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Title:

Plurilingual students in EMI: Variable language use, educational democracy and linguistic justice

Most students on English-medium instruction (EMI) programmes in higher education will meet the European Union's language target of 'mother tongue plus 2' foreign languages (FL), where most commonly one of the FLs is English. Eurostat figures show 51% of school-leavers do learn two or more FLs, a figure likely to be higher among those entering tertiary education. But do EMI programmes make use of the knowledge vested in their students' plurilingual competences? Would it be democratic and just to allow students to contribute their learning in whichever language it may be acquired?

Here we report a study into the language use of a multinational group of students on one course (n=140) at a Dutch university which has adopted a bilingual language policy in which programmes or courses are either in Dutch or English. Through quantitative questionnaire (valid response 105) as well as focus groups and written reports, we investigated the students' perceptions of educational democracy and linguistic justice, as well as barriers and facilitators to learning. We stratified the students according to how many FLs they spoke (78% spoke 2+ FLs, 51% spoke 3+ FLs), among other manipulations. Results are surprising, sometimes initially appearing counter-intuitive. For example, students who speak 3 or more FLs are more likely to perceive that they do not get equal treatment in an EMI programme than those who do not speak any FL (i.e. native speakers of English). Similarly, the more FLs a student speaks, the more difficult they find it to adjust to local culture. Students who speak no FL are more likely to perceive that other languages and cultures are marginalized in an EMI programme.

We discuss and explain the findings from the first year of a multi-year study which includes respondents from a variety of disciplines and, hopefully, will involve other universities. The study highlights the discrepancy between what we may call 'parallel bilingual policies' and the reality of the plurilingual stakeholders involved.