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English as a medium of instruction: students' strategies

Abstract

Although English medium instruction (EMI) is now widely spread throughout the world, there is surprisingly little research into the challenges students face in the process of trying to learn subject material by means of a non-native language, or how learners attempt to address these challenges. The study reported in this article employed a qualitative approach, using video-recording, an open-ended questionnaire and stimulated-recall interviews, to investigate the difficulties faced by students working in International Relations and Psychology classes in a Turkish university. The students were also asked to identify the strategies they used in an attempt to cope with these difficulties. The students were, indeed, able to list a number of difficulties, but they also managed to produce numerous strategies they used to deal with their problems. Implications are suggested for student support and teacher training, as well as suggestions for ongoing research.

Introduction

In spite of calls to resist the evils of “linguistic imperialism” (Canagarajah, 1999; Phillipson, 1992), and to respect “multilingual realities” (Edwards, 2014: 7), there seems little doubt that English has continued its inexorable march as the global lingua franca. Rightly or wrongly, in terms of current realities, English would seem to be firmly established as the language in which the world does business, interacts socially, travels, and entertains itself. Increasingly also, English is the language which is used for educational purposes. As Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2012) put it, although plurilingualism is promoted as an ideal, “reality indicates that it is English which is preeminent and has become the main foreign language that is used as a means of instruction at universities in Europe and worldwide” (p. xvii). Furthermore, this global expansion is showing no signs of slowing down, since “there is now conclusive evidence.....that across the world we are experiencing a rapid increase in EMI” (Dearden and Macaro 2016: 456-457).

Of course, if subjects are being taught in an environment where English is the dominant language (e.g. UK, USA, New Zealand, Australia, etc.) it is really quite natural that the majority of education would be conducted in English. Indeed, students often come to these countries to study precisely in order to gain exposure to English. It seems less “natural” however, in countries which have their own native language, and which are concerned mainly with teaching students for whom English is a foreign language. Nevertheless, English-medium instruction seems to be spreading further and further. Dearden and Macaro (2016), for instance, discuss the cases of three European countries: Austria, Italy and Poland, and Aguilar (2015) adds Spain. In the Middle East, Inan, Yuksel and Gurkan (2012) debate the expectations of English-medium departments at two Turkish tertiary institutions, while Belhiah and Elhami (2015) consider the EMI situation in the United Arab Emirates. Further east, Lei and Hu (2014) question the effectiveness of EMI in China, Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim and Jung (2011) compare the policy with the reality in Korea, while Chapple (2015)

discusses the use of EMI in Japan. Further south, Viriri (2013) considers the inadequacies surrounding the use of EMI in Zimbabwe. In short, it would seem that EMI has spread almost everywhere.

But why, we might ask, would countries where English is not the native language, or where English has never even been historically important, want to set up courses where English is the medium of instruction? According to Dearden and Macaro (2016), two of the most salient reasons relate to the desire for internationalization and establishing a global profile, and the desire to attract international students and the revenue that they bring with them. But these desires are not without their challenges, perhaps the most prominent of which relates to language proficiency. As Belhiah and Elhami (2015) report regarding the UAE: “the current EMI situation leaves much to be desired with students struggling to learn the subject matter due to their low-proficiency in English” (p.3). According to Byun et al. (2011) this difficulty does not relate only to the students, since there has been “compulsory enforcement of EMI without regard to students’/instructors’ language proficiency” (p. 431); they also bemoan “the lack of a much-needed support system” (ibid.).

Although, as noted above, English-medium instruction is now widespread, there is actually surprisingly little literature on the subject, and what there is often deals with the teachers’ perspectives rather than the students’. Teachers’ perspectives are, of course, important, but we also need to know how students cope in the face of the difficulties inherent in having to make sense of sometimes difficult subject matter with limited linguistic resources.

