distant from the Anglo-American model, which adds further complexity in the adaptation of courses from Italian to English.

Nevertheless, in the last few decades, internationalisation has become an explicit goal in HE, as well as an indicator of prestige for institutions (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011). Italian HE has made clear efforts to increase its participation in this global process, often via the implementation of EMI courses (e.g., Clark, 2018; Guarda & Helm, 2017). Despite the aforementioned complications,

perception studies have identified some positive responses to EMI implementations (e.g., Costa, 2018; Costa & Mariotti, 2017).

For the reasons elaborated, Italian HE seems an especially fertile ground for EMI research, particularly to gain deeper insight into the relationship between EMI and local academic environments. The present study breaches this subject by investigating the reported practices and beliefs of university lecturers, contextualizing them with their disciplinary background, as well as with the country's academic and disciplinary tradition.

## 2 Theory and method

As introduced in Section 1, in this paper I operate on the basis of a conceptual distinction between academic culture (understood as the practices and values shared by the scholarly community at large), academic tradition (or specifically connotated practices and beliefs of the local academic community), disciplinary culture (intended to encompass the paradigms of knowledge construction shared among scholars belonging to specific disciplinary "tribes", as called by Becher, 1989), and disciplinary tradition (or the locally codified practices that distinguish, within the scope of a disciplinary culture, specific communities of scholars). Through this distinction I posit that various tiers of cultural factors affect the beliefs and behaviours of members of the academic community, which cannot be recognized and understood in isolation from such factors. In Section 1, I have identified culture through Stenhouse's (1967) definition of a set of shared understandings; to break this notion down further, in the present paper I take culture to signify "all learned customs, beliefs, values, knowledge, artefacts and symbols that are constantly communicated among a set of people who share a common way of life" (Akindele & Trennepohl, 2008, p. 154).

Thus, a multi-layered understanding of culture is arguably critical in EMI, which represents a crossroad of various experiences and backgrounds. Expanding on the theoretical construct of "double knowing" (Singh & Shrestha 2008, p. 66), Earls (2016) conceptualized EMI as requiring a "triple knowing", to encompass home culture, host culture and English. This can represent a challenge not only for students, but also for lecturers, who hold the responsibility of "facilitating those forms of knowledge transfer deemed appropriate and desirable, and making students aware of the inappropriate forms of transfer in need of remediation to function effectively in their current academic environment" (Earls, 2016, p. 135). According to this conceptualization, the local context does play a relevant role. Given what I previously discussed regarding the interplay of culture and tradition, in the present paper the "local" is not limited to a single situation or institution, but rather it calls into play those beliefs and practices shared in Italian academia as a community, identifiable in the reported experiences of lecturers even across different backgrounds and different institutions.

In light of these considerations, in order to investigate in detail beliefs and practices of the professionals in this academic community, in the present study I adopted a qualitative methodology, known for its emphasis on saturation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participants were initially individuated via purposeful sampling, aiming for individuals with teaching experience in both L1 and EMI courses (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011); the sample reached its final composition

after subsequent rounds of variation and chain sampling, that granted its balance regarding experiences represented (Dörnyei, 2007). This procedure resulted in 13 participants, from the Humanities (HU), Social Sciences (SS) and Natural Sciences (NS), employed at three major Italian universities. A certain lack of uniformity in the literature regarding the categorization of disciplines is to be acknowledged (see Becher, 1989; Kuteeva & Airey, 2014; Neumann, 2001; Roothoof, 2019; Sawir, 2011). The study at hand divides them in NS, SS and HU, reflecting the positioning of each discipline at their respective institution.

