Attitudes towards English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI): a case study of University of Mandalay

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Abstract

With the rise of globalization and the spread of English, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has become common among higher education institutions around the world (Kang, 2018). This study aims to investigate the attitudes of teachers and students of University of Mandalay towards the use of EMI. To this end, in the 2018-2019 Academic Year, 40 teachers and 80 students from Social Science and Natural Science departments were randomly selected and their perceptions of EMI in the context of University of Mandalay were explored. Two instruments were employed: a questionnaire survey administered to teachers and students in two versions, one for teachers and the other for students, comprising slightly different questions adapted to the target populations, based upon earlier studies (Saeed, Iqbal & Azam R, 2012, Başıbek, N, et.al. 2014) and a semi-structured interview. Findings reveal favourable outcomes indicating positive attitudes towards the impacts of EMI as well as its perceived limitations. Both groups acknowledged EMI's role in the internationlisation process of tertiary institutions and upgrading language skills. Respondents believe that EMI programmes can improve students' language competence as well as teachers' expertise in both content and language instructions. Though aware of potential benefits EMI can offer, teachers draw parallels between EMI and increased workloads. It seems they need more time to prepare lessons for teaching in the English medium compared to the usual Myanmar medium. In contrast to teachers' cautious approach to EMI, taking into consideration the risks and challenges, student participants are overwhelmingly positive about implementation of EMI: almost all the students (90%) are enthusiastic about implementing EMI at the university given the perceived positive impacts EMI might have on their English language proficiency.

Key words: English as a Medium of Instruction, attitudes, Englishization, bilingualism

Background

In the history of Myanmar education, English Medium Instruction (EMI) has been employed to a larger or smaller extent. The extent to which English has been used as a language for Medium of Instruction depends on education policies operational at the time. English as a medium of Instruction (EMI) has been used since 1920 when it served as a formal medium of instruction in the University of Yangon, Myanmar. With shifts in 1960s in the political scenes and education, the practice of using English as a medium of instruction in private-run European Code Schools and the system of teaching English from Kindergarten onwards came to an end (Han Tin, 1992). Myanmar was made the sole medium of instruction at the Basic Education level thereby drastically reducing students' exposure to English. With changes in politics the English language was termed a foreign language which by extension excluded it from being used as a medium for the acquisition of knowledge (Myo Myint, 1992). In addition to this, Myanmar's long-term "closed door" policy resulted in the decline of importance of English in Myanmar. Consequently, the use of English dramatically declined in 1960s being gradually replaced by Myanmar, the official language and sole medium of instruction at all levels of education. However, beginning 1981, perceptions of policy makers and the administrators on English have been transformed gradually – accepting English as the most important foreign language, being the dominant language of business, science and international affairs. This resulted in the introduction of the New Education Programme which upgraded the

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role of English in education and prescribed that English be used as a medium of instruction at the upper secondary level to teach science subjects and economics. At the university level, English became the medium of instruction for most disciplines (Myo Myint, 1992) although explanations of terminology and concepts may be given in Myanmar. The use of English, however, does not extend to the oral medium, with explanations done in Myanmar and most teachers adhering to the grammar (word-for-word) translation of English texts. Long term decline in the use of EMI resulted in considerable challenges and difficulties of reestablishing EMI policy in the current education system in spite of the resurgence of English as a medium of classroom instruction. The requirement to use EMI, at least at the textbook level, is a challenge for teachers who did not receive English medium instruction at school since their students are eventually required to answer examination questions in English which imposes upon teachers the unenviable task of helping them memorise texts in English often with vague understanding of the meaning. Without properly introducing or planning teaching guides, without disseminating relevant information, and probably most challenging of all, delivering subject content without properly adapting to the needs and levels of students or general needs in education, challenges have been encountered by both teachers and students. Students are helped to understand content through teaching inputs in the Myanmar medium although they are required to learn and respond in English in examinations. Also, EMI becomes even more challenging when command of academic English among students and teachers is severely limited.