In order to manage what must seem like an extremely daunting task, students must surely have strategies, defined by Author (2015) as “actions chosen by learners for the purpose of learning or regulating learning” (p. 426). Oxford (2011) claims that strategies can help “make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, and more effective” (p. 14). Yet, although strategies might reasonably be expected to contribute to successful learning for students in an English-medium environment, they are virtually invisible in the EMI literature to date. The study described in this article therefore sought to address this lacuna by seeking the answers to two main questions:

- 1 What difficulties do EMI learners face?
- 2 What strategies do they use to deal with the difficulties?

The Study

Setting and participants

This study took place at a private English-medium university in Istanbul, Turkey. Data were collected using intact classes from two non-English-related departments: International Relations (N=24) and Psychology (N=15). Altogether, there were 39 participants recruited according to convenience factors such as timetabling. All the participants were freshman-year

students at an average age of 18 (20 female, 19 male), from 11 different national backgrounds as (see Table 1):

Table 1: Countries of origin of the students in the survey, with number of students (N) from each country

COUNTRY	N
Turkey	12
Kyrgyzstan	3
Albania	2
Kazakhstan	3
Uzbekistan	3
Indonesia	3
Cambodia	2
Malawi	3
Mali	2
Afghanistan	3
Pakistan	3
Total: 11 Nationalities	39

None of the students was a native-speaker of English, though it can also be seen from Table 1 that, although taking place in a Turkish university, Turkish students were not a majority. In other words, the majority of the class did not speak either Turkish or English as their L1.

Data Collection

Before beginning data collection, both the lecturers and the learners were informed about the study and asked to sign a consent letter assuring them of confidentiality, that participation was voluntary, and the questionnaire results would have no effect on their grades. In fact, all the students who were present agreed and signed the consent form. In order to collect data from a variety of perspectives and to be able to cross-check data and thereby increase reliability, three different data collection instruments were used:

Video recording

The intended function of the video-recordings was twofold: to provide a permanent record of the class for later checking, as well as serving to stimulate learners in the recall sessions. In

order to be able to hear and see the lecturer or the learners clearly, two video-recorders were used: one was fixed on the lecturer's table recording the class from the front, the other was flexible, and held by Author 1 to record the class from the back. Author 1 stood behind while video-recording to minimize any effect on the learners and to help avoid the well-known observer's paradox, whereby the mere presence of an observer can affect "natural" behaviour. In fact, as observed by Author 1 and confirmed by the lecturer, the participants did not care about the recorders, and they did not appear to affect behaviour in any way.

Open ended questionnaire

In order to survey the reactions of all the students, the teachers were asked to finish their classes ten minutes early, at which point the students were given an open-ended questionnaire. In the questionnaire, the learners were asked to reflect and express their thoughts and ideas in their own manner, writing specifically on what type of difficulties they generally face in the EMI classroom. Although they were free to use their mother tongue to articulate their thoughts, most of them wrote in English.

Stimulated Recall

Immediately following the classes, stimulated recall interviews were conducted with seven students to explore cognitive processes which occur in learners' minds while listening to their lecturer. Three of the students were from International Relations, the other four were from the Psychology class. These students were purposively selected either because they were from different language backgrounds or for the practical reason that they were not in an immediate rush to take their other classes. The interviews were performed immediately after the video-recorded classes to increase the likelihood that the data could be easily accessed from short-term memory. As much as possible, the learners were allowed to initiate recalls themselves, with some prompting from the researcher as required to stimulate recollection. The recalls were conducted either in English or in Turkish (which was then translated by Author 1). The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data analysis

The initial step of analysing the data involved examining the open-ended questionnaires for themes. These were first listed (open coding stage), then grouped according to four key themes (axial coding stage): difficulties according to speaking and listening, the lecturer, vocabulary, and affect/cognition. The features of interest regarding difficulties and/or strategy use from the stimulated recalls with the learners were transcribed.

