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**ENHANCING STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS VIA  
EMI: MYTH OR REALITY**

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***Abstract***

The English as a medium of instruction (EMI) phenomenon in the Russian Federation is at the earliest stage of its development with many problems arising both in theory and practice. Therefore, the authors of the article consider it essential to explore the EMI application in a particular higher educational institution namely Kazan Federal University. The purpose of this article is to address one aspect of the multidimensional EMI phenomenon with the particular emphasis on students' attitude to EMI and its potential to enhance their subject-specific progress.

The results of the pre-course survey depict that students enrolled to the program, come from various English language backgrounds varying from A2 to C1 in accordance with the European framework of references. The major challenge underlined by the respondents, especially those with B1 and below, was presumably connected with lack of speaking skills which frustrated students and eventually hindered them of effective communication with their peers. However, the post-course survey data illustrate a genuine degree of agreement expressed by the participants on a number of issues. This study highlights several correlations between teachers' ability in implementing interactive methods along with active learning techniques in EMI lecture and students' enhancement in English communication skills together with content understanding. Thus, the authors proceed that it's flexibility in teaching and possession of interactive teaching skills exposed by a lecturer which ultimately affect students' boost of motivation to learn the content of the subject delivered within EMI framework.

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**Keywords:** English as a medium of instruction (EMI), active learning, teaching methodology, content knowledge, instructor, soft skills.



## 1. Introduction

Global processes encompassing the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Internetization, which are broadly underway, have a profound impact on education and lifelong learning. They determine not only the national policies but greatly influence the tertiary institutions' approaches to transforming their curricular to fit into the international educational environment. Moreover, the 21st century economy unlike the 20th century one has been built with an emphasis upon the human capital which is becoming the country's most valuable economic asset. And what is more pivotal due to labour market internationalization, the labour force requires English proficiency to compete in the global arena. In the given context when both instructors and students have access to higher educational materials regardless their geographical location and social status, the relevance of the English language as the language of academic instruction at a tertiary level is expanding and becoming widely emphasized by the international academic community (Chapple, 2015). Teaching in English is not necessarily the teaching of English. Under the current circumstances language learners should evolve into language users, and the tertiary education is precisely the milestone for this breakthrough.

The question that arises here is: what actions should a University undertake to meet the described above challenge? The obvious response will be to increase the amount of academic hours tailored for ESL learning and/or to introduce programs or separate courses with English as a language of instruction. The latter seems to match the internationally prevailing approach with EMI (English as a medium of instruction) gaining significant attention among the academia. "There is a fast-moving worldwide shift from English being taught as a foreign language (EFL) to English being the medium of instruction (EMI) for academic subjects" (Dearden, 2014). In fact, there is a growing trend to use English as a lingua franca for tertiary education worldwide.

The European market of academic programs in higher educational institutions proposes a considerable variety of EMI courses. Top Russian universities are taking bold steps to adopt English as a language of instruction at a graduate level with only a few of them practicing EMI within the undergraduate curricular. However, the EMI phenomenon in the Russian Federation is at the earliest stage of its development with many problems arising both of the theoretical and practical nature.

Therefore, the authors of the article consider it essential to explore the EMI application in a particular higher educational institution (HEI), namely Kazan Federal University with the idea to contribute to the pedagogical framework of EMI development in Russia. This article will address one aspect of the multidimensional EMI phenomenon with the particular emphasis on students' attitude to EMI and its potential to enhance their subject-specific progress (Sungatullina, Zalyaeva, & Gorelova, 2016).

## 2. Problem Statement

### 2.1. Challenges and benefits of EMI for Russian universities

The whole world has been experiencing profound englishization for more than 50 years. The idea of using English as a medium of instruction originates from the bilingual education movement of the 1950s in Europe and Canada (Barnard, 2013) and is growing at the exponential rate (Dafouz, & Guerrini, 2009).

The Russian Federation has been excluded from the process due to the historical reasons, which influenced the pace of ESL teaching development and the adoption of the EMI policies (Sungatullina et al.,

2016). Indeed, it is legitimate to consider the EMI phenomenon in Russia for not more than 10 years. It gradually advanced from the CLIL approach where language teaching is organized around the informational content rather than a linguistic syllabus (Richards, & Rodgers, 2001). The CLIL was practiced predominantly within ESP classes in HEIs, where the teachers set double objectives to improve both the subject knowledge and the ESL proficiency. With the shift to EMI the focus is transferred to the professional subject content however the increased language proficiency is viewed as a valuable byproduct. "EMI is seen as having the distinct advantage of killing two birds (i.e., disciplinary learning and English proficiency) with one stone" (Guangwei, & Jun, 2014). Nevertheless, these double benefits and increasing enthusiasm over EMI frequently lead to "unrealistic expectations of only positive effects" (Kiyong, & Huijung, 2011), when potential challenges are ignored and their educational significance is not given enough consideration.

