English as a medium of instruction: students' strategies

Adem Soruç

Carol Griffiths

Abstract

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

Introduction

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

EMI (English-medium instruction) is defined by Dearden and Macaro (2016) as providing instruction in English in contexts where English is not the language commonly spoken. It is often confused with CLIL (content and language integrated learning) which is defined as a "dual-focused form of instruction where attention is given to both the language and the content" (Coyle, Hood and Marsh, 2010: 3), and CBI (content-based instruction) which is

1

"designed to embed language instruction in the context of content that is meaningful to learners" (Cammarata, Tedick and Osborn, 2016: 12). Indeed, these approaches have similarities, and may at times overlap. The essential difference, perhaps, is that EMI does not directly concern itself with language: this is taken for granted (at least in theory, though it may be different in practice), wheras CLIL and CBI are dual-focused. Another distinguishing feature may be that, although in theory EMI can be applied at any level, it is probably more common at tertiary level (as in the study described in this article), whereas CLIL and CBI are common at primary and secondary levels as well. There may also be a geographical distinction: CBI originated in North America and tends to be more commonly used there, whereas CLIL is the term more commonly used in Europe, and EMI is used globally in non-native environments.

Indeed, EMI seems to be spreading further and further. Dearden and Macaro (ibid.), for instance, discuss the cases of three European countries: Austria, Italy and Poland; and Aguilar (2015) adds Spain. In the Middle East, Inan, Yuksel and Gurkan (2012) debate the expectations of English-medium departments at two Turkish tertiary institutions, while Belhiah and Elhami (2015) consider the EMI situation in the United Arab Emirates. Further east, Lei and Hu (2014) question the effectiveness of EMI in China, Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim and Jung (2011) compare the policy with the reality in Korea, while Chapple (2015) discusses the use of EMI in Japan. Further south, Viriri (2013) considers the inadequacies surrounding the use of EMI in Zimbabwe. In short, it would seem that EMI has spread almost everywhere.

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

In order to manage what must seem like an extremely daunting task, students must surely have strategies, defined by Griffiths (2015) as "actions chosen by learners for the purpose of learning or regulating learning" (p. 426). Yet, although strategies might reasonably be expected to contribute to successful learning for students in an English-medium environment, they are virtually invisible in the EMI literature to date. The study described in this article therefore sought to address this lacuna by seeking the answers to two main questions:

1   What difficulties do EMI learners face in the classroom?

2   What strategies do they use to deal with the difficulties?

The Study

Setting and participants

This study took place at a private English-medium university in Istanbul, Turkey. Data were collected using existing classes from two non-English-related departments: International Relations (N=24) and Psychology (N=15). These classes were conducted along fairly traditional lecture-style lines, where students were required to listen to the teacher, to write notes and sometimes to answer the teacher's questions. Altogether, there were 39 participants recruited according to convenience factors such as timetabling. All the participants were freshman-year students at an average age of 18 (20 female, 19 male), from 11 different national backgrounds (see Table 1):

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

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

None of the students was a native-speaker of English. Since, however, they were studying in an EMI environment, the preferred language for research purposes was English. However, since the first language of Author 1 was Turkish, Turkish students were given the option of replying in Turkish in order to facilitate free expression of ideas.

Data Collection

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

Video recording

The intended function of the video-recordings was twofold: to provide a permanent record of the class for later checking, as well as serving to stimulate learners in the recall sessions. In order to be able to hear and see the teacher or the learners clearly, two video-recorders were used: one was fixed on the teacher's table recording the class from the front, the other was held by Author 1 who stood behind the class while video-recording to minimize any effect on the learners and to help avoid the well-known observer`s paradox, whereby the mere presence of an observer can affect "natural" behaviour. In fact, as observed by Author 1 and confirmed by the teacher, the participants paid no attention to the recorders, and they did not appear to affect behaviour in any way.

Open-ended questionnaire

In order to survey the reactions of all the students, the teachers were asked to finish their classes ten minutes early, when students were given an open-ended questionnaire in which they were asked:

1   what difficulties do you generally have in an EMI classroom?

2   what strategies do you use to deal with difficulties?

3   write any other opinions regarding the EMI phenomenon

In the questionnaire, the learners were asked to reflect and express their ideas in their own manner. Although they were free to use their mother tongue to articulate their thoughts, most of them wrote in English, with just a few of the Turkish students writing in their L1 (Turkish).

