

English-medium instruction at university in China – student perceptions

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Abstract: English-medium instruction is expanding rapidly in China, especially in the higher education milieu. The reality of English language proficiency in the classroom is often at odds with expectations, particularly when many students are the product of rote learning in high school. This paper aims to illustrate the challenges of a mainland Chinese university 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 students participating in programmes where English is the medium of instruction. Opportunities and challenges are identified, with recommendations for future practice being made. Amongst the main challenges identified are a gap between what is said and what is actually happening in the classroom and the increasing presence of foreign ‘experts’ in education in the country. Yet, students are also presented with an opportunity to take their place as global citizens in the twenty-first century.

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

Introduction

The global expansion of higher education has led to increasing emphasis placed on national and world university rankings. In turn, this has led to the adoption of new curriculum approaches that will have far-reaching implications for teaching and learning, with English as a medium of instruction (EMI) being perhaps the most readily visible change. [1] China has been to the forefront of adopting curriculum and pedagogy that places emphasis on the student’s autonomy. [2]

Not only are large numbers of students studying EMI programs at Chinese universities, but Chinese students also comprise at least a quarter of international student enrolments in both the USA and Australia, for example. [3] English language proficiency, for these students, has to go hand in hand with the ability to quickly adapt to dialectical teaching [4], often at odds with the more traditional didactic teaching style that has been the experience of generations of Chinese students.

It should be noted that students are not always enthusiastic about EMI programs, as the example of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) proves. [5] In 2005, students opposed CUHK directives to promote the teaching of more courses in English, worried that teaching in Chinese languages was being undermined. CUHK officials argued that to not increase the number of courses taught in English would lead to CUHK not being able to compete with other institutions. Therefore, challenges are encountered when there is increasing emphasis on EMI.

Contextual overview

The university in this study has student enrollment of approximately 4,000 students. It is a public institution, established in 2012, and is expanding quickly, like many universities in China. Unusually for a Chinese university, there is a low student-professor ratio (1:10), which allows for meaningful interaction between students and professors. More than three-quarters of graduates undertake further studies abroad, primarily in the US.

The university plans to intensify EMI programs and requires students in their first two years to take intensive English courses. Until recently, English teachers were mainly native Chinese speakers, but now native English speakers comprise approximately two thirds of the English teaching faculty.

Literature review

Culture

Culture is regarded as a difficult concept to define, but researchers such as Matsumoto believe it to be ‘the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next.’ [6] Chinese culture is widely seen as collectivistic. [7] This, in conjunction with an education system that has been viewed as didactic [8], has led some Western educators to assume that questioning does not often occur within the classroom. However, the Confucian education system considers questioning as one of the basic tenets of education, with the main difference from the Western style of questioning being that the Confucian model encourages questioning when a sufficient amount of knowledge has been acquired, and not from the beginning. [9] Therefore, when a Chinese student does not behave in a way consistent with a Western teacher’s expectations in the classroom, the teacher needs to understand that there is cultural influence at play. [10]

Added to this is the Chinese cultural concept of face, seen as ‘the need to be respected by others and not be embarrassed in social situations’. [11] One example of the concept of face is when a student does not answer a question asked in the classroom by a teacher. What a non-Chinese teacher may perceive as lack of knowledge could be the student’s fear of losing face by not giving the most relevant answer. Better not to answer, as it is safer. In the same way, students who do not understand something in class are not likely to ask a question, in case the teacher perceives that the student has not studied hard enough. The concept of face is linked to feelings of embarrassment and shame, and therefore it supports social relationships within a group, by discouraging any action that might be seen to change the relationship in a negative way. Yes, active participation in learning may not happen, yet what is important is that social relationships are maintained.

