EMI in Turkish Universities: Collaborative Planning and Student Voices

Julie Dearden Principal Researcher
Mustafa Akincioglu Research Assistant
EMI Centre, Oxford University Department of Education
The authors

**Julie Dearden**

Julie Dearden is the Senior Research and Development Fellow in English Medium Instruction (EMI) at EMI Oxford, Oxford University Department of Education and was the Principal Researcher for the projects described in this report.

**Mustafa Akincioglu**

Mustafa Akincioglu was the research assistant for the EMI in Turkey projects in this report. Mustafa also teaches on the EMI courses for teachers at EMI Oxford.

**Ernesto Macaro**

The research team was directed by Professor Ernesto Macaro, Director of Oxford University Department of Education.

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Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI) is a growing global phenomenon. In universities around the world ‘internationalisation’ is a current buzzword and teaching academic subjects through the medium of English is seen as the means by which internationalisation can be achieved.

By teaching through the medium of English, universities open their doors to students and academics from around the world. They attract students from other countries and provide their home students with opportunities to study abroad. The motivation to become an international or global university arises from: a desire to compete on a global education stage and attract the best academic minds; the desire to publish in English-speaking journals; to rise in the university rankings and, more practically but vitally, the need to attract students from abroad to ensure the future financial survival of the university.

In Turkey, Turkish is the language of instruction in state schools, although EMI was used during the first year at the elite state Anatolian High Schools, until they lost their special status in 2005. Approximately 110 out of 178 Higher Education institutions in Turkey teach through EMI to some extent in some or all departments. EMI is generally prevalent in the newly-established private universities in Istanbul and Ankara and the elite state universities.

In many universities students are required to undertake a Preparatory Year English language Programme (PYP). It is only after successfully passing the PYP end-of-year test that students are permitted to commence their chosen field of study. Tests are often written in-house by individual universities with little standardisation. The transition from the PYP to studying through EMI has very important implications for both teachers and students and therefore research into how both groups are coping is vital.

This report presents the initial findings of two research projects which focussed on English Medium Instruction at tertiary level in Turkey from the perspectives of both the students and the PYP and EMI teachers. In this report we adopt the definition of EMI as:

“The use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English.”

(Dearden, 2015)

The research was innovative in the sense that it was the direct result of discussions with PYP teachers and EMI content teachers from Turkey during a summer school held in Oxford in August 2014. The two projects were inspired by the fact that there seems to be little research so far into exploring how the students’ transition from PYP to EMI may be supported by both PYP and EMI teachers, and also into understanding what motivates students to study at EMI universities in Turkey.

Data for the two projects was collected from teachers and students between December 2014 and August 2015. Participants in the two projects came from different areas of Turkey, as highlighted in the map below (figure 1).

References:
Project 1:  
A Collaborative Planning Project

Methodology

The Collaborative Planning project explored how collaboration in lecture planning evolves between a PYP teacher and an EMI teacher and whether or not there is mutual benefit to teachers from these collaborations.

We investigated whether an intervention, in this case asking the teachers to participate in collaborative planning, might bring about a change in the views and practices of EMI teachers at universities in Turkey.

In August 2014, OUP funded a teacher education summer school at EMI Oxford. A group of 17 PYP English teachers and EMI content lecturers attended. The aim was to share experiences of teaching EMI, learn teaching skills for the EMI setting and explore ideas for future research. During the summer school it became clear that the PYP teachers and the EMI lecturers, with the exception of one pair of teachers, did not know each other – let alone support each other – even though they worked for the same universities. Reasons for this include the fact that they worked in different departments and buildings, that there simply was not a tradition of university teachers collaborating across the curriculum, time pressures and the different statuses held by different types of teacher. This separation of PYP and EMI teachers led us to question whether there would be any advantage of the two sets of teachers collaborating.

Nine PYP-EMI pairs from four different universities took part in project 1.

Collaborative Planning Tool (CPT)

The nine collaborating PYP-EMI pairs each planned a series of eight first-year EMI lectures together. The main focus for the planning sessions was on the lexical content and level of all the written and spoken texts to be used before, during and after each lecture. In order to provide a framework through which the pairs could develop their discussion, we devised a Collaborative Planning Tool (CPT) in both electronic and paper versions that included prompts and questions to help the pairs reflect on the language content of the lecture.