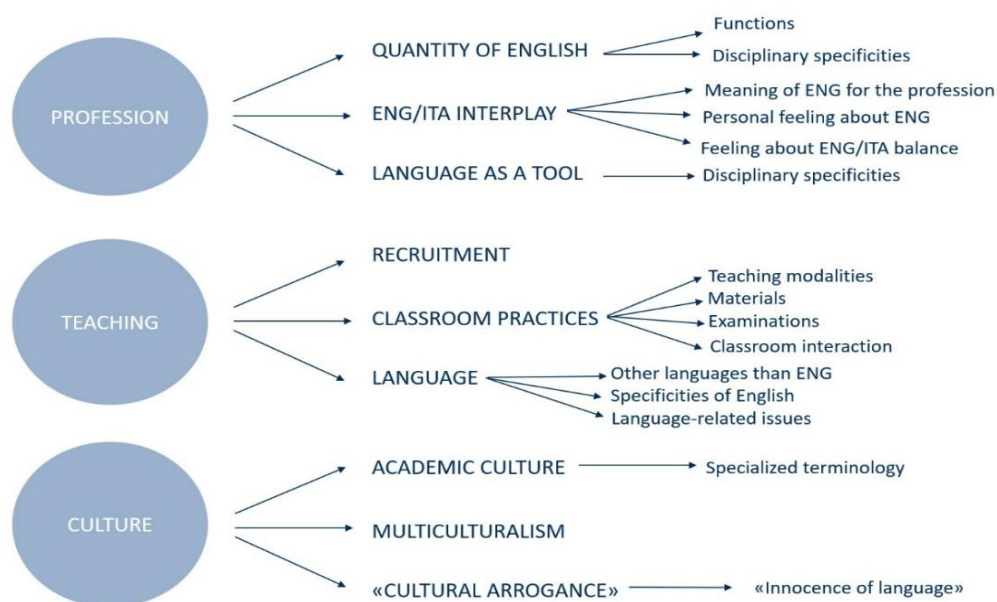
In reporting the participants' data (Table 1), priority is given to their subject, teaching experience and linguistic repertoire, which are considered of primary interest for this analysis. However, similarly to Kuteeva and McGrath (2014), in order to avoid any infringement of privacy, gender, age, and position at the various institutions are removed. This does not deny the potential relevance of that information in contextualizing the data; thus, a more general account is provided here: participants included 8 women and 5 men, from their late 20s to their late 50s, at different stages of the academic career, all but one in tenured positions.

**Table 1.** Participants' information. Languages (Ancient Greek, Arabic, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Latin, Portuguese) are given in order of self-reported proficiency; many Italian high schools require up to five years of Latin and Ancient Greek study, here placed in parentheses for those who mentioned them.

Lecturer Alias	Discipline	Years of Experience	Languages
NS_Biotech	Biotechnologies	30	IT, ENG, FR
NS_Pharmageno	Pharmacogenomics	30	IT, ENG, FR
NS_Viro	Virology	18+	IT, ENG, FR, DE (LAT, ANC_GR)
NS_Gastro	Gastroenterology	7	IT, ENG
NS_Stat	Applied Statistics	10	IT, ENG
SS_Inteco	International Economics	25	IT, FR, DE, PT
SS_Finance	Finance	24	IT, ENG
SS_Intmana	International Management	23	IT, ENG, FR
SS_Law	Law	20	IT, ENG (LAT)
HU_Cons	Conservation	22	IT, ENG
HU_Archist	Architecture History	11+	IT, ENG, DE, FR
HU_Arthist	Art History	7	IT, ENG, FR
HU_Archeo	Antique Archaeology	2	IT, ENG, FR, AR, GR (LAT, ANC_GR)

The participants were invited to join the study directly via email or in-person meeting and no prior personal connection existed between myself, as the sole conductor of the interviews, and the participants. All participants signed an informed consent document, accepting to participate in audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in person, taking place at the various institutions, generally in the participants' offices. The interview included questions regarding different aspects of the profession, while also leaving room for participants to guide the conversation to other areas that they reputed of interest. The aim of this methodology, well-established in qualitative

