TEACHING IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

EMI (English as the Medium of Instruction) has led NRU HSE to implement the use of English in teaching different subjects. It takes into account the institution's language policy and the programs which offer subjects in English, as well as the needs and benefits of the teachers and students. The use of English is increasing in tertiary education. The concept of teaching content in another language, other than that of the students', has existed since the past century. But its study has not showed how to progress in these subjects. So, it was necessary to collect qualitative and quantitative data by means of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaire data and feedback from students taking such classes at NRU HSE shed light on problems involved with EMI classes. The findings of this needs analysis that was carried out in this paper can help to create an action plan that will include training schemes to foster internationalization. The report concludes with practical recommendations for language support activity and improved English language abilities.

Keywords: English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI); internationalization; qualitative and quantitative data: questionnaire.

1 INTRODUCTION

Speaking about EMI, it is necessary to mention that it may have both cultural and political implications in countries where the first language is not English, internationalization of education and the desire to compete globally has led to the growth of English-medium instruction (EMI) in higher education around the world.

The internationalization and globalization of higher education are also key factors influencing the growth of EMI in non-English speaking cultural contexts [1], [2]. As English is one of the most widely used languages today, EMI has often been seen as a means to gain access to an international academic community whose lingua franca is English [3], [2]. According to Graddol, "the need to teach some subjects in English, rather than the national language, is well understood: in the sciences, for example, up-to-date textbooks and research articles are obtainable much more easily in one of the world languages and most readily of all in English" [4].

This article focuses on the effects of English-medium instruction on language proficiency in the subject of higher education context in NRU Higher School of Economics. Changes in language proficiency, in the knowledge of the subject studied in English by students at this university is paid special attention to. This article described the environment in which the study took place. It looked at education in NRU Higher School of Economics and the language policies in education in relation to the social, cultural, economic, and political issues which influence them. It examined the general use of English in NRU Higher School of Economics, and its usage within the HSE’s education system, along with discussing the institutional context in which this study took place.

This study looked at the language proficiency of students at NRU Higher School of Economics and the change that took place in their English language ability and subject proficiency over the course of EMI study. It is the goal to develop and compete globally which fuels the demand for English language learning as it reflects the contemporary power balance and offers the hope that mastery of the language will lead to employment and prosperity for the country’s citizens [5]. So, one can see and understand why courses are taught in English at the university level.

The basis of the academic experience is usually focused on six learning outcomes: language, information technology, critical thinking and quantitative reasoning, information literacy, global awareness, and leadership.

English is the medium of instruction for the university courses, so it is necessary to make sure that students enrolled have a minimum level of English before starting the course. That is why all the students at the Public Administration Department take a unified State Exam in English at school.
2 BACKGROUND

In countries where English is not the official language, previous research regarding English-medium instruction has primarily investigated its implementation in relation to sociocultural politics and the rationale for using EMI. Research has explored language policy and reasons behind the increase in English-medium instruction due to the internationalization of education, globalization, and the employability of graduates [6], [7], [8], [9], [3], [10], [11], [12], [13]. Mouhanna indicated in his research cultural issues that though "the use of English served as a barrier to students' comprehension of course content, and required much more support or time to translate given information», it is considered important to continue with EMI as it made students marketable for jobs.[13] Along with the desire to be internationally competitive, it was indicated that the ease of finding up-to-date materials in English has led to an increase in courses taught through the medium of English [14]. Airey and Linder noted that some of the positive effects of English-medium instruction for universities in Sweden were that they were able to accommodate overseas students and foreign academics, relevant course texts were available in English, students had a competitive advantage in the job market and were prepared for an academic world dominated by English. They note though that little research has been done on the effects of second-language lectures on students’ learning [15].

English-medium instruction in the context of this study is primarily seen as a means of delivering course content. Teachers are not specifically using instructional techniques to improve the language proficiency of students. This immersive environment in the target language that students experience in higher education will be considered an ideal environment for second language acquisition by some theorists [16].