Some view EMI as Western cultural imperialism [12], though this is not necessarily the case. In China, English is seen to be of instrumental value, which is what Phillipson (2014) calls ‘lingua nullius’ [13], or a neutral linguistic resource. [14] When it comes to education reform in China, the phrase ‘with Chinese characteristics’ is often used, thereby signalling the maintaining of Chinese cultural values. [15]

Internationalization

The use of English as a medium of instruction, therefore, is seen as a means of internationalisation. Many parents prefer English as a medium of instruction (EMI) to Chinese as a medium of instruction (CMI), as they believe English proficiency will lead to a brighter future for their children. This was found to be the case in Hong Kong, for example. [16] This view resonates with that of Pennycook: ‘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’. [17]

Higher education institutions are also proponents of EMI, as they see this as a way to attract not only more Chinese students, but also international students. [18] In addition, Chinese universities have come under increasing pressure to prepare graduates who can take their place in a global economy. [19] It has been suggested, however, that Chinese universities are

more concerned with attracting international students so that they can achieve high positions on world university ranking lists.

To enter university, a Chinese student must take the Gaokao entrance exam, where English is one of the subjects tested. Additionally, Chinese universities administer what is called the College English Test (CET), which is designed to assess the ability of non-English major students to use English. There are two levels in the CET, namely Band 4 (intermediate level) and Band 6 (upper intermediate level). CET 4 must be passed by a student before graduation.

Concerns about English as a medium of instruction (EMI)

There are no signs of a slowing down in the adoption of EMI in Chinese universities. This means there are some general, yet fundamental concerns that need to be addressed both in China and elsewhere in the world. [20] Chief amongst these concerns is the linguistic ability of teachers to deliver subject content through the medium of English as the language of instruction.

Many universities believe they are dealing with this issue by employing greater numbers of teachers for whom English is their first language. However, this can lead to cultural adjustment issues, as well as linguistic ones, such as the ability of students to understand the subject matter in English, if no Chinese language is used in the classroom. English language textbooks may help, although care needs to be taken with the underlying cultural assumptions implicit in many such textbooks, which may not comply with the beliefs of either Chinese students or Chinese academics. Textbooks of an economic or political nature, for example, might be a misfit.

Students' English abilities are also potential challenges for EMI lecturers, who see themselves as subject specialists, not language specialists. Students' diverse language abilities require more effort and resources from content lecturers in adapting teaching materials and activities, which can lead to frustration and even demotivation. Establishing an English threshold and improving students' English proficiency above that level might address this [21]; although a threshold measure might be seen to promote elitism. [22]

Understanding the English language is one concern. Another concern, which needs to also be given prominence, is the ability of both students and teachers to engage in a critical manner – or, in other words, the negotiation of meaning through student-teacher and student-student interaction, in order to not only comprehend, but also evaluate. This is necessary if original assignments/presentations are to be produced by students, and also necessary for teachers, if they are to provide meaningful feedback to students.

Indeed, this is where one of the main concerns with EMI lies, as there is a possibility that both students and teachers may not consider Chinese languages as suitable for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. This can already be seen when it comes to research, as published research is almost overwhelmingly in the English language. [23] Therefore, English can be seen to be as much of a barrier as a gateway to progress. [24]

Standardisation v sustainability

With increasing use of EMI, there is more standardisation than ever before when it comes to Chinese universities. Foreign experts are being relied on in ever greater numbers. However, classrooms are constantly changing environments, as any teacher knows, so if a Western model is being imposed in some quarters, and local classroom culture becomes less prevalent, the only constant will indeed be change, thus making sustainability harder to achieve.

Teachers and students need to be consulted, as this will lead to them feeling invested in EMI. If they feel invested, they will be empowered to be successful. [25] In turn, the relationship between teachers and students will become a closer one, as they are both invested in the success of the EMI project.

Foucault mentions that education involves power. [26] In China, power in education lies in the hands of the policy-makers. By involving teachers, for example, in the reform process in the first instance, there would possibly be higher levels of job satisfaction shown among teachers. As Shann [27] and Adams [28] have shown, teacher job satisfaction clearly corresponds to student achievement. Therefore, taking contextual factors into account, instead of imposing a one-size-fits-all EMI model, might lead to sustainability in the long-term.

Method

This is a qualitative study; therefore a phenomenological approach was adopted. [29] It was believed that this approach would more fully capture a wider spectrum of the participants' perceptions of their lived experiences. In order to elicit a wider variety of responses, questions were open-ended. In such an approach around twelve participants are usually interviewed, as happened with this study.

