

## Inclusion and performativity: the power of pronouns in EMI lectures

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According to the European Commission, “[m]aking higher education systems inclusive and connected to society requires providing the right conditions for students of different backgrounds to succeed”<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, one way that HE institutions have promoted inclusive education has been by introducing English-Medium Instruction (EMI), involving a shift to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) as the instructional language in multilingual university settings.

The importance of student inclusion in lectures is not new. Talk-in-interaction is widely considered as an indicator of good pedagogical practice (Muijs & Reynolds 2011; Lo & Macaro 2015) and is generally accepted as beneficial to learning (Marton & Tsui 2004). Classroom talk has strong discursive characteristics since lecturers’ main activities of teaching are realised linguistically through classroom talk. Given that lectures in Italy are generally lecturer-initiated (Ciliberti & Anderson 1999) by analysing what lecturers actually *say* when participating in classroom activity, patterns of participation may be revealed.

Investigating the use of personal pronouns is one way to do this, since pronouns are “central to intersubjective communication – they are the means language provides for constituting the roles of speaker and addressee in face-to-face interaction” (Rounds 1987: 14). With regard to ELF lecturer discourse, Formentelli (2017), Dafouz et al (2007), Dafouz Milne (2006) and Molino (2018) all found the most frequent pronoun to be *we*, signalling a collaborative approach and acting as an indicator of inclusion. While Walsh (2004) found *I* to be the most frequent personal pronoun, she noted that interpersonal rapport was created through involving students in activities also through audience-inclusive *we*, since such inclusive pronominal forms are “likely to foster the active participation of students in class, boosting their sense of belonging to a group” (Formentelli 2017: 68).

The study presented in this paper aims to further contribute to this debate by investigating the frequency and function of personal pronouns in EMI lecturers’ classroom talk, and comparing them with lecturers’ own perception of the degree of interaction in their lectures. This enables us to assess the level of inclusion in EMI lectures at UNIBO as well as to show the extent to which lecturers’ perceptions are consistent with their discursive practices. Indeed, non-native English-speaking lecturers have not always found it easy to adapt to the new EMI environment, claiming that EMI requires more time for preparation and finding it difficult to adjust their traditional lecturing style in order to promote active student participation (Jensen & Thøgersen 2011; Picciuolo & Johnson 2020). Findings may thus contribute to designing appropriate material for lecturer training courses.

This study extends our ongoing research into EMI lecturer discourse (Johnson & Picciuolo 2020; Picciuolo & Johnson 2020). We interviewed lecturers of both Physical Sciences and Social Sciences subjects at an Italian university about their teaching experiences. Then we used SketchEngine to compare the frequencies of 1st and 2nd person pronouns across disciplines in a corpus of approx. 200,000 words of lectures given by the same lecturers. Lecturers’ perceptions might be expected to match their discursive practices. In fact, most lecturers in our survey considered the level of interaction in their classrooms to be fairly high. We found the pronoun *you* to be the most frequent pronoun used by lecturers from both macro-areas in our corpus, possibly suggesting direct reference, enabling the lecturer to interact with the students, asking them questions or expanding on previous points (Dafouz *et al* 2007), and thus perhaps providing evidence of a certain degree of co-operation between lecturer and students. However, a closer look at *you* in context show that it mostly appears in conditional sentences preceded by the conjunction *if*, in both macro-areas. Therefore, *you* functions here as an impersonal indexical which is not directly deictic to the hearer (idem. 2007: 653). This would suggest that lecturers are reluctant to promote bidirectional speech exchanges.

The preparation of teaching materials for EMI lecturers’ support courses should bear in mind the importance of raising awareness of the role of lexico-grammatical resources in mediating content-subjects (Lo & Lin 2019: 155) and providing relevant practice.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education_en)

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