The Challenge of Providing English Language Programmes: How to Equip Academics with Better EMI Understanding

By

Oksana V. Polyakova

PhD in Sociology, Deputy Director for international affairs, associate professor, Kazan Federal University, SCOPUS ID: 56539626000 ORCID ID– 0000-0003-0719-3071, oksanapolyakova16@gmail.com, +79172670527

Dilyana D. Sungatullina

PhD in Linguistics, associate professor, Kazan Federal University, SCOPUS ID: 56521603100 ORCID ID– 0000-0002-6601-8073, ddsungate@gmail.com, +79047665068

Yuliya N.Gorelova

PhD in Linguistics, Head of the Department for Graduate Studies, associate professor, Kazan Federal University, SCOPUS ID: 56524686700 ORCID ID– 0000-0003-1114-9751, gorelovajuliya@gmail.com, +79033871132

Abstract

The article discusses English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) phenomenon in the context of academics' professional development with the idea to enhance teaching and learning efficiency within L2 programs. The article contains critical analysis of existing EMI PDPs worldwide, highlighting their benefits and limitations. The primary aim of the article is to prove the significance of professional development programs (PDPs) for academics practicing EMI. Results of the research derive from a four-phased experiment on designing and implementing EMI PDP for 21 academics of various age, gender, teaching experience and academic fields in Kazan Federal University. Pre-course interview and post-course survey provide the basis for tailoring the PDP content to the requirement of the target audience and emphasize the gaps to be bridged in the course of program design for the future. Based on the PDP experience, the researchers supplemented the list of conventional EMI concerns with the issues of pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of pedagogical discourse, active teaching and learning techniques (ATL) along with Gen Z learning style awareness. The article contributes to EMI PDP four core course components: (a) Gen Z needs and learning styles, (b) English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and classroom discourse, (c) ATL application, and (d) public speaking. Multidisciplinary audience of the PDP raised an issue of social and natural sciences gap of EMI interpretation in terms of pedagogy and methodology and the fact that the lack of pedagogical content knowledge and procedural knowledge hampers EMI success. Moreover, the authors doubted the priority of content knowledge over L2 language proficiency and questioned the eligibility of pure course material translation from L1 into L2.

Keywords: EMI, professional developments programme (PDP), students' engagement, course content, active teaching and learning techniques (ATL).

Introduction

Academic community, being an environment of constantly mingling nationalities, accelerates global spread of English as a medium of instruction (EMI). Previously, EMI phenomenon headquartered predominantly in North European universities in their pursuit of

internationalization policy [26], deriving from 'content and language integrated learning' or CLIL. Nowadays, EMI is gradually evolving into a distinguished and recognised branch of knowledge, which goes far beyond the university context.

EMI concept research both from the learner's and the instructor's perspectives along with EMI pedagogy dissemination are in a focus of the educational paradigm so far. Generally, studying through English poses additional demands on EMI student, bombarded by a curriculum on one hand and non-native subject-specific vocabulary on the other.[24] In many cases EMI student engagement, which is principally lower than that in the first language (L1) classrooms, drops significantly.[2] Therefore, it is quite natural that English-medium instruction might become a setback for some students' academic achievements, leading to stress, tension and reduced interest in studies.

Low academic engagement among EMI students is not necessarily determined by poor language skills, but may be a result of the 'so-called' generation theory.[12] Modern students, entering contemporary EMI environment, are those who belong to the Generation Z (Gen Z) or iGen. Less focused, individual, dependent on reward, having lack of respect for authority from one perspective, but digital savvy and entrepreneurial in their spirit from the other [6] [4] [23], this cohort have seriously challenged all stakeholders involved in education. The gap in the knowledge about Gen Z students' academic needs and learning styles leads to a greater gap between the tools and methods employed by university professors in the classroom and Gen Z students' actual engagement in the learning process.[19]   Thus, EMI teachers are under constant pressure, since delivering content through English needs institutional support and assistance in terms of language improvement, pedagogical training and resources' provision (books, materials for classes).[9]

Therefore, to address these local and global challenges universities crucially need to tailor effective professional development programs (PDPs) for the English-medium instructors. The research team piloted and conducted 72 academic hours PDP for Kazan federal university professors currently involved into EMI academic programs. By applying the framework of educational paradigm into PDP designing process, the following research questions have been explored:

1.   What challenges do EMI content teachers encounter when delivering their subject content in English?
2.   What kind of training and professional development do they need to overcome these challenges and deliver subject content via EMI effectively?
3.   How might EMI PDP influence teachers' beliefs about EMI teaching?
4.   What should be done further to support EMI teaching at tertiary level?

