

HEPCLIL (Higher Education Perspectives on Content and Language Integrated Learning)

English as a medium of instruction in teaching other languages: attitudes and practices

Vilma Bijeikiene
Vytautas Magnus University

Daiva Pundziuviene
Vytautas Magnus University

Internationalisation of HE and emergence of English as a global academic lingua franca used by people who share neither a common native tongue nor cultural and educational background have not only offered more opportunities but also raised challenges. According to recent European surveys, the percentage of pupils attaining the level of independent user in English varies from 14% to 82%, which evidences the potential and the complexity for English as a medium of instruction at tertiary level. This study aims to present the model of foreign language instruction at Vytautas Magnus University where one third of 30 languages are taught through English. It investigates the attitudes and practices of teachers in delivering their English-medium language courses by discussing the questions whether teaching other languages through English is psychologically, culturally and educationally preferable for teachers and students, whether it can limit the content taught and require a special methodology, how the teaching process changes with multiple languages used in the classroom and what level of English is necessary for teachers and students to ensure high quality of English-medium language teaching. The study is based on qualitative methodology with 12 language teachers participating as respondents. The results reveal areas in need of improvement.

1. Introduction

The increasing complexity and magnitude of issues in multilingualism, multiculturalism and language learning are demonstrated by the up-front presence of these issues in European policy debates, public forums, educational discourse and other solemn arenas. The questions placed on the table are broad and reaching far into a variety of areas relevant to societal cohesion and welfare. Moreover, they are inextricably bound together and interdependent so that a superficial and overgeneralising approach will not suffice. For instance, an increasing multicultural and multi-ethnic compositions of European countries has encouraged the reconsideration of a rather simplified primary 1+>2 formula of a European citizen's preferable linguistic competence shifting to a more localised focus on

minority, cross-border, significant regional and other types of languages. This shift in its own turn requires relevant changes in language teaching policies.

In view of the 'unity in diversity' principle, Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) places a special emphasis on the development of students' plurilingual competence and their broad multicultural awareness. With the offer of over 30 languages to the university students of all study fields and the general public, VMU not only implements its *artes liberales* ideology, but undoubtedly provides its graduates with enhanced career opportunities. Around one third of the languages offered at VMU are taught through the medium of English, which has been determined by a number of factors. Firstly, VMU Institute of Foreign Languages, which provides most of foreign language instruction, is highly multicultural with 16 nationalities represented by its academic staff. Most of them teach their first language and thus need English as an additional language, an academic *Lingua Franca*, for instruction. Secondly, the advancement of internationalisation at VMU has resulted in growing numbers of international students and the need of English-medium language courses as well. Finally, the increasing internationalisation has determined the need in English-medium study programmes which also include language learning as part of the curriculum. For instance, depending on their interests and specialisation into particular regions, students in the English-medium study programme of International Politics and Development Studies are required to choose between Russian and Arabic; similarly, students of another internationally-oriented programme, namely the programme of European Economic Studies, have to gain communicative competence in Spanish, German or French.

The circumstances outlined above undoubtedly underscore the expanding and multifaceted role of English which is nowadays referred to as the 'core skill' in CLIL discourse (Ball, 2014). Ironic as it might sound, in the context of highly internationalised

contemporary tertiary education, English has become not only the core skill indispensable in developing one's professional and academic, i.e. content related, competences, but also the key instrument in acquiring one's plurilingual proficiency. In view of this complexity, the current study has undertaken the following research aims: to analyse the attitudes and practices of teachers as participants in EMI (English-medium) language learning and teaching process, to investigate their evaluation of the benefits and challenges of this process and to examine their insights in its methodological aspects. Finally, the overall aim of the study is to outline recommendations for the quality improvement of EMI language learning and teaching.

2. Theoretical considerations of English-medium language learning

Since its introduction into language teaching discourse in the early 1990s, the term CLIL has not only acquired the place of an umbrella term in the hierarchy of content-oriented and pragmatics-driven approaches towards language teaching and learning, but also gained the brand label feature including such as “innovative, modern, effective, efficient and forward-looking” and most probably many more (Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, Smit 2010:3; cf. Coyle, Hood, Marsh 2010). It must be the capacity to connote these features that maintains the attractiveness of CLIL as brand label and continuously expands its inclusiveness.

