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Higher education medium of instruction and career prospects: an exploration of current and graduated Chinese students' perceptions

Hongdu Huang  and Samantha Curle 

Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

This article reports a mixed-methods study that explored university students' perceptions of whether and how English Medium Instruction (EMI) improves career prospects. Questionnaire ($n = 100$) and interview data ($n = 20$) were collected from current and graduated (alumni) students from an EMI Finance programme at a Chinese university in Beijing. Participants reflected on their EMI experience and/or career experience to determine whether or not their employability had increased. Findings showed that both cohorts of students were positive that EMI will/had increased their career prospects. They believed that EMI could/had expanded their career choices as well as provided more job opportunities by improving their English proficiency. Overall students agreed that using EMI meant less content was taught, however, denied that this would negatively affect their career prospects. Practical implications for pedagogy are discussed.

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Career prospects; higher education; China; English medium instruction (emi)

Introduction

As the most recent global survey on the use of English Medium Instruction (EMI) showed (Dearden 2015), this phenomenon has expanded across the globe. EMI is defined here as 'the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English' (Macaro 2018, 19). Numerous studies that have explored stakeholders' perceptions of EMI have found that EMI is believed to improve students' career prospects and opportunities (Doiz, Lasagabaster, and Sierra 2013a; Lei and Hu 2014; Jiang, Zhang, and May 2016). However, there is a paucity of empirical research that has followed up on this claim by directly asking students whether and how EMI improves their career prospects. Specifically, perceptions of students that have already graduated from an EMI programme (alumni) have not been explored. This study therefore aims to make this original contribution to knowledge by filling these two gaps in the literature. Findings from this study provide the foundation for future research into the possible relationship between EMI and career prospects. It also provides practical pedagogical suggestions of how EMI programmes can be improved to benefit students' career development.

CONTACT Samantha Curle  samanthamcurle@gmail.com  Building 1 West North, Office 3.17b, Bath, BA2 7AY, United Kingdom

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Literature review

The expansion of EMI around the world

As English has developed into the global lingua franca, so too has English started to dominate as the medium of instruction across all levels of education. In 2014, Dearden mapped the global growth of EMI and found that EMI programmes are rapidly expanding particularly at the tertiary level compared to the secondary school level. This is in part due to globalisation in general, as well as the internationalisation and marketisation of higher education (HE. Doiz, Lasagabaster, and Sierra 2013b). In Europe, English is 'the most dominant second language (L2) medium of instruction' (Marsh and Laitinen 2005, 2) and labelled by Coleman (2006, 1) as 'the language of higher education'. In the Middle East and Asia, EMI in HE has also seen a sharp rise (Macaro et al. 2018). This has been in an attempt to attract foreign students, enhance universities' international reputation, and encourage student mobility (ibid). It is also rooted in the wider claim in numerous language policy documents that EMI improves students' career prospects (Macaro 2018). However, there is little research evidence for this claim; this study therefore fills this gap in the research literature.

The expansion of EMI in China

China has witnessed a rapid increase of the use of English to teach academic subjects in its universities (Hu 2019). EMI is viewed as an important strategy for developing a modernised HE system and strengthening the nation's cultural, academic and economic competitiveness in the world (Hu and Lei 2013). This ideology is based on the assumption that EMI helps improve English proficiency, and that English is important for the development of China. English proficiency has been treated as a valorised form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1991); a passport to numerous resources that can bring economic, social, educational, and professional opportunities (Hu 2005, 2009). China has witnessed an increasing demand for professionals that are proficient in English due to the influx of foreign and joint-venture enterprises. This was brought about by the 'opening-up' economic reform in 1978, as well as the acceleration of globalisation (Yang 2005). To cope with globalisation and the scientific and technological revolution happening in China, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) changed its HE policy in 2001. The MOE stipulated that 5–10% of undergraduate (UG) courses of certain academic majors such as Information Technology, Finance, and Law, should be taught through the medium of English or 'other foreign languages' (MOE 2001). Numerous Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) opted for EMI, however, this led to concern about the quality of these EMI programmes. The MOE therefore expanded HE reform, setting up and funding 500 'good model' EMI courses, a project that ran from 2007 to 2010 (MOE 2007a). Additionally, in response to the Belt and Road Initiative: China's global development strategy that involves infrastructure development and investments across the globe; the MOE set a goal of providing 300 HE EMI programmes by 2020, mainly to attract international students (MOE 2010). The promotion and expansion of these education policies over the last decade have therefore promulgated a rapid expansion of EMI programmes in Chinese HE (Pan 2007). An enduring topic of debate, however, has been the quality of these programmes: has the change in medium of instruction (MOI) had the desired effect of simultaneous academic content mastery and increased English proficiency? How has the change in MOI affected student career prospects? This study sheds light on this issue.