Background of the Study

To define EMI let us cite a group of researchers from Oxford University, who first suggested the term to be referred to "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English".[18] Therefore, the definition itself, despite its simplicity may indicate broader and in some cases opposing trends. The summary of the approaches to EMI concept, outlined by Macaro's research team, were later elaborated by other linguists with the emphasis on the following aspects of EMI:

- Linguistic competence of the teachers - general English proficiency or the competence to teach academic subjects through English;[18]
- EMI students' English proficiency level;
- The amount and the scope of additional support provided to EMI students to ensure their course content success.

Being, undoubtedly, a multifaceted phenomenon, EMI provides various opportunities to all the parties involved. Firstly, these are the institutions, offering academic programmes conducted via EMI, which apparently boost international reputation and visibility, strengthen cooperation with foreign partners, and expand global networks.[26][10] Meanwhile, students mainly get advantage in form of enhanced English language skills, increased mobility opportunities, higher employability, and improved quality of education. Similarly, academic staff involved in EMI may gain from international research and joint projects.[11]

Despite indisputable benefits of having EMI programmes among the ones institutions offer to applicants, their implementation is far from being easy. The greatest concerns lie among programme design, course content, and inadequate level of English language that lecturers at these programmes possess. Most importantly, those who teach educational content might fear doing that in English, assuming their English language skills to be insufficient.[25] Thus, lack of confidence and fear of poor self-efficacy hamper proper instruction, demotivating academic staff to join EMI programmes.[5] These may lead to the conflict of their professional identity as experts in their discipline and their perceived lack of proficiency in a foreign language.[14]

Another important issue that university management is trying to tackle in regards to EMI practice is deficient pedagogical knowledge of content teachers.[13] The majority of lecturers merely translate their L1 materials into English without changing their teaching approaches, methods or attitudes to the content choice. This misconception may result in lack of students' engagement in the classroom and poor content digestion.[14]   As a matter of fact, to develop effective EMI environment all higher education institutions should provide not only training in teaching methodology[5], but an on-going support system of continuous professional development for the academic staff.[25] Though, the number of sources related to EMI teacher progression is limited, the general knowledge about teacher development might be helpful in outlining the key strategies in EMI PDP design.

Since teachers often hold preconceptions about learning and teaching strategies that are resilient to change, teachers' beliefs play a central role in their professional development process.[21] Therefore, there is a pre-requisite to tackle teachers' deeply held beliefs in order to reduce resistance to the novel. [18] Another important element in teachers' professional development is reflective practice mentioned by Farrell [9], who states it as a key to subject "teachers' philosophy, principles, theories and practices to a critical analysis" that will allow EMI teachers to act in a deliberate, intentional manner to result in student learning outcomes. Accordingly, to determine the layout for professional development programme the conceptual pillars upon which most of them are designed should be identified.

Luneta and Murray define content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and procedural knowledge as essential factors of effective classroom teaching.[16] [20] As far as content knowledge is concerned, no one doubts it to be the core among other professional characteristics of a good teacher. The pedagogical content knowledge is built upon the concept of how students learn specific content, the misconceptions and errors associated with certain concepts

as well as enrichment tasks needed to enhance the quality of students' learning.[16] Procedural knowledge helps teachers to solve problems quickly and efficiently [22], whereas pedagogical knowledge influences teaching performance through knowledge of teaching and learning, instructional approaches and the curriculum.[16] Thus, the concept of three critical factors in classroom teaching was employed as the methodological foundation of EMI PDP design.