Given that the present study aims at the analysis of teaching languages through the medium of English to speakers whose native or first language is not English, a question arises as to how much this teaching process could be related to CLIL -- no matter how inclusive this umbrella term is. Technically speaking, it is the process of teaching one's third or subsequent language L3, L4, etc. through the medium of one's second L2 (cf. Hufeisen, Neuner 2004; Ringbom 2007). On the one hand, this teaching process remains within a linguistic domain, i.e. no non-linguistic subject as for instance mathematics,

economics, etc. is involved. Therefore, in this process one of the most important features of CLIL as a fusion of language teaching and subject (non-linguistic subject) teaching is cancelled out. On the other hand, another equally significant characteristic of CLIL, namely the use of an additional language, or vehicular language, is a very much highlighted aspect of the teaching process focused on in the present study. Moreover, along with this similarity comes the need of new didactic decisions and adaptation of methodology, which is the need emphasised in CLIL as well as in teaching L3 through the medium of L2.

3. Methodology

To reach the aims set in the introduction, the study applies qualitative methodology using a questionnaire designed with closed and open questions. Moreover, teachers' round-table discussions that regularly take place at the Institute of Foreign Languages have also contributed to elicit the intended data. The questionnaire clusters into four parts, firstly, focusing on the respondents' experience in EMI language teaching, secondly, concentrating on various benefits the respondents see in EMI language teaching, then aiming to disclose the challenges such teaching may pose to the participants of this process and finally initiating an open question discussion as to what methodological changes are necessary for such language teaching to be effective. The answers have been obtained from 12 language teachers who agreed to participate in the study as respondents.

4. Results and discussion

As indicated in the introductory part, VMU Institute of Foreign Languages supplies learners with the offer of 30 languages, with the possibility of 1/3 of the offer to be learned through the medium of English. Thus the considerably high proportion of EMI in language teaching

determines a correspondingly broad variety in the respondents' experience in EMI as well as in the circumstances under which such teaching is implemented (Table 1).

Table 1. Experience in EMI language teaching.

Target language	TL vs L1	Experience in EMI	Special training in EMI	Is special training in EMI necessary?
Arabic	-/-	3,5 years	No	Yes
Chinese	-/-	2 years	No	Maybe
Chinese	-/-	1 year	No	Yes
Chinese	-/-	1 year	No	Yes
French	-/-	2 years	No	of course
German	Lithuanian	2 years	unfortunately no	highly necessary
Lithuanian	-/-	10 years	No	yes, for non-linguists
Norwegian	-/-	0,5 year	no	--
Russian	-/-	2 years	unfortunately no	highly necessary

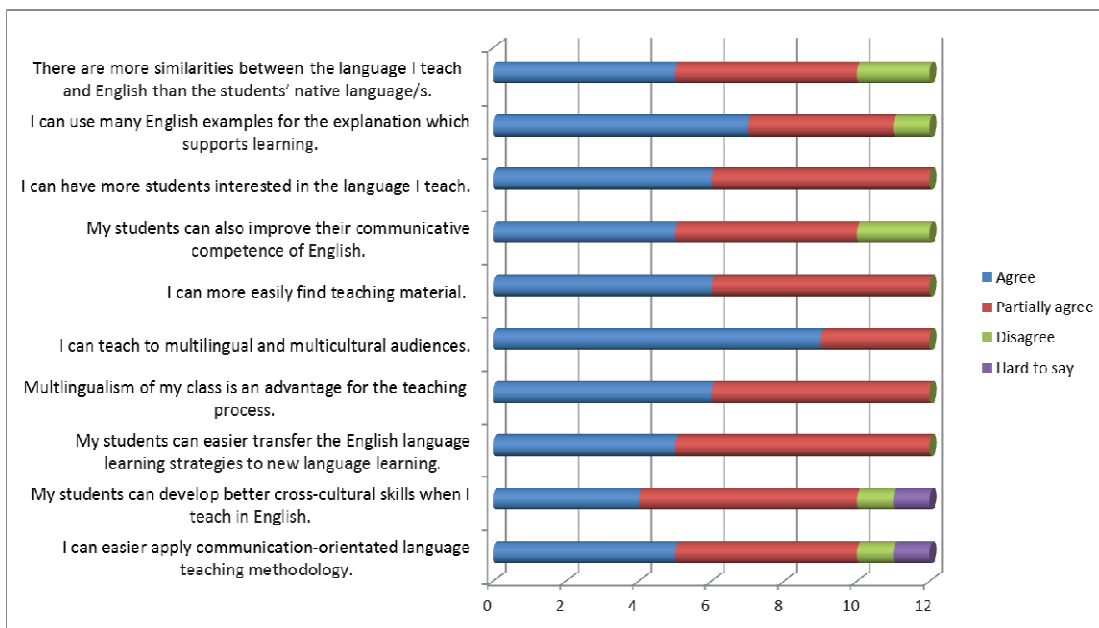
Russian	Kirghiz	1 year	No	--
Spanish/Catalan	-//-	10 years	a course	yes, for inexperienced
Spanish	-//-	10 years	a course	would be helpful

In their teaching practice, the respondents of the current study cover a wide spectrum of languages (9 in total) representing a rich linguistic and sociocultural variation. Most of the respondents, except for two, teach their first languages, however, their experience in EMI language teaching considerably differs ranging from one semester to 10 years. Most of the teachers, except for two who indicated a short course, undertook EMI language teaching without any special EMI didactics training. Moreover, the necessity of such training is presupposed in two answers which have a modifier *unfortunately* added the negation *no* and further revealed in the direct question about such need (see the last column in Table 1). A tendency can be observed that most acute necessity of all EMI training is felt by the teachers who have had 2 years of experience which could be seen as sufficient time to discover the specificity and complexity of such teaching, but insufficient time gain enough competence to cope with the challenges without additional linguistic and didactic support.

