Enactment of medium of instruction policy: Enhancement of student learning in courses with English as a medium of instruction

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Enhancement of Student Learning with English as the Medium of Instruction: Students Interview Findings

Dr. CHOI, Tae Hee
Dr. YUEN, Wai Kwan Gail,
Mr. CHEUNG, Kwan Lok

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This research project aims to identify the difficulties and needs in teaching and learning of EFL students and staff during the transition from a tertiary institution where the medium of instruction (MoI) is the mother tongue of the dominant student population to one that adopts English, a foreign language for the majority of the student body, as the primary language of lesson delivery. Through surveys and interviews conducted at a tertiary institution in Hong Kong, the study intends to investigate the perceptions of two groups of stakeholders of the MoI policy and provide critical insights in helping instructors and learners cope with the change. As an increasing number of tertiary educational institutes worldwide are considering the possibility of mandating English as the MoI in view of the perceived strategic value of the language for global competitiveness, this study will render implications for post-secondary institutions which aim to switch their MoI to English or are undergoing a similar change in a wider context.

This series of Briefing Papers presents information about different aspects of the project.

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This paper reports the results from interviews with students, illustrating the difficulties students had experienced in EMI lessons. It then investigates supports available within and outside the focal institute and identifies gaps between student's needs and support provided.

Methodology

The investigations in this phase adopted a qualitative stance to probe into participants' perceptions regarding EMI courses with reference to the findings of the survey. It attempted to identify students' difficulties and needs in learning in an EMI environment, which form a crucial empirical grounding for the devisal of institutional and classroom-level measures to enhance the effectiveness of CLIL teaching. As an extension of the first phase, phase two of the project is composed of interviews with six students. The population of participants was deliberately diversified in terms of self-rated English proficiency, gender, major fields of study, and educational backgrounds to render implications capable of inferring and addressing the needs and concerns of a wider community.

The six student participants who were at that time taking an EMI module were recruited through the student and staff e-mail directory and course instructors. Among the participants, three were female and the other three were male. Three received EMI secondary education, and the other three attended CMI secondary schools. Since the students' needs had found to be closely linked to their English proficiency and/or confidence in using the language, at least two students of each of the self-assessed English proficiency levels, which were basic, medium and advanced, were recruited. Regarding their areas of study, two participants majored in English and the rest came from varied disciplines of Science and Web Technology, Chinese Education, Mathematics Education and Physical Education.

To allow room for researchers to elicit in-depth information from the participants, semi-structured interviews were employed. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with personal information anonymized. Each interview session lasted about one hour. To take researcher impact into consideration, three participants were interviewed in English by a non-Chinese-speaking instructor and the other interviews were conducted in Chinese by a local instructor. The interviews conducted in Chinese were translated into English and member-checked to assure the accuracy of meaning.

Findings
Students' Difficulties
Understanding of Course Content: Word Level and Sentence Level
Despite the diversity in backgrounds, all participants expressed that they had encountered difficulty comprehending the content in EMI courses, which echoed the findings in phase one. However, the differences in their English proficiency resulted in different levels of comprehension obstruction. Participant 2, 3, 5 and 6 expressed that the major obstacle in understanding class content concerned technical words or expressions that were used in General Education electives and Professional Studies courses including those in the areas of curriculum, classroom management, and psychology. The most concrete example, and perhaps also the most serious, was given by participant 5, who had "no time to do the checking of each words because there were 60 pages of the PowerPoint and on each slide and there were five to ten words that I don't understand." On the other hand, participant 1 and 4, who were both English-major students and presumably more proficient users of English among the participants, revealed that their problems in understanding were on, at least, the sentence level rather than on the word level. Participant 1 said she understood every word but failed to construct meaning from the combination of the sentence segments. Participant 4 said she had difficulty understanding concepts, and translating terms in English into Chinese, which shows that her level of comprehension was at least beyond the word level. In addition to the difference in comprehension levels, the understanding of content of these two groups also concerned different receptive skills. When the interviewees talked about comprehension problems, non-English major participants mainly focused on both reading and listening while English major participants only mentioned problems in listening.

