

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERNATIONALIZATION AND  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEVEL IN A PUBLIC ACADEMIC  
INSTITUTION**

**LA RELACIÓN ENTRE LA INTERNACIONALIZACIÓN Y EL NIVEL  
DE IDIOMA INGLÉS EN UNA INSTITUCIÓN ACADÉMICA PÚBLICA**

**A RELAÇÃO ENTRE INTERNACIONALIZAÇÃO E NÍVEL DE  
PROFICIÊNCIA EM INGLÊS EM UMA INSTITUIÇÃO ACADÊMICA  
PÚBLICA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the process of internationalization and its relationship with the English language at a public higher education institution located in the state of São Paulo. To this end, two distinct scenarios are explored: the first analyzes the views and perspectives of the institution's faculty regarding internationalization and English; the second focuses on a specific internationalization initiative—namely, the potential implementation of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in the postgraduate program in Logistics, which aligns with the goals outlined in the institution's internationalization strategic plan. The findings of this case study, based on data collected through two distinct questionnaires—one for each scenario—indicate that, although internationalization is deemed important by the majority of faculty members, limited English proficiency emerges as a significant barrier to participation in certain activities. In the specific context of the postgraduate program, faculty members' English levels range, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), from A2 to C1 and 40% have achieved B2 or C1 levels. Nonetheless, EMI may be implemented by those who have a high level of proficiency and interest in doing so, particularly given that not all courses within a program are required to be delivered in English.

**Keywords:** Internationalization; EMI; English-language; Logistics postgraduate program.

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## RESUMO

Este artigo examina o processo de internacionalização e sua relação com a língua inglesa em uma instituição pública de ensino superior localizada no estado de São Paulo. Para tanto, exploram-se dois cenários distintos: o primeiro analisa as visões e perspectivas do corpo docente da instituição em relação à internacionalização e ao inglês; o segundo concentra-se em uma iniciativa específica de internacionalização — a saber, a potencial implementação do Ensino em Inglês (EMI, na sigla em inglês) no programa de pós-graduação em Logística, que se alinha aos objetivos delineados no plano estratégico de internacionalização da instituição. Os resultados deste estudo de caso, baseados em dados coletados por meio de dois questionários distintos — um para cada cenário — indicam que, embora a internacionalização seja considerada importante pela maioria dos docentes, a proficiência limitada em inglês surge como uma barreira significativa à participação em certas atividades. No contexto específico do programa de pós-graduação, os níveis de inglês dos docentes variam, segundo o Quadro Europeu Comum de Referência para Línguas (CEFR), de A2 a C1, sendo que 40% atingiram os níveis B2 ou C1. No entanto, o EMI pode ser implementado por aqueles que possuem um alto nível de proficiência e interesse em fazê-lo, especialmente considerando que nem todos os cursos dentro de um programa precisam ser ministrados em inglês.

**Palavras-chave:** Internacionalização; EMI; Língua inglesa; Programa de pós-graduação em Logística.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el proceso de internacionalización y su relación con el idioma inglés en una institución pública de educación superior ubicada en el estado de São Paulo. Para ello, se exploran dos escenarios distintos: el primero analiza las opiniones y perspectivas del profesorado de la institución con respecto a la internacionalización y el inglés; el segundo se centra en una iniciativa de internacionalización específica: la posible implementación de la enseñanza en inglés (EMI) en el programa de posgrado en Logística, que se alinea con los objetivos del plan estratégico de internacionalización de la institución. Los resultados de este estudio de caso, basados en datos recopilados mediante dos cuestionarios distintos (uno para cada escenario), indican que, si bien la mayoría del profesorado considera importante la internacionalización, el dominio limitado del inglés se presenta como una barrera significativa para la participación en ciertas actividades. En el contexto específico del programa de posgrado, los niveles de inglés del profesorado, según el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas (MCER), oscilan entre A2 y C1, y el 40% ha alcanzado los niveles B2 o C1. No obstante, la enseñanza en inglés puede ser implementada por quienes poseen un alto nivel de dominio e interés en ello, especialmente considerando que no todos los cursos de un programa deben impartirse en inglés.

