What are the Teachers' and Students' Attitudes Towards English as a Medium of Instruction Within the European Higher Education Area?

Literature review

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Abstract

Several universities are establishing study-programs taught in English (ETPs) even when the local language is not English, an initiative that has sparked controversy. The sudden increase in these programs has been heavily criticized, as there are concerns about a potential lack of planning and a disregard for teachers' and students' views. The present review looked at the studies examining the teachers' and students' attitudes regarding these English-taught study-programs within the European Higher Education Area aiming to put their opinions at the forefront of relevant research. The current literature review indicated that teachers and students' acknowledged the importance of *ETP*s for boosting their mobility and employability prospects, even though they agreed about the lack of a shared official university policy. Furthermore, both groups admitted having language-related difficulties, also claiming that teacher training was neglected. The importance of these findings is undeniable for policymakers, teachers, and students. Crucial structural weaknesses of the *ETP*s were revealed, with further research considered vital for delving deeper into teachers' and students' struggles.

Keywords: *EMI*, Europe, attitudes, students, teachers

1. Introduction

Within the broader framework of a European multilingualism policy (Eurydice, 2006), many countries are incorporating English as the language to be used in tertiary education. Such a policy was based on participating in the Bologna Process, a series of multi-national educational reforms initiated by the Bologna Declaration in 1999 (Dafouz et al., 2013). Many countries either members of the European Union or geographically located in the European continent formed a barrier-free European Higher Education Area (*EHEA*) by signing the Bologna Declaration, aiming to ensure homogeneity across the European universities. The goal was also to provide people with the 'varied lenses needed to capture, understand and create our global reality' (Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 1995, p. 224–225) and to educate multilingual, multiliterate, and multicultural professionals able to work and communicate in a globalized world (García & Beardsmore, 2013; Skutnabb-Kangas 1995). To this end, European universities encouraged scholars and students from other continents to enroll in European universities (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; Papatsiba, 2006), using English as the Medium of Instruction (*EMI*) to facilitate mobility. Using the definition provided by Macaro et al. (2018), *EMI* is defined as:

> "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (*L1*) of the majority of the population is not English" (p. 37).

EMI has been found to improve students' English competence (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Yang, 2016), foster learners' mobility and employability (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014), and is believed to be a powerful motivator factor for English learning (Doiz et al., 2014; Yang, 2016). Furthermore, this expansion of English in tertiary education can be tangibly reflected in the number of English-taught programs (*ETP*s) in the *EHEA*, which, according to the study by Wächter and Maiworm (2014) skyrocketed to 8,089 in 2014. This signalled a 239% increase compared to their previous study in 2007, although *ETP*s with partial *EMI* were excluded from the recent research design.

It is noteworthy that such a widespread domination of English can also be attributed to socioeconomic and political forces stemming from globalization which have boosted this trend (Kuteeva, 2018). More specifically, according to Wilkinson (2012), the popularity of EMI is due to multiple macro factors such as the economy, society, politics, and education. In a broader context, this acceleration could also be linked to globalization, the incessant flow of resources, higher education's ambition of becoming international, and the growing international, dominant status of English

(Hu, 2019; Macaro 2018).

However, the vagueness surrounding the existence of a common official policy has created a heterogeneous sample within the *EHEA*. In other words, Nordic countries have officially adopted the parallel language use policy (Dimova, 2017) allowing teachers to use the local language when necessary. Even the admission requirements are not the same in all countries of the *EHEA*, with Turkey constituting a prominent exception, as universities require students to be part of a preparatory year *(PYP*) and pass a language test before being admitted to an *ETP* (Ekoç, 2020).