The twelve participants are an even mix of male and female participants, all Chinese, as, at the time, there were fewer than ten international students at the university. The snowball sampling technique was employed, where the researcher chose a few interviewees on the basis of personal acquaintance and then these interviewees recommended others. [30]

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

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

Coding of interview data first took place first by attaching labels to the information, in a process known as 'open coding' [31]. The next step entailed sorting the data by categories, placing them under 'core categories' to identify the patterns and themes. Quotes which illustrated these themes were also identified. The data were then summarised, which led to 'thick description' [32].

Results and discussion

A total of four major categories emerged from the interview analysis, namely language ability, involvement in the process, high expectations and cultural concerns. Each of these will be discussed in turn below.

Language ability

Language, with its well-documented links to identity, is always going to be an emotive issue. Charles is, like all participants, forthright when expressing his views on this topic:

“This is our country, China, and Mandarin is my language. Now we are told that students should be bilingual? Why can't education be in Chinese? I like the English language, but I love my own. English is difficult for me and difficult for the other students in my class. Sometimes we all just use Chinese, honestly, because it takes less time to explain and understand.”

Jules makes a distinction between learning the English language and learning her subjects in English, with English as the medium of instruction:

“Learning the English language and learning my subjects in English are two different things. During my language class, my reading comprehension was

very good. I also did some presentations on a weekly or monthly basis, but it was very different from presenting my subject area in front of the students. Now that I'm about to graduate, though, I see it more positively."

To be a student of the English language did not require evidence of English proficiency, as learning a language is seen as a process; the only criterion was being able to use English according to the level she was placed in. However, learning subject-specific content in English requires specific types of language skills, so while students might consider themselves skilled in English reading or writing, they found learning their subject specialism in English demanding:

"But even in the simplest language, you know, it is technical, so it is not easy to understand immediately. And because we did not understand, we asked questions. But the professors themselves answered in English, which was their second language, so to the students it seemed that they tried to explain, but they were not confident and they made mistakes and then they explained in Chinese so that students could understand. And that made us stop asking questions. So it was kind of pointless." (Tyler)

Some professors had previously studied and worked in English-speaking countries, others lacked formal training in English and had few opportunities to use the language. Therefore (use of English as the instructional language was clearly a key issue for those professors who had not had the opportunity to study/work abroad.

English is undoubtedly an important language in the Chinese higher education system because of its functional value. However, it is necessary to note that using English as a medium of instruction is not equivalent to learning English. According to the findings, students remained rather neutral as regards the question of whether using English in non-English subjects would help them learn English. Students in their final year felt more positively, perhaps because they had applied to universities abroad in order to continue their education, and could see very clearly why English would be of value. However, it is clear that students without sufficient English proficiency may be disadvantaged in learning non-English subjects, become reluctant to ask questions in class, and may even lose interest in the subjects altogether.

The issue of power relations comes to the fore, with power in terms of education reform being concentrated in the hands of policy-makers, with little attention being paid to the teachers and learners in classrooms. This could conceivably alienate those who perceive their language as being second best, and could also undermine the professionalism of all teachers involved by having teaching and learning taking place in a language that is not the students' or most teachers' native language. Language problems are exacerbated when teachers had to work with students with diverse language abilities. In an English language classroom, students can be streamed according to language level, but this does not happen when the subject specialisms are being taught. How is everyone supposed to adjust to such challenging circumstances? Teachers have to be aware of content and also language, which must be frustrating to many. The issue of language and power is being played out in the classroom.

Involvement in the process

The EMI education policy reform is widely acknowledged to be top-down. This has meant that neither teachers nor students have been consulted about or involved in the discussions about EMI. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many are unhappy with this state of affairs, which is confirmed by Amy:

“Nobody asked any of the students, and we are the ones who are directly affected. How did the university think this was going to make us feel? Many of us might have gone to other universities if we had known this was going to happen. We’re always the last to know, although maybe we get to know things before many of the professors.”

