

English-medium Instruction at University in China – A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The wholesale expansion of English-medium instruction, especially in higher education in China, has highlighted the gap between what is said and what the reality is in the classroom. English language proficiency expectations add complexity to a milieu where many teachers began their careers teaching in the one of the Chinese languages and many students come from a school environment where heavy emphasis was placed on rote learning. What, then, has this meant for teachers and students? This paper aims to illustrate the challenges of a mainland Chinese university to acquire a strong local academic identity and profile to answer the needs of a knowledge-based society driven by globalisation. The central aim of this study is to critically explore the perspectives of both English language and subject-specific teachers participating in this English as medium of instruction reform. Opportunities and challenges are identified, with recommendations for future practice being made. Amongst the main challenges identified are a top-down approach to English as a medium of instruction reform and the increasing presence of foreign 'experts' in education in the country. Yet, internationalization of universities presents an opportunity for China to be at the vanguard of higher education reform.

Keywords: China, universities, English as a medium of instruction.

INTRODUCTION:

The English language has developed into “the most widely taught, read, and spoken language that the world has ever known” (Kachru & Nelson, 2001). This rapid spread of English has led to a rapid increase in the number of English medium of instruction (EMI) programmes across institutions of higher education around the world. This increase was first seen in Europe and can be attributed to the Bologna Declaration of 1999 by which the European Higher Education Area was established. Since then, the increase in EMI programs can now be seen in many Asian countries, including, more recently, the Chinese mainland. The increasing use of EMI means that universities need to draw up coherent language education policies in consultation with key stakeholders, including teachers and students, for the implementation of EMI.

The global expansion of higher education has brought about more ambitious educational goals that require new curriculum approaches that will have a major impact on teaching and learning (Kehm & Stansaker, 2009); (Hallinger & Lu, 2013). Nowhere has this become so visible as in Asia, where the race has intensified for the provision of EMI programs, as higher education institutions have sought high world university rankings (Altbach & Umakoshi, 2004); (Mok & Cheung, 2011). In fact, it is the increasing emphasis placed on university rankings that has created the impetus for moving towards English as medium of instruction (EMI) in the first place.

Additionally, it needs to be considered that in both the USA and Australia, Chinese students comprise at least a quarter of international student enrolments (Open Doors 20/11, 2011). Not only do these students have to be demonstrate English language proficiency, but they also have to adapt to dialectical teaching (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), which is quite different from the more traditional didactic teaching style that has been the norm in China for generations.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT:

China, along with other countries in the Asian region, has invested heavily in various educational reforms in recent decades. The reasons for this are clear cut – on a macro level, China wished to create a knowledge economy, with the corollary aim of developing the country as an international education hub, and, on a meso level, the goal was to provide a better quality of education for Chinese youth.

China can serve as a unique case for studying complex issues of pedagogic transformations as a result of the interactions between Western educational thinking and non-Western local cultural heritage over the course of modernization (Deng, 2011). The recent curriculum reforms in China, for example, mark a deliberate shift from the traditional teacher-centered knowledge transmission model of classroom pedagogy to one that centers on student autonomy and knowledge construction, curriculum ideas originated from the West (Liu, 2011).

The prevalent Chinese pedagogy right now contains both traditional ‘Chinese’ elements and ‘Western’ elements, in line with the popular slogan currently in use in many facets of Chinese education, i.e. ‘with Chinese characteristics’ (Cheng and Xu, 2011). China has adopted the Western analytical, rational paradigm of thinking, but it has retained the Chinese tradition of emphasizing hard-work and extrinsic motivation in learning (Cheng, 2011). This is a healthy state of curriculum development (Liu W. , 2016).