Results

The first author identified 26 distinct themes in the information provided by the students regarding their difficulties with EMI. The second author added an extra theme, making a total of 27. This indicates an inter-rater level of agreement of 96%. The difficulties noted (using the students' own words, including occasional "infelicities") were:

1 Difficulties with speaking and listening (6)

- Understanding the heavy accent of other international students (four times)
- Understanding the English used in classes (four times)
- Understanding the course itself because of my low-level English (two times)
- Interacting with other students as they are not good at English (four times)
- Answering the questions easily (two times)
- Speaking in English – being able to produce what I want to say (two times)

2 Difficulties related to the lecturer (8)

- Following some lecturers because their English is not good enough (three times)
- Lecturers read only from slides (three times)
- Understanding English-speaking lecturers, so feeling bored, or leaving the class (five times)
- Keeping up with the lecturer and the topic (five times)
- Speaking with lecturer when international students speak (three times)
- Interacting with a foreign lecturer (five times)
- Understanding Turkish explanations that lecturer sometimes make (three times)
- Understanding lecture content in English (five times)

3 Vocabulary difficulties (7)

- Understanding vocabulary used in the class (eight times)
- Understanding themes/terms (eight times)
- Getting to know vocabulary (eight times)
- Inferring vocabulary from context (eight times)
- Decoding vocabulary while listening (two times)
- Remembering key vocabulary (four times)
- Looking up vocabulary for different meanings (four times)

4 Affective/cognitive difficulties (6)

- Speaking because I feel shy (three times)
- Interacting with others comfortably (six times)
- Making presentation as I feel embarrassed (three times)
- Remembering things easily (having poor memory) (three times)
- Concentrating on the lecture – distract easily (three times)
- Lack of competition in the school because only few students have good English (three times)

During the stimulated recalls (conducted according to the details in the Data Collection section), the seven interviewed students suggested strategies they used to cope with their

difficulties. Following transcription, the first author initially identified 43 strategies. However, based on the definition of strategy as “actions chosen by learners for the purpose of learning or regulating learning” (Author, 2015), the second author agreed with only 36 of these, producing an initial inter-rater agreement level of 84%. Issues with strategy identification were agreed by negotiation. As with the difficulties, the students’ ideas are reported verbatim, without attempting to correct any “errors”, except for those who preferred Turkish, which had to be translated.

Stimulated recall 1

The two Psychology students in this interview were from Kyrgyzstan (K) and Albania (A). They were purposively chosen because of their active participation in the class, and invited for the interview immediately after the class. They watched the video and provided some examples of their strategies. Some of the strategies they note (e.g. taking notes, sitting at the front, asking questions) are mentioned several times, so they are only counted once.

K: Like for me, when I am trying to understand a topic I try to concentrate on the topic (1) and imagine some different situations or conditions (2). To make sure that I understood I ask related questions (3) I visualize/imagine the situation (4) me in that process

A: Here I try to think out of the box (5) critically think (6) about the information, specify (7) and clarify (8) that everything that I know..... I try to mix the information with my real-life experiences (9) ...internalize the information into myself.. and when I do this I find it I don’t really have to study a lot after class for the exams.

A: Because it is a social ...social psychological lesson, without examples wouldn’t make any sense, so I really try to ask a lot of other examples (10) or solutions to different problems that they face in their life. When we do this usually the information we take in the class is very easily internalized or understood by us.

A: Sitting in the front (11) is very important.

K: Participation (12) is also important. ...makes easier for you to remember later in the exam....it...doesn’t take... time to study it later after the class.

A: Because it help you understand in (emphasized) the class. Whenever there’s something I don’t get it, I always ask specific questions (13). Sitting in the front is very important. Sitting in the back no matter how concentrated you are there are physical barriers and obstacles that won’t let to go on. Take notes (14) as much as I can, but sometimes taking notes the information slips

K: I agree

A: I choose to understand (15) instead of taking notes

K: Yes, it is also my like I don't take notes except for this class as the lecturer forces us. I am taking notes for him like to make him motivated

A: to make him cheerful happy. In this class we take more notes in the other class lessons. Notes are very important, I have no doubt that. But different people have different types of learning, so personally understanding the information very clearly deeply at the first interaction (16) is much important than just taking notes and struggling it late.

