



Review

English as a Medium of Instruction: Exploring Benefits and Challenges in the 21st Century

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A B S T R A C T

Language education has remarkably undergone a major shift since the advent of the communicative approach in the 1970s. As English has long become the world's lingua franca, the approach to its teaching and learning has also witnessed an outstanding breakthrough. This is illustrated by the growing figures of non-native English language speakers that far exceed the native ones, and that entails a special status for English. Therefore, different proposals have been made as to how English should best be approached in teaching given its various characteristics as an international language for communication. One of these approaches is English as a medium of instruction (EMI). In this regard, and in their attempt to attain internationalization and develop the quality of higher education, many institutions in non-English speaking countries (e.g., Japan, China, Malaysia, Germany, etc.) have opted for the world's first language as a means of instruction in various academic subjects, namely the science-related ones. This paper, then, is set to conceptualize and highlight the process of using English as a language of teaching and learning at the tertiary level, and explores its potential benefits and challenges for students and professors in the Moroccan higher educational context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Surely, English has been for many decades now the world's lingua franca. It is the language of business, media, industry, science, technology, and tourism. It allows for more mobility, movement, and interaction than any other rival language. This explains why a great number of universities around the world, in their attempt to become international and to attract foreign students, have decided to use English as a means of instruction in most of their academic subjects.

This internationalization has become a recurrent concern for higher educational institutions. It is implemented in a variety of ways; one of which is to attract students from overseas. These universities, which are mostly European, American, and Asian, work hard enough to allure students from other countries, namely from developing and emerging nations in Latin America, Asia and Africa. To do this, they adapt

their trainings or create special ones that suit the needs and expectations of students. For instance, the European integration in higher education, known as the Bologna Process, provided an internationalization integration system by standardizing diplomas into bachelor, master and doctorate, and by setting up a unified system of grading acknowledged by all institutions regardless of the member state (Park, 2019). Students' exchange programs are other means of carrying out this internationalization project. Besides, some Western universities (e.g., American, British, French, German, etc.) seek partnerships abroad and create courses in collaboration with universities in the target countries. These initiatives are supported by the Erasmus project (Murata, 2019). To attain internationalization, these institutions adopt the world's first language as a means of instruction.

There seems to be a firm belief that this internationalization can only take place through

English language education or through what Galloway et al., (2017) call ‘education through English.’ For many, English is a dominant language and a “tool for global mobility, a gatekeeper to knowledge, a prerequisite to career success” (Brumfit 2004, p. 166, as cited in Galloway & Kriukow, 2019, p. 137). The issue here lies in the conflicting points of view that this increasing financially educational ‘market’ is rapidly becoming a serious threat to national identity and culture at large. However, for others it represents an unequivocal step for social and economic development and modernization.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1. Definitions of EMI

Most EMI definitions involve the use of English for teaching and learning purposes in non-English native contexts where English is seen as a lingua franca, a lingua-cultural means of communication, or a foreign language. Dearden (2014) posits that English as a medium of instruction implies that “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (p. 2). Similarly, Galloway (2020) believes that instructional English entails “the use of the English language to teach academic content in places where English is not the first language of the majority of the population” (p. 10). From their part, Tsou and kao (2017) state that EMI is perceived as “a strategic decision to improve quality of education, alumni employment, publications, international academic exchange, etc., all of which contributing to the institution’s international profile” (p. 4).

In this vein, and for the very essence of EMI application in academic and educational venues, many countries around the world have long adopted tangible policies endorsing the use of English as a medium of instruction for the good of their education system.

2.2. Worldwide EMI Context

EMI in Europe

The implementation of English as a medium of instruction at the tertiary level first appeared in Europe in the 1990s, and has significantly evolved ever since. It “has found fertile ground in continental Europe” (Tsou & Kao, 2017, p. 7), mainly in Northern Europe. In Germany, the first

university English degree was created in 1979. 20 years later, all German universities were able to integrate English-based courses and degrees in the national system of education (Ammon and McConnell, 2002). This development continued to grow; in 2006 the German University Exchange Service known as DAAD listed as many as 140 higher education public and private institutions which offered English-taught study programs.