Stimulated recall

Immediately following the classes, stimulated-recall interviews were conducted with seven students to explore the strategies that students use to deal with the difficulties experienced in an EMI classroom. Three of the students were from International Relations, the other four were from the Psychology class. These students were purposively selected because they were from different language backgrounds, because they displayed interesting behaviour (e.g. active participation or withdrawal), or for the practical reason that they were not in an immediate rush to take other classes. The interviews were performed immediately after the

video-recorded classes to increase the likelihood that the data could be reliably recalled from short-term memory. As much as possible, the learners were allowed to initiate recalls themselves, with some prompting from Author 1 as required to stimulate recollection. The recalls were conducted either in English or in Turkish (for students whose L1 was Turkish and who preferred to use their L1. See Table 1 in the Participants section for details of national origins). The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed and, where necessary, translated by Author 1.

Data Analysis

The initial step of data analysis involved examining the open-ended questionnaires for themes. These were first listed (open coding stage), then grouped according to four key themes (axial coding stage): difficulties according to speaking and listening, the teacher/class, vocabulary, and affect/cognition. The data from the stimulated-recall interviews were first transcribed and (where necessary) translated into English before being examined for evidence of strategy use first by Author 1 and later by Author 2.

Results: difficulties

Author 1 identified 26 distinct themes from the questionnaire regarding the difficulties with EMI. Author 2 added an extra theme, making a total of 27. This indicates an inter-rater level of agreement of 96%. The difficulties noted (using the students' own words, including occasional "infelicities") are listed below. Where the difficulties were mentioned by more than one student, the numbers of students expressing the same idea are noted in brackets.

1. Difficulties with speaking and listening

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

2. Difficulties related to the teacher/class

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

3. Vocabulary difficulties

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

4. Affective/cognitive difficulties

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

<u>Results: strategies for coping with difficulties</u>

During the stimulated recalls (conducted according to the details in the Data Collection section), the seven interviewed students suggested strategies they used to cope with their difficulties. Following transcription, Author 1 initially identified 43 strategies. However, based on the definition of strategy as "actions chosen by learners for the purpose of learning or regulating learning" (Griffiths, 2015), Author 2 agreed with only 36 of these, producing an initial inter-rater agreement level of 84%. Issues with strategy identification were agreed by negotiation and numbered from 1 to 36 in brackets in the transcripts below. As with the difficulties, the students' ideas are reported verbatim, without attempting to correct any "errors", except for those who preferred Turkish, which had to be translated.

Stimulated recall 1

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

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

A: Here I <u>try to think out of the box (5)</u>....<u>critically think (6)</u> about the information, <u>specify (7)</u> and <u>clarify (8)</u> that everything that I know….<u>I try to mix the information with my real-life experiences (9)</u>

A: Because it is a …social psychological lesson, without examples wouldn't make any sense, so I really try to <u>ask a lot of other examples (10)</u>

A: <u>Sitting in the front (11)</u> is very important.

K: <u>Participation (12)</u> is also important.…makes easier for you to remember in the exam.

A: Whenever there's something I don't get it, <u>I always ask specific questions (13)</u>. Sitting in the front is very important. Sitting in the back no matter how concentrated you are there are physical barriers and obstacles....<u>Take notes (14)</u> as much as I can, but sometimes taking notes the information slips. I <u>choose to understand (15)</u> instead of taking notes

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

A: to make him cheerful happy....personally <u>understanding the information very clearly deeply at the first interaction (16)</u> is much important than just taking notes.

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

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

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

K: When you sit behind you see those passive people…distract you. Sitting in the front is better because you don't see people behind

A: <u>rely on personal previous experience to make it real (19)</u> … I have to <u>feel myself in the situation (20)</u>.

K: it is good for memory and understanding....so <u>putting your own experience (21)</u>

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

Stimulated recall 2

Two Turkish students were invited immediately after the Psychology class. They preferred to speak in their mother tongue (Turkish), so the transcript below is a translation. They were

purposively chosen in order to explore their reasons for being utterly silent in class: they never participated at all. One was male (M), the other female (F)

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

F: I also understand everything as I am used to English as a medium in the class.