Concerns, however, are expressed with regard to the medium of instruction. (Choi, 2010) illustrated the antagonisms which may arise with the case of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). In 2005, students opposed CUHK directives that would result in significantly increasing the number of courses taught in English. They accused the administration of undermining teaching in the Chinese language, as Chinese was stated as the principal medium of instruction in the University Ordinance. CUHK justified its position by the risk of losing its competitiveness in favour of mainland Chinese universities, as well as local counterparts. They argued that use of Chinese was tantamount to marginalising CUHK, i.e. not being able to answer the needs of internationalisation (Choi, 2010, p. 243). In other higher education institutions, English has been adopted as medium of instruction. But some non-local students find difficulties with the English-medium teaching and learning environment, while some others report its inadequacies. In fact, ‘the medium of instruction (MOI) issue constitutes the major challenge at the institutional level’ (Cheng, et al., 2009).

The university in this study, established in 2012, is a public institution with a student cohort of approximately 4,000 students. Thus, the university is expanding quickly, thanks in no small part to generous government funding. Goals are clearly defined by the institution, and this, in tandem with a dynamic leadership, is why expansion is happening successfully. The low student-professor ratio (1:10) provides students with abundant opportunities to interact with their professors and enhance their higher-order intellectual skills. Approximately eighty percent of the university’s graduates undertake graduate studies abroad, primarily in the US.

The university plans to intensify English education and to conduct all courses in English, to further its aim of mentoring its students as global leaders. To this end, students in their first two years are required to take intensive English courses. Upon entering the university, freshmen must take a placement test for English. All of this serves to increase the burden of expectations placed upon the English teachers. English teachers were, until two years ago, mainly native Chinese speakers, but now native English speakers comprise approximately two thirds of the English teaching faculty, the result of a university push to satisfy the demands of parents and students.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Culture:

Culture has been defined as “the learned ideas, values, knowledge, rules and customs shared by members of a collectivity (such as those based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, indigeneity, age, disability)” (Holmes, Hughes, & Julian, 2003, p. 157). It is accepted that culture influences how we think and behave (Clancey, 1997). Culture is often treated as one dimension which contributes to team diversity. Diversity is often linked to innovation (Dombrowski, et al., 2007) or considered in the context of how diversity can impact on knowledge management strategies such as how to manage global organisations and teams to more productively create and share knowledge (Haas, 2006).

Chinese culture is widely perceived to focus on collectivistic values (Rozell, Meyer, Scroggins, & A. Guo, 2011). When it comes to education, traditional Eastern education methods have been characterised as didactic (Rao & Chan, 2009), so it has been tempting for Western educators to assume that questioning was an alien concept to Chinese learners, thereby limiting attention to the manner of the interaction within the Western classroom. However, in the Confucian educational tradition, which underpins much of the educational

experience of Chinese learners, while memorisation, understanding, and reflection are emphasised, questioning is also considered to be one of the basic components of education.

Thus, Chinese students often will have experienced educational interactions based upon questioning. The main way in which this questioning differs from the West is that in the Confucian model, students are expected to respond only when a degree of knowledge has been acquired, whereas in the dialogic Western model students are expected to respond from the outset (Li, 2009). Thus, Western educators often have misconceptions as to the cultural forces at play in the classroom. As a result, it is unsurprising that these complex interactions often bemuse both parties. The fact that Chinese students are familiar with question and answer interactions, yet fail to respond according to expectations within Western classrooms, suggests that it is this cross-cultural component that needs to be addressed by Western teachers and not necessarily the Chinese educational system (Hodkinson, Chris, & Poropat, 2014).