In spite of these challenges, the need for an EMI policy in higher education sector becomes apparent for two main reasons. Firstly, students are trained for professional workplaces where English is used as a medium of communication. Trade, tourism, banking, government organizations and the exchange of culture, technology and knowledge are only a few examples where English is used for communication (Coleman, 2006). Secondly, as academic exchange programmes are becoming more prevalent, there is a demand for more EMI courses to support both incoming foreign students and local students who are preparing for future academic exchange abroad (Brumfit, 2004).

The application of EMI in teaching/learning at the tertiary level can potentially contribute to language learning, access to international resources and literature, and delivering content subjects in an internationally popular medium of teaching. With the increasingly popular and useful approach of EMI, there are now demands and requirements to deliver lessons, forums and workshops in English. Researchers and scholars have conducted a number of studies on the use of EMI, on perceptions of teachers and students and resultant changes and challenges brought about by EMI. EMI research has focused on a wide variety of areas, such as the growth of EMI as a global phenomenon, public opinions on EMI, teaching and learning through EMI, (e.g. Dearden, 2014), arguments brought forward for and against Englishization in Europe (e.g. Lanvers, Ursula and Hultgren, Anna Kristina, 2018). Using questionnaires and interviews, previous studies explore university teachers' views on EMI (e.g. Zare-ee and Hejazi 2017, Saeed et.al, 2012, Griffiths, 2013), and students' perceptions of EMI (e.g. Inyoung Kym and Hyun Kym, Murtaza, 2016).

To the researchers' knowledge, there is not yet any study focusing on the use of EMI in Myanmar. The area of EMI is worth exploring for several reasons: firstly, EMI has informally returned to private schools in Myanmar where English language proficiency is promoted; secondly, apart from the Myanmar specialization at universities, all other subjects have prescribed textbooks in the English medium and students are required to learn their subjects in English and also respond in English to questions in examinations; thirdly, Many teachers of different subjects claim to use EMI but apparently they use Myanmar in explaining English texts and see it as 50/50 Myanmar and English use. So there is a need to define what an

optimum use of English in EMI is; and finally shifts in education trends have mostly happened without considering the needs and aspirations of stakeholders so their voices should be listened to for successful implementation of EMI. To ensure this, as a first step, it is necessary to investigate how students and teachers view EMI. There is, therefore, a need to explore the attitudes of students and teachers towards EMI and their practical needs in applying EMI at the tertiary level so that the viability of EMI can be verified and ways and means on how best to effectively implement EMI in the context of University of Mandalay can be identified. The present study was conducted in the University of Mandalay, one of the only two leading Arts and Science universities in Myanmar, the other being Yangon University, where outstanding students can enroll and qualify for studies as a rule. Though student levels are largely consistent, teachers are diverse in terms of experiences, qualifications and approaches to teaching/learning which they have mostly picked up informally from their predecessors as students in classrooms. There is little consistent continuous professional development as teachers are transferred haphazardly and intermittently without considering the merits of such actions. As a result, some teachers lack confidence to use English to teach their respective subjects when they generally lack even basic communication skills in English, let alone effectively use it for classroom instruction.

Methods

The current study employed a cross-sectional survey design. Two sets of questionnaires, one for teachers and the other for students, and structured interview items were used to collect data on university teachers' and students' perceptions on the possible use of EMI in the context of University of Mandalay which possibly reflects the wider Myanmar scenario. The data were collected from a total of 120 participants, 40 university teachers and 80 first year students, in the 2018-2019 Academic Year. The participant teachers were randomly selected from 5 Social Science departments (International Relations, Law, Anthropology, Geography and Oriental Studies) and 3 Natural Science departments (Physics, Chemistry and Zoology). The total number of first year students in 2018-2019 academic year was approximately 500. The sample size for the data collection was determined as follows.

