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It's worth the extra effort: Behind student perceptions of success in the study of content via English-Medium Instruction.

Abstract

This chapter introduces findings from a study of student perceptions of success towards EMI study, including their reasons for choosing whether to continue taking EMI classes or study via their L1. Interviews with six Japanese undergraduate students from an international business management program were analysed using qualitative content analysis, identifying two key findings: (1) EMI study can lead to greater (perceived) understanding of content knowledge because of the extra effort required to study via the L2; and (2) the decision to continue studying via EMI involves a cost-benefit analysis of whether the extra effort will bring about subsidiary benefits, such as further L2 development. These findings indicate that EMI practitioners should consider (1) how additional benefits of EMI study can be demonstrated to learners, and (2) how the differing motivations of EMI learners can be attended to in support programmes.

Introduction

There is a scarcity of research on the effectiveness of gaining content knowledge through English Medium Instruction (EMI) programs in higher education contexts (Macaro et al., 2018). One theory driving the boom in EMI is that learners can develop their second language (L2) ability while learning content knowledge. However, Macaro (2018: 154) questions whether "learning content through L2 English leads to at least as good learning of academic content as learning content through the students' L1", and urges that further empirical evidence on the cost-effectiveness of EMI is needed. While some research suggests that EMI does not adversely affect students' disciplinary learning in contrast to its first language (L1) instructed counterpart (e.g., Zaif, Karapınar & Yangın Eksi, 2017), an overwhelming

number of studies, especially very recently (e.g., Aizawa & Rose, 2020; Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2020; Macaro, 2020) have identified various linguistic challenges faced by L2 English students (e.g., lacking the prerequisite academic and technical English vocabulary knowledge). Consequently, it seems inevitable that EMI students are considerably more disadvantaged in gaining content knowledge than their L1 instructed counterparts. Those with lower L2 English proficiency may struggle not only with the linguistic issues but also with difficulties associated with learning new academic disciplines. Nevertheless, more recently, researchers (e.g., Galloway, Numajiri & Rees, 2020; Thompson et al., 2019; Xie & Curle, 2019) have also shed light on the positive aspects of acquiring content knowledge through EMI, highlighting some perceived benefits which are linked exclusively to EMI (e.g. access to a wider range of learning resources, simultaneous acquisition of content and language knowledge, and improved self-efficacy and motivation).

Thus, one key question is whether these perceived benefits can outweigh the costs of seemingly lower disciplinary learning, and whether the EMI students are able to compensate against the costs by gaining these additional benefits. To examine these issues, this chapter draws on in-depth qualitative analyses of student interviews, exploring student perceptions of success at an undergraduate business program in a Japanese HE EMI context.

Literature Review

A vast majority of recent EMI literature has suggested that EMI students encounter language-related problems due to their insufficient L2 proficiency (see Curle et al., 2020 for an overview). For example, studies have highlighted challenges with

understanding the grammar used in textbooks (Aizawa & Rose, 2020); comprehending lectures (Hellekjær, 2010); and insufficient vocabulary knowledge (Uchihara & Harada, 2019).

Ignoring these challenges, an increased number of Japanese universities have implemented EMI programs as a means to internationalise their institutions. According to the most recent figures from the Japanese education ministry (MEXT, 2018), 37 universities have been funded as part of the Top Global University Project, or 'TGUP' since 2013. One of its main aims is to increase the number of EMI degree programs from 19,533 to 55,928 (2.86 times) by the end of this 10-year initiative in 2023, indicating the centrality of EMI in its policy statement (Rose & McKinley, 2018). Consistent with its rapid growth, scholarly attention has been placed mainly on challenges and difficulties in implementing EMI than its successes and benefits.

Some studies have more recently observed successful student learning experiences via EMI (Rose et al., 2019). For example, McKinley (2018) conducted a case study at one of the TGUP participant universities to demonstrate a successful example of EMI provision, suggesting the role of effective preparatory language support schemes in improving student linguistic readiness for EMI. Similarly, Xie and Curle (2020) unpacked the multifaceted nature of success in EMI in China, revealing that their participants were successful in developing "soft skills", such as knowing how to apply and transform knowledge and acquiring a new way of thinking through EMI. In Japan, Thompson et al. (2019) found that another TGUP university also demonstrated successful EMI provision which led to student perceptions of success in mastering content knowledge, as the greater effort required in preparation leads to perceptions of deeper understanding and success, strengthening motivation to learn via English.

