EPiC Series in Language and Linguistics
Volume 3, 2018, Pages 19–26
LSP in Multi-disciplinary contexts of Teaching and Research. Papers from the 16th International AELFE Conference

Exploring EMI lecturers' attitudes and needs

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Abstract

This paper focuses on English-medium instruction (EMI) at a Spanish public university. It reports on a mix-methods study into the attitudes and linguistic and pedagogical needs of EMI lecturers. First and foremost, the study has a practical focus and assesses lecturers' needs and attitudes as the basis for developing an EMI training course. The study takes a "bottom-up" approach to needs assessment in order to guarantee a course that is fit for purpose. It collects data from university lecturers using multiple sources to provide empirical evidence with which to inform course design decisions. Data sources include a questionnaire, field notes from observations of EMI teaching practice, collaborative planning tutorials, lesson plans and lecturers' reflections on EMI. The analysis of lecturers' language use and pedagogical strategies suggests a number of areas for improvement that could enhance EMI teaching and learning. On the whole, the findings show a positive attitude towards EMI and training, but also highlight key tensions regarding attitudes towards more collaborative, learner-centred lecturing practices. It thus argues for careful consideration to be given to lecturers' attitudes in the design of EMI teacher development courses.

Keywords: EMI; training; attitudes, needs, tensions

1. Introduction

English has now acquired the status of a "global language" (Crystal, 2003) and, as a lingua franca, it has become the most widely used language in university settings (Graddol, 2006) and the "inevitable preference in the specific and influential domain of academe" (Coleman, 2012). A recent growth of interest in English-medium instruction (EMI) can be found in an expanding body of literature, yet our understanding is still very much "under construction" (Dalton-Puffer, 2012). Though various labels are used to describe teaching disciplinary content through English, there is no commonly accepted definition of the construct of EMI. Dearden (2015) usefully operationalizes the term as the "use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English".

This short paper explores EMI at a Spanish higher education institution to better understand this under-researched concept and to focus on lecturers' attitudes and linguistic and pedagogical needs for a practical purpose. It gathers empirical data to support the development of an intensive EMI

training programme at the university. Prior to this study, little was known about EMI practices or lecturers' attitudes at the institution, and so the study fulfils a timely and practical necessity.

In a study into EMI training courses, O'Dowd found a significant divergence between the importance attributed to offering subjects through English and the attention being paid to the training of teachers (O'Dowd, 2015). While training for EMI is frequently overlooked, we also find that assessing needs is often ignored in course design yet it taking lecturer´s into account is essential for planning professional development programmes (Airey, 2013; Kling, 2013; Johnson, 2012) to ensure training is relevant to trainees' needs and sensitive to their teaching contexts (Bax, 1997). Witkin & Asltschuld point out that needs data should be collected using multiple methods and sources to increase the reliability and validity of the information and relying on one source of data is insufficient to provide an adequate basis for understanding needs and making decisions on priorities (Witkin and Asltschuld, 1995). Furthermore, understanding attitudes towards EMI, where attitude is seen as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour" (Agerly and Chaiken, 1993, cited in Albarracín, Johnson, & Zanna, 2005) and understanding what lecturers "think, know and believe" (Borg, 2009) can be seen as a crucial element in the acceptance and ultimate success of any EMI course.

2. Research questions

This study attempts to shed light on the following research questions. **RQ1**: What are lecturers' attitudes towards EMI at the institution? **RQ2**: Which areas of English language training could help support lecturers? **RQ3**: Are there areas of teacher training which would support lecturers in adapting their teaching to EMI?

3. Method and design

The study combines quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed methods framework to improve the validity and reliability of data (Mathison, 1988). Mixed methods approaches add to the vitality of research (Olsen, 2004, cited in Earls, 2016) and are advantageous because "[m]ultiple and independent measures do not share the same weaknesses or potential for bias" (Roher, 1977) and are likely to yield a more complete set of findings (Dörnyei, 2007). Such an approach is premised on pragmatism ontologies and epistemologies oriented to the solution of practical problems in the practical world (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Moreover, this study is action-oriented insomuch as the findings feed-forward to inform teaching practice and institute change by improving the quality of EMI teaching at the institution. This, in turn, should have a positive impact on students' learning and thus potentially have broader social and economic repercussions.

In the study, a number of data sources were used including: 1) A multi-scale 100 item, 5 point Likert-scaled questionnaire into language and pedagogical needs and attitudes towards EMI (60 participants) given to participants prior to study on an EMI intensive course; 2) Field notes on 10 lecturers' 20 minute microteaching sessions during the training course; 3) Field notes on 10 lecturers' 50 minute filmed lectures in a naturalistic setting after the intensive course; 4) Field notes on 10 hours of collaborative lesson planning tutorials prior to filming and 10 hours of post-filming debriefing tutorials after the intensive course and; 5) 10 lesson plans, 10 reflective teaching plans (RTPs) and 10 collaboratively written observation reports gathered after the intensive course. These various data sources were cross-referenced over time to allow for the highlighting and

categorisation of emergent themes which were subsequently aligned to address the pre-established research questions.

4. Discussion of results

The results from this exploratory study provide a complex picture of EMI needs and attitudes. However, the findings allow for a number of tentative claims to be made regarding the linguistic and pedagogical needs of lecturers in the study and a greater understanding of their attitudes towards EMI. The findings are discussed with reference to each research question.

