

EMI through virtual exchange at Bordeaux University

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Abstract

The ongoing trend towards the internationalisation of universities in Europe places English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) for education firmly on institutional agendas. This study carried out at Bordeaux University, France, explores EMI through Virtual Exchange (VE). The combination of both EMI and VE is presented here as a new area of study which we will refer to as EMI-VE. The report evaluates students' perceived linguistic progress and transdisciplinary learning competences through Erasmus VE (EVE). This multi-institutional EMI-VE context provides much needed international interaction lacking in home EMI models.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction; France; French higher education; virtual exchange; Erasmus virtual exchange; internationalisation at home; English as a medium of instruction through virtual exchange.

1. Introduction

Today, science departments in France offer both general and specific English courses for undergraduates, postgraduates, and increasingly for staff (Reynolds, 2016, 2019). In addition to English language courses, academic staff may teach science in English and students attend scientific lectures in English. This practice can be referred to as EMI which focuses on the applications of language for academic and professional contexts, rather than on the study of the language itself.

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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 of the majority of the population is not English” (Macaro et al., 2018, p. 37), and can be broadly described as integrating English language and disciplinary content in higher education.

EMI initiatives at Bordeaux University are part of the drive to encourage Internationalisation at Home (IaH) through disciplinary EMI programmes, such as biology taught in English². What is lacking in the local EMI classroom in French universities is an internationally diverse student population. French (state) universities, unlike universities in the United Kingdom, Australia, or Denmark, do not have as high a number of international students (de Wit, 2020). This is where VE helps French universities to continue benefiting from EMI by incorporating VE into their programmes. By engaging in EMI in a VE format, students will be able to interact with non-French speaking students in a more authentic ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) interaction (Hoskins & Reynolds, 2020; Reynolds, 2020).

It is for this reason that initiatives to create transnational internationalisation courses are currently offered at Bordeaux University to facilitate the acquisition of international skills, such as intercultural competence, communication, and negotiation skills in English. The objective is to broaden internationalisation schemes to beyond “a small elite group of mobile students and scholars [...] to all students and scholars” (de Wit, 2020, p. iv). These initiatives have been coined IaH to cater for students who may not necessarily have access to student mobility for socio-economic and organisational reasons.

IaH refers to “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments” (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69). The term has many overlapping concepts and objectives. In some contexts, it can mean internationalising the curriculum, in others it can refer to how institutions can make their campuses more international. The implications for domestic students are that they can be considered ‘international students’. In this sense, an international student (at home) can be understood as a domestic student undergoing a process of internationalisation (at home) under the guidance of IaH domestic linguistic policy. One way of internationalising the curriculum is through both disciplinary and transdisciplinary courses taught in English (EMI). Another way to internationalise both the curriculum and the learning environment is through the addition of VE programmes.

2. Université de Bordeaux. (n.d.). *Biology taught in English*

The [Bordeaux IaH project](#) which is part of the *NewDEAL*³ project, reports on the recent development of transdisciplinary EMI-VE at Bordeaux University. This EMI context is deemed transdisciplinary because science students studied the topic of *Nationalism and Newcomers*, which was not directly related to their main scientific area of study, chemistry.

2. Participants and objectives

The objectives of this study were to investigate whether the combination of EMI and EVE has benefited Bordeaux University's IaH programme. The learning context described in this study is transdisciplinary EMI through VE. The study aimed to highlight the specificities of this recent development which we have referred to as EMI-VE.

The study consisted of the assessment of a transdisciplinary EMI-VE course for postgraduate students of chemistry at Bordeaux University. Forty-two French speaking Master's degree students of chemistry participated in EVE, over a period of two years, starting in 2018, with a dedicated group of chemistry students each year⁴. All the participants responded to pre- and post-anonymised online questionnaires to establish their motivations for taking the course and to receive feedback after the course. During the second year of the programme, 36 participating students took pre- and post-English language proficiency tests⁵. All the participants wrote learner diaries and five students agreed to be interviewed by the author. Students with an upper intermediate (B2) to advanced (C2) level of English proficiency⁶ were invited to enrol. The Efficient Language Assessment Online (ELAO) test showed that the students were generally lower intermediate (B1) rather than upper intermediate (B2), which they had claimed to be during the selection process.