In 2007, France listed more than 490 courses in which English was the language of teaching and learning. These courses were mainly included in the masters programs of business, science, and engineering, and are currently spread over more than 160 institutions across the country (Campus France, 2019). These institutions aim at attracting international students. For instance, most of the graduate programs in Lille University are in English in various fields ranging from science and technology to culture.

Equally in the Netherlands, the EMI context appears to be ubiquitous. Using English in teaching starts from the lower university levels and largely expands at the higher ones. In 2009, 105 out 170 masters programs in Amsterdam University were in English, and almost half were at Utrecht University. Likewise, the EMI context in Sweden is even more dominant. English is prevalent there, and this actually “has led some researchers to describe it as a second language in Sweden, rather than a foreign language” (Hyltenstam, 2004; Phillipson, 1992, as cited in Toth, 2018, p. 8). According to the ‘Study in Sweden’ website (2021), Swedish universities list more than 1000 EMI courses. For instance, Uppsala University offers more than 700 courses that are entirely in English.

EMI in ASIA

The EMI status in Asia is no less prominent than that of Europe. Many Asian countries, particularly the former British colonies (e.g., Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, etc.) have had long traditions in implementing instructional English in their education system. After its independence, Singapore chose English as the official language along with the other national languages: Malay, Tamil, and Mandarin Chinese. Since 1979 EMI has become the common trend in almost all universities in the country. In 1987, Singapore became one of the first countries in the world to use English as the language of instruction in most school subjects, including Math, Science and History. This policy

has resulted in a growing figure of English language proficiency among Singaporeans wherein “70.9 % of them aged 15 and over were literate in English” (Tsou & kao, 2017, p. 8).

In Malaysia, education officials have long decided that monolingualism would not serve the country’s willingness to globalize and develop its economy. They have decided on English as a language of teaching and learning since their independence in 1957 despite the existence of more than 80 local languages (Riget et al., 2018). However, they have maintained their Malaysian national language as an official language that all students must acquire starting from the elementary level, and that is used in governmental and administrative circles. As for English, the government has made it mandatory for all educational levels, since 2003, to learn Science and Math in English. The country’s objective has been not only to keep their students in their home country by attracting international universities and creating their own ones that introduce EMI programs, but also to become a regional hub for international students.

Albeit not a former British colony, China made fast remarkable efforts towards implementing EMI. Driven by a fast growing economy, a desire to strengthen its ongoing influence in different parts of the world, and a disposition to catch up with the global study-abroad market, China has premiered English as a teaching language in various university subjects (e.g., Biology, International Trade, Information Technology, etc.); This has led the country to become “the biggest destination in Asia, attracting more than 260,000 international students to enroll in its universities in 2011 (Hou et al., 2013, as cited in Tsou & kao, 2017, p. 9).

English has long been established as the first foreign language in Japan right after World War II. In 1956, it became a subject for the high school entrance examinations in the country and a prerequisite for students to enter high schools. By 2002, most universities had already incorporated English in their study programs and entrance examinations (Silver et al., 2002) in order to respond to the demands of the job market and globalization. Similarly to China, this Japanese internationalization process has been pushed by its relentless efforts to compete with other acclaimed universities around the world, create a well-grounded educational reputation among international students, and undoubtedly cultivate

their identity and help spread the Japanese culture (Dearden, 2015). It has also been driven by “the collective English proficiency level [which] is considered to be comparatively low” (Chapple, 2015, p. 3). As of 2013, around 194 Japanese universities started English-taught courses in different forms (Tsou & kao, 2017). Yet, the attained English proficiency outcomes by Japanese students were not up to the desired expectations, given the fierce competition from the neighboring China, Honk Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, etc.

