



Students' Experiences of English-Medium Courses at Tertiary Level: A Case in Turkey

Research Article

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ABSTRACT

Universities offering EMI programmes have been gaining popularity at tertiary level. In line with the increase in the number of these programmes, there appears to be an increasing interest in investigating the effectiveness of EMI programmes. This study aimed to explore the effectiveness of EMI programmes through undergraduate students' views in a state university located in the Mediterranean region of Turkey. The data were gathered from the fourth year undergraduate students in the spring semester of the 2017-2018 academic year. These students represented this, relatively new, university's first groups to be graduating from EMI programmes. The participants of the study were six males and six females. The present study employed the descriptive survey research design. The students were selected through quota sampling. In this study, focus group interviews were carried out in order to collect rich, descriptive data with regards to students' views on EMI. Recent studies carried out at tertiary level and the reports prepared by the institutions were analysed in order to determine the interview questions, and eight questions were designed to reveal the students' views on EMI programmes. The data gathered through focus group meetings were analysed through content analysis. The findings suggest most of the participants said that the contribution of EMI programmes to the English required for the students' subject was big, and EMI programmes had an important effect on students' motivation. However; most of the participants stated that their proficiency in English had not had a steady improvement throughout their education.

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Keywords:

Medium of instruction, Higher Education, Undergraduate program, English-medium Instruction (EMI)

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Introduction

English has become widespread and one of the most important parts of our everyday lives. As a result of this trend, using English as a medium of instruction has also become popular. English Medium Instruction (EMI) is now an ever-growing global phenomenon. Most countries including Turkey have attached importance to teaching students through the medium of English. In Turkey, EMI programmes are expanding, especially in higher education institutions. However, this expansion is not limited to higher education and the number of high schools offering EMI has markedly increased (Macaro, & Akincioglu, 2017), but English as a medium of instruction has a wider popularity at postgraduate levels (Airey, Lauridsen, Räsänen, Salö, & Schwach, 2017; Bolton, Botha, & Bacon-Shone, 2017).

A close relationship exists between internationalisation and the EMI programmes at the tertiary level. Existence of the EMI programmes could be the result of many factors such as recognition of institutions through accreditation, university rankings, financial reasons and prestige (Haigh, 2014). It is worth noting that leading higher education institutions all over the world have been engaging in competition for students, researchers and academics (Lueg, 2018), and the EMI programmes play an important role in this competition.

A broad range of scholars advocate offering EMI in higher education. Klaassen and Bos (2010) studied the general language proficiency of students and concluded that students' academic language proficiency could really not be improved unless a systematic approach to planning was applied. Kirkgöz (2014) reported that students anticipate a degree from an EMI programme would offer them some more benefits during seeking employment. British Council/TEPAV (2015) reported that students were content with being able to find more plentiful resources in English. A number of studies have found that undergraduate students, in general, hold positive perceptions towards EMI (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012; Macaro & Akincioglu, 2017; Turhan & Kirkgöz, 2018).

English as a Medium of Instruction is not immune from criticism and is criticized mainly for two reasons: political and pedagogical. Political reasons can roughly be summed up as a fear of the official language's losing ground and no longer be in use as a communication tool to disseminate scientific knowledge (Jarvad, 2001; Jensen, Denver, Mees & Werther, 2013; Salö, 2010). As for the pedagogical reasons, a considerable amount are related to the ineffective delivery of course content (Cho, 2012; Jensen et al., 2013; Jensen & Thøgersen, 2011; Kirkgöz, 2009). Airey et al. (2017) suggested that, for successful EMI implementation, an institution's language policy should be designed to help improve students' English language skills. Tange (2010) pointed out some difficulties related to the lack of improvisation and spontaneity lecturers provide which can, in part, be resultant from lecturers' limitations in the language. According to the British Council/TEPAV (2015) report, English competency of the majority of Turkish students can be considered rudimentary when graduating from high school. Some research conducted with teachers and/or students at tertiary level showed that a noticeable number of the participants were dissatisfied with classes given in English (Cho, 2012; Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2013; Santos, Cenoz & Gorter, 2018). Some studies reporting the effect of EMI on achievement in content suggested that this achievement can be negatively affected by the medium of instruction (Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim & Jung, 2011; Kirkgoz, 2005).