**Palabras clave:** Internacionalización; Enseñanza en inglés; Programa de posgrado en logística.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Internationalization in higher education refers to the incorporation of international, intercultural, or global dimensions into the mission, operations, and academic offerings of educational institutions (Knight, 2004). Thus, various elements, including international academic mobility, collaborative research initiatives, and institutional partnerships can be classified as internationalization. However, such efforts often encounter obstacles within higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly due to faculty members' limited proficiency in the English language and their lack of time to engage in this language training, among other challenges (Miranda, Stallivieri, 2017; Kim, 2014). These factors highlight the complexities of the internationalization process and the insufficient English language skills among some of its key participants.

According to Altbach, Knight (2007), over recent decades, internationalization initiatives in higher education have expanded significantly, reflecting the increasing scope and relevance of the process. In Brazil, however, the internationalization of higher education requires further refinement and increased operational effectiveness as while several universities have made notable progress implementing academic mobility programs, hosting visiting scholars, offering courses in foreign language, many Brazilian institutions still lack a coherent and strategic approach to internationalization (Brasil, 2017).

One particularly prevalent internationalization strategy in universities worldwide is the adoption of courses taught entirely in English (Altbach & Knight, 2007). English Medium Instruction (EMI) refers to “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the majority of the population’s first language is not English.” (Macaro 2019, p. 2). On the other hand, despite its growing implementation, faculty perceptions of EMI are not always favorable. Research indicates that faculty members may question the appropriateness of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) and express criticism of institutional internationalization policies. For instance, Kim (2014) found that engineering faculty at a leading South Korean university raised concerns about the adoption of EMI and criticized the institution’s overarching internationalization strategy. These findings help to explain faculty members’ reluctance to expand English-language instruction, both in their teaching practices and professional development.

Furthermore, limited English proficiency among faculty members presents a significant barrier to the successful implementation of EMI as part of internationalization strategies (Martinez, 2016, as cited in Ignácio et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the present case study investigates the internationalization process and the role of English as an international language, with a particular focus on faculty expectations, interests, and proficiency levels in English, as well as the perceived function of English within internationalization efforts.

Additionally, this study specifically explores the potential implementation of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) within the graduate program in Logistics at the institution under investigation, as proposed in the campus’s strategic internationalization plan. The analysis draws comparisons and identifies parallels between the two scenarios examined.

## 2 THEORETICAL REFERENCE

The process of internationalization encompasses academic, social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions, contributing to the enhancement of both institutional and national competitiveness in local and global contexts. The motivations underlying this process include the advancement of knowledge, the promotion of intercultural understanding, the improvement of teaching and research quality, and the strengthening of economic competitiveness, among other factors. Within this framework, a nation’s economic, scientific, and technological development plays a significant role in shaping its internationalization strategies (Knight, 2004; Hudzik, 2011; Castro & Neto, 2012)

The primary objective of the Bologna Declaration was to enhance the international competitiveness of European higher education by establishing a unified European area of higher education. As a consequence, it introduced several key measures, including a standardized

degree structure, a credit transfer system to facilitate student mobility, and initiatives aimed at promoting curriculum development and institutional cooperation.

Furthermore, Wielewicki and Oliveira (2010) highlight the Bologna Declaration's influence on the internationalization processes of other countries, as evidenced by subsequent agreements such as the Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007), and Louvain (2009) which aimed to expand the structured degree cycle system, improve the quality of higher education systems, and promote academic mobility.