A & K: We take notes in English, not in mother tongue (17)

K: When the class is passive, you try to make it more active (18)

A: I try to drag the class with me to the active point and some don't work, and you feel a bit demotivated. If the class is active it inspires me.

K: When you sit behind you see those passive people...distract you. You don't want to participate. Sitting in the front is better because you don't see people behind, concentrate understanding the topic

A: rely on personal previous experience to make it real (19) ...we get a lot of abstract categories or themes. We do this connection it real and it makes very easier. I have to feel myself in the situation (20).

K: it is good for memory and understanding. Generally the theories are not for memory. You should understand them how they work, so putting your own experience (21)

A: When somebody ask you, you will explain with your own experience and with your own words. You don't need to memorize it (22) but what you need is to internally deeply understand (23).

Stimulated recall 2

Two Turkish students were invited immediately after the Psychology class. They preferred to speak in their mother tongue (Turkish), so the transcript below is a translation. They were purposively chosen in order to explore their reasons for being utterly silent in class: they never participated at all. One was male (M), the other female (F)

M: In fact I don't have any hardship, we understand the lecture

F: I also understand everything as I am used to English as a medium in the class. Also we are used to the teacher's speaking or teaching style. We have taken two courses from this teacher

M: When the class is too silent he asks questions

F: We have to stay very alert (24) in his class as he may ask questions at any time and waits for the answers (*they laugh*). I try to catch key words (25). Sometimes I translate (26). But we have to catch up with what he says. In other classes it is not the same.

M & F: This class is serious, requires discipline. We understand but can't speak especially in this class

F: We take another class, research methods, from the same teacher as we find the topics in that class more attractive and interesting it is easy to speak or participate in that class

Stimulated recall 3

An advanced Turkish EFL student who will be called E, from the International Relations class, was interviewed in English:

E: Most of the time I use note-taking in the classroom because it is the easiest way for me to remember what's taught in the class. I have some other strategies but they are not so common as note taking because note taking is written down and when I make use of them every time I can. I...make use of ... I...look for the gestures (27), the emphasize, the stress (28), some verbs, some phrases (29)...If I have really difficulty understanding I ask questions for clarification to make it a better way. I comprehend easily. All these that I use. I understand unknown words from the context, I try to use understanding from the context (30). When I can't understand from the context I look up the dictionary (31). It is very fast at that time while listening I look up to keep the class flowing (32) to catch up with the lecturer simultaneously.

Stimulated recall 4

Two more students, who will be called B and C, from the International Relations class were invited for recalls. They chose their mother tongue (Turkish). They watched themselves from the video, both sitting at the back and never participating. C said only one phrase ("Middle East") during the class.

C: It is not only because of English, but also because the course itself makes me feel bored.

B: I feel shy. Embarrassed. I speak among my friends it is OK but not in class. When the topic is interesting, it attracts my attention. I can't catch up with the teacher because my English is not good, and my memory is not so strong to keep all information

C: We understand but can't speak. When I don't understand I look at the map or PPT (33), pay attention (34) try to get the main idea (35). But although I know the answer, I can't produce; I produce absurd sentences. I can't speak.

B: Students should go abroad (36).

C: Departments should have English classes on course concept themes.

Discussion and Implications

It is not difficult to empathise with some of the students in this study, who feel shy, embarrassed, anxious, uncomfortable, bored. These problems can result an inability to

remember or concentrate. Clearly, many of the students were very aware themselves of their own language “inadequacies” (Viriri 2013). In addition, they managed to identify a number of problematic areas, including the need to interact with other students who may be difficult to understand because of their “heavy accent”, problems with understanding their teacher who sometimes spoke in Turkish (the teacher’s L1), or understanding specialized vocabulary, especially when listening. What, we might ask, should be done about such difficulties? The implication would seem to be that teachers need to be aware of and sensitive to such difficulties if student success is to be maximized.