The implementation and effectiveness of EMI in China

Li and Wu (2017) argue that the effectiveness of EMI programmes is related to how these are implemented. In the Chinese HE context, EMI programmes are widely known as 'Chinese-English bilingual education' where CMI (Chinese Medium Instruction) *and/or* EMI are adopted for different courses within a single programme of study. EMI may be implemented by using high levels of codeswitching (between English and Chinese) to ensure that students do not encounter issues

comprehending academic content. Irrespective of the approach taken to implementing EMI, research on Chinese students' perceptions of EMI has shown an overall positive attitude towards the effectiveness of EMI, particularly in improving English proficiency (Wu 2006; Huang 2009; Hudson 2009; Chang 2010). Students said that because they are exposed to more English in EMI courses, they felt that EMI was an effective method to improve their English. Improvement of English, however, is not seen as cost-free. Some content teachers (as well as students) have expressed concerns that EMI might hinder academic content learning (Lin and He 2019). EMI students have also reported linguistic challenges such as understanding lectures, reading and understanding teaching materials, using appropriate academic style to express ideas, and difficulty expressing themselves in class (Evans and Morrison 2011; Cho 2012). These challenges may stem from affective factors such as language anxiety (Seikkula-Leino 2007). Students with self-perceived low English proficiency have been found to experience high levels of learning anxiety (Huang 2015), which in turn may lead to lower academic achievement in EMI courses. This study focuses on a 'Chinese-English bilingual programme' and connects the dots in this EMI student perception research; directly exploring the possible link between EMI, improved English proficiency, academic content mastery, and career prospects.

EMI and Career Prospects

Higher education has long been related to employment both at a macro level (national level) as well as a micro level (student level; see Biberhofer et al. 2019). The Chinese MOE requires that the setting up of any new undergraduate degree programmes take into consideration the nation's economic development, and the demand of the labour force (MOE 2007b). As Li and Wu (2017) point out, the ultimate objective for HE EMI programmes in China is to help college students acquire knowledge in specific academic domains, as well as to enhance English language proficiency for later careers. Although no studies have directly explored EMI and career prospects, various studies focused on stakeholders' perceptions of EMI have brought this issue into focus. From the perspective of the HEI, universities have adopted EMI to enhance graduates' social mobility and employment prospects (Hu 2007; Björkman 2008; Chan and Dimmock 2008; Pecorari et al. 2011). In China, the ability to speak English is highly valued and considered to be prestigious as it is associated with internationalisation, good career prospects, and access to educational opportunities abroad, particularly in Anglophone countries (Hu, Li, and Lei 2014). This sentiment is captured in HEI policy documents; phrases such as '*producing talents with an international competitive edge*', '*cultivating international perspectives in our students*', and '*aims to train business management talents who can adapt to economic globalization*' are commonly seen in these documents (Hu and Lei 2013, 558).

Various studies have reported teachers' and students' beliefs that EMI brings better career prospects, especially to be able to work in international businesses and organisations (Zhang 2017). These attitudes are mainly based on the assumption that EMI improves students' English competency, and that English will be of great use in students' future careers. In metropolitan cities such as Shanghai for example, English is considered to be a core skill to secure highly competitive jobs (Lin 2018). It is also often a necessity for promotion in international enterprises that normally offer higher salaries than local companies (ibid). Studies that have examined student motivation to enrol in EMI programmes have reported career advancement (such as working for a multinational company; Lueg and Lueg 2015) as a motive to enrol in such programmes (see Belhiah and Elhami 2014; Ellili-Cherif and Alkhateeb 2015).