English plays a crucial role in several global domains, particularly science, technology, and business. As Vila (2021) points out, English is increasingly becoming the dominant medium of instruction in higher education. It has achieved hegemonic status in the fields of science and technology and is progressively assuming a central role in academic instruction, thereby reinforcing its status as a global lingua franca (Cardoso, 2020; Vila, 2021; Suzina, 2021). The use of English is also integral to the professional responsibilities of academic staff, encompassing teaching, conducting research, and engaging with international academic trends. As Meadows (1999, p. 126, our translation) observes, “scientists from countries where English is not the native language require additional time for reading and processing material written in English.”

English Medium Instruction (EMI) refers to the teaching and learning of academic subjects in English in contexts where English is not the official language (Vinke, Snippe, & Jochems, 1998). According to Altbach and Knight (2007), EMI is among the most frequently adopted strategies by academic institutions worldwide to promote internationalization. The primary objectives of EMI include attracting international students, preparing graduates for a globalized labor market, and enhancing the institutional profile and competitiveness of universities (Doiz, Lasagabaster, Sierra, 2011). Nevertheless, several studies have highlighted obstacles associated with its implementation.

A study conducted in two Japanese universities revealed significant difficulties among both students and instructors in delivering and understanding course content in English. As a result, there were frequent requests from students—and in many cases from faculty—for the use of the native language as a medium of communication (Ishino, 2022). Kobayashi (2022) notes that existing research highlights variations in the level of English proficiency required from both students and instructors for effective EMI implementation, with B2 and C1 levels of the CEFR being the most commonly cited benchmarks.

Another study from South Korea emphasized that the challenges related to EMI are not limited to language proficiency—despite frequent pronunciation, syntax, and other linguistic errors—but also involve pedagogical issues. As Lee et al. (2017, p. 218) assert: “Based on the sample of this study, we argue that Korean EMI content teachers appear to face more methodological teaching issues than linguistic challenges.” Similarly, in the Brazilian context, Gimenez (2022) emphasizes that faculty members face methodological difficulties when delivering content in English. This includes adapting their teaching strategies to effectively communicate academic content in a foreign language. As he puts it, “As EMI instructors, they face new linguistic challenges that also require new pedagogical practices” (Gimenez, 2022, p. 169), thus highlighting the need for content delivery methods that ensure student comprehension.

In a study examining faculty beliefs about EMI, Doiz (2017) reports that instructors were concerned about students' understanding and the suitability of teaching materials. This study also revealed divergent views on the use of English in EMI courses, with some instructors expressing a preference for using the native language when necessary. Many faculty members

believed that students lacked sufficient language competence to engage fully with EMI courses, and some were skeptical that the use of English would allow for effective content learning.

Another barrier to faculty participation in EMI is the widespread perception that higher education institutions do not provide adequate support for instructors tasked with teaching academic subjects in English (Lasagabaster, 2018). The lack of motivation to implement EMI in higher education stems from factors such as faculty members' reluctance to teach in English—either due to doubts about their language proficiency or a lack of interest in using a foreign language (Züge et al., 2020). In a similar way, Corrales, Paba Rey, and Santiago Scamilla (2016) describes internationalization, specifically EMI, as a top-down decision in which professors were assigned EMI classes even though they related discomfort with the internationalization policy of the institution and moreover their limited English proficiency.

Doiz (2018), in another study conducted in Spain, found that faculty often set unrealistically high expectations for their own English proficiency, which in turn created additional barriers to their participation in EMI. Instructors frequently reported difficulties with oral and grammatical skills, further complicating their engagement with EMI practices.

Taken together, these findings suggest a recurring pattern of concerns related to English language proficiency, the clarity of classroom communication, and the preparation and delivery of EMI courses. Such factors significantly influence faculty decisions regarding whether or not to engage in EMI. If left unaddressed, these issues may hinder the successful implementation of EMI and the exchange of knowledge between professors and students.

### 3 METHOD

This case study was carried out at one of the campuses of a public academic institution located in the state of São Paulo, Brazil which offers programs in areas like business management, chemistry, engineering and others.

Data collection was carried out using two distinct questionnaires: one administered to all faculty members, and another specifically designed for professors in the postgraduate program in Logistics, given the institution's intention to introduce English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses within this program.