Post-course, the students were asked in a questionnaire how VE had impacted on their language learning experience. They were also asked to compare their English language learner experiences and their VE experience.

3. NewDEAL: open, student-centred and connected programmes, within a framework of transformative learning, 9,700,000 € allocated to Université de Bordeaux by the French Ministry for higher education (author's translation) <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/cid121492/resultats-et-montant-des-dotations-de-la-premiere-vague-de-l-appel-a-projets-nouveaux-cursus-a-l-universite-du-p.i.a.-3.html>

4. 2018-19: 6 Master's level chemists, 2019-2020: 36 Master's level chemistry students. This data-set also features in the AELFE-TAPP 2020 conference paper (Reynolds, 2021).

5. ELAO test.

6. A minimum intermediate English proficiency is required to be able to converse in the weekly seminars.

3. Context

3.1. EMI as an internationalisation process

The drive for EMI in non-English-speaking countries is first and foremost based on an understanding that English has a higher status globally than other languages for scientific research and academia (Montgomery, 2013; Phillipson, 1992; Reynolds, 2016). It should therefore be acknowledged that language proficiency is relevant to understanding EMI contexts.

EMI can be a challenge for students in terms of understanding the lectures taught in English (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Roussel, 2019; Roussel, Joulia, Tricot, & Sweller, 2017). In addition, EMI lecturers may find that a second language may limit their performance, e.g. regarding idioms and humour (Preisler, 2014). Teaching in English is affected by methodological approaches used with EMI (Ball & Lindsay, 2013; Cots, Llurda, & Garrett, 2014), including tandem teaching (Cots et al., 2014) and student-centred learning (Wilkinson, 2013). It is therefore not surprising that EMI is used in VE projects in higher education, which are on the rise (O'Dowd, 2016, 2018). This is because VE provides the technological and interactive platform which home EMI lacked. Indeed, it is important to include VE in relation to EMI because of the European Commission's drive to introduce VE as a formal establishment (European Commission Erasmus Plus VE, 2021; Helm, 2016; O'Dowd, 2016).

Within the already complex framework of EMI, there are growing learner needs for autonomy and opportunities to develop digital literacies in a globalised world (Guth & Helm, 2010; Helm, 2019; O'Dowd, 2016). VEs enable learners who speak different languages to practise both their English language and intercultural skills together (Deardorff & Jones, 2009; Kramsch, 2011; Liddicoat, 2005; O'Dowd, 2003, 2011; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2007). EMI can occur online, through VE projects, where an EMI teacher need not necessarily be present during all the interactions between the learners. EMI teachers nevertheless play a pivotal role in terms of teacher support and guidance.

3.2. A need for EMI-VE in France

Practising English on site at a French University is therefore an opportunity for domestic students to become more international, at least in terms of English language use. The main issue with local EMI is that French speaking students attend their course in English with other French speakers. Observations of French EMI science classes have shown that many of the interactions between the students and the teacher are in fact typical of bilingual code-switching (Reynolds, 2016). Therefore, a person who does not speak both French and English may struggle to understand a typical local sequence in an EMI classroom. Such a locally situated use of 'Frenglish' may not always be transferable

to other communicative contexts where English is used. In such a context, the participants can revert to French whenever they need to.

The benefits of studying a scientific discipline in English in a non-English speaking country, however, must not to be underestimated, both in terms of student success rates and future employment opportunities (Dimova, Hultgren, & Jensen, 2015; García, 2009; Reynolds, 2016, 2019; Soren, 2013). Ideally, French students should be able to practise a variety of English skills at university, either with other French speakers, or with a more diverse international student population.

For this reason, domestic students at Bordeaux University participated in an international and multi-institutional VE where English was a common lingua franca among speakers.