To tailor a PDP that will eliminate all the potential gaps in teachers' perception of EMI, there is a need to establish what kind of competencies an EMI teacher needs to teach effectively those students who have a range of linguistic levels and come from different cultural backgrounds. [17] Macaro states most of the PDP for EMI are limited to linguistic aspects of the teaching like ability to communicate more effectively in English with students; expertise in using a range of language in different situations, from lectures and tutorials to conferences and online discussions; and familiarity with a range of skills for delivering instruction in English. Dubow and Gundermann notify CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and IELTS (International Language Testing Service) to be the basic criteria to assess teacher's competence to conduct via EMI, namely fluency in the language; pronunciation; grammatical accuracy; lexical range and accuracy; and ability to avoid the use of the L1.[7]

In the same way, a thorough investigation of existing PDPs worldwide reveals the fact that the majority of courses provided by European Universities focus significantly on developing and redeveloping course syllabi, EMI pedagogy and teaching techniques (Oxford and Cambridge). [28] [27]   The University of Southampton, in addition, contributes with psychological aspects of managing anxiety and enhancing teachers' confidence to the series of topics covered within the course.[30] American Universities, conversely, tend to concentrate on determining students' learning needs and designing effective lessons (OHIO University). University of Alberta (Canada) and Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona (Spain) along with all the constituents mentioned above comprise multicultural issues of teaching an international class into their course syllabus.[29]

The overall approach implemented by the described universities is of practical nature unlike the programs provided by Russian HEIs, which range is limited to two programs implemented by ITMO National Research University and Saint-Petersburg State University.[32] [31]   The conceptual part of the programs dominates over the practical one researching Bloom's taxonomy, assessment techniques and intercultural competence. However, a significant attention is paid to classroom discourse and English language proficiency. Hence, a critical overview of the existing PDPs both national and international exemplified the limitations most of them expose. Being implemented to a larger extent online, they are overloaded with theory at the expense of real EMI teaching practice.

Consequently, the imbalance toward teacher's English language proficiency fail to take into account other significant aspect of pedagogy while developing PDP for EMI like students' engagement and problems EMI students are faced with when learning an academic subject through a language they are not necessarily confident in. [3] A misconception that a successful EMI programme depends on the teacher's English proficiency alone may lead to stereotype that EMI lectures are "shallower and less precise" than lectures given through the L1. [2]

Methods

The project on PDP design and implementation within Kazan federal university framework involved four successive phases, namely (A) university teachers' pre-course interview, (B) EMI course tailoring, (C) EMI course execution, (D) university teachers' post-course interview.

(A) University teachers' pre-course interview

24 teachers of KFU who were currently or planning to be involved into EMI teaching participated in a pre-course interview on a voluntary basis. The two initial purposes of the survey were to identify the teachers' English proficiency level along with the learning outcomes they would like to achieve at the end of the PDP. The interview was held online through Microsoft Teams educational platform. The participants of the survey had a speaking session, where they answered several general questions about themselves, their teaching expertise, challenges and opportunities they encounter instructing through EMI. The utmost priority during the interview was given to the area of pedagogical and language support the participants required in the EMI framework.

(B) EMI course tailoring

To tackle the problems identified during phase A the team conducted comparative analysis of EMI trainings and workshops available in the local and global market. Based on the review and the cumulative approach towards EMI PDP layout, we tailored a 72 hours academic course with 36 hours of conventional classroom sessions and 36 hours of self-study mode. The interviewed academic staff requirements fostered three broad areas of knowledge to be integrated in the course, namely English language training, active teaching and learning (ATL), and Gen Z. Thus, the following learning objectives of the program are as follows:

- To increase General English proficiency;
- To improve the usage of English for academic purposes;
- To facilitate classroom management;
- To raise awareness of Gen Z learning styles and needs;
- To increase Gen Z academic engagement in EMI context;
- To provide teachers with a pool of effective teaching methods and techniques;
- To become more confident in public speaking in the English environment.

(C) EMI course execution

The programme took place offline during 2 weeks of 18 academic hours each, leaving the final 2 days for a project defence. The project itself was a compulsory task where the participants had to teach their subject for 20 minutes using all the knowledge they obtained in the EMI PDP. To improve the quality of the participants' EMI skills the project defence was followed by peer review, where teaching performance and English language abilities of the speaker were assessed by colleagues.

A total of 21 teachers of KFU followed the EMI PDP. The male and female participants were of various age, teaching experience and academic fields (see Table 1). All of them participated in phases A, C and D of the research.

Table 1.   EMI PDP participants' academic profile

		N of people
	under 35	5
Age	36-45	9
	46-55	3
	56 and above	4
	Up to 5 years	3
Teaching Experience	5-15 years	12
	15 years and more	6
	Medicine	7
Academic Field	Social Sciences	8
	Chemistry and Ecology	2
	Mathematics	4

The teaching staff of the course had 15 – 25 years of teaching experience and consisted of 1 PhD in Sociology and 2 PhDs in Linguistics. Moreover, the Observer attended each class to record and report on reactions of the participants during the session.