Recognising the scarcity of stories of student success from EMI programs, the current chapter further explores the costs and benefits for EMI learners by examining student perceptions of success towards content learning in the Japanese EMI context. Further, Thompson et al. (2019) recognized one limitation of their study that concerned the interview participants, who were generally very successful (i.e., achieved high grades) and had achieved high L2 proficiency. They called for further studies with a greater range of participants. This chapter responds to that call. It focuses on the interplay between perceptions of success and the factors to which learners attribute their success for a group of learners.

The Study

Utilizing qualitative content analysis of interview data with six students, this chapter addresses the following research questions:

(1) How do students perceive their study of English management via English to be successful and beneficial?

(2) What factors influence these perceptions?

Setting

This study was carried out with students majoring in International Business at a business management school from a private university in Japan. After completing an 18-month academic foundation programme, students start EMI study during the second semester of their second year. Despite an entry requirement of CEFR B1-level at English, a small percentage of students regularly test at the upper A2-level after entering the programme. The test of English for International Communication

(TOEIC) is used, and around 5% of students score below 275 on each of the Listening and Reading subtests, placing them at the A2 level according to Tannenbaum and Wylie's (2019) CEFR mapping tool.

Students are required to take a certain number of their classes via English during their third and fourth years of study but have the option of choosing to take different classes (e.g., Financial Accounting) in English or Japanese. Data were collected from students starting their third year, who had completed the preparatory program (including EAP and ESP classes) and their initial EMI lecture class named 'International Business'.

Participants and procedures

A total of six students volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews. To encourage participants to provide sufficient detail in their responses (Lin, 2015), interviews were carried out in Japanese and recorded, with permission, for translation and analysis. Utilizing a variation of Thompson and Dooley's (2020) Researcher as Translator Serial Approach (RTSA), interviews were translated by an independent translator with review by two bilingual members of the research team. Table 1 introduces the participants, including their L2 proficiency level and grade on the 'International Business' class.

Table 1. Interview participants

Name	Gender	CEFR level	International Business Grade
Student A	Female	B1	A
Student B	Female	B1	B
Student C	Female	B2	B
Student D	Male	B2	B
Student E	Female	B1	C
Student F	Male	A2	D

Data Analyses and limitations

Interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis (QCA), which involves preparation (immersion in the data), organisation (coding, generation of categories), and reporting (see Selvi, 2020). Codes were informed by theory and prior research (i.e., a 'directed' approach). Examples of perceived success and failure were identified in the transcripts, and these were coded using examples of (1) benefits (e.g. content understanding, L2 development), (2) costs (e.g., efficiency), and (2) perceived causes (e.g., effort, motivation). Categories in the data set were identified by grouping codes together when they represented patterns across the data set.

The findings presented in this chapter are potentially limited by the relatively small number of participants who agreed to participate in the interviews, and their self-selection. However, as shown in Table 1, this participant pool represents a range of L2 proficiency levels, and levels of achievement in their first EMI course named International Business. Specifically, students from the A2 and B1 proficiency level are represented, thus these participants provide a cross section of the lower levels of student L2 proficiency from which to draw interpretations about perceptions of EMI success.

Results

Although some participants indicated that their perceptions of success in studying via EMI were limited to certain courses (e.g., marketing) and levels of difficulty (e.g., less advanced courses), each of the interview participants indicated success in their

learning of business management content via EMI. This was somewhat surprising as one of the participants had failed their first EMI class, while another reported barely achieving a passing grade. Two key patterns emerged from our analysis of the interviews: (1) Studying via EMI leads to better understanding of content because of the *difficulty* of studying via English; and (2) the extra effort is 'worth it' when it helps participants to achieve the dual purposes of achieving subject mastery and developing their English language skills.