In the Middle East, similar efforts have been made to increase the number of EMI programs in universities since the 1980s (Galloway, 2020). The most prominent examples of ubiquitous English-taught programs are found in the United Arab Emirate, Oman, and Qatar, and to a less extent in Saudi Arabia. The importance placed on English in these countries started with the need to replace foreign workers with their nationals following the societal and economic progress of the petroleum industry (Moskovsky & Picard, 2020). The enforcement of this policy is twofold. First, they pay greater attention to vocational education, with a particular focus on science, technology, and engineering. Second, they send their students to study abroad, namely in Western English speaking countries.

EMI in Morocco

Although English is publically gaining ground in Morocco, its implementation is officially still limited. In public universities, English is used as a language of teaching and learning almost only in the departments of English language studies. Very few exceptions appear from time to time in some public universities where the language of instruction is English. One of them is the previously announced project of a Bachelor’s degree in Economics and Business Administration in English launched by the Faculty of Legal, Economic, and Social Sciences of Ain Chock in Hassan II University, Casablanca. If practically realized, it will be a tremendous breakthrough in the process of using English in education in Moroccan public universities.

In public higher education institutions of Engineering, Science, and Technology (e.g., ENSA, ENSAM, ENSET, ENIM, etc.) the de facto language of instruction is French. English is scarcely used there; it depends primarily on some professors’ individual attempts to use technical terminology in English every now and then. In

this vein, Moroccan university professors of Science and Technology are making significant efforts to develop their English proficiency level. A great number of them participate in international seminars and conferences where the language used is English.

The use of English-taught programs is mainly found in private higher education schools and semi-public ones (Al-Akhawayn University). Some higher schools of Business and Engineering always offer courses wherein the instructional language is English. The rationale behind it is to improve students' English proficiency, and develop their knowledge and expertise in those fields of study using the world's first language. This implies that they have been far ahead of their time in adopting a smaller, but quite comprehensive, version of the bachelor's program.

The new higher education reform represented in the bachelor's system appears to be promising in promoting English language mastery among university students. There is a lot of emphasis in this new system, which replaces the LMD (Licence – Master – Doctorate) program, on learning foreign languages, mainly English. If the project is put to practice, then English will surely be more ubiquitous in universities. In this context, the bachelor's system requires all doctorate students to reach a particular English language proficiency level before graduation. This may reasonably pave the way for future Moroccan faculty members to be able to teach in English.

Moreover, a new strategy by the educational authorities that puts significant emphasis on English proficiency in higher education is looming ahead. In order to graduate, students will be required to have a minimum English language proficiency level of B1. Students of all majors will be the target of this 'latest' reform that has just been proclaimed by the ministry of Higher Education. Albeit an apparent burden on students' shoulders, it is highly supported by them and by the public opinion inside and outside the education sector. In their study on doctoral students' attitudes towards the use of English as a medium of instruction in three Moroccan science and technology universities, Belhiah (2016) confirmed this endorsement by indicating that most participants prefer the implementation of EMI. The reasons the researcher draws involve the students' desire "to read and cite indexed journal articles in their dissertations,

their intention to pursue postgraduate studies abroad, and the desire to have an edge in the job market" (p. 211). This latest reform in Moroccan higher education represents a huge step forward in advancing the status of the English language in the education system. It also pushes more stakeholders to create English-taught programs in colleges.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Benefits and challenges of EMI

Numerous benefits can be drawn from implementing English for instructional purposes in non-English speaking countries. For students, following Chapple (2015), it can be an opportunity to improve their English proficiency and globalize the content they learn using the world's first language. It can help them develop academic performance, enhance critical thinking, and boost graduates' chances for better job-finding prospects. Kassteen (2013, as cited in Chapple, 2015) additionally posits that some other EMI benefits may well include the possibility of raising inter-cultural awareness and cultural understanding, developing the quality of academic performance, scoring high on standardized tests, and pushing students to be more creative.

Additionally, EMI offers a set of benefits to instructors. It paves them the way for having access to better job-finding prospects locally and internationally, carrying out teaching mobility inside the country and abroad, Knowing Western culture, and participating in multicultural and multilingual communities (Galloway et al., 2017). Besides, it allows them to develop English proficiency, take part in international seminars, and publish studies in academic journals.