The sequence we proposed for a collaborative planning session was:

1. PYP-EMI pair agree on a working calendar.
2. EMI teacher sends the materials to be used in the lecture to the PYP teacher.
3. PYP teacher determines the key lexical and language points.
4. During the collaborative planning sessions PYP teacher identifies language points which may cause students difficulties and starts a discussion and awareness raising procedure with EMI teacher.
5. EMI teacher amends the language content of the lecture (if need be).
6. EMI teacher delivers the planned lecture.
7. Students fill in a questionnaire asking how much of the lecture they have understood.
8. In the subsequent planning session EMI teacher provides PYP teacher with feedback on the delivered lecture.

The PYP teachers audio recorded each collaborative planning session and kept a record of collaborative planning materials to be analysed. The EMI teachers were interviewed before and after the collaborative planning sessions. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed.
Findings

Our findings are the result of analysing the pre- and post-intervention interviews we held with the EMI teachers. The main findings are:

1. The Collaborative Planning Tool (CPT) was useful

The interviewees were asked for their impression of the use of the CPT during the collaborative planning sessions. Eight of the nine pairs of PYP-EMI teachers were very satisfied, for example commenting:

- “We used the planning tool. We are very happy to participate in this project”.
- “It has been very helpful for me and I hope for the students”.

Eight pairs found the CPT useful in terms of giving a structure to their collaborative planning. Some pairs commented that after the first couple of planning sessions they no longer needed to follow the CPT closely as they had already become familiar with the order of the prompts. This suggests that the CPT or something similar might be useful for teachers and lecturers as a formal way of planning both subject content and language used during the first lectures of a year or term. After that, teachers might internalise the ideas of the planning tool and be able to consider the language they use without having to formally consult the document every time they prepare a lecture.

2. Students had academic skills but lacked the English language skills needed to study through EMI

In terms of academic skills, most of the participant EMI teachers agreed that the students were by and large ready for their academic subject studies at undergraduate level. Only one of the EMI teachers believed that the academic readiness of students had decreased noticeably during the last decade.

There was a sense that students coming from private or specialised government Anatolian High Schools were better prepared than students from state schools. They had a better knowledge of subject-specific terminology as they had already studied some of the core subjects through English.

However, all of the participating EMI teachers believed that, although the students had completed the PYP and passed the language tests, most students’ language skills were not at a satisfactory level to start their academic studies through English. One teacher’s comment was:

- “This is my biggest concern, not all of them [students] but some of them, they cannot even ask proper questions.”

The area of deficiency most frequently cited was a lack of discipline-specific English. As one of the participant EMI teachers observed:

- “I think they [PYP teachers] prepare [students] just for regular English lectures not for scientific lectures”.

The one pair of teachers who were disappointed with the CPT appeared to highlight the gap between PYP and EMI teaching. For example the EMI teacher felt that the PYP teacher should have taught the students “all the words” they would need for their first year in EMI. This raises a very good point: where should subject-specific vocabulary be learnt - in the PYP or in the EMI class? This teacher was unaware that students might face language problems and was frustrated that the PYP teacher did not know about Chemical Engineering:

- “First of all we don’t have any language problems. And she [the PYP teacher] doesn’t know the subject so she doesn’t have anything to explain in the subject. This is the point. She doesn’t have any idea about the real subject”.

The ‘real’ subject here was Chemical Engineering, not English.

These comments raise the question of whether it is reasonable or even possible to expect an English teacher to be a specialist in the subject-specific vocabulary of a particular discipline and, if so, to what level might one expect that specialism to reach and how would this come about? Moreover, some might argue that if one expects the PYP teacher to learn about a subject, should one not also expect the EMI teacher to increase their awareness of the technical aspects of language.

Even after the intervention when we asked whether participants had gained a better understanding of what the PYP did in terms of language preparation, most once again cited the lack of teaching of subject-specific academic vocabulary. One teacher said that to their knowledge, the students were taught English in the PYP through EFL-type communicative topics which did not help them to gain enough subject-specific academic language to cope with the language demands of the subject departments.
In the pre-intervention interviews there was no mention of any systematic thinking about the language content of the lectures among EMI teachers. Lecturers did not think about the English that they were going to use either as spoken language to present their lectures or as written language for slides or lecture notes. They had not given any thought to matching their own English language input during the lecture with the students’ English language levels and ability to understand. This may help to partly explain why students struggled to understand their lectures. The students’ level of English is of course important, but so is the lecturer’s ability to present information at a comprehensible level.