The chosen data collection method offers advantages such as ease of implementation and the ability to perform quantitative analysis. However, as emphasized by Nunan (1992), the effectiveness of such tools relies heavily on the careful design of valid and reliable survey items.

The general faculty questionnaire aimed to gather insights into faculty members' perceptions, interests, expectations, priorities, and levels of engagement in the institution's internationalization process. With respect to the English language, the survey assessed participants' proficiency levels, the value they attribute to English, and the extent to which their language skills may influence their participation in internationalization efforts.

The second questionnaire, focused specifically on EMI, sought to capture professors' opinions and perceptions regarding its implementation in the postgraduate Logistics program. It also aimed to identify potential challenges and assess the English proficiency levels of the faculty involved.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

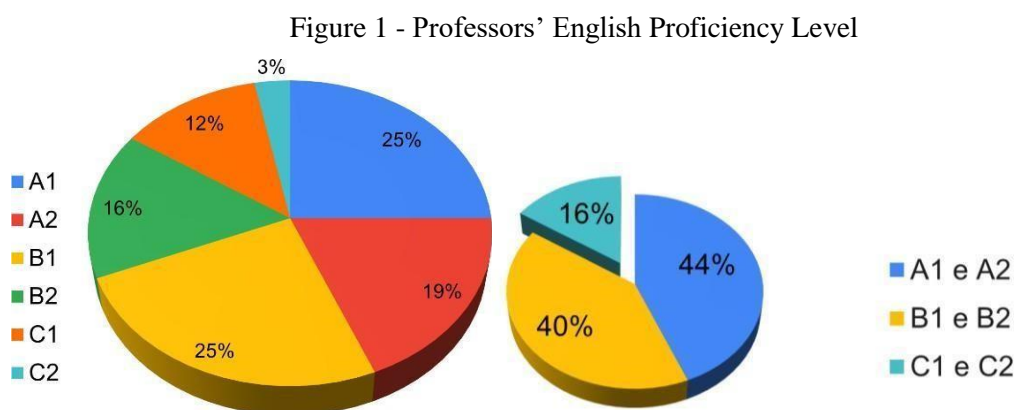
The Internationalization Strategic Plan (ISP) for the campus under analysis comprises a series of initiatives structured according to the respective academic domains. Its development was informed by the specific interests, objectives, and recommendations of faculty members even though their participation in the formulation of the plan was not mandatory, it was actively encouraged by the institution's internationalization office. This indicates the absence of a strictly topdown approach to internationalization planning, which contrasts with patterns commonly identified in the literature (Corrales, Paba Rey, & Santiago Scamilla, 2016).

The questionnaire distributed to all faculty members was designed to assess their interests and expectations regarding the institution's internationalization efforts, as well as to evaluate their self-perceived English language proficiency. The instrument comprised ten questions in a mix of open-ended, scaled, and multiple-choice formats.

A total of 70 professors from the campus were invited to participate, with 32 completing the questionnaire—resulting in a response rate of 45.7%.

Regarding the perceived importance of internationalization, 93.8% of respondents rated it as important for the institution. This outcome is consistent with the goals outlined in the Internationalization Strategic Plan (ISP) and the CAPES report (Brasil, 2017), both of which position internationalization as a key strategy for higher education institutions to respond effectively to the demands of a globalized world.

When asked about the role of English in the internationalization process, 75% of respondents identified it as essential, while the remaining 25% considered it important. Overall, faculty members recognized the critical role of the English language in advancing internationalization initiatives. Despite this acknowledgment, participants reported varying levels of English proficiency, as depicted in Figure 1.