3.3. What is an EVE?

EVEs are initially funded by the European Commission. The VE features the name of the original study abroad scheme called *Erasmus⁷ exchange* created in the 1980's⁸. The virtual version of *Erasmus Exchange* was designed in the 2010's to provide students with the opportunity of participating in mobility educational programmes without having to travel abroad. EVEs are not limited to participants from Europe, but include at least one institutional member from the European Union. From its beginnings, EVE was designed by the European Commission to promote peace by bringing together young adults from European member states and from the Southern Mediterranean. Through VE, the European Commission hoped to promote “self-esteem, curiosity, tolerance of ambiguity, decisiveness and resilience” (Millner, 2020, p. 165).

The EVE described in this study is a recurring online ten-week course hosted by a third party called [Sharing Perspectives Foundation](#). Sharing Perspectives Foundation is a non-governmental organisation and does not represent a particular university. Youths (university students or otherwise) aged 18 to 30 can participate in the programme on a voluntary basis. The main course objectives are that students should develop intercultural, interpersonal, and technological skills (through the use of online tools). These skills are transferable and are part of academic and professional development.

The VE programme involves weekly webinars which occur in ELF. The lingua franca exchanges are in keeping with current theory which challenges the representation of authenticity being linked to

7. ERASMUS: European Community Action Scheme for Mobility of University Students. The acronym was inspired by one of the first 'European' thinkers and travellers, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536).

8. Creating a generation of Erasmus students popularised by the 'Auberge Espagnole' movies.

native speakers (Helm, 2016; Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017; Pinner, 2016). This approach to language learning in a lingua franca context is based on the idea that learners do not need to be in contact with a ‘target language’ or a ‘target country’ for authentic language learning to occur.

The EVE programme involves four key areas of pedagogical activity, as follows.

- Learners watch and give feedback on video lectures related to the weekly topic of discussion on the general themes of nationalism and immigration.
- Learners attend weekly webinar meetings with other students from all over the world.
- Learners write a weekly reflective journal (describing their learner experience of the weekly meeting).
- Learners conduct short video interviews of their peers in their local area and share the videos with their EVE team members for discussion.

Although the participants from France may focus on improving their English, those joining from other universities (Annex 1) may be native speakers or not primarily interested in improving their English. They take the course to learn about *Nationalism and Newcomers*. In EVE, unlike bilateral or tandem exchanges, the participants will listen to up to ten varieties of English because it is a multi-institutional exchange. This helps all the participants get used to different varieties and accents, which is what participants previously lacked in the home EMI. EMI literature has shown that many academics who speak English as a second language struggle to understand other accents, which results in non-comprehension or communication failure (Reynolds, 2016; Soren, 2013). Students who participate in EVE are not beginner learners of English, but are developing their English language skills as bilingual French-English speakers (Reynolds, 2016). VE therefore offers them the opportunity of refining the skills they already have in a more international context.

VE, in general, has similarities with EMI because the exchange takes part in English as a language of communication:

“[v]irtual exchange projects are often implemented in English, though it is not necessarily the participants’ first language, and thus [...] they could be considered a form of EMI” (Helm, 2019, p. 6).

However, VE is seen as a pedagogical alternative to teacher-led EMI because it is collaborative, student-led, and involves opportunities for students to engage in sustained synchronic dialogue with other students in an international, rather than a national environment.

The EVE programme under discussion can be described as belonging to the category of EMI because the students were expected to learn content, in English, in relation to a given topic (*Nationalism and Newcomers*). In this case we are combining elements of scientific disciplinary learning with transdisciplinary learning to create an upgraded format of EMI. Learners accumulate specific knowledge about immigration patterns and terminology relating to political trends such as populism, for example, as well critical thinking skills. The combination of EMI and VE is what we will refer to as EMI-VE. What is unique about the application of EMI-VE in this present study lies in a combination of elements:

- the topic of study is not related to the students' main academic discipline (chemistry);
- the course is credited but optional. This is innovative for French universities which have only recently provided a greater degree of student choice in their curriculum;
- the VE offers students the opportunity of interacting in small (eight) rather than big groups (25); and
- students interact in English with speakers who do not speak French.