Calculation of the sample size for students

Particular	Value
Population Size (N)	500
Critical Value (95% confidence level) (Z)	1.96
Margin of Error (e)	0.05
a) Sample Proportion (uncertain) (p)	0.5
b) Sample Proportion (p)	0.05
Sample Size(n)	64

Although the sample size is 64 for students, the total number of students who participated in this study is 80.

Calculation of the sample size for teachers

Particular	Value
Population Size (N)	100
Critical Value (95% confidence level) (Z)	1.96
Margin of Error (e)	0.05
a) Sample Proportion (uncertain) (p)	0.5
b) Sample Proportion (p)	0.05
Sample Size(n)	40

(Source: **www.wallstreetmojo.com)**

Two instruments were used in order to investigate students' and teachers' attitudes towards the potential use of EMI in University of Mandalay: two versions of a survey questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Both sets of questionnaire contained 3 Likert scales, with 25 items for teachers and 20 items for students which were developed based upon earlier studies (Saeed, Iqbal & Azam, 2012, Başıbek, et.al. 2014) investigating students' and teachers' attitudes towards EMI. The interview asks 10 open-ended questions which elicit qualitative data from 10 students and 5 teachers to verify, confirm and reinforce data acquired by means of the questionnaire survey.

Copies of the questionnaire were distributed one month before the final examination. The question items mainly cover the areas namely English proficiency levels required in EMI, self-rated English skills required in EMI class, the role of L1 (Mother Tongue) in EMI, benefits of EMI, EMI as a form of improvement in English language skills, challenges faced by students and teachers and their willingness to implement EMI policy in Mandalay University. After data collection, descriptive statistics was processed and anlaysed for individual questionnaire items. The interview was conducted in the second phase after an interval of two weeks. To ensure collection of authentic and reliable data, interviews were conducted in the Myanmar medium. Then the data were transcribed and translated into English.
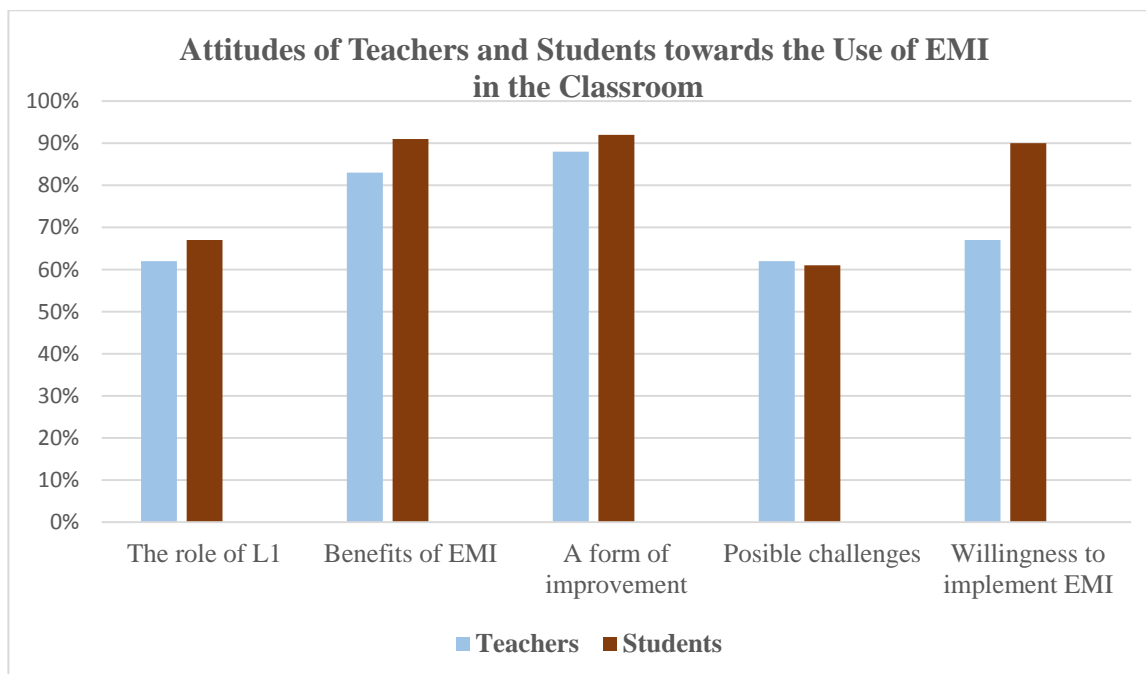
Results