Pattern 1: It's less efficient but more valuable

All interview participants expressed positive affective responses towards EMI and perceptions of success about their past EMI experiences. Interestingly, each of the students suggested that studying business management via Japanese is easier, however the interview participants also all suggested that the extra difficulty of studying via English made them attend more closely to the objectives and contents of classes, leading to perceptions of success in understanding the content more completely. In other words, this pattern represents a relationship between perceptions of positive understanding, negative efficiency, and positive effort. For example, in response to the question "Do you think that you can actually acquire business expertise through those English operated classes?" Student C answered "Yes, I can," explaining that learning via EMI made the content easier to remember and retain,

> it is harder to find the important part or takes time to understand… (but) when I was taking the IB and ESP courses, I found out that I did not acquire the contents that I should have acquired in the Management class which was taught via Japanese.

Similarly, Student D indicated that they were successful in learning via EMI, although "it is a bit inefficient" as they require greater preparation, need to use a dictionary for unknown words, and take greater time to understand the contents. Student D revealed

that, as a result,

> I can understand the class more clearly… I concentrate more in English than in Japanese. I think I can acquire the knowledge 'for real' in English operated courses.

When comparing the effort they expend when studying via Japanese versus English, students explained they can passively interact with Japanese lectures and content, but need to regulate their behaviour more when studying via EMI. For example, Student F revealed that he carries out roughly 30 minutes of preparation before each EMI class (e.g., reviewing slides and content), but no preparation for classes carried out in Japanese, stating he does not feel it is necessary to help him pass the final exam.

Participants discussed various self-regulatory activities they carry out to manage the burden of studying via the L2, with dictionary usage and text review common to each participant. An interesting sub-theme revolved around their greater participation in class and reliance on collaboration with classmates. To illustrate, Student E indicated that in their preparation for class,

> I read the textbook in advance and try to understand the basic contents. When I have something I cannot understand, I ask my friends who are good at English.

Other participants were more explicit about the need for greater collaboration. Student B suggested that without the support of their classmates, she would not have been able to get through her early EMI classes:

> *Student B:* I could not catch what the professor said and I kept asking my friends. I did not understand at all, so it was very hard.
> *Interviewer:* I see. You and your friends helped each other.
> *Student B:* Right. I could not get credit without my friends.

In summary, this theme centred around a perception amongst students that the greater time and effort of studying via EMI has benefits for their understanding of content. As a result, they expended more effort, carried out greater preparation, and drew upon different sources of assistance to achieve subject mastery. This finding represents

another view of success, as even students with relatively poor performance (e.g., Students E and F) noted that they had achieved success from this perspective.

Pattern 2: It's worth it because it serves two purposes

Five of the six participants expressed their willingness to carry out the extra preparation required of content study via future EMI study, due to their perception that they are achieving subject mastery and developing their language skills. Thus, this pattern represents a relationship between perceptions of efficiency and motivation to carry out EMI study. Student F stated that study via EMI was beneficial as "my English ability improves and I can acquire business expertise." A second example comes from Student A, who explained that she had experienced success at learning via EMI despite it taking more time, stating,

> speaking only about "efficiency", I think studying in Japanese is better. However, from the language learning perspective, it is really good that we can improve our English while understanding the knowledge or concepts. Also, in the international business area of study, there is more information which we can get in English than in Japanese.

Student B provided a similar example:

> *Interviewer:* Do you think there is a difference in how much you can learn between studying in English and studying via Japanese?
> *Student B：* Not so much… and I can improve my English at the same time. So in terms of efficiency, English operated courses are not so bad.

However, for one of the participants (Student E), the costs of carrying out future study via EMI was considered to exceed the benefit. She explained that she chooses Japanese classes as she no longer has any motivation to further improve her English skill:

> *Student E:* because preparation takes long and I cannot follow the class without that. I lower the priority of [EMI] classes.
> *Interviewer:* So, the cost performance is bad for you?
> *Student E:* Yes. I gave up on English and I decided to go to a long-term internship. I changed how I send my time and quit studying English.
> *Interviewer:* So, you have your motivation to learn expertise but…

Student E: But English is an obstacle.

It should also be noted that three of the six students also mentioned that their perceptions of past success studying via EMI did not necessarily lead them to always choose classes carried out in English. Participants suggested that their choice to study via EMI would be limited by the perceived difficulty of the content to be studied. For example, Student C explained,

> if there is no choice (of language) then I just take the English course. Otherwise, I think about whether I can manage it or not, and if it is not too difficult, I take the class in English.

Similarly, Student B revealed that the subject area of the class would influence her choice, stating:

> It depends on the level of the classes. For example, I could follow Financial Accounting class but International Human Resource is quite a high level class. I don't think I can understand the contents even in Japanese.

