



Title of Project:

English-medium Instruction in French Higher Education:
Competing Ideologies, Policies and Practices

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

I am particularly interested in the history of language policy in France and the relationship between French language, politics, and identity. I was especially intrigued when it was announced in Parliament that a bill (i.e., Article 2 of the Fioraso law) was being passed to facilitate English medium instruction (EMI) in French universities as the decision to depart from the traditional French-only model signaled a major shift in the history of language policy in France. The field of EMI is in itself an important area of research. Over the past decade there has been an exponential rise in the number of courses being delivered in English across Europe, making EMI a particularly significant area of research in European higher education. Few studies, however, have examined EMI in France because it is a comparatively recent phenomenon.

My study contributes to the field of language policy and planning (LPP) and more specifically to the research on EMI by filling in a gap in the literature in terms of the methodological approach and the particular research context. My study contributes to the on-going exploration of EMI. This research is timely because the introduction of courses in English in French universities is a comparatively recent phenomenon. By investigating an under-researched context, my study fills in a gap in the literature on EMI. The French outlook on EMI adds to the different facets of the “Englishization” of higher education in Europe. The spread of EMI has mostly been explored in contexts where the use of English is widespread and the national language is not widely taught elsewhere as a modern language. By exploring EMI in a country where the national language enjoys strong vitality and international status, my study provides an original contribution to the field. Furthermore, France’s unique language policy history makes it a particularly intriguing case to study.

Most scholars discussing language policy in France have focused solely on official written legal documents. By showing how policy actors, at all levels, engage with and make sense of language policy, my research provides a more comprehensive picture of French language policy and challenges popular linguistic accounts of how the French supposedly protect their language at all costs.



Finally, by applying an LPP framework to the study of EMI, my study offers a different way of exploring and understanding the spread of EMI. The “ethnography of language policy” is particularly useful in illustrating how EMI is enacted in different ways across various policy contexts. Unlike other studies which usually focus on one policy layer (e.g., the classroom), the multi-sited approach to EMI reveals how it takes on significantly different meanings in diverse locations. By taking a more holistic approach, I have addressed other facets of EMI (the ideological, the political, and the discursive), thus, broadening the scope of our understanding of EMI.

Research Questions

The overall aim of my research was to examine the trajectory of Article 2 and how it has been understood in different policy contexts. In other words, my study explores how policy texts and related discourses move through national, institutional and local levels. By the time a policy reaches the classroom, the language practices can be very different from those intended at the start, creating a gap between policy and practice. By bringing together a macro-level analysis of language policy and a micro-level investigation, which takes into account people’s perceptions, experiences and practices, I provide a holistic understanding of the relationship between policy documents, institutional interpretations, and classroom practices.

My research questions were thus organized to capture how policies move through different policy layers. Research Question 1 deals with “official” language policy texts, Question 2 with local policy actors’ beliefs about EMI, and Question 3 explores what goes on in the EMI classroom:

1. How is Article 2 discursively (co-)constructed, and what discourses does it draw on?
2. How do local policy actors understand and interpret EMI?
3. How do the local policy actors enact EMI?

Research Methodology

My research is about EMI in France and more specifically about Article 2 of the Fioraso Law which was introduced in July 2013, which made it easier for French universities to deliver courses in English. Using Article 2 as the starting point for the research, the overall aim of the thesis was to examine the policy trajectory of Article 2 and how it has been recontextualised within a specific institutional setting. Ultimately, the goal was to understand how Article 2 (and by extension EMI) has been interpreted and enacted “on the ground.” My aim was to provide a holistic picture of Article 2, from its conception in Parliament to its enactment in the classroom.

The thesis comprises three main data sets: official language policy documents (parliamentary debates and four versions of Article 2), interviews (with 8 EMI teachers and 2 university administrators) and EMI classroom observation (14 hours).

Summary of Findings

Whereas EMI has become naturalized and taken for granted in the university context, it is still largely contested and highly contentious at the national level. On the one hand, the use of English is considered to be part of everyday discourse in the university environment. Conversely, in the political



domain EMI is part of an ideological struggle. The reason why EMI is such a sensitive topic at the national level is that it symbolizes much more than just courses in English. The instrumentalization of EMI for political purposes shows how EMI does not have much to do with university education. The fact that EMI is accepted in the university and is highly contentious in the political domain reveals how EMI takes on different meanings across different policy contexts. Even though discursive relationships across policy layers may exist, this does not necessarily mean that policy layers interact or connect as such. These findings are significant because they reveal how consent and contestation take place, that is how a language policy can be accepted in one place and contested in another.

Although the parliamentary debates revealed significant resistance to EMI, I found that the majority of MPs were in favor of adopting EMI albeit in a moderate and controlled way. I found that the final bill was considerably different from the initial draft. While the first version more or less allowed EMI without restriction, the last one tightly controlled EMI. The transformation of the policy text however, suggests greater resistance than was actually the case. The most vehement critics of EMI are in fact a vocal minority but have considerable influence on the process of policy text production. I concluded that there is a discrepancy between the policy document and the parliamentary debates.

At the university level I found that although knowledge of English is seen as an integral part of their work as academics, they believe it is not their job to teach it. I found that teachers are primarily concerned about content knowledge and scientific expertise rather than English proficiency. Overall, teachers do not see EMI as a problem, since language, for them, is secondary. They openly concede that they have linguistic difficulties yet minimize them by arguing that the focus is on science not language. In their view, it is sufficient to master “scientific English” in order to be able to teach science. Finally, I noted that participants have a monolingual and monolithic interpretation of EMI which leaves little space for other languages.

My classroom observation data revealed how teachers overwhelmingly used English during the entire lesson (in formal and informal situations). English was not only used for delivering the lesson, it was also used for asking/replying to questions, for telling anecdotes and for making side-comments. French was very occasionally used by teachers during the lesson but mostly for off-topic related comments or for lexical insertions (when they were missing a vocabulary word in English) and also in more informal discussions with students and outside the “official” EMI classroom (for example during classroom breaks). Overall, I found that EMI works as long as the teachers are able to manage and limit classroom participation. However, as soon as teachers open up the front stage to students, more difficulties arise.

Implications

My thesis has practical implications in that my research can inform university language policies. As my research findings show, EMI has not been given thought and consideration. There is no university language policy, as such, and no guidelines. Decisions relating to language are subsumed in the UJF’s internationalization policy documents or are made on an *ad hoc* individual basis. Teachers are expected to produce the exact same courses in French and in English. This is neither realistic nor possible. By exposing the different possible EMI configurations and the various current practices, my research highlights the implications of changing the medium of instruction. While this study does not offer a one-size-fits-all EMI framework it nevertheless encourages policy actors to problematize EMI and not view language matters as secondary. As for EMI teachers, this research encourages them to reflect on their



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own practices and acknowledge the fact there are differences when classes are taught in a second language.



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