

Is EME beneficial to students?

By **Ann Veitch** - 28th July 2023



English-medium education (EME): the use of the English language to teach and study academic content in places where English is not the primary language of communication of the majority of the population. EME can be found in both basic (primary & secondary) and higher education.

In basic education (BE), the perception of governments, parents and learners is often that learning subjects through English is advantageous for educational and career success, but there is little (if any) evidence to support this view. At primary level, in particular, a move away from mother-tonguebased education to EME can impair learning and prove a barrier to inclusive and equitable quality education. Research shows that students need six to eight years of studying an additional language as a subject in order to develop the cognitive and academic language proficiency necessary to study other subjects in that language. Despite this, over a third of children around the world begin their education in a language they cannot speak or understand.

Parental demand for EME can drive political decisions to introduce it at primary level, but the widespread and uncritical adoption of EME at primary level in some parts of the Global South is forcing children to "sink or swim," with English becoming a significant problem for many, rather than a resource to support their learning.

For countries that do move to EME at any stage in BE, such systemic change needs very careful planning and communication, with a focus on initial teacher training, continuing professional development, language improvement, and the development of organisational and pedagogical guidelines to support effective teaching and learning. Too often, though, these vital components are not properly developed as part of a move to EME in BE.

In higher education, EME is here to stay, and it will continue to have a profound impact on the shape of international education, as the number of students enrolled on a course outside their home country continues to grow by around 5% a year.

There are many perceived advantages to EME in HE, including economic growth, university prestige, access to intercultural learning, increased student revenue and increased competency in English. However, again,

evidence to support most of these benefits is limited or lacking, partly due to a lack of monitoring and evaluation of EME programmes.

There are many challenges to EME in HE, with lecturers, often lacking in relevant pedagogical training, sometimes having to simplify lesson content as both they and their students may lack the language skills to understand or articulate complex concepts. Students, meanwhile, can fail to fully understand lecture content and materials and struggle with academic reading and writing, issues that can lead to students failing courses or dropping out altogether.

Universities often struggle to recruit lecturers who can teach their academic subject through English, and where professional development for lecturers is available, it tends to focus on improving their language skills and not on the pedagogic skills they need to teach in an EME context.

Given these issues, language in education policies need to be carefully considered and sensitively managed to be successful, while being aware of potential unintended impacts. Decision makers need to be cognisant of the linguistic, cognitive, affective and academic factors affecting learners and educators when planning EME programmes. Critically, the interplay of local or mother tongue language(s) with English must be assessed to ensure appropriate inclusivity to support the achievement of learning outcomes.

Image courtesy of Library



Ann Veitch

Ann Veitch is the British Council lead for English in a Multilingual World.