M: When the class is too silent [the teacher] asks questions

F: We have to <u>stay very alert (24)</u> in his class as he may ask questions at any time and waits for the answers (*they laugh*). I try to <u>catch key words (25)</u>. Sometimes I <u>translate (26)</u>. But we have to catch up with what he says.

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

Stimulated recall 3

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

E: Most of the time I use note-taking in the classroom because it is the easiest way for me to remember what's taught in the class. I have some other strategies but they are not so common ... I…look for the <u>gestures (27)</u>, <u>the emphasize, the stress (28),</u> <u>some verbs, some phrases (29)</u>…<u>I try to use understanding from the context (30)</u>. When I can't understand from the context I <u>look up the dictionary (31)</u>. It is very fast at that time while listening I look up to <u>keep the class flowing (32)</u> to catch up with the lecturer simultaneously.

Stimulated recall 4

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

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

B: I feel shy. Embarrassed. I can't catch up with the teacher because my English is not good, and my memory is not so strong to keep all information

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

B: <u>Students should go abroad (36).</u>

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

Discussion and Implications

It is not difficult to empathise with some of the students in this study, who feel shy, embarrassed, anxious, uncomfortable, bored. These problems can result in an inability to understand, remember or concentrate. Clearly, many of the students were themselves very aware of their own language "inadequacies" (Viriri 2013), and when answering the questionnaire, they managed to identify a number of problematic areas, including difficulties with listening and speaking, with the teacher and/or the class, with vocabulary and with challenges related to affect and/or cognition. What, we might ask, should be done about such difficulties?

During the stimulated-recall interviews, the students themselves appeared to be very aware of the potential for strategies to help them be more effective and the strategies they identified during the interviews were numerous (n=36) and varied. A variety of cognitive strategies (for interacting mentally with the material to be learned) can be identified, including *asking questions*, *visualizing*, *using prior experience, being specific*, *clarifying*, *exemplifying*, *looking for main ideas*, *thinking creatively ('out of the box'), thinking critically,* etc. In order to manage vocabulary difficulties, students mentioned strategies such as *guessing from context*, *using a dictionary*, *using paralanguage* (e.g. gestures), *translating*, *using key words*, *using visuals*, etc.

It is interesting also to hear the two interviewees from the first stimulated recall talking of using metacognitive strategies (for regulating the learning process) to manage the teacher and/or the class by *taking notes* in order to "motivate" their teacher, and to influence classroom dynamics by *sitting at the front* and *participating actively* so as to "drag the class" along and prevent themselves from becoming "demotivated". Student E also mentions the need to "keep the class flowing". In other words, in addition to strategies aimed directly at managing their own learning, students are capable of using strategies to manage the learning environment (including their teacher).

Perhaps the area where fewest strategic ideas were forthcoming was in the affective domain (managing emotional reactions such as shyness, embarrassment, boredom, distraction): nobody really suggested any ways to deal with these problems. Also, although there were a number of strategies for coping with listening difficulties (e.g. *paying attention*, *remaining alert*, *concentrating,* etc.), there were really no suggestions for "being able to produce what I want to say". These two "gap" areas (affective and speaking strategies) might suggest useful directions for further exploration.

Those of us who have worked in these kinds of environments know full well that there is often huge pressure to allow students into their chosen courses, even though the fact that their language level is inadequate is crystal-clear. They are often brimming over with good intentions: "I will work hard!" But in fact, they often have no idea of the enormity of the task, and it is often not long before they become discouraged and demotivated, like B in stimulated recall 4, who sits silently at the back of the class because "I can't catch up with the teacher because my English is not good". What are the implications of this? Should they be denied

entry until their language is at a level where they can cope? If so, what should this level be? There appears to be little consistent effort, even on many national levels, let alone internationally, to address these important questions. As Macaro (2015) puts it: "to my knowledge, there is currently no language benchmark for EMI" (p.4). In the meantime, many students are simply being set up to fail.

Suggestions for further research

There are many ways in which this preliminary study could be extended, in terms of different locations (locally, nationally or internationally), and different institutional types (primary, secondary, tertiary, state, private, etc.), which might all have different needs and difficulties. More strategies could be elicited and included in inventories which could be used to explore strategy use more widely. Some of the more interesting strategy suggestions could be probed in more depth (e.g. what exactly does *thinking out of the box* involve?). How these EMI students compare to EFL (English as a foreign language), CLIL (content and language integrated learning) or CBI (content-based instruction) learners could also be interesting questions to pursue. As mentioned above, the areas of affective and speaking difficulties are rather under-represented in terms of students' own suggestions for coping strategies, so this might well be a fruitful direction to pursue.