This complex situation in the *EHEA* illustrates that language policies are adopted without careful consideration employing top-down and not bottom-up approaches (Macaro et al., 2018). This means that policies are established by policymakers and (inter)national organizations, with key actors in teaching and learning not always being consulted (Dearden & Macaro, 2016), which contradicts the need for *EMI* programs to be carefully planned (Lasagabaster et al., 2014). However, revealing attitudes towards *EMI* and understanding what teachers think and believe (Brown, 2016; Simbolon, 2018) can be considered a precondition for the long-term success of any language policy Moreover, attitudes towards language, from a medium of instruction perspective, can considerably influence students' academic achievements and career opportunities (Garrett et al., 2006), and should be taken into account for the development of language planning and policy at universities.

Striving to ensure teachers' language competence, some institutions have established certification mechanisms, adapted to the specific university context, which assess proficiency in the language of instruction. Prominent examples of such practices include the Test of Oral English Proficiency for Academic Staff (*TOEPAS*) Certification at Copenhagen University (Dimova & Kling, 2018), *HELA* (Higher Education Lecturing Accreditation) (Álvarez, 2014) at the University of Vigo. Furthermore, in a survey of 79 Higher Education Institutions (*HEI*s) across Europe, more than 60% of them stated that they were already providing training courses lasting from one to 60 hours or, in some cases, even longer (O'Dowd, 2018). However, O'Dowd (2018) stated that "the training of teachers in *EMI* is far from being treated as an important issue in European university education" (p. 557).

Regarding students, the same anxieties about the reliability of standardized language tests, including *IELTS* and *TOEFL*, are voiced. Researchers are questioning the adequacy of these tests as an admission requirement (Gundermann, 2014), believing that they promote native-speaker norms (Saarinen & Nikula, 2013), and recommending implementation of post-entry screening procedures to identify

unprepared students who need language support (Wilkinson et al., 2006). The success of *EMI* is also questioned, because of the inadequate levels of students' and faculty's English language proficiency (Macaro, 2018; West & Aşık, 2015). Hence, it becomes crucial to understand students' views and check whether the aforementioned concerns are fathomed.

Overall, the lack of a shared official policy, the concerns about teachers' ability to cope with this new reality, and the doubts raised about the validity of language tests for students make it imperative that teachers' and students' attitudes be investigated. Macaro et al. (2018) also explained that teachers' and students' attitudes is an issue not emphasized enough.

In a similar vein, most studies have focused on *EMI* in universities that have a history of teaching through English and in countries where English is a more "integrated" foreign language, such as Finland (Mauranen, 2006), Sweden (Söderlundh, 2013), and The Netherlands (Wilkinson, 2013). However, the South European countries are also represented in *EMI* studies, portraying a different picture. The Italian context, for instance, is quite different, as the teaching of English has only recently begun throughout primary and secondary education, and it is not commonly used outside school. Therefore, the present systematic review highlights these issues by presenting teachers' and students' attitudes in countries within the full spectrum of the *EHEA*. In short, the following research question was investigated:

***RQ**: What are the teachers' and students' attitudes towards EMI within the EHEA?*

Considering the vague nature of the term attitudes, we decided to focus only on papers investigating teachers and students' views pertaining to the presence of an official *EMI* policy, the benefits of *EMI,* comments about the admission requirements and teacher training programs. The reason being that these constitute recurrent themes in the current *EMI* literature.

2. Methods

2.1 Selection Criteria

The goal of this review is to focus on studies examining students' and teachers' attitudes toward *EMI,* with certain criteria being established to ensure comparability. More specifically, the focus shifted only to the *EHEA*, thus guaranteeing a relatively homogeneous sample. This constituted an objective inclusion criterion, as countries, including Russia and Turkey, are notoriously difficult to group as either European

or Asian. Furthermore, African and Latin American countries were excluded, as they were underrepresented (Macaro et al., 2018), while Asian countries were not included due to the complicated role of the English language and them not belonging to the *EHEA*.