Before the intervention the teachers did not distinguish between a student not understanding the concept being conveyed in the lecture and having difficulty with the English language used to convey that concept. We found that through collaborative planning teachers gained a deeper understanding of the language issues that their students faced. For an EMI student there are added complications: words may have different meanings in general English from the same word when used in technical English. Words may also have different meanings from one subject to another. One example given in the pre-intervention interview was of a teacher describing capacitors which consist of two parallel ‘plates’.

- “Whenever I say ‘plates’ I expected my students to understand flat geometrical structures.”

After discussions with the PYP teacher the EMI teacher realised that the student learnt “plate” as an “eating from thing” and this was a revelation: “when she made me realise that, it was enlightening!”

The teacher explained the influence of this increased linguistic awareness on their teaching:

- “I need to define better even for native and non-native speakers and go a little deeper to make sure they understand”.

This showed a better understanding of the importance of systematically explaining and thoroughly exploring the technical meaning of a word, even to native speakers.

Linguistic awareness increased as a result of what they considered to be a very valuable association with their PYP colleague. For example, one EMI teacher mentioned that the use of occasional code-switching now proved useful and valuable for comprehension checking, which appeared to pay off. Students started to ask more questions and be more interactive in the class:

- “Starting from the middle of the semester they started asking their questions in English. They told me they wouldn’t understand the lecture if it had been in Turkish! Even the students with low level of English started asking their questions in English, which was really surprising”.

Many EMI teachers remarked that their understanding of the interplay between language and content had evolved. One of the participant EMI teachers offered the following:

- “We have two languages in physics; one is mathematics, the other one is English. Before this project, I thought mathematics as a language was more important but now I feel that the first medium should be English and this may be a little more important than mathematics for teaching undergraduate level, English must be more important in teaching physics in undergraduate level.”

From this quote we can see how the teacher developed awareness of how English is used as a vehicle for conveying the language of mathematics as applied to the discipline of physics.

Also, one EMI teacher commented that they realised the transition from school English to university where English is used as a means of instruction is not smooth or automatic:

- “for me it [planning collaboratively] was effective because I was enlightened about the language level of the students. Before I saw this is a continuation of education [...] you go to primary school [then] secondary school high school and [then] university. But when I had a chance to think about PYP and English education of the students, I started to see is that it [language education] is not part of a continuation”.

4. The PYP teacher also benefited

Although the pre- and post-intervention interviews concentrated on the outcomes for the EMI teacher, it became clear that the PYP teachers also learnt a great deal from collaboration. By testing out vocabulary on the PYP teacher, a two-way process of learning occurred in many cases. The EMI teachers became aware that technical content words, with which they are very familiar, posed a problem to students; the PYP teacher obtained greater insights into technical language used in the subject.

One teacher told us of a PYP partner who “became very excited” learning about formulae. They felt that “In terms of teaching techniques we learnt and benefited from each other”, and commented that it was the first time that the PYP teacher had met an EMI teacher and vice versa. “This project urged us to connect.” If the PYP teachers better understand the needs of the EMI teachers, they might be able to better prepare the students for the transition.
5. There is very little professional development provision for university teachers

When asked about professional development, none of the EMI teachers interviewed answered that they had received any training before they started teaching or at any stage during their teaching career. If this was indeed the case, this meant that they had not received training in pedagogy in Turkish and had certainly not received any professional development for switching to and/or effective use of EMI.

It was interesting that before the intervention, EMI teachers made little reference to their own English language proficiency. Although all of them had spent varying periods of time in Anglophone countries, they rarely referred to these experiences in relation to their current language abilities and those needed to teach through EMI. They mainly commented on the recruitment requirements they had needed to meet to secure their current posts. This suggests they had little awareness that the teaching skills and the language they used to communicate their lectures to the students could be of utmost importance.