## **2.2. Benefits of EMI for higher education**

Undoubtedly, the positive impact of EMI on the process of the Kazan Federal University internationalization, which is currently viewed as a top priority by its administration, is crucial: the faculty and the students could participate in the mobility programs, the global employability of graduates enhances, the University could employ the international staff for teaching and research purposes.

The students, who are in the focus of our attention, could also gain within the properly organized educational framework. Those enrolling into the EMI program could increase their language proficiency together with the subject knowledge. "Mixing with international staff and students can promote international and comparative understanding, global citizenship and intercultural awareness. Having practiced EMI students may also have a motivation to persist their language study beyond the requirements (Dupuy, 2000, p.215).

## **2.3. Challenges of EMI application**

Unfortunately, the picture is not as optimistic as it may seem at the first glance. In this context the primary importance is given to the language proficiency of both students and lecturers.

There is no generally accepted rule relating to language requirements for teachers and students. Most universities accept B2 (in accordance with the European framework of references). In fact, the proficiency in the classroom may vary significantly, thus, presenting additional challenge for a professor and the students. Due to the diversity of language proficiency in the classroom, instructors tend to simplify the disciplinary content reducing the proposed learning outcomes to a minimum. In the context of Kazan Federal University the students are not required to submit the results of the Unified State Exam (USE) in the English language, applying to the University programs. Therefore, the applicants tend to have various English language proficiency depending on their school background (Sungatullina, Gorelova, & Zalyaeva, 2015).

The second issue in the given framework is that B2 proficiency does not presuppose the familiarity with the academic register and specific terminology. Therefore, in order to progress students may need the supporting program, and substantially, most students who enrol into the EMI programs expect some linguistic assistance from the University. Most researchers concur on the idea that language proficiency is the key component that determines the outcome of the EMI course (Stryker, & Leaver, 1997; Swain, &

Johnson, 1997). If students lack the sufficient knowledge of English it may result in their poor performance in the classroom, in the detrimental effect on the subject learning, in code-switching and even resistance to EMI. Based on his research in engineering education Kang (2005) states that proficient English users demonstrate better content comprehension and are less nervous about their performance in the classroom, while less proficient students tend to show greater anxiety and more frequently use supplementary materials in their mother tongue.

In the world where English is a lingua franca and two-thirds of those who speak it are non-natives, teachers and sometimes students tend to demonstrate anxiety about their native-like fluency and pronunciation. However, the researchers prove that “deviations they make from a native variety” (Jenkins, 2011) are much less important than the methodology implemented by a teacher, the ability to be flexible and to adapt to a particular communicative situation (Breeze, 2016). Professor's ability to interact with the audience and to conform their understanding is valued much more by the students than the high English proficiency (Suviniitty, 2010).

### **3. Research Questions**

Hence, this study will focus upon the consecutive research questions:

1. Does EMI instruction improve students' academic achievements in the course?
2. What are the dimensions of students' achievements which are enhanced through EMI instructed course?
3. What is the constituent element which will eventually facilitate the difficulty diminishing of EMI instruction?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Thus, the authors of the current study are to investigate students' perception of content-learning via EMI instruction accompanied with active learning techniques and interactive teaching methodology within the framework of additional education program at Kazan Federal University

### **5. Research Methods**

The target participants of the current research included 55 students (7 male and 48 female) in four various years of studies in their majors (30 first year undergraduate students, 19 second-year undergraduate students, 4 third year undergraduate students, 2 first year graduate students) of Kazan Federal University, Institute of Management, Economics and Finance, who are enrolled in the additional linguistic educational program "Translation for professional purposes". Pre-course survey was held with 55 students who finally represented 3 levels of English proficiency in accordance with the Common European framework of references: a diversity in language proficiency: 15 possessed A2, 22 – B1, and 19 – B2 (CEFR). Unlike their major study curriculum of the mentioned program has been practicing EMI instruction for more than 10 years delivering most of the theoretical courses in English. The EMI course on “English-speaking countries: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the UK) and the United States of America (the USA)” has been rigorously tailored and encompassed 40 hours of academic studies. Each lecture was devoted to a particular feature of the countries involved including history, social issues,

economic development, political structure, culture and traditions. A great number of diverse active learning and teaching methods were implemented during the educational period: carousel, card ranking, Know, Want to know, Learnt technique (KWL), Consider all factors technique (CAF) and the rest (Dupuy, 2000).

The authors employed quantitative data collecting approach asking students to participate in the survey at the end of the course. The participants were exposed to 12 Likert-scale and 3 open-ended questions which were focusing on their own perception of EMI course results and its contribution to the increasing English proficiency, soft-skills development as well as content knowledge. The results of the survey were analysed using the method of descriptive statistics.