Despite these overwhelming positive attitudes towards English proficiency and career prospects, some EMI students have reported reservations about this. Participants in Hu, Li and Lei's (2014) study in China held the view that career opportunities linked to English were only enjoyed by the privileged few, and that the link may even be 'imagined'. Research has shown that few Chinese university graduates actually use English (beyond a bare minimum) in their daily jobs (Yang 2006; Gil 2010). Furthermore, Chinese EMI students interviewed in Gu and Lee's

(2018) study complained that they could not easily secure a job after graduation, and therefore their only option was to pursue a higher degree in an English-speaking country. Participants also complained about the programme's '*less practical curriculum and extensive, but rushed and superficial, coverage of different subjects*' (Gu and Lee 2018, 402). Students said that this gave them a less solid mastery of academic content knowledge. EMI had therefore made them less competitive than their peers who had studied CMI programmes: less competitive not only on the job market, but also when applying for postgraduate studies in China. This illustrates that research evidence on the relationship between economic returns and English language proficiency is clearly contradictory (Chakraborty and Bakshi 2016; Grin 2002), rendering a need for further research. This study explores these aspects through the lens of EMI.

Research design

The current study addressed the following research questions:

Do students think EMI affects their career prospects?

- (a) Do students perceive EMI as improving their English proficiency, and therefore positively affects their career prospects?
- (b) Do students perceive EMI as negatively affecting content learning, and therefore negatively affecting their career prospects?

How can the EMI Finance programme in focus be improved to benefit students' career development?

Method

Context

This study was carried out in the Business School of a public university in Beijing, Mainland China. The EMI programme in focus was an EMI Finance programme. As a 'Chinese-English bilingual programme', 70% of the courses are instructed through the medium of English; courses such as *Principles of Economics*, *Statistics*, and *Western Economics*. This particular programme was chosen for this study as it claims that EMI students are educated with the aim in mind to improve students' English, which will prepare them for promising careers in business organisations, such as banking, security and international trade companies. While some students go on to successfully complete further studies either in China or overseas, the average employment rate of graduates is over 98%. In 2018, fresh graduates of this EMI programme were reported to receive an average monthly salary of 7833RMB.¹ This is approximately 10% higher than the reported average salary (7113 RMB) for total graduates of Finance and Economics majors in Beijing (Xinchouwang 2018).

Participants

This study adopted a purposive sampling approach (Dörnyei 2007). Questionnaire data was collected from 50 current undergraduate students and 50 alumni (i.e. students that had already graduated from this EMI programme). Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students (10 current UGs, 10 alumni).

All UG students were either 3rd- or 4th-year. This ensured that they had had sufficient experience studying through EMI upon which to reflect; as well as be at a stage of their studies in which they were thinking about their career prospects.

All alumni (students who had already graduated) had at least 6 months (or more) working experience. This ensured that they had sufficient work experience upon which to reflect.

All participants had different English proficiency levels, different academic levels, and varied work experience. This ensured that different voices could be heard.

All participants were studying/had studied the same EMI Finance programme:

- All participants were studying/had studied the same courses through English
- All participants have/had the same English language support while studying through EMI (29% of the total EMI programme credits): Year 1 & 2: Four English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses (9 hours a week of general English reading, writing, listening and speaking). Year 3: selective English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, such as Business English.

Data collection

This study took a mixed-methods survey approach to data collection (Creswell and Clark 2017). The following research instruments were used:

A six-point Likert scale questionnaire (i.e. 1 = Strongly agree and 6 = Strongly disagree; $n = 100$) which was designed to collect three types of data:

- participants' demographic information
- participants' perceptions of EMI and career prospects
- participants' evaluation of the focus EMI programme

One-on-one semi-structured follow-up interviews ($n = 20$)

The HEI and all participants provided written or oral informed consent to participate in this study. A pilot study was conducted to test, refine, and finalise the research instruments and procedures for the main data collection (Heigham and Croker 2009; $n = 4$). Based on participants' feedback, adjustments were made to the pilot questionnaire and interview questions. To avoid any misunderstandings the questionnaire items were written in both English and the participants' first language, Mandarin Chinese. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. A reliability analysis of the questionnaire items reached an acceptable level, $\alpha = 0.73$. All items were therefore retained.