In other words, while our findings indicated student perceptions of success from their past studies, students still appeared to be carrying out a cost-benefit analysis when considering whether to carry out future classes via EMI. Further, language improvement and perceived language difficulty appeared an important factor influencing their cost-benefit analyses.

Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

A number of discussion points emerged from the findings of this study. Our first finding regarding student perceptions of the benefits and how successful they are when studying English management through English showed that all participants expressed positive affective responses towards EMI. Students noted that, like other studies, there was extra difficulty studying through EMI, but our findings revealed a

new dimension: that expending this effort was 'worth it' as they had to pay closer attention in class and had to spend more time comprehending the content material. This in turn led to deeper understanding, mastery of content, and therefore success. Our findings align with prior studies such as Thompson et al. (2019) who found that students felt that the greater the effort they expended in their EMI studies, the deeper their understanding of content, and therefore the more successful they were. This in turn strengthened their motivation to learn via the L2. One student in that study, for example, stated that EMI challenges could be overcome through increased motivation and effort in learning.

Our second finding concerning the factors that influence student perceptions, illustrates that when students choose whether to continue with EMI or study via their L1 – two key factors were at play: (1) whether they perceived their resources to be sufficient to interact with the content (i.e., whether the cost of carrying out the extra effort would be worth it in developing greater understanding of content); and (2) whether they had achieved their language learning goals. For two of the students, despite perceiving success in studying via EMI, they indicated that they would choose classes carried out in Japanese due to a focus away from further developing their language ability. In other words, the cost of carrying out the extra effort to study content via English was reliant on students still having language learning goals. This finding also aligns with those of Galloway et al. (2020) who found that Japanese students studying via EMI were more likely to focus on the language benefits (and costs) in comparison to international students. This indicates that the factors underlying EMI cost-benefit analyses may be context bound and require further exploration. Results from Xie and Curle's (2020) study also reflected students' perceptions of the benefits of EMI outweighing the challenges experienced. Students

reported that not only did they think their language proficiency would increase, but also that the way they apply knowledge, and even their way of thinking, was transformed. These types of changes that students experience while studying through EMI require further research, and one challenge for EMI programmes is helping learners understand these potential additional benefits of EMI study.

While numerous studies have explored students' perceptions (see Macaro et al., 2018), most of these studies have done so on a superficial level. Further reflective data needs to be collected from students to delve deeper into what other 'soft skills' they might acquire during their EMI learning. This might be operationalised by asking students to write reflective journals. Once we better understand students' EMI experiences, practitioners can then design programmes of support for students going beyond simply linguistic support. Galloway and Ruegg (2020) noted the differing needs of international and domestic EMI learners with respect to support systems; our study of domestic learners in similar contexts suggests that support systems – even within one programme - may need to be tailored to the various needs of learners with different L2 proficiency and support needs. In other words, greater personalization of support may be needed to help students realize their individual goals from EMI study.

Implications from the study

The findings of this study have several practical pedagogical implications. Our participants were at a lower English level in comparison to students in previous studies carried out in similar contexts. For example, compared with Thompson et al. (2019), this participant group had lower L2 proficiency and EMI success. These students were using EMI to achieve language learning goals, and it encompassed one aspect of their perception of their success in EMI. In other words, different groups of

learners have different perceptions of success and different reasons for studying via EMI. Language improvement appears to be a key factor that could be further explored in future studies, for example, is it a factor for lower-level students but not higher-level students?

This finding has practical implications for the types of linguistic support programs provided to students. Integrating language support may not only influence student success in studying via EMI (see Rose et al., 2019) but also influence student motivation towards EMI. It was found that students based their decision on continuing to study through EMI using a cost-benefit analysis (i.e. whether added effort brought additional benefits). Such costs-benefits could be made clearer to learners in EMI programmes by highlighting, based on empirical evidence, how their content knowledge and/or linguistic competence may improve as a result of studying through EMI.

This study has also shed light on students' perceptions of how successful they feel in their EMI studies. There needs to be a greater focus on understanding the motivations of different types of learners; that is, a greater focus on those with basic English ability – the stakeholders most likely to be negatively affected by EMI. This would shed further light on what drives different types of students to study through English, and how we might best support them to find success in their EMI studies.

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