4. Evaluation and discussion of learning outcomes

The participants' attitudes to VE were largely positioned in relation to their previous English language learning experiences. Firstly, in an EMI or English language tutorial at Bordeaux University, the student-teacher ratio is typically 25 to one. In the VE sessions, there were approximately eight students and one facilitator. Secondly, each student was from a different higher education institution, and did not share a first language with the other students.

These differences between traditional English language learning contexts and EMI-VE are reflected by a student in the post-course questionnaire response:

“[t]he thing that inspire me the most is the people. They are so interesting. Everyone is different. Of course, the themes discussed during the ten weeks given me the motivation to think or act differently. Before the programme, borders were not very important for me and I didn't understand why some people are very attached to these borders. But thanks to this programme I can now understand why. Of course it will have an impact. It already has an impact. I talk about the sessions to my family, to my friends. Sometimes we talk about the topic discussed”.

Another student stated:

“I had to speak, so it was a first for me, to speak with people. I was really happy to see the class was only in English. The meetings were held in English and in France a lot of French will be spoken. [EMI-VE] was a bit more challenging. The class is big enough but not too big. If you stay silent it show. You have to take your place and contribute”.

Post-course, the students were asked to rate their English language improvement from ‘not at all’ to ‘very much’ on a five-point Likert scale. The results showed that 87% (36/42) of the participants believed that their English had improved thanks to EMI-VE. This impression was not corroborated by the results of the pre- and post-language tests. The students remained at the same Common European Framework of Reference for language proficiency (CEFR) English level post-course. This can be explained for several reasons.

Firstly, remaining at the same CEFR proficiency level does not necessarily mean that a learner has not improved. The language test was used as a general indicator of English language proficiency. A leap from one CEFR level to another is not generally expected by the CEFR over an eight to ten week period (Cambridge Assessment English⁹). In EVE, there are 20 hours of interactive online meetings, and approximately 100 hours of private study. An increase in English language proficiency can be expected after 200 hours of guided learning hours according to the CEFR (Hoskins & Reynolds, 2020). Secondly, this could be partly due to the course itself or to other formal and informal learning occurring during term time (for an example of informal English language learning see Peake & Reynolds, 2020). The average EVE pass grade of 75% revealed that lower intermediate (B1) competence in English was sufficient to pass the course.

The students experienced changes in confidence and stance as much as progression in identifiable language markers¹⁰ (Luoma, 2004; Reynolds, 2021). The students claimed VE had helped them to improve their English skills because they had to interact more, as is highlighted by these four reflective journal (diary) entries written by four different participants:

“in class there is always someone who can speak for you. In class there is one question [from the teacher] and one answer. In the virtual class there is one topic but lots of questions”¹¹.

9. CEFR proficiency levels referred to in this test: Beginner (A1-A2), Intermediate (B1-B2), Advanced (C1-C2). According to Cambridge Assessment English, a jump from one proficiency CEFR level to another may only be expected after 200h of guided learning. <https://support.cambridgeenglish.org/hc/en-gb/articles/202838506-Guided-learning-hours>

10. In speech, there are language markers which are different from the written word. When studying speech, these items can be labelled as fillers and hesitation markers such as ‘ah, um, you know, let me see’ (Luoma, 2004). French speakers, until they are more advanced speakers of English, will continue using French language markers even when speaking in English: ‘done, voilà, euh, hein’ (Reynolds, 2016).

11. This data-set also features in the EVALUATE conference paper (Reynolds, 2020).

“I’m less shy and I feel a lot more confident by talking and sharing my opinions to other people online. I think it also applies to real life. It makes me less shy to talk to strangers and to share my opinions to them. I also learned to be more respectful and tolerant with people that have different opinions than me. I think that the peaceful environment that you created in this programme helped a lot in this. I also learned to talk more ‘directly’. Now, everything comes out of my mouth in a very short amount of time”.

“I feel I made a lot of progress. My English improved a lot”¹².

“I have progressed in comprehension of English, specially because of all the different accents that I heard each weeks. I also gained confidence in talking in English”.