Data analysis

After all questionnaire data had been collected, SPSS was used to generate descriptive statistics to find out if students thought EMI affects/affected their career prospects (RQ1). There was no missing data. Interviews were translated by the first author (a native Mandarin Chinese speaker). These were then transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 12 (2018) for analysis. The qualitative data analysis followed the pattern of the three coding phases as based in grounded theory: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Dörnyei 2007; Gibbs 2007). In order to avoid inaccurate interpretation and reduce possible over-interpretation, the researcher double-coded 25% of the transcripts and achieved a satisfactory intra-rater reliability ($\kappa = 0.92$). These same transcripts were also coded by a second researcher and achieved an inter-rater reliability of $\kappa = 0.85$. Differences in coding were examined and negotiated by the two researchers.

Results

RQ1. Do students think EMI affects their career prospects?

RQ1a. Do students perceive EMI as improving their English proficiency, and therefore positively affects their career prospects?

Table 1. Interview coding scheme: themes related to EMI and career prospects.

Theme	Code	Frequency
English Proficiency and Career Prospects	Expands career choices	18 (90%)
	English is 'One more skill'	12 (60%)
	Enables further study abroad	12 (60%)
	Preference for English-demanding jobs	9 (45%)
	Globalisation	7 (35%)
	Professional qualification	6 (30%)
	Access to advanced information in English	6 (30%)
	Development of finance industry	5 (25%)
	Potential for promotion	5 (25%)
	Content Learning and Career prospects	Efficiency
English proficiency creates comprehension issues		8 (40%)
Curriculum provision		8 (40%)
Enables further study		8 (40%)
Students' low English proficiency		6 (30%)
Other abilities		4 (20%)
GPA		3 (15%)

English proficiency and jobs

Questionnaire data revealed that participants generally agreed that English Medium Instruction was beneficial to career prospects ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.84$). Most participants ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.00$, Valid Percent (VP)* = 94%, *Valid Percentage (VP) is calculated for agreement, i.e. score >3.5) agreed that studying content knowledge through English could improve their English proficiency. Even more participants ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 0.84$, $VP = 97%$) believed that English proficiency brings better career prospects. This perception was also frequently mentioned in interviews when asked how EMI influences career development (see Table 1).

As Table 1 illustrates, 90% of interviewees ($n = 18$) held the view that better English proficiency could expand career choices and bring more job opportunities. They thought English proficiency could provide opportunities to work not only in domestic companies that require the use of English (e.g. foreign companies, multinational companies), but also in other industries (e.g. the English education industry), and in other countries. Xie, who studied Media as a postgraduate and is now working in the Internet industry, said that:

'English was much more important than content knowledge when I made my career choices ... Your professional knowledge keeps changing (if you change your career). But English is always a transferable skill. So, whatever you do, no matter Finance or Media, (English) is very important.'

Yang, now an English teacher, echoed this; *'You can find out that each work I've done required different aspects of English although all these three jobs are totally different.'*

Apart from expanding career choices, half of the alumni pointed out that English proficiency could provide more opportunities for them to show off their abilities and talents, which was helpful for promotion in their current jobs. Jane noted that in order to move up to a higher position in the foreign company for which she is working, better English proficiency is required. Alumnus student Zhao provided an example of how English proficiency provides unique opportunities within the workplace:

'My work seldom requires me to use English. However, one time we needed to pick up one foreigner from the airport when we were going to launch a new product ... None of my colleagues could do this except me ... You have an advantage compared to those who don't have this skill (English) ... The opportunity came to me because no one speaks English except me.'

In fact, more than half of the participants ($n = 12$, 60%) viewed English as a 'skill', and that this skill could make them more competitive in the job market. Alumnus student Wang shared her experience of this:

'I was interviewed for an internship for China Reinsurance Company. That internship was really hard to get ... They have an international programme. So, I think they might demand English use. My competitors were a PHD from

X University and a Master from Y University. They talked about professional knowledge that I didn't understand. So, I said my English was good ... They hired me at last.'