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

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

Conclusion

This study has taken a very preliminary look at what is a mushrooming phenomenon in our contemporary globalizing world: the use of English-medium instruction (EMI). It is difficult not to feel that it has grown so quickly, often fertilized by economic imperatives, that the ability to ensure theoretically sound and supportive practices has not kept up. In this study, we have tried to gain insight into the difficulties students experience with EMI, and some of the strategies they employ to address the difficulties, with the idea that these might be passed

on to other students in order to help them to learn more effectively. There is, in fact, much more research required from both the students' and the teachers' perspectives in order to attempt to ensure the best possible outcomes for everyone involved as they undertake the very challenging task of teaching and learning in a language which is not their own.

3985 words

References

Aguilar, M. (2015). Engineering lecturers' views on CLIL and EMI. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism.*

Belhiah, H. and **M. Elhami.** 2015. 'English as a medium of instruction in the Gulf: When students and teachers speak'. *Language Policy* 14: 3-23.

Byun, K., Chu, H., Kim, M., Park, I., Kim, S. and **J. Jung. 2011.** 'English-medium teaching in Korean higher education: Policy debates and reality'. *Higher Education* 62/4: 431-49.

Cammarata, L., Tedick, D. & Osborn, T. (2016). Content-based instruction and curricular reforms: issues and goals. In L. Cammarata (Ed.), *Content-Based Foreign Language Teaching* (pp.1-22). New York & London: Routledge

Coyle, D., Hood, P. & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning.* Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

Canagarajah, S. 1999. *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University press

Chapple, J. 2015. 'Teaching in English is not necessarily the teaching of English'. *International Education Studies* 8/3: 1-13.

Dearden, J. and **E. Macaro.** 2016. 'Higher education teachers' attitudes towards English medium instruction: A three-country comparison'. *SSLLT* 6/3: 455-86.

Doiz, A., Lasagabaster, D. and **J. Sierra** (eds.) 2012. *English-medium of Instruction at Universities: Global Challenges.* Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Edwards, J. 2014. 'Bilingualism and multilingualism: some central concepts' in T. Bhatia and C. Richie (eds.). *The Handbook of Bilingualism and Multilingualism* (2nd edition). Chichester: Blackwell.

Griffiths, C. 2015**.** 'What have we learnt from 'good language learners'?' *ELT Journal* 69/4: 425-433.

Inan, B., Yuksel D. and **S. Gurkan.** 2012. 'Expectations of department lecturers and/or professors from prep school education and prepatory English language lessons'. *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences* 46: 3164–171.

Lei, J. and **G. Hu.** 2014. 'Is English-medium instruction effective in improving Chinese undergraduate students' English competence?' *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 52: 99-126.

Macaro, E. 2015. 'English medium instruction: Time to start asking some difficult questions'. *Modern English Teacher* 24/2: 4-8.

Viriri, E. 2013. *English as a Medium of Instruction in Zimbabwe: Inadequacies Surrounding its Use in Rural Secondary Schools*. Saarbrücken, Germany: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing.

Adem Soruç completed his PhD recently at Yeditepe University, Istanbul, Turkey. He has worked as a post-doctoral researcher on English as a medium of instruction (with Prof. Dr. Ernesto Macaro) at the University of Oxford, and is currently teaching at Sakarya University ELT department in Turkey. He is carrying out research on EMI, English as a lingua franca, learner identity, characteristics of good language learner, and issues related to instructed SLA, etc. He has published a number of articles and presented at many international conferences. adamsoruc@gmail.com

Carol Griffiths has been a teacher, manager, and teacher trainer of ELT for many years. She has taught in many places around the world, including New Zealand, Indonesia, Japan, China, North Korea, UK and Turkey. She has presented at numerous conferences and published widely. Learner issues (e.g. individual differences, such as strategies, style, gender, age, culture, motivation, identity), teacher education and support (e.g. methodology, error correction, coping strategies), language issues (e.g. ELF, multilingualism), sociolinguistics, action research, and using literature to teach language are her major areas of research interest. (website: www.carolgriffiths.net). Email: carolgriffith5@gmail.com