(D) EMI university teachers' post-course interview

The post-course interview incorporated 13 questions where the participants evaluated each particular module according to the following criteria: how useful the module was, the relevance of the content delivered, and whether the material was easy to understand or not. The interview generally focused upon the positive and the negative feedback on the programme as well as the teachers' suggestions on further changes for the course to become more efficient and relevant.

Results and Discussion

The programme implemented outlined serious gaps in EMI understanding depending upon teachers' background. The ones from social science were more inclined to understand the concept while those with the background in natural science were more reluctant to concentrate on pedagogical issues and methodology, considering the content knowledge to be of the highest priority in the classroom. As was mentioned in the background to the study, teachers' preconceptions influenced greatly their attitude to the programme and accordingly they were either biased to content dominance or were more flexible and responsive to PDP content.

While conducting stage A of the research, the team outlined two major predispositions in teachers' preconceptions: (1) the participants were of the opinion that direct translation of the content delivered in L1 is enough to meet EMI standards (81% of respondents); (2) academics assumed language awareness in L2 to be of a primary importance and neglected methodology to be the vital element of students' successful learning outcomes. In fact, only 4 respondents stated their interest in teaching techniques at the interview stage. The results obtained proved the research questions declared at the initial stage of the analysis: lack of pedagogical content knowledge and procedural knowledge hampers EMI success.

To eliminate the identified misconception, the PDP was accurately designed to cover all the areas the researchers identified as critical to form a deeper EMI concept understanding. The modules included the following:

1. What is EMI in general and how to adapt its concept to Generation Z needs and learning styles?
2. Syllabus design: How to make your course effective?
3. Effective teaching: What do you need to know in order to teach a student?
4. Lecturing effectively: How to conduct a lecture in English?
5. Classroom Management: asking questions and giving answers, providing feedback (Speech clichés for solving educational tasks).
6. Lesson Plan (Stages of conducting classes). Working with individuals or small groups at a seminar (How to conduct a seminar in English).
7. Public Speaking for lectures: How to create powerful introduction to the academic course (Secrets of a successful promo video).
8. Giving a presentation (Tips for creating impressive presentations).

Each module was carried out at a separate day for 4 academic hours. The training combined lectures, teamwork, individual practice and results statement. A subsequent survey confirmed the success of the tactic chosen, as some of the participants responded later:

All the knowledge I gained is of high practical value. Methods of active interaction with students, speech clichés for solving educational tasks and academic vocabulary were especially useful for me."

"It was a great course that helped me a lo";
"I could hardly imagine that EMI is so complicated";
"I will definitely redesign my lectures…";
"This PDP experience will help me to get better results from my students."

The final stage of the research was teachers' post-course interview when participants assessed all training sessions from three perspectives: whether they find the material given relevant, easy to understand and useful for lecturing in future. The 5-grade scale to provide feedback was offered as an option.

The module on EMI general concepts showed passive resistance to recognise the necessity to learn more about the issue to be better prepared for teaching. This section received one low rating (1-grade) and one person could not evaluate it at all. The rest of the group responded passively providing total 13 maximum scale results and 6 responses with 4-grade rating.

The modules on Gen Z learning styles and needs were highly appreciated by the audience due to several reasons: only a few distinguished the trend, but unknowingly faced the necessity to adapt teaching practice and content delivery to the new cohort of students' requirements. Being equipped with scientific background of the Gen Z trend, will help teachers to increase students' academic engagement in EMI context. Only three participants evaluated the module by 4-grade rating while others provided the maximum one.

The modules on implementation of English for academic purposes, tools to facilitate classroom management, and especially sessions on effective teaching methods and techniques were the ones that showed the highest level of participant' engagement, enthusiasm and willingness to proceed the practice in the real classroom. No negative or neutral feedback was given; moreover, the more detailed feedback on PDP effectiveness supported the quantitative data: 95% of respondents highlighted this part as the most useful one. Moreover, the majority of PDP participants confirmed they would be more confident in public speaking (lecturing) in English.