Participants also mentioned how EMI indirectly affects career prospects. 60% of interviewees ($n = 9$) said that EMI was beneficial to study abroad by improving English proficiency and helping to pass tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. One alumnus participant mentioned that, to her knowledge many companies (including some state-owned enterprises) showed preference for students that had graduated from foreign universities. Some participants ($n = 7$) elaborated that state-owned enterprises value English because of international business cooperation. They noted that due to globalisation and the need for international communication, English (as the international lingua franca) is becoming more and more important in almost every industry and all different types of companies. Alumni Huang and Yu stated this poignantly:

Huang: *The Finance industry (in China) is becoming more closely related to the international market. If you want to work in securities companies or do some work related to consulting, there's a high possibility that you will need to communicate with foreign clients ...*

Yu: *(English) is definitely an advantage in the long run ... If you want to do macroeconomic research, you have to pay attention to America's policy and read their annual report. They are all written in English ...*

English for the job and professional qualifications

Two participants pointed out the importance of how EMI improves students' English for Specific Purposes (ESP); in this case Finance-related English. Alumnus student Zhang said:

'Good English proficiency is one thing. The other thing is that how you use your English for your own job ... Students majored in English also have high level of English competence. However, if you can combine English with your professional knowledge, EMI is definitely an advantage for you to find jobs, especially jobs related to your major.'

Similar to ESP, 30% of the participants ($n = 6$) stated that the EMI programme could help them get professional qualifications, such as ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants), CFA (Chartered Financial Analyst), and FRM (Financial Risk Manager), which are all tested in English. Additionally, better English proficiency was said to be important for enabling access to up-to-date information, which would keep employees updated with the latest news and advancements in their industry. These two reasons were viewed by participants as important factors that would positively affect career development. 45% of participants ($n = 9$) also expressed their preference for jobs that demand English; saying that they didn't want their 'English to become useless', and they 'have spent so much time learning English. You will want to use it in your career', as well as 'I want to find jobs that combine English (and professional knowledge)'.

RQ1b. Do students perceive EMI as negatively affecting content learning, and therefore negatively affecting their career prospects?

Questionnaire data showed that 77% of participants agreed that less content is taught when it is taught through English ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.15$). However, most denied that EMI would be a cause for lower content grades and therefore negatively affect their career development ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.22$, $VP = 22\%$).

EMI curriculum: structure and content

More than half the interviewees ($n = 11$) who thought EMI negatively affects content learning gave the reason that EMI decreases their efficiency of learning content. Some ($n = 6$) pointed out that for students with low English proficiency, it might be expected that their learning of content would be negatively affected. Apart from this, participants raised several concerns about the structure and content of the EMI curriculum ($n = 8$). Students noted that in their freshman and sophomore years the focus was on taking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses, leaving most EMI content courses to be taught in the third year. This is unlike Chinese medium programmes where content

courses are more evenly distributed across the first three years of study. Generally speaking, the third and fourth years of university study in China are key for students to do internships and to look for jobs. Current EMI student Yu explains how this structuring of courses negatively affects content learning, and has other unintended side-effects;

Yu: If those content courses were arranged in the sophomore year, we may have learned deeper content knowledge... Why didn't I learn those content courses carefully (in the third year)? Because I was busy doing internships... In the short run, internships can help you find better jobs. In the long run, we still need solid content knowledge...

Surprisingly, participants also complained that the content of their EMI courses was not closely related to their major (Finance). Current EMI student Gao complained:

'I think the main problem of our curriculum is that it teaches broader (content knowledge). It doesn't focus on Finance. For example, it teaches International Trade... But if you don't change your career path (and work in the international trade industry), there are not many chances that you can use these knowledge.'

Postgraduate studies, exams, and studying abroad

Compared to alumni, undergraduate (UG) students focused more on the indirect influences of EMI on career prospects, such as further study. According to one UG student (Liu), more than one-third of his classmates planned to study overseas after graduation, and some wanted to pursue postgraduate studies in China. Few students actually chose to immediately enter the job market after graduation. Speaking to alumni, those who had decided to study abroad found that many courses in the foreign universities where they studied, were similar to what they had experienced in the EMI programme in China. They concluded that EMI had provided a good foundation for their studies abroad.