6. EMI teachers did not plan the subject or language content of their lectures in any formal way

Before the intervention, all of the EMI teachers informed us that they prepared a general curriculum for every course. They prepared with their colleagues within their subject departments and decided who was going to teach which part of the curriculum. However, they did not write down a detailed lecture or lesson plan for each lecture. As one of the participants explained:

- “I don’t write this [lesson plan] down [because] I have all this in my mind, automatic.”

6.1. ‘Flipped’ classroom

An interesting aspect of teaching and learning through EMI in one university was that teachers used ‘flipped’ classrooms. Teachers pre-recorded lectures and students watched them online before the class, so that class time was kept for questions and discussion. This teaching approach may present some advantages in the EMI context. Firstly, teachers did a great deal of preparation when making each video-lecture and gave consideration to exactly what they would say: “for every slide I also write down what I’d like to say for that slide”.

Each lecture was written, rehearsed, filmed and edited; working in this system forced EMI teachers to plan their lecture in greater detail than most of the other participants. The teachers also had to give more thought to the English language used during the filmed lecture.

From the students’ point of view ‘flipped’ classrooms may provide opportunities for more interactive classes because they automatically have a question and answer session built into the framework. In an EMI context, discussion and interaction are important for students. Interacting with peers gives students a chance to check their own comprehension of subject content. In addition, students need the opportunity to speak and use the English that they have heard in order to build their own language skills.

7. EMI teachers preferred materials and resources written in English

The respondents commonly remarked that they mostly made use of teaching materials and resources written in English. These resources were usually written for a native-speaker or global market. These materials were considered more attractive than their Turkish equivalents. Sources written in English not only had a more systematic approach to the academic topics but also included a wider range of authors, enabling students to acquire a broader understanding. There was an inherent belief that English books were ‘good’ books and yet there was no mention of these materials having been adapted for the Turkish classroom.

8. All teachers were positive about continuing collaborative planning

All of the teachers were positive about the prospect of continuing collaborative planning although with differing levels of enthusiasm. Moreover, they had different views on how this collaboration should continue in the future. Some suggested that the framework for collaborative planning (the CPT) could be improved in a way that would address the particular needs of different subject departments. Some teachers suggested that this type of collaboration might happen just once at the beginning of new courses, through which they would receive a valuable applied linguistics perspective from PYP teachers. Perhaps one of the most interesting positive comments on continuing collaborative planning came from one of the participant EMI teachers who was also the Head of an engineering department. They ardently supported the idea of looking for more structured and sustainable relations between the engineering department and the PYP department so that planning lessons collaboratively could continue, saying:

- “I’d love to do that [continue to plan collaboratively]. I got criticism [meaning feedback] when I prepare the videos and the other materials for my lectures. My presentations became better and better, this project helped me. I asked the Principal and the university admin to continue to this collaboration, in the same way I experienced, being in communication with PYP. We want to continue this because this [collaboration between the engineering department and PYP] is good for our students and also for our instructors.”
Project 2: Student Voices Project

Methodology

In the Student Voices project an online survey was used to study the motivation and beliefs of students choosing to study at an EMI university. This aimed to explore the PYP, first year and second year students’ motivations for choosing to study at an EMI university and explore any changes in their views of EMI over time.

A total of 997 students from 18 Turkish universities that deliver courses through EMI responded to the survey. This comprised 14 private and 4 government universities, which reflects the ratio of these institutions within the cities where we carried out this research (78% to 22%). However this ratio does not correlate with the ratio of participating students from these universities, which is 48% to 52% respectively. Students who chose to study their academic subjects through EMI at government universities showed considerably more interest in sharing their opinion on their motivation to study through EMI.

When we look closely at the participants we notice that 858 (87%) of the total number of participants are of Turkish nationality whilst 131 (13%) of them are international students (figure 2).

In terms of gender the proportion is 54% female to 46% male. In respect to the year group the participants were part of, the data shows that the majority of students who responded (60%) were PYP students, 23% were first years and 17% were second years (figure 3).
Findings

Following analysis of the survey, the main findings are presented below, supported by quotes from the students. It is interesting to note how the students’ opinions differed across the different years.

