

English Medium undergraduate classes: Are they useful for students' language development?

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Abstract:

Like other developing countries, Sri Lanka too introduced English Medium Instruction (EMI) at tertiary level undergraduate courses with a view of enhancing the English proficiency of the students. The assumption behind this introduction was that when the students were given opportunities for being exposed to plenty of input in a second language (SL) their language proficiency would develop. Generally, in Sri Lankan universities, English is taught as a second language. However, in reality, the EMI students do not show any remarkable achievements in their language proficiency, as expected. However, many of the EMI students whose language proficiency was weaker at the entry point to the university seem to continue to struggle, after three to four years of being in the English medium classes, to cope with the problems associated with the medium of instruction. This study aimed to find out whether there was any improvement in the language proficiency of the science undergraduates of a Sri Lankan university by following their courses in EMI. Also, it aimed at identifying the challenges faced by them in EMI classes. This study was conducted with a group of undergraduates who were already identified as weaker in their proficiency in English. The study revealed that the students had several issues concerning their English language proficiency including issues arising from lack of foundation knowledge in English from schools which in turn hampered their learning of the content subjects. Students claimed that they developed only the listening skill as a result of EMI and that there was no significant improvement of the other skills, namely speaking, reading or writing. The findings of this study were used to provide additional language support for the students.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction (EMI), Second Language, English language proficiency, Content subjects, Language improvement.

Introduction

The students who had very limited language proficiency at schools continue to struggle at the university too. Sudden change in the medium of instruction for almost all the students, except for a very few who studied in English medium at secondary level, has been a problem to cope with their academic studies. This situation affects them from developing their language proficiency further. This study investigates the problems faced by students in EMI classes. In this study, it has been attempted to find the problems faced by EMI students to see whether there is any improvement in their language proficiency by following their courses in English medium.

Objective

Objective of this study is to investigate if there is any improvement in the level of language proficiency of the science undergraduate students by following their courses in EMI and to identify the challenges faced by them in EMI classes.

Methodology

For this study, around 50 students who failed the English language examinations in the first year of their academic study were selected (Semester I). In the faculty nearly two-third of the students had failed that examination out of 180 students who sat for the first year first semester English examination.

The students who participated in the survey are mostly from rural areas and all of them studied their secondary education in their mother tongue. In this study, students whose mother tongue is Sinhala and Tamil participated. Currently these students are in their second year of academic study. A common syllabi is taught for the second year students. Of those 50 students, 40 students participated in the study. Of the participants, nearly 60% followed their school studies in Sinhala medium and the rest in Tamil.

In this study, questionnaires were distributed to collect data. In addition, two Focus Group Discussions were held with students. One among the students whose mother tongue is Tamil and another one for Sinhala-speaking students. These discussions were held to collect further data and at the same time to ensure data triangulation with the data collected from questionnaires.

Findings

The objective of conducting English medium instruction is to enhance the language proficiency of students by teaching them in English. Hence, in this study, students' perception of how their different language skills improve over a period of study at the university was looked into.

None of the students claimed that their overall language proficiency was excellent at the time of entrance to the university. The majority of the students (44%) fall in the poor category, while slightly less percentage (38) state that their language proficiency was somewhat good. Hence, the latter percentage increased to 50% as a present condition. With regard to individual language skills nearly 60% of the surveyed students felt that their speaking ability was poor, next to writing (38%). The statistical analysis using chi-square indicates that there is a significant improvement in the overall English proficiency as well as the listening skills¹. Nevertheless there is no remarkable development in other three skills, namely reading, writing and speaking.