If students choose to pursue postgraduate studies in China, they need to take the United National Graduate Entrance Examination. English is an important, compulsory subject that makes up 20% of the total grade. Wu (a current EMI student) who wants to change his major to Psychology and pursue a Masters degree in China, stated that EMI was beneficial for him to take this exam and pass the English language element. However, for participants who want to pursue further studies in Finance in China, the content knowledge element of this exam remained more important. These interviewees showed strong negative attitudes towards EMI and content learning. Current EMI students Li and Chen elaborated the dilemma posed by this exam being in Chinese:

Li: If you want to take the postgraduate entrance exams (in China), you have to study really hard. You will find you have not learned those knowledge points... What you've been taught and tested are all in English. You need to spend time switching (those content knowledge) into Chinese... If you say something in Chinese, I can't match it with English...

Chen: I want to take postgraduate entrance exams... if I had learned through Chinese, those exams would be easier for me.

Despite these negative views, some participants ($n = 8$) still believed that their learning of academic content is not compromised by EMI, because they had no issues understanding the taught content. This they felt therefore did not affect their content grades negatively, which in turn would not pose any barriers to career advancement. Students felt that rather than content grades, other factors such as university ranking, and personal ability played a more important role in job hunting. Only three alumni mentioned that certain companies (e.g. security institutions or the 'Big Four' Chinese accounting firms) required applicants' undergraduate transcripts and/or GPA when hiring.

RQ2. How can the EMI Finance programme in focus be improved to benefit students' career development?

Most participants agreed that this EMI Finance programme is/had prepared them well for their future/current job; with good English proficiency ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.03$) and sufficient content knowledge ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.16$). Nevertheless, 98% of participants also admitted that this programme could be improved to benefit students' career development. Akin to the issues raised by interviewees, suggestions made to improve the EMI programme related mainly to the curriculum. Firstly, participants ($n = 12$, 60%) suggested increasing the proportion of content courses in the

timetable. They also took issue with the content itself; suggesting that courses should be more directly related to Finance, such as those that would prepare them for professional qualification tests. Students also suggested including elements in EMI courses that would provide explicit Finance career guidance. Other suggested programme improvements were:

- (1) Increase students' opportunities for English language production (e.g. embedding oral presentations into course assessment);
- (2) Replace currently used Chinese translated textbooks with original English versions;
- (3) Improve EMI teachers' English proficiency through further training (or by hiring foreign content teachers);
- (4) Teach 'deeper' content knowledge by using the first language (L1, i.e. Mandarin Chinese) when explaining content;
- (5) Initially divide students into different classes according to their English competency.

Discussion and implications

English proficiency and career prospects

Firstly, participants strongly emphasised the importance of English when talking about the impact of EMI on career prospects. Overall, participants felt that EMI improves English proficiency, and therefore boosts career prospects. This finding is in line with previous studies that have argued this to be the case (see Belhiah and Elhami 2014; Ellili-Cherif and Alkhateeb 2015; Li and Wu 2017). However, further research into this claimed direct correlation is needed.

Secondly, students expressed that another benefit of EMI and increased English proficiency is that of expanded career choices; either in terms of companies for which they can work, or in terms of being able to work in other industries unrelated to Finance. This was similar to findings in Zhang's (2017) study where EMI teachers and students said that EMI affords students the opportunity to work in varied international businesses and organisations. This sheds new light on the ripple effects EMI has on career versatility.

Finally, students noted that increased English proficiency due to EMI afforded them greater opportunities to study abroad; a finding in line with EMI motivation studies in China (Jiang, Zhang, and May 2016). It is, however, in contrast to European studies where participants have reported that *working abroad* is an important perceived benefit of EMI (Dearden and Macaro 2016; Rhodes 2018). Overall, these findings highlight a perceived connection between increased English proficiency (due to EMI) and career advancement. However, we echo participants in Hu, Li, and Lei (2014) study who question this presumption and call for further empirical studies to be conducted on this.