On top of these, the next inclusion criteria referred to the year of publication and the accepted sample size. To begin with, Macaro et al.'s paper (2018) suggested that the number of *EMI* programs initially increased from 2006 to 2010 before skyrocketing in 2010. Therefore, the papers' accepted publication dates ranged from the first day of the year 2010 until the end of October 2022, when the reviewing process commenced. Specifying the range for publication dates allowed us to narrow the scope to the most relevant and recent papers, avoiding older publications, which would not have reflected the current academic reality. Regarding the sample size, studies were incorporated in the present review, provided that the sample size was equal to or higher than 20. The aim was to have samples that had sufficient statistical power to uncover significant effects, hence aiding us in reaching robust conclusions.

Overall, the final list of papers abided by the selection criteria and focused on teachers' and students' attitudes toward *EMI*, aiming to verify or disprove the initial hypotheses. Also noteworthy, though, is that the use of English was associated with ICT tools and blended learning being used in *EMI*. However, reporting on this issue would be only indirectly linked with how teachers and students perceive the use of English during the lectures, thus constituting a by-product of *EMI* implementation. In a similar vein, papers using students' grades as a proxy for the efficiency of *EMI* were also eliminated, due to the existence of confounding factors, including individual differences, subjective grading criteria, and different grading scales, influencing performance. Finally, partial *EMI* programs were also rejected, as they were not considered entirely informative.

2.2 Compiling Literature

To find relevant materials for this review, reliable tools were used. More specifically, Web of Science (*WoS*), a highly reputable database, was chosen because of its peer-review system, which filters out material that is not peer-reviewed and could hence be of lower quality. This aspect constitutes an advantage over Google Scholar, as the latter includes more papers but of lower quality.

Regarding the search in the database, different keywords were used to find the most representative terms. Starting from a broad search of the phenomenon of *EMI*, I then proceeded to alternate between the abbreviation and the full name of

EMI, before seeking papers about teachers' and students' attitudes within the *EHEA* (Table 1). However, noticing that the inclusion of both "attitudes" and "Europe" in *WoS* yielded an insufficient number of papers, meant that an artificial method of

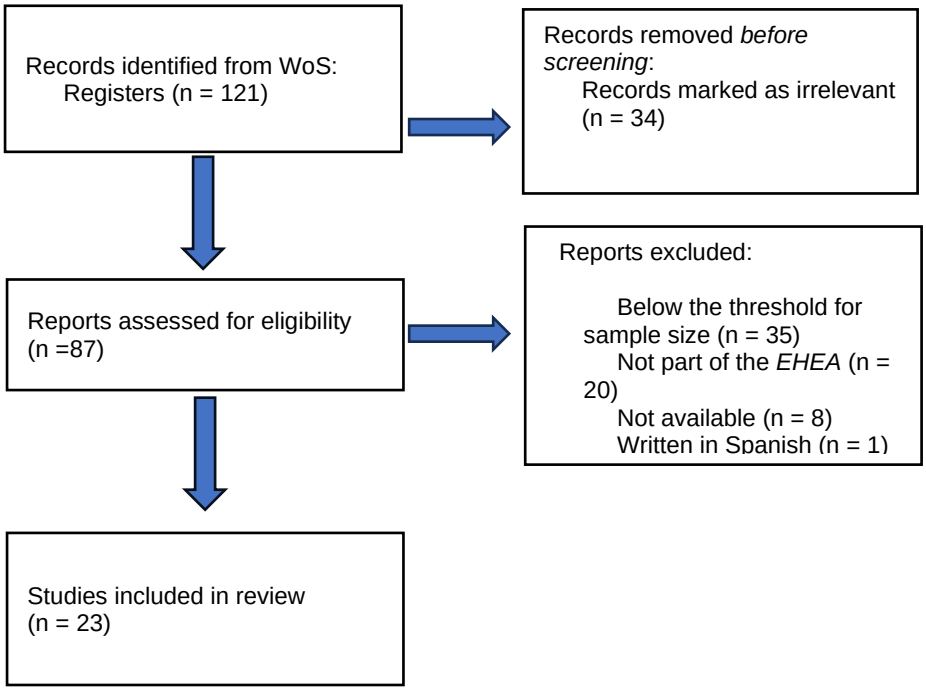
Table 1

The Search Terms Used and the Number of Results They Yielded

Search Terms (WoS)	Number of results
EMI	23,818
English as a Medium of Instruction	4,331
EMI Higher Education	2,310
English as a Medium of Instruction Higher Education	1,412
English as a Medium of Instruction attitudes	429
EMI attitudes	206
English as a Medium of Instruction in European Higher Education	121
English as a Medium of Instruction in European Higher Education attitudes	15
EMI in European Higher Education attitudes	10