Questionnaire survey results

Based on simple frequencies and percentage, analysis of the data obtained from students and teachers indicated that a large number of teachers and students agreed with the statements on the advantages of EMI. Regarding "The need of English proficiency level in EMI", 95% of the teachers believed that it is necessary to know English in any academic discipline in higher education and they need English language skills to teach respective subjects in EMI. 85% of the teachers believed that they can teach academic subjects using EMI whereas 15% were unsure about this. On the subject of the role of L1 in EMI class, 62 % of teachers and 67% of students agreed that using L1 can potentially hinder improvement of student's English proficiency. 85% of the teachers agreed that bilingualism assists in students' knowledge acquisition and 84% of students believed that they understand their subjects better when their teachers explain the concepts through bilingualism. Responses to the student questionnaire indicated that 85% preferred the bilingual model, while only 3 % opted for the English medium and 12% was uncertain. Both groups of participants, teachers and students, believed that teaching in the Myanmar medium allows teachers to delve deeper into the subject content. As regards the benefits of EMI, 83% of the surveyed teachers and 91% of surveyed students agreed that EMI provides students with better employment opportunities since regular exposure to English in the academic setting can help improve students' English language

proficiency which is believed to aid in other areas as well. When students are asked to rate their English language skills, only 51% believed they can follow instructions in an EMI class. With regard to possible challenges of EMI, a significant number of participants from both groups of respondents (62% of teachers and 61% of students) admitted that the use of EMI in the classroom is challenging for them. Pertaining to their willingness to implement EMI policy in the university of Mandalay, 67% of teachers want to support the use of EMI in the classroom whereas 90% of students want teachers to experiment with EMI for the development of language skills whereas 10% are unsure how willing they are to implement EMI.

It is noteworthy that teachers for the most part avoided taking a clear stand for or against EMI whereas students stated firmly that they welcome the implementation of EMI policy in the University of Mandalay.

Interview results

In addition to the questionnaire data presented above, 5 teachers each selected from different disciplines, namely International Relations, Law, Zoology, Oriental Studies and Geography were interviewed. Teachers chosen for interviews were selected based on whether they used the English medium text books and students were selected based on whether they were required to answer examination questions in English.

The interviewed teachers prefer EMI to a Myanmar medium instruction for the following reasons:

1. EMI provides a lot of exposure for both teachers and students to improve English language proficiency for scholarship programmes, student exchange programmes, etc.
2. EMI can enhance higher education development, facilitate academic exchange, offer better employability, familiarize teachers and students with academic studies of foreign countries and raise international reputation for the university.
3. The use of EMI leads to increased international academic exchange.
4. EMI can improve student/staff mobility.
5. English is a necessity for all academic disciplines.

6. It (EMI) provides excellent opportunities for bilingualism.
7. EMI improves students' academic language skills such as the English language skill, presentation skill, etc.
8. EMI helps students gain better access to and enables effective use of English medium resources.
9. EMI builds regional/international networks for research and projects

On the other hand, the interviewed teachers identified some disadvantages of EMI in spite of its practical uses.

1. To use EMI, a high level of English language proficiency is needed. A weak mastery of English might lead to difficulty in comprehending subject matters for both teachers and students which in turn can lead to demotivation.
2. EMI increases the workload of teachers because they need to use substantial amount of time for lesson preparation.
3. Proper guidelines need to be issued for teachers to use EMI.

The interviewed students claimed that they prefer their teachers to use EMI in delivering lessons whereas some of them admitted that occasionally they found it difficult to understand the content when the teachers used only English.