Content learning and career advancement

Although participants generally agreed that EMI threatens content learning, they denied the negative effects this might have on their future/current careers. Students argued that since EMI improves their English proficiency, this somehow compensates for any inadequacies in content learning when considering career advancement. The conclusions of this study therefore differ from that of Gu and Lee (2018, 402) who argue that students' enhanced English proficiency cannot compensate for their lack of a solid mastery of content knowledge.

As alumnus student Wang's experience showed, the combination of high English proficiency and relatively less solid content knowledge, *can* still find its locus and demand in the job market. In fact, targeting jobs in companies that require the use of English may be one strategy to boost EMI students' employability. Considering the growing number of foreign and multinational companies in China, EMI students do appear to have access to greater job opportunities (Lueg and Lueg 2015).

This, however, requires further statistical empirical evidence from national employment data and longitudinal tracking of EMI students' career advancement.

Pedagogical implications

Very few empirical studies have directly asked students for feedback on how to improve the EMI programme on which they are currently enrolled, or from which they have already graduated (Macaro et al. 2018). This study has begun to fill this research gap and provides clear pedagogical implications for implementing and improving EMI programmes (particularly Finance-focused) based on student feedback.

Firstly, the university should re-evaluate curriculum design; examine whether the curriculum is effective in fulfilling students' expectations of improving English competency without compromising content learning. Content course curriculum should be adjusted to ensure that EMI graduates are not at a disadvantage compared to their CMI peers. A thorough needs analysis of the curriculum and how it may or may not be meeting students' needs is necessary.

Secondly, students noted the unbalanced focus on EFL courses rather than EMI courses in the first few years of study. One suggestion could be to set a higher English language proficiency threshold for students to be admitted to the EMI programme. In Europe, to study at a European territory institution, international students are required to be at a B2 English level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Deygers et al. 2018). Martinez and Morgan (2020) also recommend this threshold for EMI learners. This could be trialled to see whether this might be appropriate and applicable to the Chinese EMI context.

Finally, the overall design of EMI programmes should be re-evaluated in order to further meet student requirements. For example, allowing more flexibility across the programme. This could be operationalised by allowing students to switch to a CMI stream (time restrictions pertaining) if they felt the EMI programme was not meeting their needs. Or by permitting students to take a certain proportion of credits through CMI, if those credits are only offered in that stream (e.g. Finance career development courses). Another form of programme flexibility could be to embed a choice number of internships into the programme. Students would then be able to not only gain work experience in the area but also strengthen their professional connections in the industry.

As noted by Kim, Son, and Sohn (2009), the success of EMI programmes depends on a great number of factors including: students' English proficiency, learner needs, and student support offered by HEIs. Any HEI implementing EMI should therefore prioritise student opinions, feedback and EMI programme evaluation to then take action to improve their EMI programmes.

Conclusion

The main finding of this study was an overall positive attitude towards EMI and career prospects. Participants believed in the effectiveness of EMI in improving English proficiency, and the knock-on beneficial effects this has on their future/current careers. However, as this study is descriptive in nature, further quantitative research on this topic is called for; particularly a systematic comparison between EMI and CMI graduates' career trajectories as well as income levels. This would provide supplementary evidence for participant claims in this study. Additionally, replication studies of this study need to be carried out both in similar as well as vastly different contexts. This is in terms of country, participant demographics, academic subject, and implemented EMI model. Replication would verify and/or challenge the results of this study, provide further evidence for generalisation, as well as shed more light on the possible relationship between EMI and career prospects.

Note

1. To safeguard the anonymity of the university, the source of this data is not referenced.

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No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Hongdu Huang is an Economics EMI teacher in China. Her research interests lie in the growing use of English Medium Instruction in Chinese higher education; particularly the effect of Medium Of Instruction on student job prospects.

Samantha Curle is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics and Advanced Quantitative Research Methods at the Department of Education, University of Bath. Her main research interest lies in factors affecting academic achievement in English Medium Instruction. Her research has been published in journals such as *Journal of Asia TEFL*, *Language Teaching, System, Applied Linguistics Review*, *Studies in Higher Education*, and *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*.

ORCID

Hongdu Huang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8246-0937>

Samantha Curle  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3790-8656>

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