

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION (EMI) IN THE CASE OF AN *INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION* COURSE IN ENGLISH

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Abstract. English has become an international means of communication. Thus, it is gaining its popularity worldwide as a means of instruction in higher education all over the world. Although English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has grown exponentially in recent years, a number of perceived needs and challenges still remain unaddressed. This article starts with a brief description of EMI methodology. Then, it discusses the results of the study, the main objective of which was to find answers to the following research questions: (1) How do the learners perceive the EMI course? and (2) What are the challenges faced by the students in the EMI classes? The participants of the research project described here were three groups of international students attending an Interpersonal Communication (IC) course in English at one of technical universities in Poland.

Key words: English as a Medium of Instruction, interpersonal communication, students' perceptions, presentation skills, technical university students

INTRODUCTION

English has become a lingua franca (Drożdżał-Szelest and Szczuka-Dorna, 2013; Phuong and Nguyen, 2019), therefore, it is gaining its popularity worldwide as a means of instruction in higher education all over the world. Researchers in the field of Second Language Learning have been interested in the role of English as a Medium of Instruction among different groups of students. What is more, some scholars have made attempts to define and describe what actually EMI refers to taking into consideration different perspectives and points of view. The current paper describes the outcomes of a small-scale study conducted in the Centre of Languages and Communication of Poznan University of Technology in the academic year 2021/2022. In the first part of this article the author focuses on literature review. The second part discusses the method, i.e. aims and research questions, participants as well as data collection and data analysis procedures. Finally, the results, discussion, implications and conclusions are presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is beyond doubt that EMI is gaining its popularity all over the world. In line with this tendency, universities in Poland introduce EMI in their programmes. Vogel (2021: 88) claims that 'Introducing EMI does make the European University a more attractive place for international students'. Sawicka (2021: 91) suggests that

The main aim of implementing English Medium Instruction (EMI) is to internationalise the education on offer, particularly in higher education. Internationalising a university involves attracting foreign students, employing international faculty as well as preparing local students for the international world of education and employment.

It must be highlighted, however, that the labels given to EMI as well as its definitions are inconsistent and sometimes confusing (Briggs, Dearden and Macaro, 2018). As Macaro, Curle, Pun, An and Dearden (2017) point out in a great number of studies they researched the label that was used to refer to EMI was 'English medium instruction', 'English as *a* medium of instruction', 'English as *the* medium of instruction' or 'English-medium education'. There were also single cases of scholars using other terminology such as 'parallel-language education', 'English as a lingua franca', 'partial English medium', 'English content-based instruction' and 'English taught programmes'. Macaro et al. (2017) also claim that EMI is a term used ubiquitously geographically and usually is applied to higher education. In Europe, but not exclusively in Europe, however, it is labelled 'content and language integrated learning' (CLIL). In this paper the label 'English as a medium of instruction' is used and EMI is defined as '[...] the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the populations is not English' (Macaro, 2018: 19). It is interesting to note that previous research projects on EMI have generated rich descriptions of learners' and teachers' perceptions of EMI. They included the respondents' attitudes and perceived challenges or obstacles. Generally speaking, students' positive attitude towards EMI has been reported. For example, Galloway, Kriukow and Numajiri (2017) write that, according to the questionnaire surveys and interviews conducted among over 500 students at 12 higher education institutions and 28 staff members at 8 universities in Japan and China, students mostly are positively inclined towards EMI courses or programs, with nearly 90 per cent agreeing that EMI is appropriate at a university level. A similar outcome was reported in Kong and Wei's (2019) survey of almost 300 Chinese students. In the above-mentioned study, 70.3 per cent of the participants agreed with the statement 'EMI helps improve my English language proficiency'. What is more, Galloway

et al.'s (2017) research showed that, according to faculty members, EMI was beneficial for students' overall language knowledge and subject knowledge. Last but not least, 25 university teachers from Austria, Italy, and Poland in Dearden and Macaro's (2016) interview had a positive attitude towards EMI and believed that EMI could improve students' English.

METHOD

1 AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was conducted with the purpose of investigating students' perspectives on English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) within the *Interpersonal Communication* course in English. It focused on a very distinctive group of learners, namely, technical university students who are expected to attain a high level of communication skills in English to be able to work successfully as engineers in the future. The following research questions (RQs) were addressed:

RQ1: How do the learners perceive the EMI course?