Brian gives his view:

“It would be logical to ask the students what they think, to listen to what we say. We are the ones who are in the classroom every day. We know our level, we know our professors, and we know what will work. Instead, the management treats us as if we don’t matter, just to do what they decide. This is not education, it’s a political game, and the students and teachers are the ones who suffer.”

Jenny echoes Brian’s view:

“I learned something in English class: Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn. I think it was Benjamin Franklin or someone who said it. Anyway, it’s true, but who has involved us here? We are just told we need to learn everything through English. The truth is that we don’t. We want to have the freedom to enjoy class, to have discussions. Many of our professors just ignore what they are told and teach in Chinese. There will be more international students, so they are told they will have to teach in English, but why should everyone have to study in a language that is not their first language if there will be only one or two international students in class? Nobody talks with us about these things. We know professors are unhappy, because they are complaining. The administration decides for us, as if they know what’s best.”

It is interesting that students and teachers share many of the same perceptions and voice similar dissatisfaction about their university experiences – that policies are decided for them without their input, that classes and lectures do not allow them to engage meaningfully with the material or in dialogue, that what is happening does not apply to their daily lives. Lack of communication and involvement leads to expressed discontent, and also, perhaps, to unrealistic expectations.

High expectations

Many of the participants had high expectations of their university studies, particularly when it came to their professors. When it comes to EMI, they expect native-like American and British accents from all of their professors, including those who have not worked or studied abroad. Steve said:

“There is an issue. Most students expect professors to speak perfect English like a native English speaker. I think this places pressure on the professors, and might affect their confidence. Of course, if their English is not good, then we can’t understand the subject and some students might have a bad idea about the professors’ competence. Sometimes I think we put more pressure on the professors than we do on ourselves. However, we want confident and creative professors. After all, we will need to be the best at our work in the future, as China is developing fast.”

Rachel commented on resources and the styles of teaching:

“If we are going to learn in English, then we expect the most modern resources and textbooks, just the same as in Harvard or CalTech or Stanford. Of course, we expect these things if we learn in Chinese also. Then we expect the teachers to translate and to have interactive classes with modern methods. Most of us will go abroad to do a PhD, so we expect to get into these universities easily because of our study here. We expect to be able to think critically and to be able to adapt easily when we travel.”

Clearly, inadequate resources would have a negative effect on the success of EMI policies. Perhaps one thing that needs to be considered is that textbooks imported for abroad are designed in the main for classrooms where facilities are expected to be at a high level. Many Chinese classrooms do not have such facilities and would require substantial institutional investment in order to make changes. By employing ‘returning Chinese’, or professors who have lived, either as students or faculty members, for a substantial time overseas, many universities hope to bridge gaps and meet expectations.

Eric acknowledges that there is a lot of competition for jobs upon graduation, yet nonetheless expects that his studies will give him the edge over other potential job candidates:

“More students are graduating from university these days, so there is more competition for jobs than before. However, because this university employs a lot of returning Chinese professors, who have spent time abroad, I expect that I will watch and learn from them and develop many patents in my field. I expect my English to be fluent and to be able to work abroad for a few years, maybe in the US, and then return to China and get a good job. This university will help me with that.”

In today’s fast-evolving, globalised workplace, skills such as being highly adaptable, being able to think both critically and creatively and striving to be the best are all seen as being important. These participants possess such skills in abundance, yet, while all express a wish to spend some time outside of China, and therefore implicitly see EMI as being of instrumental value, they are not all aware of the cultural issues that must first be acknowledged and perhaps then overcome.

Cultural concerns

As we saw earlier, language is a means of expressing identity. It is therefore not a surprise that cultural concerns loomed large in this study.

Flynn expresses her concerns about the possible perception by some that the Chinese academic system is not as robust as other systems:

“When I came here, I expected to learn in Chinese and publish articles in Chinese. However, sometimes even to find some of the research we want in Chinese is difficult, as there is so much more available in English. Before, I wanted to do postgraduate study in China, but my teachers said it is better to go to the US or UK. Why? Aren’t our universities good enough? Aren’t our teachers good enough? By putting pressure on me to go abroad, I feel people are telling me that the system in China is not as good. This doesn’t make me feel confident about what I learn.”