Source: The authors (2021)

Figure 1 indicates that 25% of participants self-identified their English proficiency as being at the A1 level. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), this level reflects the ability to carry out basic communicative tasks in English. The CEFR further specifies that individuals at the A1 and A2 levels are generally able

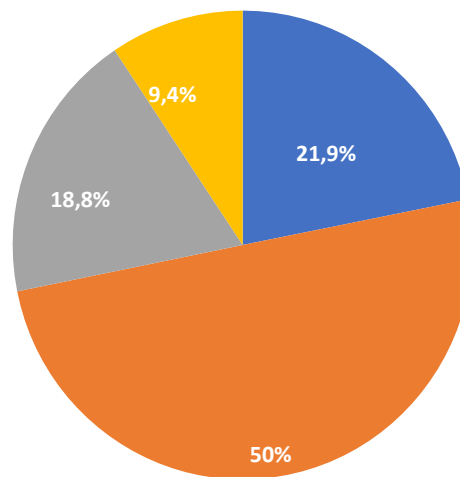
to comprehend and employ familiar, everyday expressions, engage in basic interactions, exchange straightforward information, and provide simple descriptions.

As shown in Figure 1, 43.8% of respondents reported proficiency levels within A1 and A2, while 40.6% identified with the B1 and B2 levels. These latter levels denote a more independent command of the language, wherein users can produce simple yet coherent discourse, narrate personal experiences, articulate ideas related to familiar topics, and express opinions, including both positive and negative evaluations. Although the proportion of participants at A1 and B1 levels is equal (25%), the total percentage of those with basic proficiency (A1 and A2 combined) surpasses those at the intermediate level.

Moreover, only 15.6% of professors reported proficiency at the advanced levels (C1 and C2). At these levels, individuals are expected to communicate fluently and effectively, engage in discussions on complex subjects, and present arguments and information in a clear and well-structured manner.

Within this context, Figure 2 reveals that 50% of participants perceive their current level of English proficiency as inadequate for fulfilling the objectives outlined in the campus's Institutional Strategic Plan (ISP). This perception reflects an awareness among faculty of the critical role of English proficiency in facilitating international academic engagement, a concern similarly highlighted by Zare-ee and Hejazi (2017) in other global academic settings.

Figure 2 - English Language Proficiency and Internationalization Actions



■ It is sufficient ■ It is insufficient ■ It is close to what is required ■ I don't know

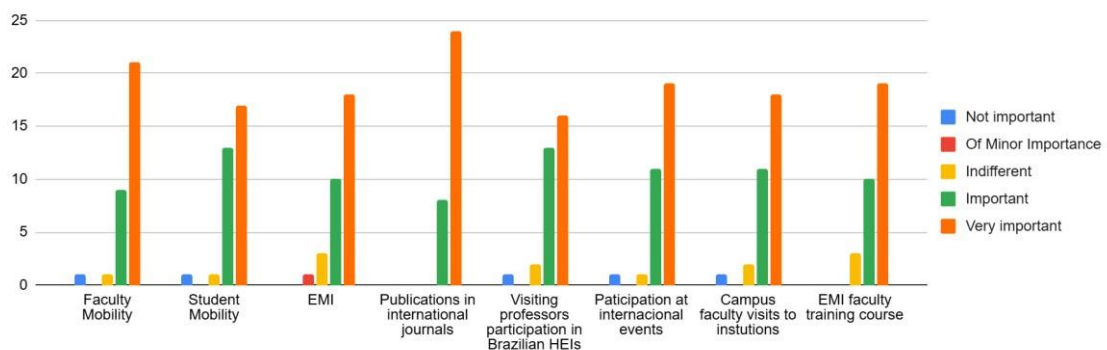
Source: The authors (2021)

Conversely, 21.9% of faculty members reported that their English proficiency meets the requirements associated with institutional internationalization efforts, while an additional 18.8% indicated that they are currently progressing toward higher levels of proficiency. This suggests that a segment of the faculty is actively engaged in improving their English language skills. Altogether, 40.6% of the respondents either possess or are approaching a level of English deemed sufficient for effective participation in internationalization initiatives. This finding is particularly noteworthy, given that faculty members' proficiency in English is widely regarded as a key factor in advancing institutional internationalization (Kruseman, 2003, p. 7, as cited

in Coleman, 2006, p. 4). Nevertheless, 9.4% of respondents expressed uncertainty regarding whether their English skills are adequate for involvement in such activities (see Figure 2).