In a number of countries, including Turkey, where English is not the mother tongue, EMI in higher education has rapidly gained importance (Aslan, 2018; Jensen et al., 2013; Macaro, Curle, Pun, An & Dearden, 2018). However, the case in Turkish universities is, to some extent, different than many other higher education institutions in other countries as a preparatory year programme (PYP), which, by offering students one-year of English tuition, serving as a bridge between high school and required undergraduate study level (Aguilar & Rodriguez, 2012; Macaro & Akincioglu, 2017; Ozer & Tanrıseven, 2016). Students in PYPs are provided General English classes. However, the majority of students' entry level to university, in terms of language proficiency, are too low to benefit fully from EMI, even after a year of PYP (British Council/TEPAV, 2015;

Macaro & Akincioglu, 2017; Macaro, Akincioglu & Dearden, 2016). PYP is considered to play a crucial role in preparing students for departmental courses in English, but students are also expected to steadily increase their proficiency levels in English until they graduate.

This study has brought to the fore views on EMI practices at a Turkish university. In this sense, wherein an institution has a university-wide language policy and the evaluation of that policy has a pivotal role. This current study is expected to lend support, in two ways, to ongoing discussions regarding the effectiveness of EMI undergraduate programmes. First, this study can contribute to higher education institutions that intend to conduct a need analysis on tuition in EMI; secondly to universities shaping their university-wide language policy. This study could also serve as a data set for a survey questionnaire for lecturers with regard to teaching in English. The results of this study may also serve to draw attention to the common teaching practices within an EMI undergraduate programme. Given this background, this study aims to answer this question: “What are students’ perceptions of the EMI courses at their departments?”

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate undergraduate students’ experiences in the EMI setting and attitudes toward the EMI courses. To that end, semi-structured interviews were undertaken in order to collect their views on learning the field-specific content in English. The current study used a case study approach to explain students’ perceptions and experiences in an EMI setting.

Participants

The data set of this study comprised fourth year students in a state university located in the Mediterranean region of Turkey. The size of the groups was decided by a quota in order to represent all the departments equally. To this end, it was decided to recruit at least three participants from each programme, namely, Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE), Industrial Engineering (IE) and Management Information Systems (MIS). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 12 undergraduate students between May and June 2018. In total, four interviews were conducted with six male and six female students.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data of this study were gathered through focus group interviews. Group interviews allowed researchers to gain detailed insight into the views of different participants within a group (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012). Upon review of related literature, 11 interview questions were developed for the purposes of the study. Later, upon review by the researchers, three questions were removed. The questions were all open-ended and ordered from the general to more specific questions in the middle or later stages of the interview. Sample questions include the following: “How does EMI affect your academic performance?” and “What would you change in the delivery of lectures in your departments, if you were given a choice?”

Group interviews lasted between 40 and 85 minutes. A total of four sessions were completed in three weeks. The interviews were undertaken and audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees. The recorded files were transcribed verbatim, and the data were coded for emergent themes. Content analysis was used on the data. First, the researchers, separately, coded the data. Later they reviewed their codes and developed the themes.

The following points were taken into account with respect to reliability and validity. Based on the literature covering student perception at EMI programmes, interview questions were developed. An expert, who has published studies on the medium of instruction at higher education institutions, was contacted. This expert, who works at the Department of Translation and Interpreting, checked the items for adequacy and comprehensibility. Researchers modified the items in accordance with the expert’s suggestions. In qualitative studies, calculating inter-rater reliability is a well-known method to evaluate raters’ coding consistency. For

this reason, the formula suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used. Two researchers separately coded the transcripts and inter-rater reliability was computed between the coders. The inter-rater reliability was 0.84 (91/91+17) and a value above 0.80 represents good qualitative reliability. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), an inter-rater reliability should approach 0.90.

Findings

The results revealed three key themes of content subject learning in English. These are “positive attitude towards EMI,” “negative attitude towards EMI” and “factors affecting the effectiveness of EMI”. Table 1 reports the participants’ positive views on EMI.

Theme 1. Positive Attitude towards EMI

Students reported that they could easily stay up-to-date with access to primary sources in the field (f=9). As one respondent pointed out, they could read primary source texts in English.

Reading [texts] in English, in my opinion, is like staying up-to-date. My subject is about innovation and all the publications [in my field] are available in English. When searching [for course material in Turkish], after a point, when you click on the 4th or 5th page, all you can find is [materials] in English. Most of the resources in Turkish are translations of the original books in English. I have tried Turkish resources too [but now] I search for resources available in English. (EEE, Male, 24)

Students said that their familiarity with subject specific terminology in English better improves in an EMI programme (f=6). It seems that students feel relieved to see the dominance of English as the Lingua Franca in certain job markets.