RQ2: What are the challenges faced by the students in the EMI classes?

2 PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 30 university students (12 females and 18 males), enrolled in the first year of a three-year BA programme. On average, they were 20.7 ($SD = 3.2$) years of age. As Figure 1 shows, most of the learners were Polish ($N = 20$) and others came from the following countries: India ($N = 2$), Azerbaijan ($N = 1$), Zimbabwe ($N = 1$), Rwanda ($N = 1$), Ukraine ($N = 2$), Saudi Arabia ($N = 1$), Nigeria ($N = 1$), Belarus ($N = 1$). When it comes to the students' mastery of the target language (TL), it could be characterized as falling somewhere between the B2 and C1 levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001). The learners' field of study was Sustainable Building Engineering and all the subjects were taught in English. The course led by the author of this paper was *Interpersonal Communication (Effective Presentation Skills)*. The students had 15 meetings with the teacher (30h) once a week.

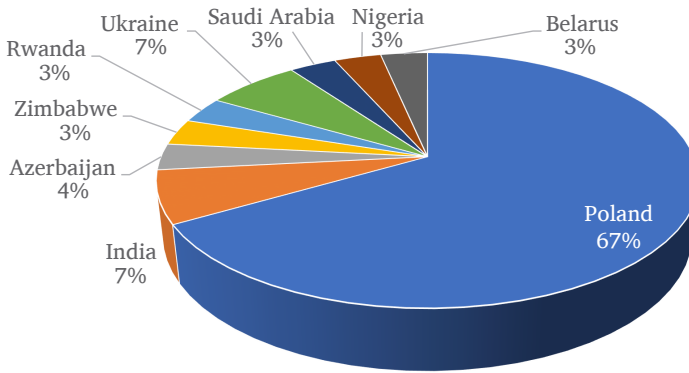


Figure 1 The participants of the study according to countries

The main objectives of the course were as follows:

- providing students with techniques for preparing and delivering an effective scientific and business presentation with analysis of the stages: content and organization, form and message, verbal and body language, audio-visual aids (with particular emphasis on the design, description and interpretation of graphs, diagrams, charts);
- providing the ability to implement and use databases and statistics efficiently;
- providing the ability to use source materials, i.e. respecting copyrights and prohibiting plagiarism;
- developing students' ability to cope with asked questions, participate in the panel discussion and interact with the audience.

The course programme is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Course programme

Course programme	
1.	Introduction to the course of Interpersonal Communication
2.	Listening skills
3.	Speaking skills
4.	Non-verbal communication
5.	Preparing for public speaking: presentations
6.	Intercultural communication
7.	Students' presentations
8.	Students' presentations
9.	Feedback and assessment
10.	Summary of the course and final grades

DATA COLLECTION

In order to collect the requisite data, both quantitative and qualitative research instruments were utilized. They were designed for the purpose of the study by the author of this paper. They were as follows:

- *A background questionnaire* – this tool was composed of three parts:
 - Part I comprised items related to demographic information concerning the participants, such as their country of origin, sex, age, field of study, mother tongue as well as their self-evaluation of English proficiency.
 - Part II included 13 4-point Likert-scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) that referred to the students' perceptions of the EMI course they took part in.
 - Part III presented two open-ended questions pertaining to the greatest benefits and challenges of the EMI course.
- *Semi-structured interviews* – these were conducted with 6 volunteers and audio-recorded. The interviewees were asked the following questions which were further elaborated upon, depending on the responses:
 - Are you satisfied with the fact that you participated in the EMI course? If yes, why?
 - Did the course motivate you to develop your presentation skills?
 - What are the greatest benefits of such a course?
 - What difficulties did you experience during the course?
 - Which topic of the course was the most interesting for you and why?
 - If you could change/add something to the course, what would it be?

Due to the fact that some of the students participating in the research project came from other countries than Poland and all of the learners manifested high levels of foreign language proficiency, the background questionnaire and the interviews were conducted in English.

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics, which comprised calculating the mean and standard deviation values. When it comes to the qualitative analysis, first of all the data were transcribed. Then, they were thoroughly read in order to obtain a better picture of the available information. Finally, the data were read and re-read with the purpose of finding some regularly occurring issues.