Linked to these characteristics is the long-recognised Chinese cultural focus on face, defined as ‘the need to be respected by others and not be embarrassed in social situations’ (Hwang, Ang, & Francesco, 2002), leading to compliance with social norms by means of well-developed feelings of shame and embarrassment. One way in which face is expressed is when a student who is uncertain about the answer to a question posed in public by a teacher, avoids answering for fear of losing face by giving an irrelevant answer. The opposite also applies, as sometimes teachers may be unwilling to answer a question posed by a student. In their mind, it is safer not to answer. This is so even if the non-respondent does not understand and would benefit from attempting an answer. Similarly, students who are uncertain of a concept are unlikely to ask a related question in class for fear of losing face because that could lead to judgements of a lack of diligence on the part of those asking. As such, face helps to express cultural values related to power distance, for example by discouraging acts that would alter one’s position in power relationships. Face also reflects cultural values related to collectivism, in that the shame and embarrassment associated with loss of face helps to inhibit actions that may lead to exclusion from a collective. Consequently, face is both culturally supportive of maintaining social relationships, even while it inhibits active participation in learning.

One concern regarding the use of English as a medium of instruction is that Anglo-centrism and US cultural imperialism would unnecessarily be encouraged e.g. (Todd, 1999); (Singh, Kell, & Pandian, 2002). David Crystal even termed the English language a ‘cultural nerve gas’ (Crystal, 2000, p. 78) invading non-English cultures. In this, he is supported by Pennycook, who believes that ‘the promotion of particular teaching approaches is closely linked to the promotion of English and to the promotion of particular forms of culture and knowledge’ (Pennycook, 1994, p. 152).

However, adopting English as a medium of instruction may have no necessary connection with Anglo-American cultural imperialism. Thus, the two issues may not have an intrinsic relation. Policy-makers in East Asia, whose articulations of the value of English as an instrument for the knowledge economy and internationalisation efforts are reimagining ‘English’ as something of a floating signifier, or what (Phillipson, 2014) has evocatively called ‘lingua nullius’ means that many view English as a neutral linguistic resource (Pan & Block, 2011). This could suggest the Chinese are maintaining traditional collectivistic values while adopting some western ways (Decker, Calo, Yao, & C. H. Weer, 2015).

Internationalization:

In post-colonial contexts, the globalisation of English has been claimed to be the fundamental force responsible for generating a gate-keeping effect with respect to the attainment of status and prestige in society. As to Hong Kong, parents prefer English as a medium of instruction (EMI) to Chinese as a medium of instruction (CMI), as they believe good English proficiency equates a better future for students (Chan, Hoare, & K. Johnson, 1997). This belief is echoed by (Pennycook, 2001): ‘With English taking up such an important position in many educational systems around the world, it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions’.

English has also become a necessary tool for global higher education institutions to promote more internationalization by accommodating both international and domestic students who use English as a medium of instruction (Altbach & Knight, 2007); (Chen, 2008) and to prepare local students who meet the demands of the global markets (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2012).

China needs to further cultivate citizens who can communicate in English to further compete in the global economy (Zheng, Young, Brewer, & M. Wagner, 2009). Even before entering universities, students must take the entrance exam known as Gaokao in which English is tested as a main subject. Furthermore, a standardized national English proficiency test is administered at Chinese universities, known as the College English Test (CET),

which is designed to assess the ability of non-English major students to use English. The CET has two levels: Band 4, which reflects an intermediate level, and Band 6, which indicates upper intermediate level. All applicants are required to pass CET Band 4 before graduation. Moreover, English-medium instruction has also been adopted in several universities in China but it is widely perceived to have been established for inviting international students only (Muthanna & Miao, 2015), with the aim being to do well on world university ranking lists.

Chinese and expatriate teachers:

Any discussion of education reform and English as a medium of instruction in China needs to consider that differences exist between Chinese teachers and expatriate teachers. Expatriate teachers lack any form of job security, unlike their Chinese counterparts, which can create its own tensions.

Leadership roles almost invariably go to Chinese teachers, all of which will influence teacher satisfaction. Cultural difference (Hofstede, 1984), (Hofstede, 2001), (Hofstede, 2004) is key to understanding the Chinese context, as Chinese society typically exhibits a markedly high degree of power-distance, meaning deference to authority, while collaborative with peers. Expatriates from other countries, however, may be from more individualist societies, with less deference to authority. What is clear is that cultures are different, and, when a reform happens in a society that is traditional in nature, yet modernising rapidly, EMI needs also to be understood in the context of culture.