1. A majority of students believe EMI is beneficial

In response to the survey question “do you think it is a good thing for university students in Turkey to study through EMI?”, 59% of the participating students replied yes (figure 4). We might expect this percentage to be higher as when the students chose their universities and departments at the beginning of the academic year, they knew that they were choosing an EMI course. Our survey took place at the end of the academic year, so this may indicate that students feel less motivated after having studied through EMI for one year. This may also be taken as a starting point for looking into the reasons why 41% of the students who are in PYP, first year and second year have reservations.

2. Learning through EMI is a challenge

Students did not find it easy to learn through EMI, although most felt that with effort and study they could cope. However, they also mentioned some classmates who could not cope and struggled to grasp difficult concepts in a foreign language. As one student comments:

- “I feel good because English is an international language but in Turkey, people prefer Turkish and in my university a lot of students even don’t understand it so often the lecturer explains in Turkish after English”.

3. EMI instils confidence

Being able to speak English seemed to instil a very strong feeling of self-worth. English helped the students of all years to feel confident, well educated and successful:

- “I feel well developed and improved my level of English”.
- “My level of English is Upper-Intermediate. I am feeling successful”.

4. PYP students were very optimistic

The PYP respondents were very positive for EMI and all the opportunities it could bring, and felt that the PYP had prepared them well. They felt that their level of English would be sufficient to study their subject at university and were confident they would cope:

- “Our English preparatory school enhanced my level of English, now my level is advanced”.
- “I am fully confident about my English level. I don’t think I will be having any trouble”.
- “I think I am ready for the department”.
- “I believe I have the needed skills to learn the subjects in English”.

Of course some students were not as confident, but still remained optimistic that they could improve by making a personal effort:

- “I think that I have improved my English level since I came this school. I believe I will be able to be prepare for next year, but with my request and my effort”.
- “I think my knowledge of English language is enough to go through my major, but still there is space for my English to improve”.

Figure 4: In general, do you think it is a good thing for university students in Turkey to study through EMI? (total 989)
“Before I started to study preparatory school, my English level was incapable but now I can write about something better and I comprehend what I read and I can comment about it. In my free time, I prefer watching foreign movies. however, I know that I have to improve my English level because I think, I can have difficulty in my department”.

Only a few PYP students felt that they really were not ready for studying at an EMI university and were expecting to encounter difficulties, especially with speaking:

- “I think I’m not ready for my department exactly. In summer, I have to develop my speaking skills”.
- “My English is not bad. Even, I am better than most of my friends but I think I’m not ready for my subject completely”.

Some students realised that they probably needed a specific type of English for their studies:

- “I think I should learn departmental English before department lectures”.
- “I might have difficulty only about terminology but I can overcome this in a short time”.

5. First year students were still enthusiastic

First year students saw English as a world language which opened up access to research materials and enabled them to participate in a global society. Many students mentioned wanting to communicate with friends around the world (perhaps due to the influence of social media) and become ‘world citizens’:

- “English is a world language and most scientific research is reported in English, thus I think it is beneficial to be educated in this language”.
- “We live in a global society right now, so it is a brilliant experience to improve our English level through classes. With the help of English we can communicate with majority of the population and become a world citizen”.
- “It is really good for our future and improve ourselves in abroad about our workplace”.

Many students saw themselves as global citizens and commented that in a country like Turkey, it was important to have a world perspective. They also enjoyed studying with international students:

- “It is good to learn with the foreigners and also it leads to study or work in abroad in the next years hopefully”.

However, enthusiasm for EMI seemed to decrease slightly from PYP to first year.

6. First year students were slightly less confident in their English skills

In comparison with the PYP students, the first year students mentioned more often that they did not believe that their English skills were sufficient for university. A slight lack of confidence in their ability seemed to creep into their responses. Perhaps the reality of studying through EMI had set in:

- “I don’t feel enough to discuss in English with other people”.
- “actually i don’t keep up with some time later the lesson”.
- “Not so comprehended”.

There was a realisation that they needed a great deal of vocabulary:

- “Of course there are some vocabulary that I have to learn because in the end I am actually an engineer”.

Some of the confidence they had shown in the PYP preparation they had received seemed to have diminished:

- “I finished prepare class with Upper-Intermediate, but I think that my level is Intermediate(B)”.
- “I’ve graduated from advance but not feel like this. Maybe upper or intermediate. It’s all about speaking. We can understand what people say but can’t reply them”.