Figure 1

The Screening Process Regarding the Inclusion of Relevant Papers Under "EMI attitudes".

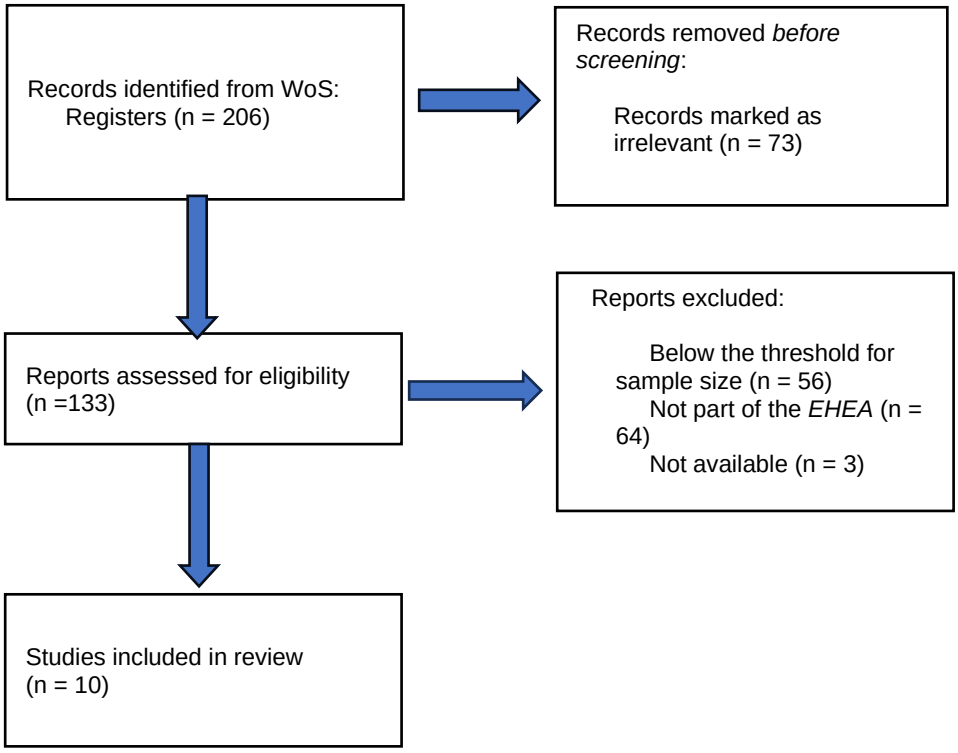


combining them was opted for. Therefore, emphasis was put on the last two keyword entries, as one focused on "EMI attitudes" yielding 206 results, while the other referred to "English as a medium of Instruction in European Higher Education" providing 121 papers for the set timing frame for publication. The latter offered ten papers, whereas the former gave five more, thus adding up to fifteen studies in total.

This number was the result of meticulous abstract screening processes to ensure that the papers chosen abided by the set selection criteria. To elaborate, Figure 1 illustrates that out of the 121 results that the search for "English as a Medium of Instruction in European Higher Education" yielded, 35 were excluded due to either limited sample size and/or content-related issues, as they could be assessing *EMI* from the perspective of judging nonnative accent, measuring performance or even referring to Content Language Integrated Learning (*CLIL)*. Another 20 studies were not describing *EMI* within the *EHEA*, 34 were not relevant, eight were not available and one was written in Spanish. From the remaining studies, ten were selected for the results section and the rest were incorporated in the Introduction or the Discussion, as they provided a theoretical framework for *EMI* research.