EMI research (e.g., Guarda & Helm, 2017; Kuteeva & McGrath, 2014), is to provide deep insights into the ideas, reasoning and practices of the interviewees. In light of the complexities highlighted in relation to L2 interviews (Welch & Piekkari, 2006; Zhang & Guttormsen, 2016), the participants were allowed to choose whether the interview be conducted in their L1 (Italian) or in English. While many initially stated to have no preference, eventually all interviewees opted for Italian. All excerpts from the dataset presented in English are my translation<sup>6</sup>. All interviews, averaging at around 40 minutes in length, were transcribed in their entirety and manually analysed. I conducted a thematic analysis on the dataset, following the guidelines prescribed in Braun and Clarke (2006): in particular, I adopted the six-step approach involving familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up. For the coding step of the analysis, I carried out the procedure via close reading and with the support of data analysis software Nvivo, which helped tracking nodes and, subsequently, themes. The coding of the dataset was guided by the research questions, resulting in the following analytical tree (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Analytical tree.

Information was grouped under three main categories that emerged from the thematic analysis: profession, teaching and culture. These main categories are intended as descriptors for the following: presence and significance of English for the profession of university lecturer as a whole; experience of involvement and teaching in EMI degree programmes; and relevance of culturally specific elements both in teaching and research. Similarly, all subcategories also emerged directly from the data, their nuance factored-in in the analysis. In the next section, I go through each of these categories, explaining their nuance and providing supporting excerpts from the dataset.

### 3 Results

This section offers an overview of the analysis' findings, following the logical progression represented in the analytical tree in Section 2 (Figure 1), starting

with profession and moving on to teaching and culture. Henceforth, text presented in quotation marks is to be considered as directly quoted from the dataset. Throughout the coming subsections, all excerpts from the interviews are attributed to the respective lecturer by means of the aliases introduced in Table 1. Similarly, disciplinary areas are addressed in their short form (NS, SS, HU), as explained in Section 2.

### 3.1 Profession

Asked to quantify their professional activity conducted in English, the lecturers reported great variety, with percentages of use spanning from 10 to 90. However, no clear relation was evidenced between quantity of English and discipline. Similarly, also the functions that, according to the participants, involved use of English (i.e., conferences and collaborations; publications; research<sup>7</sup>) did not reveal behavioural differences in relation to disciplinary background, with one exception: publication practices. All three disciplinary areas reported different habits here, with NS lecturers using only or mostly English, SS lecturers using mostly English or an equal amount of English and Italian, and HU lecturers using mostly Italian. These answers reinstate the idea that the use of English is linked to specific functions, which are closely related to the international dimension of the academic profession.

The lecturers framed the very presence of English in their profession as an opportunity, a necessity, or a challenge, with similar distribution. The SS group positioned firmly in the challenge category, while HU lecturers showed a slight propensity for considering it an opportunity. In terms of their personal feeling, the HU lecturers mostly reported excitement, while NS lecturers generally framed it as not being a problem for them. SS lecturers spread evenly between these two attitudes, while also reporting that using English cost them effort. Importantly, if the lack of either excitement or distress among NS lecturers appears to be in line with what EMI research has evidenced in the past (i.e., that in NS the use of English is simply considered part of the job; see e.g., Kuteeva & Airey, 2014), HU lecturers' excitement is not as well documented. As discussed in the introduction, those disciplines have long been considered the hub of EMI antagonism. However, these HU lecturers showed an overall very positive attitude towards the use of English, often more so than their colleagues. This painted a peculiar picture: many of the lecturers subscribed to a stereotypical view of disciplinary areas (according to which HU and certain SS would have little interest or possibility to use English); however, not only did HU and SS lecturers report being interested in using English, they also specifically connected this attitude to their discipline and academic environment, again, framing English as an opportunity, to encourage the sharing of knowledge.