The participants reported that their speaking and listening skills improved the most, especially when listening to speakers of English with different accents. These features of communicative adjustment are not evaluated by the ELAO test. As French higher education IaH courses tend to run one semester only, longer term VE initiatives would be necessary to test for improved language proficiency. Future studies in how oral proficiency improves in VE would therefore be valuable.

Finally, the deviation from content learning related to chemistry was reported as both a challenge and as a welcome change, as can be seen in these three diary entries by different learners:

“I study chemistry and in class, we never talked about political and social topics, so for me, to listen fresh point of view about the European situation is very educational”.

“I like science but I like art too. I am very curious about the culture of other people, how they think, what they do. I am also continuously trying to grow as a person and discover new experiences and new cultures”.

“I also learned a lot of things regarding populism or nationalism in Europe with this program”.

Like other EMI courses, the course was very topic focused. The students had specific themes¹³ to discuss each week, and were encouraged to stick to the topics. The students led the discussions

12. This data-set also features in the EVALUATE conference paper (Reynolds, 2020).

13. Examples of themes: Integration and diversity, Forced migration and membership, Politics of belonging, Globalisation to tribalism, Symbols of a nation and ‘homeland’, and Brexit: Why did Britain vote to leave? (EVE weekly programme: overview p.2: 2018)

and worked on projects together, which perhaps differed from their other learning experiences in relation to chemistry.

5. Conclusion and implications

The combination of EMI-VE is a much needed addition to instructor-led EMI models because EMI-VE focuses on the VE models of facilitated dialogue. Students engage in a series of questions and discussions, which differs from traditional approaches such as answering yes or no answers and sitting final exams. Students are continuously assessed on their active participation.

EMI-VE provides students with the opportunity of interacting with up to eight students from different locations. The EMI-VE programme described here enabled students to gain access to different varieties of English through multi-institutional VE carried out in ELF.

EMI-VE provides an opportunity to establish beneficial programmes for university students who wish to interact with international students on global issues while improving their English proficiency. EMI-VE offers an interesting format regarding English language practice for students who major in the sciences. Students who study science are moving beyond English for scientific purposes towards wider applications of English through VE. Here, we have seen how postgraduate students of chemistry were able to widen their expertise to socio-politics.

The quality of the EMI-VE educational programme is assured by the rigorous review process which the European Commission applies to all EVEs. In addition, the quality of EMI-VE is assessed by our own university board of assessors through continuous monitoring of our students before, during and after the programme.

Our project has shown that EMI-VE with science students benefits from a focus on cultural topics. Future iterations of EMI-VE with a focus on disciplinary content learning should include a strong element of interactive and critical thinking activities.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1.

Institutional participants of Erasmus virtual exchange 2018-2020 piloted by Sharing Perspectives Foundation. One student from each university participates in a group with approximately seven students from other universities from this list: Université Mohamed Lamine Debaghine de Sétif 2 (Algeria), Applied Sciences BFI Vienna (Austria), Vesalius College Brussels (Belgium), University of Tartu (Estonia), Network for European studies at the Helsinki University (Finland), Bordeaux University (France), Paris Descartes University (France), Rouen ESITech (France), Kiron Open Higher Education (Germany), Osnabrück University (Germany), Syrian Youth Assembly (Germany), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece), University of Macedonia (Greece), Corvinus University in Budapest (Hungary), Budapest Business School (Hungary), Irish School of Ecumenics, TrinityCollege Dublin (Ireland), University of Limerick (Ireland), Bologna University (Italy), Next Generations Global Studies group, University of Padova (Italy), University of Trento (Italy), Utrecht Centre for International Studies (Netherlands), University of Groningen (Netherlands), HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (Netherlands), University of Oslo (Norway), Islamic University of Gaza (Palestine), University of Palestine (Palestine), AGH University (Poland), SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw (Poland), Évora University (Portugal), ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Portugal), University of Oslo (Norway), Comenius University of Bratislava (Slovakia), University of Granada (Spain), English Start Up (Syria), Higher Institute of Technological Studies of Béja (Tunisia), Hacettepe University (Turkey).