Figure 2

The Screening Process Regarding the Inclusion of Relevant Papers Under "English as a Medium of Instruction in European Higher Education".



Furthermore, when searching for "EMI attitudes", 73 papers were discarded as irrelevant, 64 were reporting findings on studies outside the *EHEA*, three were unavailable, and 56 were related but violated the set selection criteria (Figure 2).

3. Results

3.1 EMI Policy

Before presenting teachers' and students' attitudes towards an *EMI* policy, we should distinguish between the two aspects of policy. To elaborate, it could refer to either the methods used by universities to attract teachers and students (internationalization policy) or the method of implementing *EMI* (pedagogical policy).

Starting with the first definition of policy, data from Spain (Aguilar, 2017) and Italy, Austria, and Poland (Dearden & Macaro, 2016) indicated that teachers were unaware of any official *EMI* policy enforced by their universities. They claimed that *EMI*'s growth was not the product of meticulous planning", a problem also evident with the lack of support and set criteria for selecting *EMI* teachers.

Even in the presence of university policies, the official documents of 10

European Universities (Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2022) did not reflect teachers' views, regarding a threshold for English language proficiency. The established policy, as reflected by those documents, also neglected the educational support that teachers thought they needed as well as the communicative purpose of *EMI*.

Pertaining to a pedagogical *EMI* policy, it was absent from official documents, with teachers often resorting to teaching strategies that are not part of *EMI*. These included the parallel language use, that is the alternation of the local language and English during lectures, in countries such as Spain and Sweden (Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2022), Denmark (Dimova, 2020), and Turkey (Ekoç, 2020). This was attributed to teachers' inadequate English proficiency, and the extent of its implementation varied depending on the discipline. More specifically, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) teachers at a Spanish university (33.3%) admitted to allowing the use of L1 more than their counterparts in the Humanities (21.7%), with the latter responding that the use of the local language depended on other factors at a higher percentage (30.4 % vs 16.7%) (Roothooft, 2019). Finally, the lack of an official policy also influenced teachers' teaching goals. A study in the Republic of Macedonia showed that teachers in the Language Center of the National University emphasized the communicative aspect of English, whereas those teaching in the English department aimed to raise awareness towards native norms (Agai-Lochi, 2015).

3.2 Goal of EMI

Both students and teachers highlighted the importance of *EMI* for mobility and employability. To elaborate, Engineering lecturers in Spain explained that English is the language of science and the tool that increases employability (Aguilar, 2017), with teachers and students from another Spanish university (Mira et al., 2021) and teachers at a Turkish university also supporting these ideas (Ozer, 2020).

However, despite teachers supporting *EMI*, they also argued that universities and policymakers have a completely different goal in mind. In other words, they claimed that universities implemented *EMI* to compete internationally (Dearden & Macaro, 2016) and/or to increase their revenue (Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2022). Such a concern was even voiced by students in Catalonia (Sabaté-Dalmau, 2016) who despite acknowledging the value of *EMI*, were, nevertheless, suspicious about the political and financial forces supporting it, calling for measures to safeguard minority languages and linguistic diversity. All in all, the acceptance of

EMI was not complete, as students and teachers stressed its positive impact, but also raised concerns.

3.3 English Language Proficiency

The issue of English language proficiency was approached from two perspectives, namely participants' language skills and the existence of a threshold allowing participation in *EMI* programs.