Participation in the Classroom: Peer Pressure
Students' lack of understanding of course content, along with speaking competency, decreased class participation in EMI courses. All participants said their attention level in EMI lessons would be low or they would even "tune out" if their understanding of the course content was weak, especially, as participant 1 said, in a mass lecture, where students would more likely to chat with each other. However, only non-English major participants (participant 2, 3, 5 and 6) expressed that classroom interaction would be affected. Participant 2 and 3 said that they would refrain from asking questions in class if their understanding of the topic was inadequate; participant 5 and 6 said that students would not contribute much verbally because they would be afraid that their peers would laugh at their English. Participant 5 described what his thinking would be in an EMI course: "Suppose the teacher was a foreigner, I wouldn't speak a lot, because the others would know my English was bad as soon as I started talking. That's what I sometimes thought."

Completion of Assessment and Workload: Academic Linguistic Repertoire
Except participant 4, the English-major student who received secondary education in an EMI school, all participants stated that they had encountered difficulty tackling written assessments, especially essays, in EMI courses. They attributed their struggles in writing to the inadequacy of their linguistic repertoire required in English academic writing, claiming that they had had trouble writing in academic style with appropriate vocabulary, sentence structures, and organization skills. To accumulate linguistic resources for successfully completing assignments, they chose to read extra reference materials or sample assignments in English, which intensified their workload besides reading to understand course content in English.

Motivation: Prospect-directed
The generally low motivation of students taking EMI courses exacerbated their learning experience which had already been obstructed by the English language barrier. In the Hong Kong context, as suggested by all participants, the most common type of motivation in learning English is instrumental motivation, which "involves perception of purely practical value in learning the L2" (Saville-Troike, 2012, p. 92) such as career and education opportunities. Thus, the need to use English in students' anticipated career is a chief factor determining students' willingness to study in English. Participant 1 and 4, who themselves were supposedly experiencing more stress for having to take courses offered by the English department, at which the teachers assessed students' language besides content, ascribed non-English major students' low motivation to their future work contexts. Participant 4's and 6's opinions, when asked about whether certain modules would be appropriate to be EMI and certain would not, were a case in point in combination: "Practical courses should take the actual workplace situation into consideration." "[T]here is no reason to ask a student majoring in ECE to teach pre-school children in English." However, participant 3 and 6 expressed that low motivation to learn through English could be outweighed by a high interest level of course content.

Students' Needs
When asked about what supports in general students taking an EMI course would need, comments from the participants pointed at understanding of learning content and tackling assignments.

Understanding of Course Content: Classroom Practice and Materials Development
Participants' opinions about their needs in terms of understanding target knowledge concerned in-class practice and materials design. Generally they expressed that students were in need of more receptive supports. Some demanded more input especially before teaching commences such as definitions of key terms in Chinese and handouts with

Chinese explanations; some said that their teachers' classroom language was opaque and could be plainer. Participant 1 considered having a handout in hand while listening to the teacher useful in consolidating understanding.

In terms of understanding, participant 1, 3, 5, 6 talked about the provision of learning materials, and almost exclusively focused on handouts. They said that to better assist understanding handouts would need to be in more detail, and all of them, except participant 1, claimed that Chinese translations of important concepts could be added. In their responses, unexpectedly, little attention was paid to reference books, which were supposedly a major source of knowledge in tertiary education. Participant 1 provided an explanation:

> To help understand the content better, so I think they just want more notes so they don't need to …… Usually we have a textbook, and usually students don't have the patience to read that. They just want to, they wish that they can read the handouts and learn everything in the handouts. But maybe that's not very realistic.

Her response shows that there might be a contradiction between the perception of teachers and students in terms of the function of a handout. Teachers would, presumably, recognize handouts as an assistive, auxiliary tool rather than a principal channel of knowledge transmission, as some students were said to have perceived it to be.