At the tertiary level, there are driving forces that push universities to adopt EMI policies. Their incorporation of instructional English is considered a way for meeting the needs and objectives of globalization, and a constant concern for "raising research profiles and visibility in rankings" (Kassteen, 2013, as cited in Chapple, 2015, p. 2). Through EMI, higher education institutions (HEIs) are able to compete with other acclaimed universities in attracting as many international students as possible, and in gaining global reputation as ones of the best ranking universities. Some of the main reasons behind this are to increase their financial income, improve the quality of education inside the institution, and internationalize the educational

context. Moreover, as HEIs usually choose talented students in particular, these students often become researchers, and are allowed then to turn into skilled researchers and / or professionals; contributing thus to the development of both their host institutions and host countries.

Equally important, various challenges are involved in the choice for EMI implementation. The most common hurdle is the inadequate or low English language command among students and instructors in non-native speaking venues (Galloway et al., 2017). Such insufficiency is highly likely to affect the two sides in different ways. The students may suffer from demotivation and / or low self-esteem as a result, while their teachers may either fail to explain the course content efficiently, or find difficulty maintaining communication in the target language. The consequential aftermath is that teachers will heavily use code-switching in teaching and learning; often resorting to the mother tongue or other foreign languages (French as the case in Morocco) that are locally dominating and prevalent.

Another concern involves the controversial threat facing national languages and local identity and culture (Brock-Utne, 2013; Cason & Rodriguez, 2013, as cited in Chapple, 2015). Some countries, (e.g., Malaysia, Japan, etc.) have decided to empower the national language in parallel with attributing increasing educational importance to English. And for this very reason, they do not come out comparatively as successful in English-taught programs as other rivaling countries such as Singapore, Taiwan, and China, indeed.

3.2. Models for EMI implementation

A number of approaches are considered by EMI instructors worldwide depending on the local needs of each country. The preparatory model is implemented in most of the world. It suggests that students enroll in a one-year English language class followed by the end-of-year test before embarking on English-taught courses (Tsou & kao, 2017). The rationale behind this approach is to prepare university students for the EMI academic subjects by pushing them to acquire English. The second model, the pre-institutional selection model, involves selecting students with a reasonable English language proficiency that allows them to understand and be understood in their corresponding EMI classes. This model

is prevalent in contexts where English-taught programmes are commonly believed to be quite mature (Utokyo Academy, 2021), as in Western Europe. The institutional support model is the less widespread approach that relies on the support provided by the institution in favour of faculty and students alike. This model is most often used in institutions where the proficiency level is high. Yet, students may still need language support, while their instructors look forward to recognition of their teaching efforts, alongside training and a working environment that is conducive to learning.

In the Moroccan context, given the apparent low English language level among many students of various subjects –not those majoring in English–, and following the new higher education reform that requires students to achieve a B1 English proficiency level, the optimal approach that meets the local needs is the preparatory model that aims at developing their level and prepare them well enough for EMI courses. Besides, not only do students need preparation in Moroccan universities, but also their professors need support in the form of language training. Most of them were taught in French, and now they teach in French, not in English. This implicitly entails that their current proficiency may well prevent them from using English as an instructional language. They are highly likely to find difficulty maintaining communication or explain the content efficiently in English. Therefore, this model applies both to Moroccan students and teachers.

4. CONCLUSION

Surely, English as a medium of instruction has been endorsed by many countries around the world for decades now, and has in turn empowered many universities in their pursuit for internationalization. With the implementation of instructional English, these universities have in effect improved the quality of their academic and educational performance by attracting more talented students and by meeting the needs of globalized education promoted by the world's first language. In the Moroccan context, the status of EMI is slowly developing in public higher education. With the help of the recent reform advanced by the Ministry of Higher Education, English is expected to occupy a greater role by increasing the number of English language classes in various college departments, and by enforcing its status as an important prerequisite for students wishing to graduate.

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