The answers to the question as to what exactly the training in EMI language teaching could include split into two categories. First of all, the respondents highlight the importance to develop their communicative competence of English starting with a diagnostic test and advancing further within their relevant level. In regard to the specific aspects of English competence development, the respondents accentuated general listening and speaking

skills, the language of classroom management, as for instance, giving feedback or giving instructions, specific vocabulary, grammar terminology and academic English. They also emphasised the need in developing the skills of recognising and exploiting the cross-linguistic similarities in case of English as an additional language. The other category in the respondents' argumentation for EMI training relates to cooperation, teamwork and sharing of good practice. For example, the respondents would see it as an important advantage if their classes could be observed by more experienced colleagues in order to obtain the latter's feedback. They also believe that examples of international experience would be highly beneficial and would enable inexperienced teachers to add creativity and versatility to their EMI language teaching.

Figure 1. Benefits of EMI language teaching.

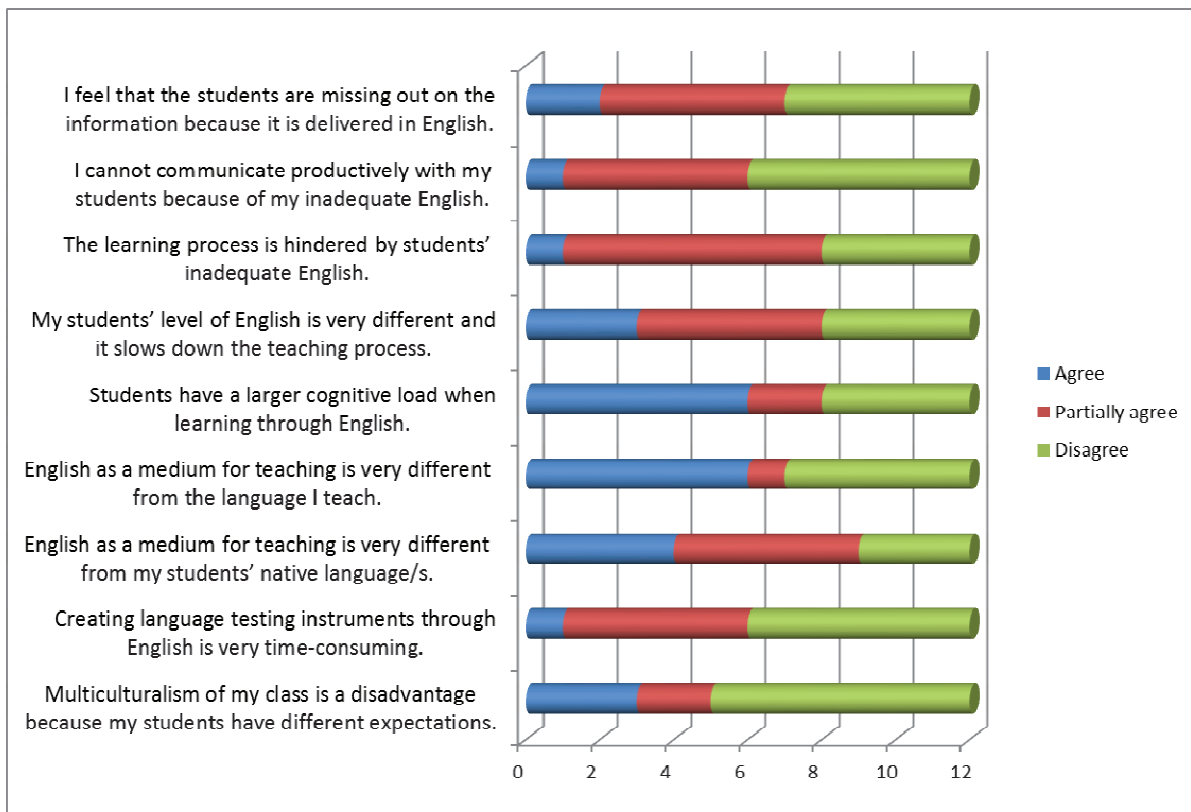


Round table discussions with EMI language teachers allowed us to formulate a set of possible EMI benefits (Figure 1) and challenges (Figure 2) for the respondents to consider and evaluate. The answers to the proposed benefits reveal the respondents' quite positive attitudes as the agreeing and partially agreeing answers tend to dominate. Most

