

EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS INTO EMI IN FLANDERS: ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO STUDYING AGENCY AND INTERACTION IN THE CLASSROOM

1. INTRODUCTION

EMI (English-Medium Instruction) is a highly controversial topic in Flanders, sparking debate across political and academic circles. Opponents express concerns:

- **domain loss** (Staring, 2015, p. 249; Deneckere et al., 2020; Geeraerts, 2020, p. 185);
- **hollowing out** of Flemish sociocultural **identity** (Laureys & Versluys, 2022, p. 67);
- lecturers' and students' **language proficiency** (KNAW, 2017, p. 12; Vos, 2017, p. 366);
- **increased cognitive load** (De Bruyne, Kremer & Valcke, 2015; Roussel et al., 2017);
- overall **quality of instruction** (Deneckere et al., 2016).

However, **we still know very little about how EMI is actually enacted in everyday classroom settings**. Researchers, both within our faculty (see Rosiers & Vogl, 2019) and internationally (Dimova et al., 2015) have underscored the urgent need for ethnographic, on-the-ground studies to explore the interactional complexities of EMI (in Flanders).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study investigates the interactional dynamics of EMI in two Flemish engineering programs — one in bio-science engineering and the other in industrial design engineering. Using a linguistic ethnographic approach, data was collected over a 10-month fieldwork period:

1. **Interactional data** (AV recordings of classroom interaction);
2. **Attitudinal data** (interview/surveys with lecturers & students);
3. **Observational data** (field notes, photographs, spatial descriptions of classroom).

4. FINDINGS

Lecturer as **street-level bureaucrat**, (re)producing language policy at the micro-level:

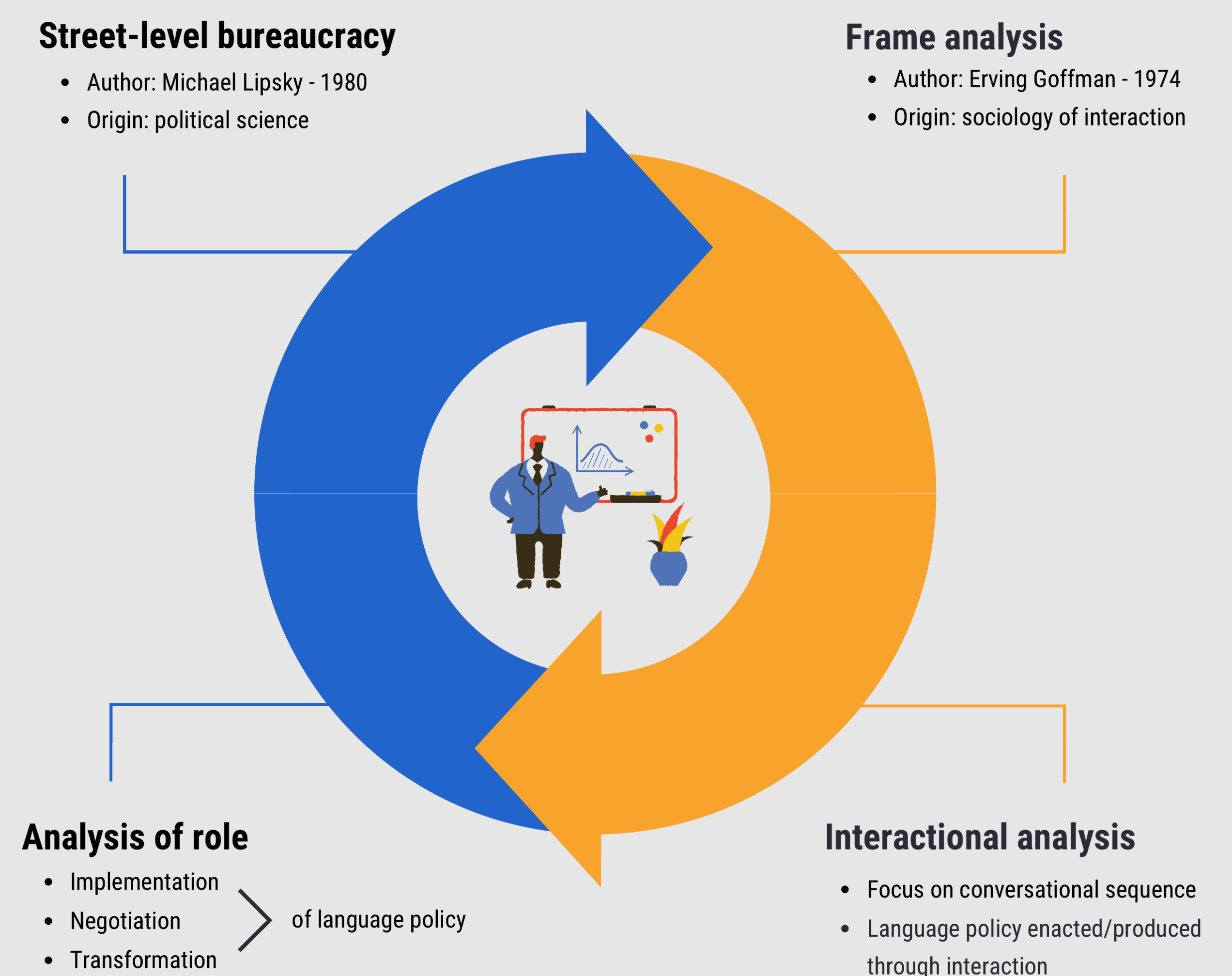
- Lecturer navigates a **fine line between institutional requirements and the students' learning needs** (De Soete & Slembrouck, 2024)
- Lecturer negotiates contributions in languages other than English, leading to a systematic **functional distribution of languages** (De Soete & Slembrouck, 2023)
- **Disciplinary differences**: industrial design engineering is more inclined towards a multilingual operationalization of EMI than bio-science engineering (De Soete, 2023)
- Different positions on the EMI-multilingualism spectrum based on **contextual factors**:
 - Discipline
 - Student population
 - Lecturer's linguistic background
 - Instructional method
 - Pragmatic concerns