Empowering teachers:

Top-down education reform often relies on foreign experts. Often, it is a Western model which is imposed, which neglects the fact that classrooms are constantly changing environments (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1993). By disregarding local classroom culture, change becomes the norm, meaning sustainability, ostensibly the objective of education reform, becomes more difficult to achieve.

Empowerment of teachers is central to any informed discussion of English as a medium of instruction (Fullan, 2003). This can be achieved both by consulting teachers and by also providing meaningful training opportunities. By being invested in a project, the likelihood of success is greater (Cornett, 1991). Empowerment of teachers is a major factor in successful education reform (Kincheloe & Steiberg, 1998), as teachers are more satisfied in their work and perhaps also more likely to involve students as co-creators of knowledge.

There is a clear correlation between teachers' job satisfaction and student achievement, as found in many studies (Shann, 1998); (Adams, 2010). One of the simplest, yet more comprehensive definitions of job satisfaction, is derived from (Chen, 2008), who found that job satisfaction consists of an employee's attitudes, feelings or preferences towards one's work.

As (Foucault, 1982, p. 123) contends, education involves power, and, in China, power in education lies in the hands of the policy-makers. Excluding teachers from the reform process has been shown to create a myriad of problems (Gershberg, B., & Andersson, 2009) indicating that a thorough and in-depth understanding of the local context is crucial to the success of any education reform.

Some concerns about English as a medium of instruction (EMI):

There are a number of concerns which should be critically considered as EMI continues to be recommended and adopted in China and elsewhere. (Shohamy, 2012) has identified a number of these, as they relate to universities in general, with the most immediately salient being the linguistic competence of lecturers of academic disciplines to effectively deliver the content of their subject through the medium of a second language. Many, of course, may have studied their subject in English-speaking countries to a very high level, but the ability to read widely and write at length in a second language does not necessarily transfer to effectively explaining key concepts to students in such a way as to make the lectures comprehensible.

Some universities seek to employ lecturers for whom one or other variety of English is their first language, yet rarely consider the cultural as well as linguistic difficulties of mutual adjustment to unfamiliar academic conventions. This leads to the issue of the ability of students to understand instruction in a foreign language, whether by local or overseas lecturers. Local and overseas students in the region may have studied English in schools for many years, but the limited curriculum time in most cases does not allow them to reach a linguistic competence (such as an IELTS score of 6.0) sufficient to pursue their subjects in English.

To some extent, the linguistic limitations of staff and students might be overcome by the use of textbooks written in English and some universities in China have invested heavily in this solution; others may consider investing in recent technological innovations such as MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses) developed by universities elsewhere. While this may ease the burden on the lecturer and allow the students time to understand subject content with the use of print and online resources, there may be a misfit between the underlying cultural

assumptions and beliefs of academics in the Asian context and those of authors of textbooks and MOOCs, for example in subjects such as economics.

Additionally, it is important to consider the extent to which lecturers and students can *critically* engage with content delivered in English. By such critical engagement is meant both the internal processing involved in individuals attempting to comprehend and evaluate conceptually complex texts, and the further negotiation of meaning through interaction between the lecturer and students, and among the students themselves. Eventually, students need to demonstrate their learning by some form of spoken and/or written academic assignment, and here the use of a foreign language presents two severe challenges: firstly, for students to produce original work at the appropriate academic standard and genre in English (and here the temptations of various forms of plagiarism cannot be overlooked); and, secondly, for lecturers to be able critically (again) to review their students' written English, and then to provide appropriate feedback.

These concerns should be sufficient for policy-makers to pause and take stock regarding the implications of EMI within their institutions – but there are also wider linguistic and social issues that need to be taken into account.