After the university entrance exam [with the grade I received] I could have been placed in a different university in a city I favoured more. I could have enrolled [in those universities] but they were Turkish [Turkish Medium Instruction programmes]. However I favoured my programme (an EMI programme) over the same programme in Turkish. (MIS, Male, 22)

Another point students emphasize is benefitting from EMI when entering the global job market (f=4). Students widely believe that a degree from an EMI programme would be advantageous for their future employment. A female student, 23 years old, says:

... [it] will affect [positively] when we try to get a job because some factories [companies] favour a degree from EMI programmes. ... As far as I know, a certain level of English is [also] required to get hired by the government. (MIS, Female, 23)

Theme 2. Negative Attitude towards EMI

Some students asserted that inefficient academic content acquisition took place as the teaching of their academic subject is not done through the medium of Turkish, (f=14). An interviewee indicated as:

There are some courses [where teaching in] Turkish is preferable because you understand better, learn better because it is our mother tongue (IE, Female, 23)

...We sometimes use resources in two different languages. Actually I study using materials in English but when I have difficulty understanding the content, then I switch to Turkish [and] I study and [simply] understand [specific content] and I switch to English again. (IE, Female, 24)

One of the most frequently mentioned grievances of students is a decrease in their academic performance due to EMI (f=8). Some students believed their exam scores were indirectly affected by the medium of instruction. A female student answered:

...we cannot effectively articulate our thoughts in English. I can write a single-paragraph [answer to a question] when it is English, whereas I could have written paragraphs and this affects my scores [negatively]. This can be a problem specific to me. (IE, Female, 23)

Students reportedly spend more time learning content knowledge in English (f=9). Students, especially at levels where subject content gets complicated, said they need to spend more time to acquire this knowledge. As one student put it:

If I were enrolled in the TMI, I would probably be more successful because the language [medium of instruction] would be Turkish and I would acquire something directly. I wouldn't spend extra time [and] effort. (EEE, Female, 25)

Another concept retrieved from the interviews is a possible inability of students to interact in class. Some students reportedly grow shy because of lecturers' attitude or some language barrier (f=5).

...but sometimes teachers discourage you. [For example they say] 'you should be using a different word [or] your pronunciation is not correct. Haven't you learned that by now!' In this case the student tends to feel shy and she lacks confidence to talk. Therefore she underperforms in class..." (IE, Female, 23)

Another student, 23 years old, went on to say:

...if it is something written, then I can express myself. There is no problem. I can express myself, but when it is verbal, I tend to stay quiet or feel shy. This is also related to people around me. If I weren't criticized, then I can feel more comfortable. (MIS, Female, 23)

Theme 3. Factors affecting the effectiveness of EMI

Students repeatedly identified the impact of pedagogical practices on the effectiveness of EMI (f=35). Students drew attention to pedagogical challenges regarding educational psychology, teaching methods and techniques and the like.

Teachers, in my opinion, should clarify more often when we fail to understand [the content lecturer's] main points. One of my teachers, for instance, was more fluent [than other content lecturers] but s/he was speaking word by word [clearly] and levelling himself/herself to our level of knowledge. ... His/her subject specific knowledge was vast but s/he was rarely using technical words. S/he could have used them [terminology] but she didn't quite want to. (EEE, Male-2, 22)

On the role of the content lecturer in the class and pedagogical interaction, another student said:

He was a teacher who can sit next to us and level himself down to our level of proficiency when necessary. ... 'What is your opinion on this? You should be looking from this perspective' he often says. He is a friendly teacher. (MIS, Male, 23)

Another cause for concern expressed by students regarding the effectiveness of EMI is the effect of course content/discipline (f=7). On one hand some students reportedly obtained higher scores in courses traditionally considered to be more verbal, but on the other hand others claimed to obtain higher scores in subjects traditionally viewed as more numerical and the use of English is not often necessary.

Our subjects are mostly numerical ... We use numerical methods to solve problems. We see a few numbers and apply formulas and continue [solve problems]. We don't often read instructions [in the exam papers]. ... my academic performance wouldn't be affected by the English as a Medium of Instruction. I would be getting the same scores [if the medium of instruction were Turkish]. (EEE, Male, 22)

In exams, when I am asked questions whose answer I don't know for sure, if they were asked in Turkish I couldn't come up with an answer because the teacher would [easily] understand that my answer was irrelevant. ... However, [when the exam is] in English I use a flowery style, structures or keywords [specific to that subject] at times. Sometimes I provide a superficial answer. ... the scores [I have got so far] or feedback [showed me] my practice was [found to be] working. (MIS, Male, 24)

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the state of EMI programmes, which have been gaining popularity in recent years, through the eyes of undergraduate students. There are a number of reasons for higher education institutions to introduce EMI at undergraduate level. However, this poses both potential benefits and drawbacks. It is of vital importance that departments should introduce an EMI programme only after adequate planning and as Kirkpatrick (2017) suggests EMI cannot be successfully implemented unless universities adopt an inclusive language policy.

