University teachers’ beliefs on the roles of languages in higher education

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In order to tap into lecturers’ conceptualisations of content and language integration and provide a better understanding of this complex and frequently implicit process, this paper investigates a multi-sited data base of 21 semi-structured university teachers’ interviews. Drawing on a conceptual framework recently developed to analyse English-medium education in multilingual university settings or EMEMUS (Dafouz and Smit, forthcoming), known as ROAD-MAPPING, this study will focus specifically on how the Roles of English and other languages (RO) are conceptualised by participants and on the links made between integration, language roles and internationalisation (ING) at tertiary level.

The subjects under scrutiny work in a variety of disciplines, (i.e. business studies, economics, education, engineering, hospitality studies, and physics), and diverse locations, (i.e. Austria, Finland, Spain and the UK). This range of settings illustrates the diversity of English-medium education in terms of geography, type of higher educational institution, academic disciplines, educational degree level, lingua-cultural backgrounds of students and staff, and sociolinguistic status of English in relation to other languages. Firmly based in the qualitative research paradigm, the multilingual database has been subjected to a re-iterative content analysis, complemented by discourse analysis. This allows us to highlight the complexity of the discursive construction of beliefs as well as to reveal the common themes converging across settings.

Findings suggest that teacher beliefs on the integration of language and content are shaped contextually and that such integration is constructed on a continuum from obstacle to opportunity within the learning context, with the added possibility of its relevance or even existence being denied. This is partially linked to the perceived locus of responsibility for achieving such language and content integration, from primarily teachers in some continental European settings to primarily students in the UK.

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