Part of the reason for this seeming decrease in enthusiasm may be due to the fact that lectures were not interactive and not enough emphasis was put on the students speaking in class. Students did not feel involved in the lectures:

- “The classes should be more proactive”.
- “In my opinion EMI should focus on the speaking point because the general problem in Turkey is Turkish students can not express theirselves fluently”.
- “the lecturers should be more willing to involve the students in discussions and conversations within an English medium”.

7. Students were concerned about losing their Turkish language

There was a concern that students were learning terminology in English but not in Turkish. Some students worried about losing the use of their Turkish language. They wanted to learn the terminology of their subject in both languages:

- “learning English is very important now but if we learn our job in turkish we can be better in our jobs in the future, we have to learn english by taking seperated English lessons”. 
“Students cannot reach the informations in their mother tongue which is a big problem for learning process. However, it provides us a lot of opportunities like having a successful career”.

“I like the concept, it helps because the English is a lingua-franca; however if we could learn the Turkish counterparts of the terminology, labels and concepts it would be much better”.

In a similar way to the first year students, second years also expressed the wish to be able to express themselves both in Turkish and English:

“I am having problems with expressing myself in my native language because our programme is so dense and highly focused on foreign concepts”.

8. Second year students valued EMI

In the second year, students were still enthusiastic about EMI and the opportunities it might bring. They felt personally inspired and valued by being part of an EMI university and having an EMI education, mentioning that they believed that English teaching resources were superior to Turkish resources:

“English sources feel more credible”.

“It offers us different perspectives”.

“Learning subjects in English keeps me up to date”.

9. Second years felt they had not developed their language skills

Some second year students felt that EMI was difficult and did not feel that they had all the skills they needed:

“Essay writing and listening is difficult”.

“We do learn English to some extent before university but you still need to teach yourself to be at uni level”.

“I am not well prepared”.

In particular, students mentioned insufficiently developed speaking skills:

“Maybe increasing speaking practise can feel well and it can be got progress my selfconfidence”.

“I think my English level is enough for understanding and learning the lectures. But it is still very hard for me to make a presentation in English or speak English in front of others”.

However, this difficulty in understanding can also apply to lectures in Turkish, which echoes our findings in the Collaborative Planning study.

“Sometimes when the subject is really hard, its hard to understand that even my native language so english increases the difficulty but other than that its not a problem”.

10. Frustration with EMI lecturers’ English

A very striking difference between second year students and students in the first year and PYP was the increased level of frustration they expressed with their lecturers’ level of English. The comments below show this dissatisfaction and disillusionment of second year students with their lecturers:

“I think it is wonderful but with these lecturers/teachers the courses becoming pain. I think they also need a preparatory year to improve their pronunciations”.

“In my opinion; both students and lecturers needs much more education about English”.

“I think lecturers should improve their speaking, especially in our department”.

“It would be better when our instructors will become better”.

Moreover, taking a language exam and getting a definite score must be compulsory for the lecturers in every 5 or 6 years since most of them does not care about their level of English”.

As mentioned above, these findings need to be treated with caution as we did not follow the same students through PYP to first and then second year. However, it remains interesting to consider the issues raised by the way the students’ motivation for EMI seems to diminish over time. It is also worth considering their opinions on the interactivity of lectures, the importance of the lecturer’s proficiency in English, and the opportunities for students to use and develop their own language skills not only in English but also in Turkish.
Oxford University Department of Education and Oxford University Press collaborated on a research project on EMI in Turkey over the academic year 2014/15. This looked in particular at the challenges faced in implementing EMI policy in tertiary and focused on the transition between the Preparatory Year Programme and study of majors with English as the Medium of Instruction.

In the Collaborative Planning study the PYP and EMI teachers gained an understanding of each other’s work: EMI teachers gained an awareness of the linguistic challenges to be faced in an EMI lecture and PYP teachers gained valuable knowledge of the subject content.

The Student Voices project enabled us to begin to document students’ enthusiasm for EMI and the opportunities it brings as well as their frustrations. It’s also interesting to see how students’ opinions differed across the different years of study. We received very positive responses on both the Collaborative Planning and the Student Voices projects from the participating universities in Turkey, and many of them expressed interest in contributing to further research on EMI.

Thank you to the participants in the EMI Oxford summer school who inspired this research project.