(1) And then our discipline, conservation, is very auto referential. We believe to be the best in the world. However, being able to talk... And even if that were the case, that we are the best in the world - which might be true -, having contacts with others is even more important, to share what we know. Especially when we're good at something for once. (HU\_Cons)

(2) So, you ask me if this is true for my discipline more than others, I can tell you that I don't know. I mean, fundamentally I think not. [English] is necessary in all disciplines, you



need it for any... even for the most basic idea. If it was conceived, it ought to be communicated. Unless it's very dull. (SS\_Law)

Most of the participants described the L1/English balance at university as efficient. Half of them ascribed to it a potential for enrichment, but it was also pointed out that, while it would be incorrect to consider the situation balanced, at the moment it seems functional. That is because, while research and publishing can often happen in English, there is still a significant portion of teaching in Italian. Some lecturers did stress that it is important for Italian to maintain a position of relevance in Italian academia.

- (3) Well I wouldn't call it... it's not a question of balance. But I think the Faculty of Economics did the right thing. [...] I think it would be wrong to do like the Polytechnic [of Milan] and try to use only English [...] In Italy, in my opinion, one should also be able to speak Italian at university [...] I also think it's fair to leave students the option to [take courses] in English or Italian, and I think that an Italian professor should be able to speak English, yes, but also speak Italian and write in Italian. The problem is that we only write in English these days. So, if, I don't know, a young researcher writes in English but can't write in Italian, that is not great, in my opinion. (SS\_Finance)

The overwhelming majority of the lecturers also reported giving language a high degree of importance in their discipline (over half of them describing it as "fundamental"). One of the interviewees specifically spoke of a "methodology of language", a set of strategic operations that lecturers perform through language towards various aims. Indeed, the lecturers stressed the pedagogical potential of a specific and deliberate use of language as a way to captivate the student, set the appropriate register and even ascertain comprehension.

- (4) Based on how they use language I understand if they understood. So, to me language is... a test. If they can translate in intelligible language formulas and graphs, this makes me think that they... have a clear grasp of the concept. So, formulas and graphs are tools, tools to facilitate the learning process. However, it is then language that expresses it more clearly. (SS\_Inteco)
- (5) In my opinion very important, I, and perhaps many more, underestimate it. I don't possess the command of language, of the dialectic, that I'd like to. And I recognize this limitation. Over time I have evolved, I have grown [...] It happens to me to fail students who scored a 24 [out of 30] at the written part, because maybe they can pass the multiple-choice test, but they can't talk, for example. They can't express themselves. So, to me it is fundamental, they know that. (NS\_Viro)

Again, the lecturers motivated their stance on the basis of specificities of their own field, while, in fact, the analysis showed this perception being shared across all disciplinary areas.

### 3.2 Teaching

The lecturers reported getting involved in EMI programmes as a result of their reputation, connections or previous experiences abroad; some of them volunteered. On the other hand, one account also offered a picture of the pressure for faculty that EMI implementation can sometimes entail:

- (6) I was asked to create this course from nothing. The university really cared about our faculty also getting a course in the humanities entirely in English and so... I wasn't recruited, I was thrown, let us say, into the fray [...]. However, I have to say it was... more than a recruitment it was a Godfather style situation: they made me an offer I couldn't refuse. This kind of situation. And to that I... answered. Because in the end it's not like I had options. And no one bothered thinking, for example, to evaluate my knowledge of English. So. [...] I have to say, my debut into didactics in English was, I repeat, simply due to... I don't want to say an imposition, because one can always say no, but as a matter of fact, it was an external imposition. (HU\_Archist)

When asked about their teaching, many of the lecturers (predominantly SS/NS) reported a higher degree of interaction in EMI compared to their L1 classes. They also often reported having to change their pedagogic and assessment strategies in the shift from L1 to English. Nevertheless, there were elements that remained consistent: most lecturers still preferred an off-the-cuff delivery and kept the oral component in their examinations.

Half of the lecturers, from various disciplines, also mentioned disliking slides: they were considered limiting and perceived to impoverish and speed up excessively content vehiculation. Furthermore, there was a concern that slides may be too distracting for students, and that they may be used as a replacement for the course literature. As mentioned, this dislike for slides was manifested across disciplinary areas.