## **6. Findings**

With the purpose of measuring students' academic achievements at the EMI course, the authors have outlined 4 broad groups of indicators:

- Content knowledge (culture and traditions, history, social, political and economic development of the English-speaking countries),
- English proficiency (improvement of English-speaking skills, language switching practice decrease, note-taking in English, reading textbooks in English),
- Soft skills (public speaking skills, team working skills and communication skills) and
- Instructor's performance (instructor's facilitation, instructor's knowledge of teaching methodology and active learning techniques).

Items and their loadings are shown in Table 1.

### **6.1. Content knowledge**

There is a significant enhancement in the students' knowledge of English speaking countries subject. Primarily this can be applied to the students' insight in culture and traditions: 87% of the respondents admit that they broadened their horizons upon this issue. The weakest link here is the historical background of the English-speaking countries. Due to the great amount of information to be covered during the educational procedure solely 73% of the respondents perceive that they have improved in history of the USA and the UK (Table 1).

### **6.2. English proficiency**

The overwhelming majority of students enrolled to the course, almost 90%, reported that their English speaking skills have improved. Furthermore, more than a half of them (54%) stated that they tend to switch less to their mother tongue in the classroom discussions. Two-thirds of the course participants (76%) found no difficulty in reading course materials and textbooks in English, and nearly 73% experienced no problems with taking notes in English (Table 1).

### **6.3. Soft skills development**

The survey results highlight its importance for the students' soft skills' development, as just under 64% report that they became more confident in delivering oral presentations, 89% gained stronger skills of

teamwork, 82% experience less difficulties in communicating with others, while 91% underlining the relevance of the gained skills for their future occupation (Table 1).

#### 6.4. Instructor's performance

Almost 90% of the students emphasized the highly engaging course instructor who displayed a variety of teaching and interaction methods, involving the audience with various proficiency level in different group tasks. Therefore, the level of students' satisfaction with the course results is around 90% (Table 1).

**Table 01.** Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) of students' academic achievements in EMI course

Items	M	SD
<b>Content knowledge</b>		
Knowledge of culture and traditions of the English-speaking countries	4.05	0.54
Knowledge of historical background of the English-speaking countries	3.74	0.59
Knowledge of social, political and economic development of the English-speaking countries	3.89	0.63
<b>English proficiency</b>		
Improvement of English-speaking skills	4.11	0.57
Language code switching practice decrease	3.53	0.74
Note-taking in English	3.76	0.51
Reading textbooks in English	3.82	0.67
<b>Soft skills</b>		
Public speaking skills	3.75	0.82
Team working skills	4.22	0.63
Communication skills	4.07	0.66
<b>Instructor's performance</b>		
Instructor's facilitation	4.20	0.62
Instructor's knowledge of teaching methodology and active learning techniques	4.33	0.64

There are several significant correlations that can be identified in the study: the correlation between the interactive teaching methods along with active learning techniques and students' knowledge of culture and traditions of the English-speaking countries ( $r=0.59$ ), the correlation between the interactive teaching methods along with active learning techniques and students' enhancement in communication skills ( $r=0.51$ ) (see Table 2).

**Table 02.** Correlation (r) between the Interactive teaching methods and active learning in EMI course implemented by a teacher with the students' academic achievements ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ )

Variable	Items	r
Interactive teaching methods and active learning techniques in EMI course	Knowledge of culture and traditions of the English-speaking countries	0.59
	Knowledge of historical background of the English-speaking countries	0.41
	Knowledge of social, political and economic development of the English-speaking countries	0.49
	Improvement of English-speaking skills	0.53
	Language code switching practice decrease	0.14
	Note-taking in English	-0.03
	Reading textbooks in English	0.35
	Public speaking skills	0.23
	Team working skills	0.32
	Communication skills	0.51

This allows the authors to conclude that such indicator as instructor's knowledge and mastery of interactive teaching methods and active learning techniques while teaching through EMI facilitates the students' enthusiasm about the subject as well as content awareness. The emphasis upon collaboration between the participants during the lectures fosters their involvement in communication procedure in the English language.

## 7. Conclusion

The results of the survey have proved the idea that language proficiency of both students and teachers is not the only factor contributing to the success of the EMI course. In the described course the teacher used the students-centered approach and adequate learning pace. Thus, the classroom management, thorough planning and organizing of the learning process together with use of various interactive techniques resulted in the positive learning outcomes of the course. The authors are convinced that English-medium instruction is a highly challenging environment for students with various levels of English language knowledge. Facilitation and interaction is a primary source of decreasing the stress and fear of speaking among low-level English students and promotes peer instruction among those, whose level is close to B2 and above. Consequently, EMI course within Kazan Federal University framework may be efficiently diversified in terms of teaching methodology and active learning techniques. All these signify a new step of EMI trend development within the Russian Federation higher educational environment.

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