To gain a deeper understanding of faculty members' interests in internationalization, participants were asked to rank a list of proposed internationalization activities by order of importance. The majority of respondents considered all of the proposed activities—faculty mobility, student mobility, English-Medium Instruction (EMI), publication in international journals, hosting visiting professors, participation in international events, faculty visits to other institutions, and EMI training—to be highly important (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Importance of Internationalization Initiatives



Source: The authors (2021)

In response to a follow-up question concerning their overall perception of internationalization, 62.5% of participants indicated that these activities are generally relevant to the institution. Additionally, 34.4% stated that internationalization initiatives could contribute to both their English language development and professional growth. Moreover, 62.5% of respondents affirmed that such actions are directly aligned with their respective fields of expertise.

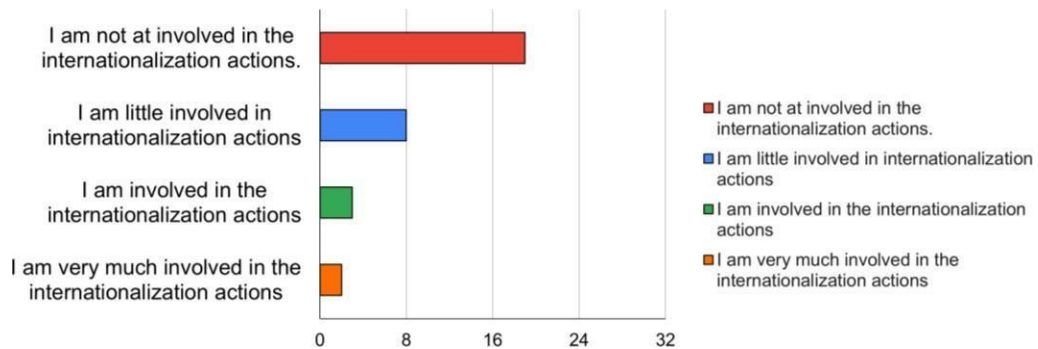
These findings suggest a strong interest in internationalization among faculty members, as the proportion of respondents who rated these activities as "not important" or "not very important" was comparatively low. Accordingly, internationalization is broadly perceived in a positive light and may serve as a valuable component of faculty development, particularly in preparing professors to engage with international students and academic environments (Hofling, Zacarias, 2017).

However, with respect to actual involvement in internationalization activities, 59.4% of respondents reported not participating in any such initiatives, while an additional 25% indicated limited or indirect engagement (see Figure 3). This low level of participation contrasts with the widely held view that faculty play a central role in advancing internationalization, and that their active engagement is crucial to its success (Miura, 2006).

It is important to note, however, that at the time of this particular data collection, the institution's internationalization efforts were in an early stage of development. Many initiatives were either in the planning phase or had not yet been fully integrated into the institution's strategic framework. As such, the faculty's reported levels of involvement likely reflect the preliminary nature of these discussions and the emerging priorities and expectations articulated

in the institution's strategic plan for internationalization. Figure 4 presents a detailed overview of faculty engagement in internationalization activities at that time.