Completion of Assessment: Individual Support and Teacher Feedback
Comments in this aspect mainly concerned essay assignments. Participant 1, 5 and 6 expressed that individual support for academic writing was needed since most students lacked experience or training in academic writing before entering the institution. Participant 5's personal experience seemed to represent a rather serious case that he and his classmates did not even "know where to begin" when tackling an essay assignment in English. He claimed that individual instructions in writing essays were needed and an ideal duration would be two to three class sessions.

Presumably having less trouble with academic writing, participant 1 and 6 only demanded feedback, both from teachers and peers, on their work. Participant 6 added that the more room for improvement the teacher pointed out, the more students could learn from the assignment, and elaborated:

> And I think comments to your work are important, more than your learning. Because you don't know what level you have reached when you learn, but if you use it, and there are people who give you comments, it's the most important step……
> [The teacher should] comment on the content, indicating [things like] 'this sentence is not written clearly,' 'what does it mean?'

He further suggested that the assessment of a course could be divided into multiple parts so as to let students learn continuously instead of a one-off assignment weighing 100% of the overall course grade.

Implications

Pedagogical and Institutional Considerations

Results show that student participants needed a variety of support concerning the areas of receptive understanding and academic writing. Students with lower English proficiency required more support for acquiring content-obligatory vocabulary while more competent learners of English needed auditory input appropriate to their level. It is suggested that teachers of EMI courses could consider preparing content-rich handouts with Chinese translation especially for key terms and concepts, and uploading them on Moodle or other online learning platforms before class; in terms of classroom language, teachers could use plain language in short sentences with simple structures (e.g. avoiding complex sentences and jargon). For academic writing, instructors are advised to allocate more time, preferably two tutorial sessions, for assignment instructions and give more formative feedback to students on their writing especially on language use and organization.

The lack of motivation among the student population sheds light on a more wide-concerning issue, the MoI policy implementation. In the socio-cultural context of Hong Kong, the motivation to learn English is normatively of the instrumental type, being influenced by individual career and/or higher education aspiration. As the focal institute is a teacher's college, a large number of students are trained to be teachers of different specialized subjects at local primary or secondary schools, where command of English may not necessarily be as valued as in other sectors in the society. There thus arises a pragmatic concern of whether it is worth jeopardizing teacher-training quality in exchange of doubtful, unsecure outcomes with the adoption of a rudimental framework of which the fine-tuning and the development of corresponding supportive measures may entail enormous time and effort. The focal institute is advised to conduct a feasibility study vis-a-vis the language mandate and consult experts in CLIL to overhaul the implementation process.

Self-learning Strategies and Resources

From the interviews, the difficulties encountered by students in EMI courses mainly, in essence, concerned their English proficiency particularly technical words, and academic writing. Although there is a language center at the focal institute, participants, however, generally claimed that the supports it had offered were unsatisfactory in aspects such as propaganda, service availability and relevance. As participant 1 recalled her and her classmates' experience attending compulsory modules offered by the center:

> During the course, in the course outline it says the course will help us to improve our reading and speaking and also academic writing but nothing taught about academic writing. Nothing really related to academic writing. And for the advanced level they said their lesson was more fun but still not related to academic writing. They said they had to play some games in English, so it's more interesting than ours, just read to one another, but I don't think that's very helpful or support the language learning.

With their negative perception of the center, an eclectic but immediate solution would be providing self-study resources for students.

For the aspect of English proficiency, students are advised to before each class session read textbooks or reference books with special attention paid to bold items, which are likely to be important concepts or technical words. If explanations in the materials were too opaque, students could find those terms on Wikipedia, which tends to provide more detailed and simpler explanations, usually, with multiple language options. The notion of academic writing is relatively more complicated because it entails a wide range of knowledge and a specific set of linguistic repertoire. As overhauling the service of the language center would take considerable time, an efficient solution to this could be using resources on the internet. A number of web pages that focus on different aspects of academic writing and English grammar accessible to undergraduate students have been carefully selected and listed on the website.

If you have any further inquiries, please contact Dr. Tae hee CHOI at choith@ied.edu.hk.

Reference

Saville -Troike, M. (2012). *Introducing second language acquisition*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.