agreement or partial agreement has been generated in multilingualism-related categories. In other words, the respondents believe that EMI empowers them to have more students interested in enrolling in their groups, which closely relates to the new teaching environment of the increasing multiculturalism of higher education. They also regard the multilingual and multicultural audiences to be an advantage for language teaching. As indicated by one of the respondents: "It is hard to say why, but mixed groups (Lithuanians and a few foreign students) are usually very nice". Less support is granted to the statements related to methodological issues. The teachers are in doubt about the exploitation of cross-linguistic similarity, the possibility of additionally improving students' competence of English, developing cross-cultural skills and applying a more communicative approach. When delivering their comments on the benefits of EMI in language teaching, the respondents also mentioned the possibility that they have as teachers to also improve their competence of English by delivering EMI classes.

The respondents' attitudes toward the challenges of EMI in language teaching (Figure 2) present a more controversial picture than in the case of benefits which is shown by the fact that all three types of answers alternate in different proportions. Multilingualism of the class appears to be seen by the respondents as the least challenging issue, which supports the tendency observed in the analysis of the benefits. In contrast to the case of benefits, however, the consideration of challenges resulted in many more comments delivered by the respondents in that way revealing their feeling of doubts and concerns. The comments could be seen as clustering into three categories: linguistic, procedural and cultural challenges.

Figure 2. Challenges of EMI language teaching.



The linguistic challenges primarily relate to the respondents' belief about students' inadequacy with regard to English, namely their failure to understand the teacher's explanations, their different levels of English and different experience in EMI learning. This is reported to be evidenced by students' reluctance to ask questions and their ensuing poorer participation in class which can finally result in their lower marks. Comments about procedural challenges demonstrate teachers' lack of experience in handling multilingual audiences in EMI language teaching as could be derived from their comments like "What language should I use to give an answer to a question placed in Lithuanian in a multilingual class?". The cultural challenges of EMI language teaching relate to students' cultural and educational backgrounds which may differ significantly and in that way hinder the teaching process. One of the respondents has shared a culture-related misunderstanding in his multilingual and multicultural class: when explaining the Spanish word 'rosa', he makes reference to a well-known cartoon "Pink Panther", which works well

with the students from European cultures, but is not recognised by students from China and Korea.

The respondents' answers about methodological changes that they had to make when transferring to EMI language teaching permeate their either positive or negative attitudes that have been observed in their evaluation of benefits and challenges. The negatively permeated, or rather pessimistic, attitudes are evidences by the following methodological decisions: reduced methodological versatility, fewer creative tasks due to the lack of time and increased procedural strictness as, for instance, supplying students with word lists to make sure that all students understand. Other decisions include keeping English to a minimum and resorting more to ICT usage as well as trying to exploit the multilingual composition of the audience for revealing cross-linguistic similarities and 'false-friends'. Some respondents report about their practice of bringing in examples of cross-linguistic comparison not only from the target and the vehicular languages (i.e. English), but also showing examples of learners' first languages, for instance, Lithuanian.

5. Conclusions

The divergence in teachers' answers demonstrates that EMI in language teaching shapes out in multifaceted and largely unfamiliar situations and needs to be studied in detail in order to enhance the quality of language teaching at tertiary level. On the one hand, this unpredictability sometimes coupled with teachers' linguistic insecurity and lack of methodological bases poses obstacles to EMI language teaching that need to be considered and attempted to be removed by higher education institutions to promote the internationalisation of their study programmes. On the other hand, the appreciation of EMI for language teaching as the way of attracting multilingual and multicultural audiences gives hope that the challenges can be turned to opportunities based on such values as a

friendly atmosphere, increased cultural awareness as well as maintaining and sharing of tolerance.

6. References

Ball, Phil, 2014. Plenary speech 'CLIL and Competences: Assessment'. In *CLIL Policy and Practice: Competence-based Education for employability, mobility and growth*. 10-12 March 2014. Como.

Coyle, Do; Hood, Philip; Marsh, David, 2010. *CLIL Content and Language Integrated Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dalton-Puffer, Christiane; Nikula, Tarja, and Smit, Ute, 2010. „Charting policies, premises and research on content and language integrated learning“, in *Language Use and Language Learning in CLIL Classrooms*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1-19.

Hufeisen, Britta, and Neuner, Gerhard, 2004. *The Plurilingualism Project: Tertiary Language Learning – German after English*. Council of Europe Publishing

Ringbom, Hakan, 2007. *Cross-linguistic Similarity in Foreign Language Learning*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.