Starting from students in Turkey, it was found that only 52% were able to meet the language requirements on their first try, while 6.2% needed four attempts to surpass the threshold (Ekoç, 2020). In view of this, students suggested the establishment of English for Academic Purposes (*EAP*) tests to ensure that they were qualified to follow lectures in an *EMI* context, as only 21.8% of the participants were satisfied with the current *EMI* reality. Teachers from another university in Turkey also underlined the low level of students' proficiency in English as a major problem at 81.4% (Ozer, 2020). The same concern was voiced by Danish teachers, claiming that local students had high general proficiency in English, but they were lacking academic proficiency (Dimova, 2020), which constituted a barrier during lectures and led to the parallel language use policy. Difficulties in coping with English were also in the form of students suffering from communicative anxiety as a corollary of a lack of confidence when judging their linguistic competence.The results of a study in the Basque country (Santos et al., 2018) showed that there is a correlation between these levels of stress with gender and the academic discipline of students, with female students studying Business exhibiting a higher amount of anxiety than those majoring in Education. Another interesting finding regarding students was that those in Catalonia supported teaching and tests that promoted native-like norms and prioritized accuracy, even though they struggled with English (Sabaté-Dalmau, 2016).

Moving on to teachers, it was discovered that they were also facing certain difficulties. Lecturers in Italy claimed that teaching in English threatened their skill to improvise during lectures, worrying that their potentially inadequate language proficiency would be assessed negatively by students, particularly during communication in informal contexts (Helm & Guarda, 2015). In another study in Denmark, teachers admitted that not everyone was adequately prepared for *EMI* (Jensen & Thøgersen, 2011), while teachers from 10 European Higher Education Institutions, suggested that it was not easy to assess students' language proficiency (Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2022).

Regarding the existence of a benchmark for proficiency, the selected studies illustrated the absence of an established threshold. To elucidate, Engineering lecturers defined approximately C1 for teachers and B2 for students, as the required language level proving adequate competence (Aguilar, 2017). Students in Turkey also replied that they would have to get 60% on a language test measuring general proficiency to become members of an *EMI* class (Ekoç, 2020). Nonetheless, the fact that they were given four chances to meet the requirements raises questions pertaining to the appropriateness of such a test.

Such a vague threshold was found in other countries as well, which was often the result of an incomprehensive *EMI* policy. In other words, lecturers from Italy, Poland, and Austria could not agree on a specific required language level (Dearden & Macaro, 2016), while their colleagues from 10 other European universities also expressed similar difficulties (Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2022). Quite interestingly, despite 61% of Danish teachers finding current tests adequate, they suggested interviewing students and assessing written statements of purpose and students' research experience to ensure that students can follow a lecture in English (Dimova, 2020).

3.4 Teacher Training

Teacher training constituted another neglected aspect of *EMI*. Such a reality was either attributed to the scant offering or even the total absence of educational and language support to teachers.

To begin with, lecturers in Spain (Aguilar, 2017) were favorable towards any language support that the university could offer to them, recognizing the complicated nature of *EMI*. Teachers in Turkey (Ozer, 2020) and Teaching Assistants and Assistant Professors in a Serbian university (Đorđević & Blagojević, 2019) pinpointed the specific domains they needed training including speaking and pronunciation skills (28.4%) and pedagogical training (12.8%). New teaching strategies and terminology for teaching their academic subject also gathered support.

Furthermore, teachers of an Italian University (Helm & Guarda, 2015) as well as those of 10 European *HEI*s (Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2022) expressed their desire to receive training pertaining to teaching methods, without explicitly stating their need for support or the specific skill that needed improvement. The importance of training was even highlighted by students in Turkey, who claimed that teachers should be properly trained before being allowed to teach in an *EMI* classroom (Ekoç, 2020).

Despite the training provided by certain universities, though, such as the University of Copenhagen, this was not always appreciated by trainees. To be clearer, *TOEPAS* allowed teachers to engage in a simulated teaching experience, as their performances were recorded and written feedback was given. However, only 54% of the teachers kept the video of their lecture and only 5% watched it claiming that they were too self-conscious (Dimova, 2017), while the written report provided was also overlooked. Nevertheless, they recognized that the training increased their awareness about their teaching methods, strengths, and weaknesses, but it did not change their teaching practices. In contrast, teachers simply inserted the *TOEPAS* certification in their CVs to increase their job prospects.