While immersion contexts are generally believed to provide input and exposure to language which will lead to language acquisition [16]. Educational policies related to improving language ability especially in EFL contexts are based on the idea that content instruction in a second language will aid in its development [11]. A few studies have investigated change in language ability during the course of English-medium instruction [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22].

Studies have explored issues of implementation of EMI which include teacher involvement in policy decisions [23] the difficulties they face [24], [25] and the adaptations that students must make when studying in a second language [26], [27], [28].

Some academic issues investigated in relation to EMI and language proficiency level include whether EMI instruction is as effective a means of delivering content as doing so in the learners’ first language [6], [15], [29], [13], [30]. A variety of research, as noted above, has been done in relation to EMI, but little of it has actually explored the effectiveness of EMI in relation to increasing language and subject proficiency.

3 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to empirically investigate the students’ attitude to EMI and to their academic proficiency when content delivery takes place in English. It seeks to discover what happens to students’ English language and academic skills while studying in English-medium classes in NRU Higher School of Economics. The views of students are examined using various methods in order to more fully understand and describe whether language and academic proficiency increases during English-medium instruction in NRU Higher School of Economics.

This paper develops the idea that it is important to understand if within the context of NRU Higher School of Economics higher education exposure to English as the medium of instruction was adequate to increase proficiency. The main focus of this study is to empirically investigate the assumption that language learning takes place during content delivery using EMI.

The research was designed to investigate the following questions.

1. Does the language ability of students adequately improve during their study?
2. What are the students’ perceptions of their English language ability as a result of attending English-medium classes?
3. What is students’ perception of academic proficiency at the beginning and at the end of the course?
Participants in this study were thirty 4th year students of The Public Administration Department. This group of students was chosen as participants because they were the students who passed IELTS exam at the end of the 2nd English language course.

Student questionnaires were developed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from participants regarding their perception of the English language and academic abilities. Questions asked were about how students perceived the English language and academic abilities and how they managed to cope with the English-medium instruction.

Questions were organized in the way to get information about perceived English language, academic abilities and their improvement, and the ability to perform tasks related to academic study in English.

The questionnaires included various types of questions in order to provide both quantitative and qualitative data in relation to students’ perceptions of language ability (see Appendix).

By using a variety of item types on the questionnaire, different analysis techniques were possible which offered a range of ways to look at the data collected. The use of closed questions was a useful way to generate frequency of response information.

The open-ended questions on the surveys offered a chance for students to more fully explain their choices if needed and could shed light on an issue.

To more fully answer the questions related to perceptions of language and proficiency ability, semi-structured interviews of students were conducted. Semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewer to have a structural framework for the interview with a list of themes or main questions to be covered. Interviews were used to validate responses from the questionnaires, and to understand more fully students’ perceptions.

The interview schedule used in this paper was semi-structured with open-ended questions based on extending and explaining responses from the online survey (see Appendix). The general issues of the interviews were:

- perception of proficiency in the English language and in academic subjects' skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking);
- perception of improvement in language skills throughout the course of study;
- ability to cope with material presented in English during the time of study;
- problems faced due to language ability and how these are dealt with;

Interviews were conducted with the student participants; all the interviews were recorded. The interviews followed a general format with student interviews lasting from 12 to 20 minutes each.

Interviews were transcribed and looked at qualitatively. Themes, issues, and ideas were identified and noted across interviews to add support to the quantitative results.

Information from open-ended response questions and interviews was treated as qualitative data, and content analysis was undertaken to find commonalities and themes to investigate more fully the relationship with quantitative data gathered. Qualitative data was then used to reinforce results found from the quantitative data through the use of quotes from participants to support or explicate findings.

4 DISCUSSION

The effects of English-medium instruction can be seen from several points of view. This paper also examines English language ability from students’ perspective, exploring perceptions surrounding the results of learning the subject and language ability.

The responses to the question of whether students’ English skills met their expectations for studying in an English-medium environment were analysed.