Working only in English, many students may come to think that their own languages are inadequate vehicles for the transmission of 21st century knowledge. In fact, this is already happening, as fewer and fewer academic and scientific books and articles are published in languages other than English; for example, 'more than 95% of indexed natural science journals and 90% of social science journals use all or some English' (Lillis & Curry, 2013, p. 229). Thus, there is a vicious cycle operating, to the extent that English can easily be recognised as a barrier to the use of students' and teachers' native languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008) – and cultures - in Asian academia as well as other spheres of life (Nadkarni, 1984).

Complexity theory:

Fullan's complexity theory (2003) advocates for a process where participants become stakeholders in the change process. Fullan also notes that, in many reforms, too much attention is paid to the teaching profession in general, and not enough to the individual teachers who have to implement any reform. What this may lead to is continued problems in terms of implementation, as 'the energy, intrinsic motivation and commitment of everyday teachers' (Fullan, 2003) is disregarded, thereby failing to capitalize on one of the most important ingredients in a reform.

With any reform comes an increased emphasis on accountability, both in terms of teaching performance and student learning outcomes. While this is welcome, it needs to take into consideration that teachers need to be provided with meaningful opportunities to improve and develop professionally, and also needs to recognise that they need to be given the tools and resources to enable this to happen, to ensure sustainability.

METHOD:

To suit a qualitative study, a phenomenological approach was adopted, as advocated by (Brunner, 1998), (van Manen, 2001) and (Wolcott, 2001). Such an approach seeks to understand what every day experiences entail. It provides insights on the lived experiences of participants and how they attach meaning to those experiences. A qualitative approach was adopted because it was believed that this approach would more fully capture a wider spectrum of the participants' perceptions. An attempt was made to make the questions open-ended to elicit a wider variety of responses. It is usual in such an approach to interview around twelve participants, as is the case with this study.

The twelve participants are an even mix of subject-specific and English language teachers, and also an even mix of male and female participants in each category. Of the English language teachers, one of the male participants is Chinese and the other two non-Chinese, while the female English language teachers comprise two Chinese teachers and one non-Chinese teacher. For the subject-specific teachers, all of the participants are Chinese, reflecting the composition of subject-specific teaching faculty at the time of the study, when there were very few non-Chinese teachers hired as subject specialists. The snowball sampling technique (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) was employed, where the researcher chose a few interviewees on the basis of personal acquaintance and then these interviewees recommended others. Three teachers are Chinese and three are Western expatriates, whereas all students are Chinese.

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What do teachers perceive to be their students' English needs?
2. How well do teachers think students' needs are met?
3. What challenges do teachers face in teaching an EMI course?

Interview data were first coded using ‘open coding’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to attach labels to the information. The data were then sorted by categories and placed under ‘core categories’ to identify the patterns and themes, with quotes which illustrated these themes also being identified. Summarising the data led to ‘thick description’ (Punch, 2003) or a ‘storyline’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 148).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

A total of four major categories emerged from the interview analysis, namely a need to be recognised, lack of awareness by university administration, language ability of teachers and students, and pedagogical issues. Each of these will be discussed in turn below.

A need to be recognised:

This was by far the most pertinent category, with every participant expressing a need to be recognised by university administration. As Flynn, a Chinese teacher of English, opined:

‘It seems that every year the university administration decides that the English curriculum must change – and they tell us in the middle of the semester, when we are busy with teaching and exams, and have no time to work on the new curriculum, syllabi and materials they expect to be in place by the end of the semester. We do our best, and are never thanked by them, just ordered to do more.’

Michael, a Chinese subject-content teacher, also bemoans the lack of recognition by the university administration:

‘It’s not just about salary, you know. Sometimes all we want is a thank you – we’re human, after all. Instead, we are expected to be available mornings, evenings, weekends. In the last 2 months, I’ve had maybe one free weekend. Don’t they know I’ve got classes to prepare, research to do? They just don’t recognise how hard we work, and preparing classes in English, it takes twice as long!’

