

English Medium Instruction in Switzerland

Background

English is a significant part of the linguistic landscape in Switzerland, a nation that already represents a unique plurilingual context where several languages and cultures coexist with a high degree of political harmony. Owing in part to its multi-language heritage, Switzerland has become the centre of activities for many international business and humanitarian institutions (Zinggeler 2005). Switzerland's over 100 international schools that offer primary to secondary level programmes partly or entirely in the medium of English attest to the country's international reputation (ICEF Monitor 2013).

English has played an ever increasing role in recent years in Switzerland. For example, numerous large-scale Swiss companies have introduced the use of English internally as a lingua franca in order to facilitate communication even between Swiss nationals from different linguistic regions (Zinggeler 2005). Within the public school system, English language instruction is universal, and even introduced in some German-speaking cantons before French, the second national language (Graddol 2006). Census data show that out of Switzerland's 8 million inhabitants, 300,000 regularly use English in the home, and nearly one million regularly use English at school or work (Swiss Federal Statistical Office 2013).

The growing significance of English in Switzerland, shifting from merely a foreign language to a second or additional language that is part of the standard repertoire inhabitants are expected to have, has been observed for some time (Graddol 1997, Watts & Murray 2001). The growth of EMI in higher education is part of this phenomenon.

Current situation

The introduction of English-medium programmes in Switzerland at the higher education level has been controversial, especially at the Bachelor level (Studer 2015b). Nevertheless, higher education institutions report broad increases in the number of such programmes. In Switzerland, English-medium programmes have been introduced a) to attract international students, thus tapping into a growing market, b) for Swiss nationals to improve language skills and better integrate into the international and national workplace where English is needed, and c) to facilitate staff mobility (Ammon & McConnell 2002). At a time when international student enrollment in English-speaking destination countries is slowing down (Graddol 2006), international enrollments are rising in Switzerland.

Wächter & Maiworm (2014) state that in Switzerland nearly half of all higher education institutions offer English-taught programmes, with 39 institutions offering over 200 English-medium programmes. This represents 14% of all programmes taught and involves an estimated 5,700 students. Switzerland ranks in the top-10 in Europe in the number of institutions that offer English-medium programmes, the number of programmes offered, student enrolment (Wächter & Maiworm 2014), and programmes per capita (Gundermann 2014). These are all constantly increasing with time, following a trend common to the rest of Central Western Europe.

The evolution of EMI in the future will clearly depend on local factors. Such local factors in Switzerland include local linguistic diversity, attitudes to English and its value, the mix of local and international students, the perception of quality of English-medium programmes, and students' learning objectives (Studer & Gautschi 2016, forthcoming).

Swiss English Medium Instruction research issues

To date, EMI has received comparatively little systematic research attention in Switzerland, despite its highly multilingual nature and its first-hand experience with multilingualism as an integral part of its political and educational systems. Themes relevant to the Swiss context that are the focus of research at ZHAW include:

- the development of EMI quality management tools
- student factors that influence decisions to select EMI modules at Bachelor and Master's levels
- models of EMI lecturing competence
- analysis of local context features that impact EMI
- student expectations regarding the selection of EMI programmes
- differences between international students and local students
- local challenges related to the introduction of EMI programmes
- the development of a Swiss corpus of EMI texts and discourse.

Research into these areas provides key information pertinent to Swiss EMI, and contributes to a better understanding of EMI generally.

References and suggested reading

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