RESULTS

1 QUANTITATIVE DATA

Table 2 shows the participants' responses to the EMI questionnaire items. As can be seen from the Table, the highest averages were for the following statements:

- 'I am confident in using English in classroom discussions'. ($M = 4.3$; $SD = 0.75$)
- 'Studying in the EMI class makes me more active and competitive'. ($M = 4.3$; $SD = 0.75$)
- 'Studying in the EMI class correlates with my being more open towards other cultures'. ($M = 4.3$; $SD = 0.8$)
- 'The EMI course helps me to prepare presentations in English'. ($M = 4.3$; $SD = 0.76$)
- 'I have no difficulty in delivering an oral presentation in English'. ($M = 4.3$; $SD = 0.8$)
- 'Delivering an oral presentation in English is a stressful experience for me'. ($M = 4.3$; $SD = 0.75$)

The lowest averages were for the following items:

- 'I have problems with understanding the academic teacher'. ($M = 1.63$; $SD = 0.8$)
- 'I cannot communicate effectively with the lecturer or express my ideas clearly in English'. ($M = 2.06$; $SD = 1.41$)
- 'I have difficulty in expressing my thoughts due to my limited English-speaking ability'. ($M = 2.06$; $SD = 1.01$)

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for the EMI questionnaire

($N = 30$)	Mean	SD
1. I am confident in using English in classroom discussions.	4.3	0.75
2. Studying in the EMI class makes me more active and competitive.	4.3	0.75
3. Studying in the EMI class correlates with my being more open towards other cultures.	4.3	0.8
4. The EMI course helps me to prepare presentations in English.	4.3	0.76
5. I have no difficulty in delivering an oral presentation in English.	4.3	0.8
6. Delivering an oral presentation in English is a stressful experience for me. If yes, why?	4.3	0.75
7. The EMI course helps me to develop my communication skills.	4.1	1.0
8. The EMI course helps me to understand other lectures at the university. If yes, why?	2.9	1.28

(N = 30)	Mean	SD
9. The EMI course can help me improve my learning motivation and interests in other cultures.	3.6	1.18
10. I have problems with understanding the academic teacher. If yes, why?	1.63	0.8
11. I have difficulty in expressing my thoughts due to my limited English-speaking ability.	2.06	1.01
12. I cannot communicate effectively with the lecturer or express my ideas clearly in English.	2.06	1.41
13. I am willing to take EMI courses in the future.	3.4	1.32

The researcher also asked the students to provide additional answers to some open-ended questions (items: 6, 8, 10). The responses presented in Table 3 and further are in the original wording of the students.

Table 3 Open-ended answers to items 6, 8, 10 of the questionnaire

Questions	Students' responses
6. Delivering an oral presentation in English is a stressful experience for me. If yes, why?	<p>'It's always stressful to present something in front of crowd'</p> <p>'I don't like public speaking'</p> <p>'Every presentation is hard'</p> <p>'I'm always stressed of public presentations'</p> <p>'Simply pressure of public speech'</p> <p>'I am stressed do talk to a large audience'</p> <p>'I am worried that I will misspell something or forget a word'</p> <p>'I am afraid that I'll make some mistakes and the audience won't understand me correctly and also because I have this thought in my mind that <i>it's not my first language</i> and I don't know some specific scientific words. But I am trying to <i>break this barrier</i> during this course'</p> <p>'I'm afraid of other people's criticism'</p> <p>'Because I started learning English only 10 months ago'</p>
8. The EMI course helps me to understand other lectures at the university. If yes, why?	<p>'Because we are learning useful phrases and words connected to our major'</p> <p>'A lot of communications'</p> <p>'We practise more English, so it is effective during other classes'</p> <p>'Because English is one of the most commonly known language, and I know how to speak English'</p> <p>'It enhances my presentation skills so even if I give presentations in other lectures I will have more confidence and knowing how to present a topic'</p>

Questions	Students' responses
10. I have problems with understanding the academic teacher. If yes, why?	'Talking too quietly' 'Sometimes I have problems with understanding academic teachers because some of them has bad pronunciation and they do a lot mistakes so that's why not everything is always well understood' 'Not all of them but some of them it's really hard to get what they are saying maybe because English is their second language' 'Some of them have poor English'

As mentioned above, the participants of the study were also asked to provide answers to two open-ended questions. Some of the responses are presented below:

1. What is the greatest benefit of the EMI course?

- 'A chance to improve language skills related to the engineering field'
- 'To know new cultures and customs that are used in this country'
- 'A lot of speaking practice'
- 'It allows us to learn language which is connected with our field of study. We also learn skills and expressions which make my understating on others subjects better.'
- 'getting to know different cultures'
- 'I can meet people from all over the world'
- 'being able to communicate effectively with the teacher and your peers'
- 'It allows me to meet other English speakers especially in a country where English is not the official language'
- 'improving social interaction and encouraging connection between peers'
- 'Feel confident delivering presentations'

2. What is the greatest challenge of the EMI course?

- 'sometimes vocabulary is very difficult and I have to use a dictionary'
- 'to talk a lot'
- 'Presenting to a large audience of students'
- 'To stay confident'
- 'To understand people's view on the world, they all have different cultures'
- 'making a presentation in front of a group of people'
- 'What I can consider the greatest challenge of the course is the pronun-ciations. Our local accents is always in the way, therefore it is difficult for us to speak and pronounce English words properly'
- 'My personal problem would be presenting because I have stage fright'
- 'Time management'.

2 QUALITATIVE DATA

Apart from the data collected by means of the questionnaire, several of learners also took part in an audio-recorded interview. Some of the students' responses are presented below:

Question 1: Are you satisfied with the fact that you participated in the EMI course? If yes, why?

To be honest, The EMI course was my favorite class among all others. Classes were full of fun, and they were educating. I am so happy to complete this course because it taught me many things about the cultures around the world, people's body language and so on.

I was satisfied with participating in EMI course for I have gained more skills in terms of effective communications by: (1) Understanding how culture differences shape/influence communication; (2) Understanding different body languages and their interpretation in different parts of the world and of course how they also influence the communication; (3) Improving my communication skills in the team.

Just to mention few.

Question 2: Did the course motivate you to develop your presentation skills?

Yes, it definitely boosted my interest in preparing presentations. The teacher once asked us to prepare a presentation, and I was so amused while preparing it. Meanwhile, presenting it in the class was a little bit stressful, but later I found it enjoyable. I wish, I could prepare more presentations.

Question 3: What are the greatest benefits of such a course?

To my mind, the greatest benefit of this course is being aware of different cultures. Personally, I like travelling and having background from this course gives you some information which would make your trip easier and funnier. Besides that, as we talk and share our thoughts more, we get more confidence, which might be the best thing for introvert people.

Question 4: What difficulties did you experience during the course?

I had no difficulties (the most frequent answer)

Question 5: Which topic of the course was the most interesting for you and why?

The whole content of this course was really interesting to me but trying to rank them 'Culture difference' was the most interesting one to me. Because it helped to understand the cultures from different parts of the world, as we tried to have the real conversation with students from those different parts, and I gained a lot from those epic moments.

Question 6: If you could change/add something to the course, what would it be?

I would just wish that they could add this course to all circles/semesters. As you probably know, engineering is a difficult field of a study, However, students may get some fun through this course and make their university times more colorful.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to address two research questions which concerned students' perceptions of the EMI course and challenges they potentially may face taking part in such classes. As to RQ1, it is clear that the participants of the study manifested a positive attitude towards the EMI course. It is in line with the findings of other scholars, e.g. Galloway et al. (2017), Phuong and Nguyen (2019), Yildiz, Soruç, and Griffiths (2017) or Kong and Wei (2019). As regards RQ2, the learners enumerated the following difficulties: vocabulary that can sometimes be difficult, presenting to large audiences, understanding different cultures, pronunciation and time management while preparing a public speech. Taking into account all the data collected by means of the questionnaires and interviews it seems that EMI is a promising area of research. However, it still has a number of unanswered questions. It might be interesting to conduct further research projects with a greater number of students from a larger range of disciplines or universities. The more so, the study reported in this paper was conducted in a university environment in Poland, but it would be interesting to know whether EMI students in different contexts encounter similar or different challenges and needs. Another useful line of inquiry could be connected with the perceived difficulties of EMI lecturers. In addition to this, taking into account personal interests of the present researcher, studies might be conducted to investigate whether learner variables (e.g. motivation or grit) affect the findings of the present study. Finally, a dynamic approach might investigate whether learners' perceptions of the EMI course and challenges vary over time.

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