The male teacher of English, Ken, spoke about inadequate resources, seen by (Hamid, 2013), as affecting the success of EMI policies, which, in this study, seemed to affect both teachers and students:

‘The university expects us to raise the English language levels of these students to levels where they can study abroad, but that means we should have the same facilities that they do in foreign universities, and we don’t. So, we do our best, with a lack of resources, because the process of ordering is so complicated here, and we are never thanked for it, never recognised.’

It appears that a lack of awareness by university administration of the pressures faced by teaching faculty over the introduction of EMI has exacerbated tensions.

Lack of awareness by university administration:

John, a non-Chinese teacher of English, gives his view on the lack of awareness on the part of the university administration:

‘I believe the administration is well-intentioned, and, honestly, I think everyone knows that. However, that doesn’t mean they are aware of the issues, because they spend more time in meetings than they do understanding the reality of the situation on the ground. Any language policy like the one they want here has to be a gradual process, but, here, they want everything to happen overnight, and that sets the whole thing up for problems, even perhaps failure in the long-term.’

John is looking at the bigger picture, which concerns the sustainability of EMI, and is worried that it has been a case of too much, too soon. The English teachers seem to be very aware of this, perhaps because they deal in an in-depth manner with the language ability of students, like Amy, a Chinese teacher of English:

‘The level of the students is getting a little better every year, but we are still not at the stage where we can pick and choose which students we want to study at the university, like Peking University or Tsinghua. So, I think introducing English for all subjects is not the best course of action right now, because we need to move step by step. However, administration wants it all to look good, but they don’t seem to understand that they are creating more problems for everyone, teachers and students. They are not the ones in the classroom – we are.’

This view is echoed by Zoe, a Chinese subject content teacher, who has had many years of experience in US universities:

‘Administration ask for us to talk in meetings. We speak up, but they’re deaf to what we say. They don’t seem to be aware of what the issues are, or maybe they are, but they need to be seen to say we are an English medium university. However, I can tell you we are not, nor will be for some time. Most professors who say they are etching in English are actually teaching in Chinese, because their level

and the students' level is not that high.'

Therefore, it appears that despite the explicit policy of EMI advocated by the university administration, the reality of the language ability of both teachers and students may call for this to be supplemented with Chinese.

Language ability of teachers and students:

Language, with its links to identity, is always going to be an emotive issue, due to current geopolitical issues. English is important because of its functional value. However, it is important to note that using English as a medium of instruction is not equivalent to learning English. It is not clear whether using English in non-English subjects helps students (and teaching faculty) learn English. Moreover, without adequate English proficiency, students are disadvantaged in learning non-English subjects, may become reluctant to ask questions and express ideas, and may even lose interest in the subjects altogether.

Chinese faculty also felt more challenged when they felt they couldn't satisfy what they felt was an expectation from students for them to have native-like pronunciation, as well as native English-speaker accents. Some worried that their level of English when teaching would create difficulties for students in understanding. As Xu, one of the Chinese female subject-specific faculty members, recounts:

'I've been here for a couple of years, and have, until this semester, taught all my classes in Chinese. Now there is one international student in my class, and I'm told I must teach in English. This is ridiculous, because it places stress on my students nad myself. I'm not used to teaching in English, and my students aren't used to learning this scientific subject in a foreign language. We are to change everything for one student?'

Xu's feelings are echoed by Peter, an Engineering professor:

'Unlike many of the professors here, I'm used to teaching in English, as I lived and worked in the US for many years. However, it's not fair to expect professors who haven't had that experience to suddenly do things in English. It also isn't fair to the students, as many of them do not have that specialised vocabulary in English, or even the general level of English. It slows things down, when we need to speed things up and raise standards. Honestly, many are saying they each in English but are using Chinese.'