Those of us who have worked in these kinds of environments know full well that there is often huge pressure to allow students into their chosen courses, even though the fact that their language level is inadequate is crystal-clear. They are often brimming over with good intentions: “I will work hard!” But the fact is that they often have no idea of the enormity of the task, and it is usually not long before they become discouraged and demotivated, like B in stimulated recall 4, who sits silently at the back of the class because “I can’t catch up with the teacher because my English is not good”. What are the implications of this? Should they be denied entry until their language is at a level where they can cope? If so, what should this level be? There appears to be little consistent effort, even on many national levels, let alone internationally, to address these important questions. As Macaro (2015) puts it: “to my knowledge, there is currently no language benchmark for EMI” (p.4). In the meantime, many students are simply being set up to fail.

In fact, the students themselves appeared to be very aware of the potential for strategies to help them be more “effective” (Oxford 2011: 14) and the strategies they identified were numerous (n=36) and varied. Many are already well-known and included in existing strategy inventories: *taking notes*, *asking questions*, *visualizing*, *translating*, *guessing from context*, *using a dictionary*, *paying attention*, etc. But others are rather less commonly mentioned, such as *thinking out of the box* and *sitting at the front* (Albanian student), *using previous experience* (schemata, Kyrgyz student), *watching for body language* (E), *going abroad* (B), etc. It is interesting also to hear the two interviewees from the first stimulated recall talking of trying to “motivate” their teacher by taking notes, and to influence classroom dynamics by being active so as to “drag the class” along and prevent themselves from becoming “demotivated”. Such comments would seem to suggest that many students participate actively in their own learning and that teachers should capitalize on such positive involvement in the interests of promoting successful learning.

Suggestions for further research

First of all, as noted by others (e.g. Macaro 2015) much more research is required. There are many ways in which this preliminary study could be extended, in terms of different locations (locally, nationally or internationally), and different institutional types (primary, secondary, tertiary, state, private, etc.), which might all have different needs and difficulties. More strategies could be elicited and included in inventories which could be used to explore

strategy use more widely and analysed qualitatively. Some of the more interesting strategy suggestions could be probed in more depth (e.g. what exactly does *thinking out of the box* involve?), and how these EMI students compare to EFL learners could also be an interesting question to pursue.

Furthermore, awareness of students' difficulties needs to be raised, and teachers should be informed about how to provide effective strategy instruction to help students cope with the task of learning quite difficult material in a language which is not their own. Learners also need to be provided with language support, the lack of which is noted by Byun et al. (2011), and as suggested by C in stimulated recall 4.

But amid all this, we must also remember that it is not only the students who may be experiencing difficulties. Teachers too may well be struggling to modify their teaching methods (Dearden and Macaro 2016), to provide the needed support even though they may be aware of the need for it, and to deliver satisfactory courses in a language with which they themselves are less than totally comfortable. Teachers, therefore also need training and support. At the moment, very little in the way of support systems for either students or teachers seems to be available, so there is a huge amount of work to be done, first to determine the kind of support that is required and useful, and then to work out the best ways of providing it.

Conclusion

This study has taken a very preliminary look at what is a mushrooming phenomenon in our contemporary globalizing world: the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI). It is difficult not to feel that it has grown so quickly, often fertilized by economic imperatives, that the ability to ensure theoretically sound and supportive practices has not kept up. In this study, we have tried to gain insight into the difficulties students experience with EMI, and some of the strategies they employ to address the difficulties, with the idea that these might be passed on to other students in order to help them to learn more effectively. There is, in fact, much more research required from both the students' and the teachers' points of view in order to attempt to ensure the best possible outcomes for everyone involved as they undertake the very challenging task of teaching and learning in a language which is not their own.

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