4. Discussion

This systematic review examined the relevant literature on teachers' and students' attitudes toward *EMI*. The goal was to raise awareness regarding current *EMI* implementation and encourage more research to be conducted, thus constituting a valuable tool for stakeholders, policymakers, teachers, and students engaging with *EMI*.

Firstly, the present review yielded some interesting findings verified our initial hypotheses. To begin with, the absence or unawareness of an official policy confirmed that teachers and students are not always consulted when policymakers establish university policies (Dearden & Macaro, 2016). The positive impact of *EMI* on Higher Education was depicted, although this review revealed teachers' and students' concerns about their language skills. The latter was linked to,the inadequacy of the current tests measuring language proficiency (Macaro et al., 2018) and the need to measure academic English proficiency (Ekoç, 2020). Finally, the overall inadequacy of planning led to its negligence.

A strength of this review refers to the inclusion of countries that are not traditionally *EMI* supporters. To be clearer, it has been hypothesized that South European countries do not have many available *ETP*s compared to the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, with students also having lower English proficiency due to various socio-linguistic factors (Dafouz et al., 2013). Therefore, exploring students' and teachers' opinions contributes to forming a comprehensive account of *EMI* and to assessing the success of the Bologna Declaration (1999) by examining the extent of comparability within the *EHEA*.

However, the limited number of studies included constitutes a shortcoming of the present review. To elucidate, the sample of 15 papers may not lead to robust

conclusions, especially if combined with the relatively limited sample size in some of the selected studies. As a corollary, there were no studies on most of the 47 countries within the *EHEA*, while it also seemed difficult to recruit participants. Additionally, the overrepresentation of a specific set of countries is not likely to compensate for the limited quantity. Despite such problems, though, this review simply aims to draw attention to some of the problematic aspects of *EMI* and does not claim to fully explain the topic. In essence, its importance for the future of *EMI* cannot be doubted, as it paves the way for subsequent research to be conducted.

4.1 Implications

The present article focuses on teachers' and students' attitudes in countries within the *EHEA* to gain insights into how *EMI* is understood and implemented. Publishing the results could then have major implications on most aspects of the current *EMI* reality, aiming to improve the teaching and learning process.

To begin with, many universities lacked an official *EMI* policy and thus comparability within the *EHEA* was not ensured. This aggravates potential difficulties and poses an obstacle for changes to be made at an international level. Hence, before modifying parts of the *EMI* experience, a certain degree of comparability should be established by forming international committees, that should create a general international framework for *EMI* implementation. Adhering to these rules would ensure compatibility amongst the *EHEA*, while also allowing for some flexibility due to each country's socio-political context.

As for the students' struggles with English, it is likely to trigger the conversation regarding establishing *EAP* tests that would substitute for the tests measuring general proficiency. In other words, the validity of the traditional *IELTS* and *TOEFL* scores is likely to be questioned, as even when these criteria were met, language-related difficulties were expressed. Hence, these tests may be complemented by other tests or even be substituted by *EAP* cut-off scores. To this end, teachers' and students' arguments should be at the forefront of *EMI* research to apply pressure for changes to be made by policymakers.

Finally, the absence or underestimation of teacher training programs is another problematic part of *EMI*. This stresses the need for training to be established or upgraded, which should be tailored to teachers' needs. Incentives should be offered for completing them, while the difficulties caused due to insufficient training should be highlighted. Emphasis should also be put on lifelong learning and on

creating official international accreditation procedures as a requirement for teaching in an *EMI* classroom.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that many *HEI*s have increased the number of *ETP*s offered. The present review illustrated that an official university policy was often absent, while the value of English for future employability was appreciated. The absence of a threshold for teachers' and students' English proficiency and the negligence of teacher training were also highlighted. However, the lack of consensus surrounding these crucial aspects of *EMI* is a major problem requiring cooperation amongst all parties involved. Hence, more studies should be conducted, examining students' and teachers' attitudes to gain a greater understanding and apply any necessary changes.

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