The PDP final project involved 20 minutes of lecturing by the course participants followed by a peer review. The results of peer assessment were compared with the ones done by the Observer. The assessment sheet included the following criteria:

In general, there were no big discrepancies in lectures evaluation results given by participants and the Observer. Those who were highly scored by the expert mainly gained the same results from their peers, proving the thesis that intuitively all teachers know what the ideal lecture is. Thanks to theoretical support, their intuitive predisposition molds into clear lecture design and its meaningful delivery.

Despite general positivity confirmed by the survey, several aspects outlined in the background to the research were proved while making analysis of its outcome. The debate mostly concerned on what teachers should be focused on during lecturing: on the content itself or on the pedagogy of content delivery. One of the participants designated this problem as

follows:

"We are not artists, and not dubbing actors, we are scientists. Content is all that is important to us, and voice modulations and entertaining techniques are not...".

This feedback one more time proved the existing dispute among academics on how to adapt university curriculum to changing public needs, how to combine the needs of a new generation without sacrificing the depth of university education, and how to keep content the priority without losing students' engagement.

Rating key: 1 - poor, 2 - fair, 3 - acceptable, 4 - good, 5 - excellent

Criteria	Rating				
The lecturer clearly explained the objectives and the structure of the class as well as my learning outcomes.	1	2	3	4	5
The material was logically structured and easy to follow.	1	2	3	4	5
The language used by the lecturer was clear and easy to understand.	1	2	3	4	5
The visual aids (presentation, videos, pictures etc.) used by the lecturer helped me to understand the material.	1	2	3	4	5
The lecturer knows the subject well and feels confident delivering it	1	2	3	4	5
The teacher demonstrated an enthusiasm for teaching this lecture.	1	2	3	4	5
The lecturer used a variety of methods to involve students in the class.	1	2	3	4	5
The lecturer encouraged students' participation.	1	2	3	4	5
The lecturer provided the opportunities for students to ask questions.	1	2	3	4	5
The lecture stimulated my interest in the subject.	1	2	3	4	5

Summary

Principal challenges determined by EMI researchers are insufficient pedagogical knowledge of content teachers and lack of confidence in their English language proficiency. Pre-course interviews revealed that EMI teachers tend to believe in the primary importance of L2 and pure content translation into English for successful course delivery. Moreover, course participants expressed fear or reluctance to employ interactive teaching and learning techniques as these could hamper course content. Students' engagement and teaching practice adaptation were mentioned among the factors that sophisticate the process.

Deep investigation into EMI concept along with the implementation of the four phase PDP project at Kazan Federal University revealed major competences required by the university teachers for rewarding EMI experience. These comprise linguistic competence (at least B1 English Language Proficiency), content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge with the focus on active teaching and learning techniques, procedural knowledge and Gen Z awareness (academic needs and learning styles) to enhance their actual involvement in the learning process.

These vital competences underpinned the components of the PDP course which incorporates the modules on EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction), EAP (English for Specific Purposes), classroom discourse, ATL (Active teaching and learning) and public speaking.

Conclusion

Despite the limited scope of the research aimed at determining major challenges and pillars of teaching in English the authors outlined preliminary concepts that underlie teacher-students interaction within EMI context.

The PDP revealed some similarities in attitude towards EMI concept. The open discussion provided throughout the course extended existing perceptions among teachers' from different academic background. The Program final project proved to be the case of sharing best practices in various academic disciplines that could serve as the context for comparison.

The researchers while mentoring sessions focused on pedagogy and language skills, giving participants an opportunity to explore new ways of planning lessons and implementing strategies and tools. The precise choice of the specific pedagogical tools applied during PDP implementation supported and addressed one of key challenges academics face when teaching in EMI: how to combine content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. The methodology introduced during the course is applicable in a range of contexts, and the strategies and materials are adaptable for the specific needs of various disciplines.

The implemented PDP proved the perceptions the authors assumed on course design. These includes the dispute between natural and social sciences on ATL techniques, the priority of the course content over the methods of its delivery as well as building academics cross cultural competence.

To understand the depth and the complexity of EMI framework is the prerequisite to guarantee high quality education. The participants expressed lack of administrative support for programmes currently being implemented via EMI. Training workshops, seminars and network of professionals involved in that process could improve efficiency of the latter. To develop a sustained and collaborative professional development programme for EMI faculty should be absolute priority in the pursuit of larger students' engagement.

Acknowledgements

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