On the whole, the comments show students' positive perception of the opportunities the EMI programmes present. These perceptions seem to be related to the access to primary resources in English, better employment prospects, and comprehension of subject specific terminology. The findings in favour of positive perceptions of EMI back up some earlier research (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012, Macaro & Akincioglu 2017, Turhan & Kırkgöz, 2018). In line with the findings of Kırkgöz (2014), Lueg and Lueg (2015) and Santos et al. (2018), most students believe that earning a degree from an EMI programme would probably give them more opportunities when getting a job over students who graduate from a Turkish Medium Instruction programme. It was also stated by the participants that they could improve their subject knowledge by accessing primary sources in English and this finding is supported by research (Kırkgöz, 2014; Li, 2014; Turhan & Kırkgöz, 2018).

Concerning the students' negative attitudes, the concepts of a decrease in academic performance, more time needed understanding, difficulties in knowledge acquisition, and loss of self-confidence were found. In the present study, the participants are divided on the question regarding the way their academic levels are affected when teaching is done in English. The majority of students claimed their academic performance was negatively affected by EMI. However, two students claimed the opposite and they believed they could get higher scores in exams thanks to their relatively higher proficiency in English. The literature presents some apparently contradictory results regarding academic performance. Byun et al. (2011) found that teaching conducted through a foreign language could affect students' academic performance negatively. On the other hand, Dafouz and Camacho-Minano (2016), explored the impact of EMI on students' academic achievement and concluded the use of EMI did not lower students' academic outcomes, however, students' insufficient proficiency in English seemed to be a barrier to in-class interaction (Lee, 2014) and in terms of content knowledge acquisition, EMI was lacking in efficiency (Hellekjaer, 2010; Kırkgöz, 2014; Lee, 2014; Sert, 2008).

Before a department decides to teach through EMI, there are some basic issues to consider. Three themes were identified concerning the factors affecting the effectiveness of EMI, namely (1) The role of pedagogical practices to support student learning (2) The effect of course content/discipline on the effectiveness of EMI. A notion elicited was the belief that the effectiveness of EMI is indirectly related to course subjects. Some students claim that in examinations of courses viewed as more numerical, they don't have to have a high level of

proficiency in English. In addition, a few students reportedly obtained higher scores in subjects traditionally considered as more verbal than numerical. The reasons for their higher scores may be linked to students' higher levels of English, which can help students better explain their opinion in exam papers. This finding is in accordance with the research by Dafouz, Camacho and Urquia (2014). Another factor affecting the effectiveness of EMI is the role of pedagogical practices to support student learning. Whatever the interview question was, conversation somehow included some elements which may easily be linked to pedagogical factors. Lecturers sometimes suffered from not being able to speak at the students' level when trying to provide complex scientific explanations. Some lecturers reportedly depend on a few specific techniques of teaching and do not try to adopt a new one when delivery of content knowledge fails. According to some students, lecturers' feedback may include discouraging remarks, or lecturers do not encourage interaction during class and can avoid eye contact with students when teaching. Some students report the presence of poor presentation methods. It is apparent that teaching through EMI requires not only effective use of English but also effective use of pedagogical skills. This view is corroborated in other studies (Cho, 2012; Dearden & Macaro, 2016; Huang, 2018; Macaro et al., 2018; Tange, 2010). Hence, it may be inferred that lecturers in an EMI programme are expected to be in need of receiving pedagogical training.

As a whole, our participants were in favour of the presence of EMI at tertiary level and held positive attitudes toward EMI programmes. Based on the challenges indicated by the students, areas of improvement can be determined to enhance EMI teaching and learning. It should always be remembered that a good researcher does not necessarily equal a good content teacher in EMI settings. Therefore lecturers should be open to refine their pedagogical skills.

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the data were gathered in three EMI programmes (Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Industrial Engineering and Management Information Systems), but it could be useful if the data were also collected from Partial-EMI programmes. Secondly, the small number of departments must also be considered a limiting factor. In the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made. The findings of this study can be used to support the planning and implementation of an orientation program for new students before they start their undergraduate classes. Open-ended questionnaires with as many students as possible from various universities can be used to gather more details about students' content subject learning.

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