Conclusion:

EMI is enacted in various ways, often **multilingually**, allowing full use of lecturers' and students' linguistic repertoires. This is guided by an **informal language policy made up of activity-bound interactional expectations** (i.e., which language is appropriate in which setting and for what purpose) and carefully managed and negotiated by the lecturer.

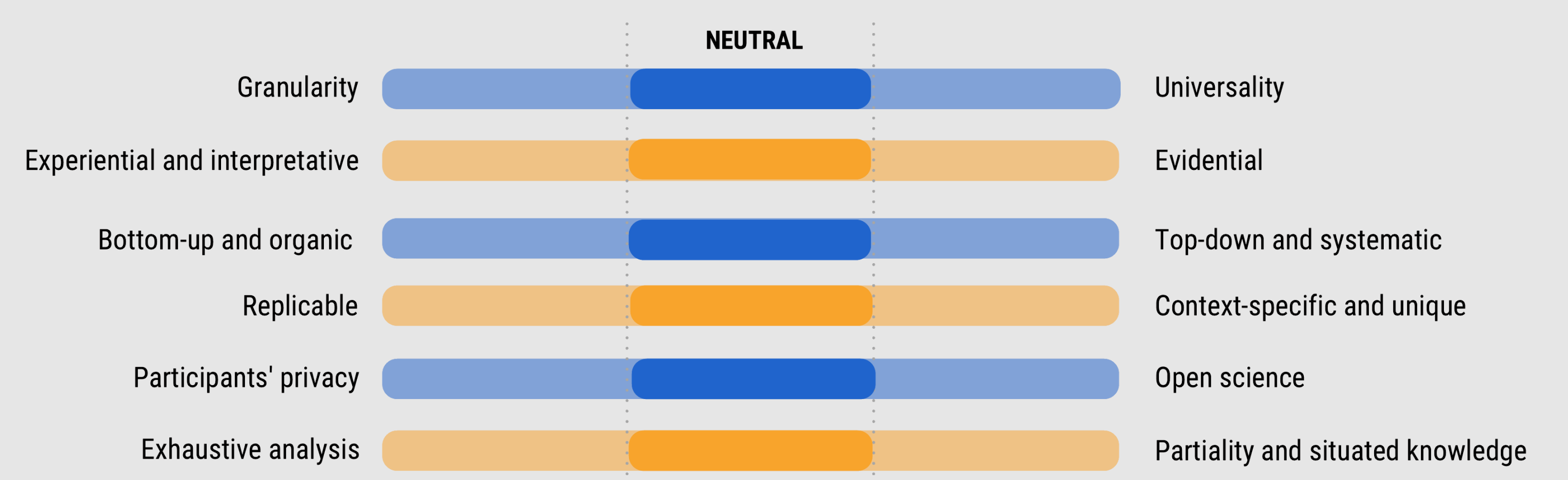
3. ANALYSIS

Interactional data excerpts were selected based on systematic criteria (e.g., fixed # of classes/lecturer/course/program, composition of student population, position in the academic year, instructional method). The resulting interactional dataset was analyzed using an interdisciplinary approach that combines an analysis of practice of terms of **street-level bureaucracy** with Goffmanian **frame analysis**. Findings were triangulated through means of attitudinal and observational data.



5. AN INVITATION TO REFLECT ON EMPIRICISM

Can I invite you to assess both the current study and your own work using the set of axes below. These binary oppositions allow reflection on key research dimensions:



This model is not prescriptive but encourages reflection on disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological choices, especially in qualitative studies (e.g., ethnography, thematic analysis, discourse analysis).

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