- (7) When you make slides, the students are tempted to study on them, so they don't consider the book. However, the book offers a wider-range vision on a topic, allows for several examples, it's got higher composition quality, and reading that instead of a couple of lines helps achieving a better understanding of the concept. This is the first reason. The second reason is that slides... when you use slides you go faster, you run. And this is not a good thing, because when things are taught with too much speed, they are not assimilated. Whereas, with chalk and blackboard, while I write I'm thinking of what I'm writing. [...] Even the students, when they write they are not passive. They are not passive auditors to something [...] I know that many of my colleagues use [slides], however I don't consider them an appropriate tool, neither in Italian nor in English. In English it can help. Especially the teacher. However, in my opinion, it is counterproductive for the students. (NS\_Stat)

Regarding course literature, most lecturers were able to assign a volume (or articles); however, lecturers from HU and NS reported specifically having to adapt or pick special material. Examples were extra support material created by the lecturer, books in Italian being translated into English, and efforts to involve the students in the selection of the course materials.

- (8) No, because we don't have [a book]. So, I... they have to do an exercise on a topic and I picked a theme that has two important books in English. So... obviously it's incomplete. [...] If they pick Italian topics, all the archival documentation and the publications are in Italian, so they can't read them. So, this year I picked [...] very archaeological themes that have a bit of bibliography in English. But otherwise, there's not a lot. And there's nothing in the archive, there are no documents. It's important they learn to search in the archives. So, let's say that this course is a bit different for them, compared to the Italian version, because obviously some things are not accessible to them because of the linguistic barrier. (HU\_Cons)

This last quote can perhaps exemplify an important element that appeared in several statements: taking a course in English is not the same as taking it in

Italian with regard to both content and methodologies. This belief will be discussed more in the next section.

On the use of language in class, while the lecturers were firm in reporting that all teaching was done in English, they also mentioned some use of other languages for expressions/quotes, names/toponyms/technicisms, or for brief interactions, for example, when someone forgot a word. These multilingual tendencies were more common for HU disciplines. The great majority of lecturers also evidenced some of the linguistic challenges that are well documented in EMI literature, such as communication not being as efficient, difficulties in the intelligibility of certain accents and challenges in the language switch (for a comprehensive approach on this see Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2020).

Finally, the participants mentioned that some features of their language use in the EMI class were due to specificities of English. They saw English as inherently “dry”; a quick, schematic language which was perceived to reduce the possibilities for parenthetical elements and tangents, which was presented as desirable. However, it was also stressed that this same dryness of the language results into less nuances, which can lead to loss of meaning. The lecturers also stated that the inferior command of the L2 compels a simpler expression of ideas which, once again, can contribute to a situation of loss of meaning. This feeling was shared across disciplinary areas.

- (9) As we know, English is more... concise, yes. On the one hand, for scientific subjects, this can help, from a certain perspective. From a certain perspective, some things are a bit simplified compared to the nuances of Italian. (NS\_Pharmageno)

### 3.3 Culture

The idea of culture represented the common backdrop to several of the lecturers' reflections regarding values and practices. Analysing the lecturers' answers, it was possible to identify three main thematic categories: academic culture, “cultural arrogance” and multiculturalism.

Half of the participants noted that their discipline finds its paradigm in a primarily non-Anglophone academic tradition, which is difficult to reconcile with EMI on multiple levels (e.g., methodologies, technical language and formamentis). In some cases, this mismatch can extend to the entire idea behind a course, starting from its very name:

- (10) - Keep in mind that with the word *Restauro*, which we use, we have to use its translation: *Restoration*. But that has a different meaning. Slightly different, but different, a difference that is important to us. So, we don't really have a word for what we mean, and we use *Conservation* instead. Which, however, isn't *Restauro*. Therefore, in the beginning this creates a block. You can't teach *Restauro* in English, because you don't have the words. Eventually, being in class, we can explain this difference and the students get a chance to understand.
- And then they use the English term, even once the difference has been explained?
- Yes, there is an official name, which I don't even remember. *Conservation*... which is not exactly what *Restauro* means, it's a bit different, but... we have to work on it, because we don't have words that can be easily translated. (HU\_Cons)

In this case, it is evident that the problem, while certainly finding a linguistic expression, transcends language, connecting with the disciplinary tradition. This

calls into question the idea that every language is equally suited for the teaching of every discipline, at least for its most technical aspects. And, once again, this does not appear to be due to an intrinsic quality of the language, but rather to the history of the discipline, which found its primary expression and development in a different cultural context. While this aspect was more evident in HU, it appeared to be experienced across disciplines. In some cases, this gave rise to the conclusion that there are pedagogical reasons for including certain languages in the learning of specific disciplines:

- (11) The technical language in Italian has its own linguistic form, which is the result of centuries of study that in our case, in my case, dates back to Vasari, the 500s (or even earlier), got through the 700s, transformed, and made it to our time. [...] And historical artistic studies about Italian art have an intrinsic international dimension. So even non-Italian scholars, almost all of them know Italian, because they have to draw information from our bibliography in Italian and from the sources and ancient documents. (HU\_Artist)

It is worth noting that, for some of these lecturers, changing language inevitably changed the *forma mentis*.

- (12) I mean, this is how I see it, right? A way to see a different world. A language is also a way to see a world. In my opinion. [...] A language is a reflection, when we write we are first a reflection of ourselves. And so it's a bit like creating a double. Like, maybe it's a bit of an exaggeration, but like a sort of parallel life. The brain works in a very different way in the two languages, in my opinion. (SS\_Intmana)

Regardless, the participants confirmed that the great majority of the technical terminology in their EMI courses was taught in English, sometimes, as shown, even at the cost of accuracy.

On the role played by culture, the lecturers also discussed a condition of “cultural arrogance” in the profession favouring the Anglo-American culture. This manifested in the need for lecturers to obtain language certifications (which are considered mostly profitable for the institutions that issue them, but an unnecessary burden for professionals with proven experience in studying or teaching in English); the lack of consideration in institutional contexts (and particularly by English native speakers) for the additional effort required to international scholars to convey their ideas in a foreign language; the double-standard in research publication that can deem studies conducted in non-Anglophone countries, or with approaches non-conforming to the Anglo-American tradition, “peripheral”. It is relevant to point out that this feeling was much more present among SS/NS participants, possibly because of the more advanced Englishisation of their academic environments.

Additionally, most lecturers, across disciplines, showed not to believe in an “innocence of language” (again, as quoted directly from one of the interviews). In their view, language could not be considered simply any tool; instead, it must be deliberately refined and “perfect” (in line with what the lecturers’ comments on the crucial role of language in their profession); in addition, this also meant that linguistic choices have high relevance and carry meaning that goes beyond the literal. Interestingly, this did not prevent some of the participants from still framing English as a “neutral” language, and as such divested of that loaded meaning that they attributed to other languages.

Half the lecturers spontaneously placed the great value of EMI in its multicultural nature. They also pointed out, however, unaddressed complexities

related to multiculturalism. Some of these complexities related to practical and organizational aspects (e.g., students facing language barriers when looking for internships and collaborations with local agents; difficulties with practices of the local academic tradition); others were more conceptual and broadly pedagogical in nature (e.g., previous education impacting the ability of students to approach the content of the course; different value-systems interfacing; the fact that a lecture designed for a culturally homogenous audience will not work for an heterogenous one).

