EMI in Italy – the current situation

Italy is a relative newcomer to English Medium Instruction in Europe, but the situation is evolving rapidly. In 2014 the OECD classified Italy as a country offering ‘No or nearly no programmes in English’, based on data from 2012. Italy certainly lags behind many northern European countries, but the number of English Taught Programmes (ETPs) is increasing fast. Drawing on data from the ministry of education’s Universitaly website, we find that in 2015 fifty-two Italian universities were offering a total of 245 ETP courses, over 90% of which are at Master’s level. This is a 72% increase with respect to the previous year. The universities with the highest number of courses are mainly in the north of Italy, and the main subject areas are Engineering and Economics. The Politecnico di Milano has the highest number of ETPs, with 23 programmes in English, followed by the University of Bologna (18), University of Trento (15), University of Padova (13) and Tor Vergata (13).

Much attention has been drawn to the case of the Politecnico di Milano whose decision in 2011 to have all of its Master’s degrees and PhD courses taught in English was challenged at the Regional Administrative Tribunal (TAR) by a group of the university’s professors. The ongoing case has been widely discussed in the local, national and international press, in academia, by Italy’s language academy Accademia della Crusca and also at a political level. In January 2015 the Council of State ruled that the Constitutional Court would have to decide whether English-only university teaching violates article 33 of the Italian Constitution and students’ free access to knowledge.

The case of the Politecnico, however, is an exception to the rule, since it is the only public university which has sought to transform ALL of its Italian Master’s degree courses from Italian to English. Most other universities have a relatively small – but growing - percentage of their second cycle degree courses in English. Recent studies are also showing that most lecturers are not hostile to English Medium Instruction if it does not become compulsory or threaten to take over all university courses.

University reforms in 1989 introduced new types of degree courses and a quality assurance system with the aim of increasing participation in European and international university programmes. According to new criteria for 2014, the funding that universities receive will depend on their performance, and one of the main performance indicators regard internationalization. EMI is considered key to improving universities’ performance in this sphere though there are still many obstacles, as concluded in a recent report by the European Parliament on the internationalisation of Italy’s higher education system.
In terms of academics, 99% of teaching staff at Italian universities are Italian\(^1\), and of the 1% that are non-Italians, 70% are European, mainly from Germany, UK, Spain and France. Few universities currently require lecturers to have certifications of English language proficiency to engage in EMI, nor are lecturers currently required to have any form of professional development as regards teaching. Recent university reforms have sought to encourage universities to engage international teaching staff on temporary contracts\(^2\).

The student population in Italy may not appear very international in comparison to other European countries such as the UK, Germany and France, but the OECD 2014 report indicated Italy as a new player on the international education landscape, as Italy currently hosts 2% of the global foreign student population. Italy is also one of the top senders and receivers of ERASMUS students in Europe\(^3\) and the number of incoming international degree-seeking students is on the increase. Most of the international students in Italy currently come from neighbouring countries, Albania and Romania, but China is also one of the main countries of origin. The desire to attract international students is one of the driving forces of EMI in Italy, but currently the student population for EMI courses can be exclusively Italian\(^4\).

The majority of universities have no entry requirements to their English Taught Programmes, though a few have local admission tests and Medicine, which is increasingly being taught in English, has a national admissions test. Certification of applicants’ English language proficiency is, for the moment, rarely a pre-requisite, though some universities are moving in this direction.

There is as yet a small body of research on EMI in Italy, but interest is growing rapidly. The first large-scale study on the Italian context was Costa and Coleman’s (2012) survey which obtained a response from 50% of Italian universities. This study shed light on the main issues that characterized EMI in Italy, for instance the drivers of EMI, the (lack of) training and/or linguistic support for lecturers and a general lack of importance given to language issues. Other smaller-scale studies have looked at the implementation of EMI and/or CLIL in higher education, attitudes of teaching staff and students, aspects of language and meaning making in EMI lectures, and the professional development of lecturers.

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\(^2\) http://www.camera.it/parlam/legge/10240l.htm Art 23.3
\(^3\) http://www.eaie.org/blog/the-state-of-internationalisation-in-italy/?utm_source=Social%20media&utm_medium=Linkedin&utm_campaign=blog
\(^4\) Campagna, Sandra / Pulcini Virgina 2014.