The challenge of teachers' own English abilities in EMI is in line with findings in previous studies (Kyeyune, 2010). Studying through the medium of English does not automatically mean that someone can teach in English (Shohamy, 2012). In this study, all of the Chinese subject content teachers experienced difficulty in using English, and so too did the Chinese teachers of English language. A natural policy reaction is to invest funding to improve teachers' language proficiency, but this is a time investment, which does not help teachers who have to immediately go to the classroom and teach in English.

Language problems can be exacerbated when working with students who have varying levels of language. This was understood by Jenny, a Western teacher of English language:

'Just think – in English language class, we have different levels, and even then, teaching, and also learning for the students, can be challenging. I feel relaly sorry for the content professors, as they have to teach all these different levels in one class, in Science and Engineering subjects. That must be really challenging, and the danger is that there will be tensions between them nad English language teachers. We have to work hard to raise the students' level of academic English, but we aren't miracle workers.'

The range of students' learning styles and personalities also challenged the teaching of participants, which led to pedagogical issues. Using the students' native language, or L1, is seen as beneficial when students do not have adequate second language proficiency (Shohamy, 2012). However, the pedagogical benefits of using L1 for both language and content development remain inconclusive (Bruton, 2013). What is clearer is that pedagogical training to improve the effectiveness of codeswitching in relation to other classroom techniques would have been beneficial for the EMI lecturers in this study.

Pedagogical Issues:

Pedagogical issues affected both experienced and novice faculty, whose EMI experience varied considerably. As the EMI policy was new, they searched for suitable teaching strategies, and codeswitching was the most common strategy employed. When faculty perceived difficulties in instructional interaction they simply reverted to Chinese, like Eric:

'Of course I use Chinese. Sometimes, when there's a new concept or I am asked a question, it's just easier to explain in Chinese, as students can understand more easily, and I am confident my explanation is correct. When

students understand, they automatically are more motivated.’

To be a faculty member at the university does not require evidence of English language proficiency, as the university, like most in China, is heavily-focused on research achievement. However, teaching in English requires specific types of language skills appropriate to pedagogy. This was a challenge to the faculty, as David, a non-Chinese teacher of English, explains:

‘Learning in English and teaching in English are two different things. During my Master’s degree in ESOL, there were foreign students in the class whose reading comprehension was very good. Teaching for them, or resenting, was not so easy, and they were training to be teachers. What must it be like for the professors with PhDs who are not trained to teach their subject in English?’

Apart from codeswitching, teaching faculty struggled to find effective teaching methods. Most felt that little pedagogical support was available to them, and that they had mainly learned from experience. Some saw workshops with fellow teaching staff as desirable in order to share good practice. For example, Lulu, who teaches Biology, notes that:

‘I see that the English teachers have regular professional development and workshops, which is good, as they learn what works with these students. In the other departments, we are expected to produce a lot of research, so we don’t have time for this.’

In EMI situations, it seems that pedagogical challenges intertwined with language challenges exacerbate the classroom teaching situation (Kyeyune, 2010). As Kyeyune highlighted, teachers’ domination of classroom talk can fail to effectively facilitate learners’ academic literacy development. The prevailing issue of EMI language use may overshadow the importance of other pedagogical competences (Byun, et al., 2011). While considerable effort may be needed for EMI linguistic competence, the literature shows that short-term training can be an effective solution (Ball & Lindsay, 2012).

Based on the previously discussed challenges that the EMI lecturers were facing (lack of recognition, language proficiency, lack of awareness by university administration and pedagogy), the study suggests a number of recommendations, not only in this context but also in similar Asian contexts initiating EMI programs.

Thus, its contribution is to provide illustrations of various factors that could be taken up in future research studies, for example, faculty perceptions of the pedagogical skills and knowledge that would strengthen their EMI practices. Such research could potentially assist EMI teachers and policy-makers in other contexts to develop practical ideas for strengthening and supporting EMI programs. Finally, if English continues to be the dominant language of teaching for the future, it is essential that studies of EMI not only investigate macro issues of policy-making, but also generate evidence for good practice that can assist the development of effective EMI programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

There are a number of limitations to the study that might affect the scope of recommendations below. The small number of twelve interviews cannot be the basis for generalizing from the findings. In addition, there may have been a possible disparity and lack of representativeness of perspectives. Moreover, the data consist of lecturers’ self-reports, which may not reflect actual classroom behaviours and practices. However, the aim of this qualitative study was to gain insights into lecturers’ experiences and not to seek generalization.