Figure 4 - Faculty involvement in internationalization activities



Source: The authors (2021)

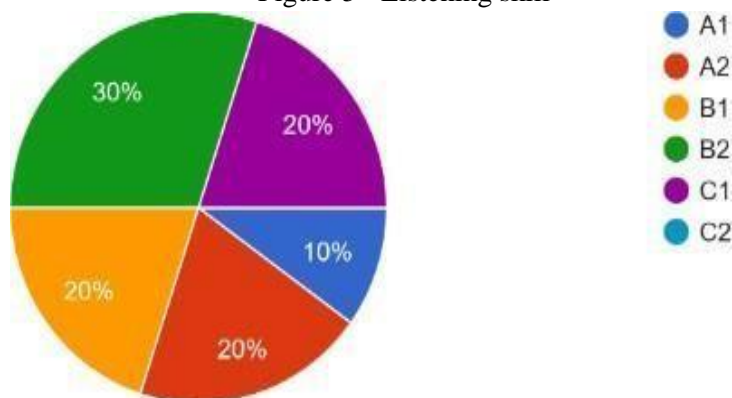
The Internationalization Strategic Plan (ISP) indicates the potential implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in the postgraduate program in Logistics. Accordingly, this study investigated faculty members' perceptions of this decision, with particular attention to the role of their English proficiency levels.

The data collected through a questionnaire administered to the ten faculty members reveal that 70% of the professors consider EMI very important, while 30% indicated that they believed it was somewhat important. This result suggests that the faculty recognizes the relevance of EMI for the program, which aligns with the ISP.

In addition, faculty members were asked to self-assess their English proficiency levels using the CEFR listening and speaking skills descriptors as these are essential for effective classroom interaction. Moreover, reading skills are already being used in some courses, since certain faculty members currently assign academic texts and articles in English as part of their coursework.

Figure 5, which refers to listening comprehension skills, shows that only 10% of the faculty classified themselves at level A1, 20% at A2, another 20% at B1, 30% at B2, and 20% at C1. None of the respondents rated their skill at C2 level. These findings suggest that listening comprehension remains a challenge for faculty members, as 50% of the participants have not yet reached the minimum proficiency level (B2 or C1) recommended in the literature (Kobayashi, 2022).

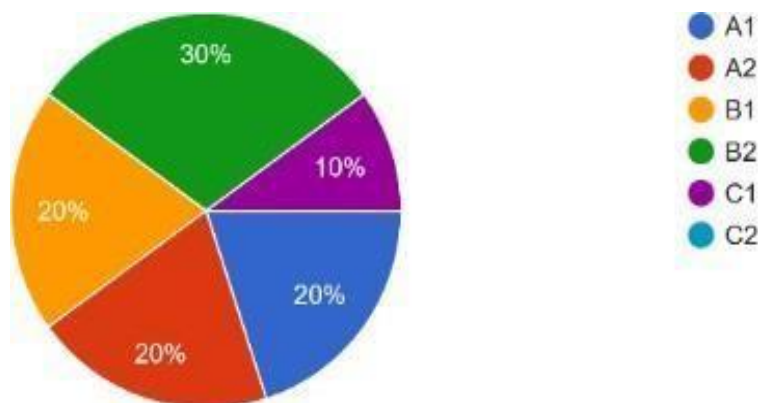
Figure 5 - Listening skill



Source: The authors (2023)

With regard to speaking skills, the results show that 20% of faculty members identified themselves at the A1 level, 20% at A2, and another 20% at B1. Additionally, 30% reported being at the B2 level, while only 10% indicated proficiency at the C1 level (Figure 4). Thus, less than half (40%) of the faculty are at upper intermediate to advanced levels in spoken English. Such findings also reveal a slight discrepancy between listening and speaking skills, with the latter posing a greater challenge for the faculty. This result aligns with the findings of Gimenez (2022) and Lee et al. (2017), who highlight faculty members' hesitation to adopt EMI due to the challenges associated with preparing and delivering lessons in a language other than their mother tongue.