All 30 participants included an explanation of their answer to the question. Sixteen of these participants noted that there was a lot of variation in their students’ language ability. Variability in the sense of overall performance was noted by six of the respondents as being a result of whether the students had studied English at school.

20 students noted that improvement is necessary and that their language ability is affecting their ability to cover course content, and their ability to learn.
Quantitative data from the questionnaire answered by students was used to look at how students view their English language ability.

30 students commented that they improved their skills because of the “regular exposure to courses” or because “classes and assignments are all in English.” When asked whether they thought their English had improved since entering the EMI course, 80% of the student participants answering the questionnaire agreed that their overall English ability had improved. But answering to the question about the proficiency level of the subject they were studying the students were not so unanimous.

Some of them (20%) preferred to listen to the course in Russian, 15% of the students did not understand the course, 25% could not answer the questions about the course and 40% of the students thought they improved in the subject.

The language ability predicts academic success. The issue of whether it is students’ linguistic abilities or academic abilities that leads to success in higher education for those studying in a second language is very important. The ability to perform academic tasks in a second language will be related to students’ second language proficiency. If students do not have a certain level of proficiency, they will be unable to ask questions in the second language or read assigned materials.

5 CONCLUSION

The article researched using EMI in tertiary institutions contexts where the goal is both the learning of content and language development. Students very often develop expectations about how to learn. This means teachers have to produce materials to explain and support learning of the course content. The major findings of the study are the following:

1. Most participants desired to improve English proficiency to take EMI courses.
2. The majority of students believed that the EMI courses they had taken were helpful.
3. The ability to interact with students of different nationalities motivated their studies.

But there are risks that are posed by opposition to EMI. And they cannot be overstated.

Opponents to EMI insist that students, taking these courses, become more passive in response to expectations.

In order for students to participate in their learning, they need to be able to interact and engage with the materials. In the case of language development this means having the opportunity to use language and grapple with the meaning of texts. Students should afford the opportunity to take control of their own learning and thus learning seems to become more the responsibility of the student. If the students do not control and self-regulate their learning, they come across the lack of interaction and become passive recipients of the language input they receive. It seems that in this particular situation learning as participation is diminished in terms of the language learning that could be taking place during content engagement with the materials presented, and instruction.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

During interviews with students, comments regarding responsibility and expectations for language learning it turned out that the ways of improving current practice should be considered. Students should be offered clearer language goals, changing attitudes toward responsibility of language learning, increasing support. EMI learners are totally exposed to the target language while studying the content so that they have to use language and learn it without spending extra time for it.

Students, in general, feel that just studying content in English is not enough for support and that additional measures are necessary to increase their ability to develop their English language skills.

As it is known the lack of language proficiency turns the students into the listeners. It does improve vocabulary acquisition to a certain extent, but on the other hand it leads to lecture-based teaching. As a result of it, students develop mostly passive language skills.

There is a need to make institutional goals for language development, which should be clear to all members of the university community. Both students and teachers need to be aware of where their responsibility lies in making sure continued language development takes place.
Language development throughout the course of study becomes something to achieve, to work at and develop. To focus on this issue, it is necessary to design a special English language course, which will help students to develop their language skills in order to be a success in EMI courses.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT LANGUAGE ABILITY

The general issues to be explored will be:

− Perception of proficiency in English language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking)
− Perception of improvement in language skills throughout 4 years of study
− Ability to cope with material presented in English during the time of study
− Problems faced due to language ability and how these are dealt with
− Types of perceived support available

Interview Questions

- Do you think your IELTS score has improved since entering the general education program in EMI course?
- Do you face any problems in your courses due to your English-language ability? If yes, what are they? How do you deal with these issues?
- What services does the university provide to help you with your English? Do you take advantage of any of these services?
- Do you use the Writing Centre? When? Why? How often?

Questions associated with the course delivery in English:

- What is the general format of your courses? (lecture, group work, course materials, handouts)
- How do you read up for your courses? When you read up with your friends do you use Russian or English to discuss the course content? Do you take notes in Russian or English?