- (13) I mean, I had to make a big transition from when I taught in Italian to English, but this was not due to the language, as much as to the people I had before me. Meaning that there was this heterogeneity, while before they were all Italians that had done our BA, or other BAs, but still in the Italian system. Both in terms of school, university, but also in terms of competence, study method. As a matter of fact, the organization of the class, of the course, was of a certain type and when I transposed it into English, it didn't work. (NS\_Biotech)
- (14) No, it isn't very much a language problem. It's a problem of the approach that we have here in Italy compared to other Universities. In general, the Italian University is based on reasoning, on doubt... and I have noticed that with foreign students, for example the Germans, in the beginning this can create a bit of disconcert. [...] Another thing that is very weird to foreigners is the oral exam. To them the oral exam is something... they get nervous. Weirdly, they have the ability to intervene in the class, but then, at the oral exam, it's terrible. They have a very bad time. (SS\_Finance)
- (15) Well the difference is cultural, it's at the basis. Not linguistic, because obviously there are things that we, among Italians, take for granted - that a monument should be preserved - that are not the same everywhere. Some [students] tell me - I show them a wooden beam with a ruined part, we can remove that part and create a prosthetic in epoxy metal, put some uranium bars on one side, so that in the end everything regains density and I can put it back. Rightfully, I don't know, the Indians raise their hand and say: "Professor, but wouldn't it be much better to just change it?" And I tell them of course, certainly, from a certain point of view. And that is exactly the problem. But this is very exciting for them, for me... But it is a big difference, an Italian would never say that, it would never cross their mind. (HU\_Cons)

As can be seen read in the excerpts, the lecturers, across disciplines, frequently reported that these challenges were not dependent on language, but rather on cultural elements.

When faced with lost-in-translation situations, the lecturers reported changing their behaviour, attempting to bridge the cultural gaps. However, none of them mentioned receiving any guideline or assistance regarding this matter, that appears to be going unnoticed in current EMI implementations.

- (16) This obviously creates a distance, because I get less of a feeling from them. I understand them less, I'm less empathetic, I recognize that. But that is because I don't have the means to understand what they are thinking, how they are feeling. [...] I repeat, because the Italian students have a certain body language, they're not shy about this. While the others, because they are a bit more inscrutable - at least for me, I repeat, it is my limitation - I find it harder to adjust. To reset. Where are you? Because sometimes I ask them explicitly and they don't reply. Even asking directly, they don't reply. So it's... I found it harder as a teacher to get through, to make certain concepts that they need to understand understood. (SS\_Intmana)

## 4 Discussion and conclusions

The present study investigated a set of Italian lecturers' beliefs and reported practices in relation to culture and tradition. The analysis unveiled some systematic differences among disciplinary areas. For example, SS/NS classes reportedly tended to be more interactive in English than in Italian. Additionally, the professional use of English (particularly for publication purposes) was very common among NS and not very common among HU. This finding concords with the reports from previous research (e.g., Ferguson, 2007). Crucially, however, this behaviour did not appear to be linked to hostility towards English (cf. Kuteeva & McGrath, 2014). While the NS group reported considering English as a necessary tool for the profession, expressing neither positive nor negative attitudes about it, it was the lecturers from HU that showed excitement for the possibilities that English offered. Aside from these differences, the lecturers reported remarkable similarities in both beliefs and practices, suggesting the influence of other relevant elements than disciplinary background. Importantly, the lecturers did not show an awareness of such similarities, subscribing to stereotypical views of the disciplines instead. Similarly, the typical challenges of working through the medium of a L2 were reported by various lecturers, regardless of disciplinary background.

The notion that changing the language of instruction entails other methodological changes has been previously discussed (e.g., Belyaeva & Kuznetsova, 2018; Guarda & Helm, 2017; Roothoof, 2019). Nonetheless, contrary to what has been found in other studies (e.g., Sawir, 2011), in the present dataset the various disciplines appeared to be similarly affected. This, again, suggests that focusing on disciplinary culture without considering the specific academic tradition risks returning an incomplete picture. Despite the changes that the EMI class necessarily entails, some of the pivotal beliefs of the Italian tradition were not especially affected; namely, the desire for elaborated language, the propension for oral examinations, the understanding of verbal production as a means to conquer ideas still appeared to be at the centre of these lecturers' practice. This is true even for those SS/NS disciplines that, in other contexts, have not been seen as placing particular value upon these practices (see Dearden & Macaro, 2016; Hativa, 1997; Smart & Ethington, 1995).