Figure 6 - Speaking skill

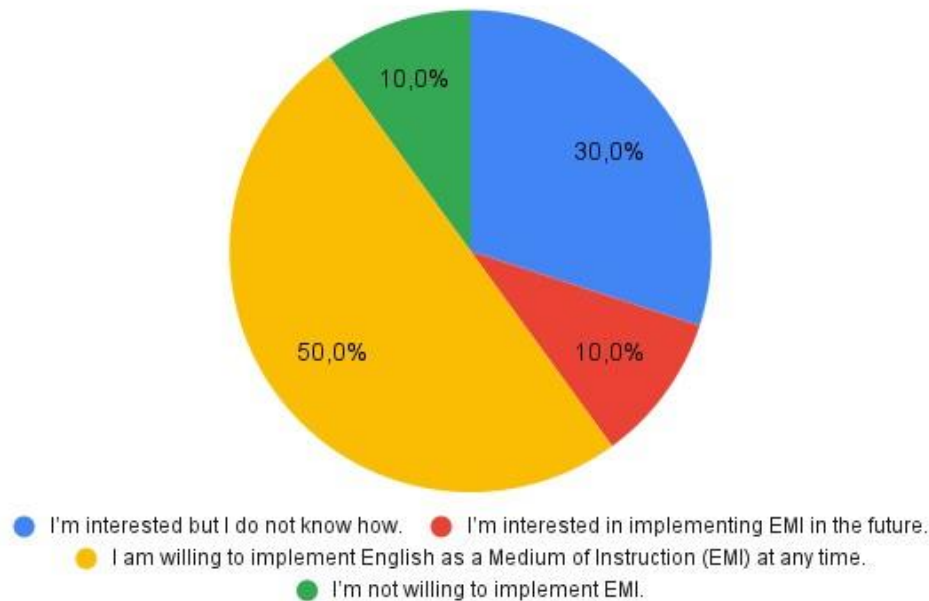


Source: The authors (2023)

On the other hand, these outcomes—specifically the reported levels of listening and speaking proficiency—can be viewed as positive, especially considering that not all courses within the program are expected to be delivered in English. Consequently, faculty members who already possess the required level of proficiency may begin teaching through EMI, potentially serving as a source of motivation for their colleagues to enhance their own English language skills.

In addition, only 10% of the postgraduate program faculty members expressed no interest whatsoever in incorporating EMI into their classes. Fifty percent indicated a willingness to implement it at any time, while 30% demonstrated interest but reported lacking the knowledge or skills necessary to do so. Another 10% were uncertain about its implementation, and 10% expressed a willingness to adopt EMI in the future.

Figure 7 - Interest in implementing EMI



Source: The authors (2023)

Overall, there appears to be a general alignment between the English proficiency levels of faculty members in the Logistics postgraduate program and those of the broader campus faculty. However, the former group demonstrates a greater level of engagement in internationalization initiatives. The majority of Logistics faculty members regard the implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) as important for the program, with 50% expressing a willingness to adopt EMI at any time. In contrast, approximately 60% of the broader campus faculty are not currently involved in any internationalization activities.

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article discussed the relationship between internationalization and the English language at a campus of a public higher education institution. To this end, two scenarios were investigated. The first encompassed the entire faculty and examined their views and positions regarding internationalization initiatives, as well as their English proficiency levels. The second focused on faculty members from the postgraduate program in Logistics, which, according to the Internationalization Strategic Plan, is expected to implement English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI).

The results indicate that the majority of faculty members (70%) consider internationalization important for the institution, although 59.4% reported not having participated in any related initiatives. Furthermore, the overall English proficiency of the faculty may pose a challenge to internationalization efforts, as only approximately 40% demonstrate upper-intermediate (B2) or advanced (C1) levels. On the other hand, within the postgraduate program, EMI could be implemented by those faculty members who already possess the required level of English proficiency which means about 40% of them and 50% of the professors are willing to incorporate EMI into their courses any time.

Therefore, English may represent a barrier to the internationalization process at the investigated campus, as the majority of faculty members have not yet attained a level of proficiency sufficient to participate in common international activities that require the use of the language. Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate a generally positive attitude among faculty members toward both the English language and the broader goals of internationalization.

This study was limited to exploring the perspectives of faculty members; however, it is essential to also incorporate students' viewpoints in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their attitudes toward internationalization and their levels of English proficiency.

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