Discussions

The study of attitudes of teachers and students towards the application of EMI led to several important findings. Firstly, a majority of respondents in both groups (83% of teachers and 91% of students) identify the favourable outcomes of EMI and positive attitudes towards its implementation. Both groups of participants view EMI as a useful tool for internationalization of tertiary institutions and upgrading the quality of higher education. They believe that EMI programmes can improve students' language competence as well as teachers' expertise in both content and language instruction. Apparently, based on participants' points of view, the use of English supersedes the language level but also is considered as a tool for progress at personal, and professional levels. Splunder (2012) and Coleman (2006) also observe recent growth in the use of EMI among practitioners and make similar findings. Secondly, in the event that EMI is implemented, given teachers' current levels of English proficiency, interview data indicated that they lack confidence to engage in authentic EMI situations in which English will constitute the dominant medium of instruction. Mastery to some extent of English and high proficiency in its use no doubt aids in the successful implementation of EMI. This, incidentally, is not unique to the Myanmar scenario as international researchers have pinpointed English language proficiency as an important factor in the success of any EMI programme (e.g., Vu & Burns, 2014). It is recommended that to improve the teachers' ability to conduct a class in English and to convey information successfully, they should be provided with EMI training. Thirdly, in spite of challenges in terms of language proficiency levels and confidence levels of practitioners, many teacher participants (67%) believe that English should be used as the sole medium of instruction in delivering lessons. This finding resonates with Belhiah & Elhami (2015) and Bukhari & Awan (2018), who found that students in their study preferred English as the sole medium of instruction, feeling that EMI helps improve their English language skills. Yet others maintain that the first language/native language of learners is potentially useful as a pedagogical tool to teach the content. Content delivered through the native tongue after first gaining mastery in its use is deemed crucial for richer, deeper understanding of subject matters. Finally, teachers link EMI to increased workloads. It remains to be seen how confident teachers are with the practical application of EMI but it seems they need more time to prepare lessons for teaching in the English medium compared to the usual Myanmar medium. Teachers tied EMI to increased workloads due to the time-consuming nature of lesson planning for EMI.

This raises further questions of whether lesson preparation in Myanmar is as time consuming as English lesson plans, how these teachers plan their lessons in the Myanmar medium and how the lessons are actually delivered in the classrooms which is worthy of a full-scale research. In contrast to teachers' cautious approach to EMI, taking into consideration the risks and challenges, student participants are overwhelmingly positive about implementing EMI: almost all the students (90%) are enthusiastic about implementing EMI due to their perceptions of positive impacts EMI might have on their English proficiency. To develop prior knowledge of perceptions by teachers and students along with prospective practitioners of EMI in Myanmar, those of University of Mandalay in particular, it may be useful to conduct a pre-implementation analysis. This study, though limited in scale, has taken initiatives to make sense of stakeholders' perspectives for a more extensive, practical and successful future use of EMI. Given perceptions and attitudes of teachers and students towards the use of EMI in the context of University of Mandalay, there is a need for greater attention to the issue of training teaching staff to increase their confidence to prepare and deliver EMI classes irrespective of the English language levels of teachers or students. The content of the training could possibly include EMI methodology, the language of interacting and teaching in English in the classroom, Micro teaching and feedback.

Conclusion

The present study investigated attitudes of teachers and students towards the practical use of EMI in the classroom using the questionnaire surveys and interview protocols. The result indicated both teachers and students have considerably positive attitudes towards the implementation of EMI in the university of Mandalay viewing EMI as a way to improve students' English language proficiency, promote more efficient delivery of subject content, as well as increased retention of teaching inputs. Many teachers were worried about increased workload preferring instead the bilingual model whereas students are somewhat more eager to implement EMI to improve their English proficiency and future opportunities. This study was limited with the relatively small sample of teachers and students. Future research could possibly explore the perceptions and attitudes of more teachers, students and administrators towards potential implementation of EMI at the university. Moreover, it could also explore such impacts on the amount of English students actually acquire and how much content they can retain to provide an insight into the practicalities of EMI.

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