These lecturers questioned some of the practices of the 'global' academia, focusing specifically on cultural aspects, rather than purely linguistic ones (such as language endangerment or domain loss). The idea of "cultural arrogance" was generally connected to the disadvantageous position of scholars who are not native speakers of English and whose research does not deal with Anglo-American contexts or methodologies; even when language challenges were discussed, the problem did not appear to be the level of proficiency itself, as much as the lack of consideration for the extra effort required of non-native speakers of English in academic environments.

However, the lecturers' dissatisfaction did not target the international dimension of academia indiscriminately: the multicultural nature of EMI, for example, was explicitly reported as the most valuable aspect of this phenomenon. In the context of education, the lecturers did not frame their challenges in terms of "cultural arrogance", but rather in terms of lost-in-translation situations. From a specifically linguistic perspective, what seemed contested here was the lack of integration between the newly introduced

communication tool (namely English) and the other relevant linguistic resources. This was, once again, generally not presented in a perspective of language protectionism, nor with an attitude of wishful multilingualism (Kuteeva, 2020). The lecturers reportedly made a modest use of other linguistic resources than English, and only seemed to consider it a problem when English did not appear to be efficient for the communication. This was often the case with those disciplines (mostly HU) that, having developed in a tradition other than the Anglo-American one, reportedly lacked the appropriate means of expression in English. In addition to terminology, another limitation born out of the exclusive use of English was found in access to sources: while the lecturers were usually able to find or make alternatives, in some cases (in no correlation with disciplinary area) drastic changes to the design of the course had to be operated. Thus, the impossibility of accessing certain resources did not only shape the information that the students received, but also the competences that they acquired and, ultimately, the aims of the course. More research could focus on such differences, in the future, to establish up to what point EMI courses and their L1 equivalent are indeed comparable, particularly within specific disciplines.

Nevertheless, the occurrence of lost-in-translation situations was not only strictly dependent on language. Cultural differences also played an important role. What emerges from the lecturers' reported experiences is a conspicuous lack of assistance in developing Earls' (2016) triple knowing, for lecturers and students alike. Lecturers routinely experienced the impact of cultural differences in their teaching and attempted bridging the gap, reporting little success. These lecturers appear thus to be shouldering at once the load of the necessary cultural mediation, as well as the (self-imposed) blame for those situations that could not easily be solved.

In conclusion, the present analysis focused on the role of culture and disciplinary background in lecturers' beliefs and practices. Confirming, to an extent, the relevance of disciplinary cultures, the study also signals that academic and disciplinary traditions may in some cases overrule what is generally understood about a disciplinary culture. Thus, projected through the prism of disciplinary culture and tradition, the triple knowing already identified by Earls (2006) actually appears to disperse into an even broader variety of skills necessary to navigate EMI successfully. Therefore, the study argues for the need for academic and disciplinary traditions to be included in the conversation around EMI. Additionally, the study identifies a clear need for attention and support to the process of cultural mediation that a multicultural type of education such as EMI requires.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sponsor institution for the research here presented. At the time of publishing, the author is affiliated with the University of Roma Tre.

<sup>2</sup> My translation.

<sup>3</sup> My translation.

<sup>4</sup> Possibly because mastery of the language is considered evidence of great culture. For a critical perspective on this, see Beszterda, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> The dispute ended with the legal authorities invalidating the Polytechnic's decision in 2018.

<sup>6</sup> The analysis was conducted on the Italian version of the interviews; however, the original excerpts are here omitted due to space constraints.

<sup>7</sup> Other than teaching, which was a necessary requirement for these participants.

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