¹ (P value 0.000 and 0.005 respectively; Significant value $p < 0.05$)

Almost all the interviewed students reported that English is essential for their future career. Nevertheless half of them preferred to have their mother tongue as a medium of instruction for their subject lectures, while the rest wanted to study in English. The preference for the mother tongue arises due to the difficulties in understanding the language, mainly grammar and vocabulary related issues. On the other hand, of those who preferred English medium instruction, 80% reported difficulties in understanding lectures that are conducted in English. In other words, majority of the interviewed students faced lecture comprehension problems. Similar to the medium of instruction, an equal number of students (50%) preferred to use their mother tongue in classroom discussions. Similar to the present study, Flowerdew and colleagues (1992, 1994, 1996 and 2000) conducted a series of studies of second language lecture comprehension among a group of Hong Kong Chinese students. Of these three studies, the first one identified students' problems in lecture comprehension. Hence, the findings of that study were similar to the findings of the present study.

In this study, nearly 90% of the interviewed students feel that poor knowledge of English affects their performance in their main subjects. These students' performance in English examinations was poor as already mentioned. With regard to specific language skills that are difficult for them, majority of the students reported that writing is the difficult skill for them. Similarly, speaking is also difficult. They are somewhat confident that they could read and understand the texts. We have already seen that understanding lectures has been a problem for almost all the students. Also, they perceive that their listening skills improve over the period of study at the university.

Reasons for students' poor language abilities

The reasons can be of external nature as well as internal. As external factors, students mentioned that at schools they did not have proper guidance for learning English. Thus, they did not have either an English teacher in their classes or English classes were not regularly conducted. In some schools, English teachers are entrusted with other duties than teaching, so that they do not conduct English classes regularly. Many of the students could not get any help to learn English from their family or environment. We noted earlier that they were from a rural environment.

In addition to these external reasons, students' attitudes and motivation also influence their learning of English. Some students think that English is hard to learn and they have lost confidence that they could learn English language. They feel shy in language classes so that they do not ask question, answer questions or involve in discussions in English even in their subject classes. Many of the students (50%) acknowledged that they concentrate on learning the main subjects only, so that they could not pay much attention to learning of English.

Role of English medium lectures in language learning

Students mentioned that many of the lecturers' use of language motivate them to learn the language. However, when asked if they got opportunities to speak in the class, students responded negatively. Even a few questions asked by the lecturers, were not answered by the students. Students rarely ask questions during lectures. This means they do not have opportunities to develop their language skills in subject classes mainly speaking.

Discussion & conclusion

Even though it was assumed that EMI at universities may help to improve the language proficiency of the students, the reality is not so. As the findings in this study and subsequent discussions on EMI indicate the English proficiency of the students who have followed their degrees in EMI is not as high as expected at the end of their course. In addition, students seem to have lecture comprehension problems, coupled with their limited language proficiency.

The important outcome of the study, which was undertaken in an EMI context is that, at FS, the lecture delivery is mostly monologic (Navaz, 2012), so that opportunities for students to interact in the classroom were limited. Also, the root of the problem is coupled with English education in schools and the EMI at university. Although EMI is a fait accompli, as discussed below, identifying the problems in EMI may help to address the existing students' issues in a better way. Moreover, the South Asian and Southeast Asian countries (e.g. Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Malaysia) teach students in English to receive degrees, while most of their school studies are in their mother tongue.

In Sri Lanka, almost all the textbooks that are relevant to higher education are available in English and also the lecturers have followed their higher education in English. The lecturers are more comfortable using English terms (technical vocabulary) than Tamil or Sinhala equivalent, though the appropriate use of language cannot be assured. On the other hand, the situation in Europe is different. Their lecturers have already learnt in the mother tongue and the textbooks are available in the mother tongue. Lecturers in European countries where English is used as a medium of instruction at tertiary level have to switch their medium of instruction from the mother tongue to English.

Nevertheless, despite these contextual differences, the limited language proficiency of students has been a common issue in EMI tertiary classes, and has been the focus of studies in both Europe and Asia. Another common issue has been the limited language proficiency of lecturers, although this has generally been investigated in Europe rather than Asia. For example, Vinkie et al (1998) found that the switch from Dutch to English produced linguistic limitations in the field of vocabulary, redundancy, and clarity and accuracy of expression on the part of the lecturers. But the fact is that at FS the lecturers' English proficiency is not considered as a factor in their appointment.

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