William, a final year student who went on an exchange program to a US university in the summer of his third year, has even more concrete cultural concerns:

“I was really looking forward to spending time in the US, as it was my first time there. However, even though I had a very high TOEFL score, which was one of the reasons I was chosen, I couldn’t understand anything for the first few weeks! Then, even as my level in English started to improve, I had difficulty understanding how to behave in social situations, and this caused me to have problems in my relationships with people. Everyone was nice, they were helpful, but I realised that to have great grades isn’t enough when I go abroad, as I need to understand the culture just as much as I need to understand my subject.”

William’s way of dealing with this was to start speaking with native English speakers on campus on his return to China, and to enjoy social occasions with them, all in the hopes of furthering his understanding of cultural issues.

Similarly, Skye, a second year student, who was about to embark on an exchange program at the end of her second year, was worried that her lack of cultural knowledge would mar her classroom experiences in the US:

“I don’t think there is enough focus in this university on courses that will help us understand the culture of other countries. Not everyone thinks the same way we do! So my friends and I are going to English Corner, where we will meet the American and British teachers. I’m watching movies and trying to learn what I can about how people live in other countries. I think if we had culture courses, it would help us feel better about having to study so many classes in English, and maybe it would make us understand each other more.”

Perhaps Skye has touched on something that could become a feature of EMI programs, which is the inclusion of modules on culture, to facilitate greater understanding of other cultures and thus break down barriers that might otherwise demotivate students. This might be particularly relevant in a context such as the Chinese one, where there are not always many opportunities in large parts of the country for interaction with /understanding of other cultures.

Recommendations

For EMI to ultimately succeed, quality teaching needs to happen in the classroom. This study's findings suggest increasing access to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) provision that is fine-tuned to the language issues in classrooms is crucial. Collaboration between subject and language specialists is highly beneficial to students' learning of both the subject-specific knowledge and the language skills. Indeed, the same could be said of teachers. University administrators and classroom practitioners thus need to consider and address students' communicative needs in their disciplines.

English undoubtedly confers benefits on those who demonstrate proficiency in the language – that can be clearly seen in this study. This means that university administrators should make every endeavour to conserve their cultural resources, to allay fears of a possible dilution of Chinese culture and Chinese languages.

In the same way, classroom practitioners should carefully select their teaching materials and make the necessary adaptations to suit the local context. Allied with this needs to be an awareness that more opportunities need to be created for students to learn English outside the classroom.

Were educators at all levels of the education system to appreciate that the demands on, and decisions made by, those at other levels of the system as being largely similar to those that they themselves experience each day, they would likely not only work better together, but also provide increased opportunities to the students on campus, leading to reform sustainability.

Conclusion

When it comes to education reform in the Chinese context, and particularly EMI, there are a number of studies that deal with teachers, yet very few that seek to know what students' perceptions are. Although the findings in this study pertain to students at one university, they nonetheless provide insight into the lived experiences of university students. Surely the point of view of students needs to also be sought, if EMI initiatives are to succeed in the long-term. Attitudes are difficult to quantify in teaching and learning. However, significant changes to curriculum and programs of study which will ultimately have a great impact on the study experience of students, need to seek (and value) the input of these same students. After all, the success or otherwise of English as a medium of instruction depends upon students' participation. This can counteract any feelings of dissatisfaction that might otherwise arise, by addressing the root causes of dissatisfaction at the source.

This case study has limited generalizability, yet it hopes to contribute to an emerging body of research on English as a medium of instruction in Chinese universities. The purpose was not to generalize, but to seek to know what students' perceptions are. In a context where both the language of instruction and the pedagogical methods employed in the classroom have been, and continue to be, the source of much debate, this study provides empirical evidence regarding both the challenges and opportunities of employing EMI.

The study did reveal some inconsistencies between policy aspirations and classroom reality in the implementation of the EMI program. Ultimately, these findings add to our understanding of how English as a medium of instruction policies in higher education need to be carefully considered, so that they are not complicit in accentuating inequalities in Chinese society, and instead lead to benefits accruing to all.

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