As teaching and learning are fundamentally intertwined, a more all-inclusive approach to any education policy, including English as a medium of instruction, should specifically engage with teachers and their concerns. This has not yet happened in this case study, which perhaps explains in large part the somewhat irregular results to date. For teachers to be more fulfilled in their jobs, and for EMI to succeed, quality teaching needs to happen in the classroom. Related to this is the issue of effective human resource policies, seen in this case study to be a weakness of the university system. A recruitment overhaul, opportunities for career development and professional development that are meaningful and, crucially, a more fair and transparent remuneration system would both support quality teaching and learning, and also make teachers feel valued, thus increasing job satisfaction. EMI faculty should first be screened for their language abilities, especially their oral skills, and confidence in lecturing in English and handling questions from students. This could be done in simulated or actual classroom situations where prospective EMI lecturers are observed as they teach a lesson. Also, language support could be provided for those wishing to enhance their proficiency for an academic context. Such support could include taking English courses specifically oriented to academic teaching in a formal setting or engaging in more informal opportunities, such as faculty exchanges, and travel grants for international conferences (Ball & Lindsay, 2012).

In this way, ‘the domination of English may also generate resistance against [...] cultural domination so that

there will be a healthy balance between gaining access to English and [...] a balance between being open to foreign cultures and values and retaining one's own' (Tsui, 2003, p. 29). Education practitioners should carefully select their teaching materials and make adaptations to suit the local context and at the same time, create more opportunities for students to learn English outside the classroom. This involves pedagogical support assisting teaching faculty with effective pedagogical techniques to encourage student participation and minimise teacher talk (Ball & Lindsay, 2012; Doiz et al., 2012). More importantly, this initiative would provide opportunities for teachers to share experiences of teaching and practices that work in their own contexts.

Institutional investment in English materials and technology to ensure that adequate facilities are accessible is also recommended. Such initiatives would reduce the workload for teaching faculty in searching for up-to-date English materials and enable students to access learning resources independently.

The final recommendation involves reviewing student recruitment procedures at universities that wish to promote English as a medium of instruction. Adequate English entry requirements are necessary to enhance the benefits for enrolled students. Otherwise, content learning might well be negated by the need for substantial English improvement.

CONCLUSION:

The findings in this study may not be applicable to the whole of mainland China, yet they would appear to lend credence to the growing demand for a review of the English as a medium of instruction policy that appears to be taking hold on many campuses. They provide useful insight into the experiences of university teachers, and, thus, give some ideas and strategies that could be useful in ensuring that future reform initiatives succeed, and perhaps necessary adjustments could be made to the current EMI initiative.

When it concerns teaching and learning, there will always be challenges with regard to teacher attitudes that will need to be overcome. However, being in continuous change mode may lead to uncertainty about the quality of the EMI policy and will certainly cause teachers to question not only the policy itself, but also why they should participate, if their input and experience are neither sought nor valued.

Any education innovation or reform program of necessity involves monitoring and evaluation, yet perhaps an unintended consequence is the rising level of dissatisfaction among teachers. As the success of the EMI initiative depends upon their participation, the initiative may not be successfully sustained if universities do not make some adjustments to policy and practice.

This paper seeks to contribute to an emerging literature on EMI in Chinese universities. As a case study, this research has only limited generalizability, even within China. Nonetheless, it provides empirical evidence concerning both the challenges and potential efficacy of employing a range of EMI learner-centered methods in a context where debate over preferred methods of teaching and learning continues to be contentious.

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