4.1 RQ1: As with other studies, this investigation finds a complicated mix of attitudes towards EMI. The findings show an overall positive attitude towards the growth of EMI. Participants are strongly motivated to teach in English, develop new skills and express a strong commitment to the university and its students. Lecturers have strong extrinsic motivations to teach in English to benefit the university, to develop professionally, and improve their own mobility. In addition, the study finds lecturers are intrinsically motivated and derive personal satisfaction from developing as EMI professionals. While financial gain is not a strong motivation, survey data and tutorial data indicate a belief that shifting to EMI should be incentivised to compensate for the extra effort, work and time required. The study found that lecturers feel EMI lectures need more planning and that certain aspects of teaching may be negatively affected by a shift to EMI (e.g. slowing down the rhythm, losing fluidity, changing methods). However, a majority of survey respondents reported that while these were challenges, the benefits outweigh the challenges.

The study found tensions over the issue of teaching content/language because, as elsewhere (Smitt & Dafouz, 2012), the study finds lecturers do not consider themselves to be language teachers. Generally speaking, the lecturers see themselves as content teachers, while some view themselves as physicists, scientists, art-historians whose secondary role is to teach. This view is also corroborated in other studies (Airey, 2013, Jacobs, 2007). It could be speculated that the shift in role implied by transitioning to EMI may be perceived as a challenge to the expert authority and content expert identity of the lecturers thus exposing vulnerabilities and resulting in resistance and defensive positions (Nevgi, & Löfström 2015). This may, in some part, explain negative attitudes towards dealing with language explicitly and further attitudinal entrenchment in this area. If this is the case, then it is an issue that should be dealt with on a teacher development programme, but dealt with sensitively.

Despite the negative attitude to the perceived threat to established lecturing roles, the tutorial data shows, much better than the questionnaire, that lecturers have a positive attitude towards developing as teachers, learning new techniques and collaborating with peers from different disciplines. It may be inferred from this, that receiving EMI training and support has a beneficial impact on teachers' professional teacher-identities which the literature shows is often not as strong as their identities as researchers (Nevgi, & Löfström 2015). It may also be inferred from the tutorial conversations and lecturers' reflective comments, that EMI training has made more reflective EMI practitioners and in some cases has had a strong impact on the way lecturers plan their classes, the amount of learner engagement they have in their classrooms and a growing appreciation of the role of language vis-à-vis content and language teaching.

Closely related to this are the lecturers' attitudes towards changing teaching methods for EMI. The questionnaire data shows that a majority of respondents thought methods adaptation was

"quite important", "important" or "very important" while adapting methods for EMI and for multilingual groups was also seen as a challenge by over 75% and 83% of respondents respectively. Though seen as a challenge, there was also an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the idea of adapting methods to multilingual groups (85%) and towards receiving feedback on teaching methodology (83%) and a belief that receiving feedback on lecture style would be useful (83%). In sum, it is encouraging to see that an overall majority of lecturers see methods adaptation and getting feedback as useful and important but accept that it will be a challenge. However, as both the questionnaire and other data sources suggest, there is a sizable minority who are critical of this view. Therefore, these beliefs should be taken carefully into account when planning a course (Benesch, 2009; Graves, 2000).

Data from tutorials and lecturer's reflective teaching plans (RTPs) also indicate an overall positive attitude to the use of interaction in the classroom, which can be found in other studies (Dafouz, 2007), but with some critical positions that see its use as problematic. Some lecturers are enthusiastic about the affordances of integrating more active learning in the form of student-centred tasks and show an understanding of how it can promote content and language learning. There is also an appreciation of the challenges involved in moving away from monologic lecturing. On the other hand, there is clearly some antagonism regarding appropriate pedagogy for EMI and some polarisation of attitudes. Despite being supported by a large body of research (Macaro, 2015; Fry et al, 2015; Johnson et al, 2014; Dafouz, 2007; Chickering, & Gamson, 1987) critical positions towards interaction emerge in the study data. First, rather than perceive classroom interaction as an opportunity to experiment with collaborative classroom techniques, there is the view that it is a culturally alien methodology proselytising an 'Anglo-American" educational model. In addition to this ideological objection, there are concerns about the practicalities of using interaction in large groups or the practicality of changing methods on a shared course. Moreover, there is the view that students are not responsible enough to work autonomously and so, from this perspective, flipping the classroom to free up time for interaction is untenable.

Though this rejection of student-centred learning tends to be a minority attitude, it is, however, rather robust, and may be deeply tied to lecturers' professional identities as content specialists, the beliefs they have about good teaching based on their experiences as learners, and contextual constraints preventing innovation. It may also be because traditional lecturing continues to be the main activity of university teachers (Exley & Dennick, 2009), or that it is felt that interaction is incompatible with the lecture genre (Musumeci, 1996). It seems monologic teaching based on a transmission model of learning is still the most common way to lecture in Spanish universities (Belles Fortuno, 2006) and lecturers, many of whom have little or no training, may not have been exposed to different teaching methods.

4.2 RQ2: The questionnaire data shows that 98% of respondents said they wanted to improve their English, and 95% thought it was important to do so. Though the self-report data on the language level of respondents is unclear, the observation participants had certified C1 (CEFR) or above. Despite having the institutionally approved minimum level to teach in English, the majority of the lecturers were concerned about making language and pronunciation mistakes. The observations did show non-standard language use typical of C1 (CEFR) speakers and lecturers valued the formative feedback on language use that was given to them. However, lecturers were uncertain about what remedial action to take and sought practical advice. Lecturers responding to the questionnaire prioritised the development of oral-aural skills above all else which makes sense

given the principal target context of use is lecturing. The same priority is found in another study in Spain (Morrell et al, 2014).

The questionnaire suggests that respondents appreciate all or any institutional support for teaching in English but they generally prioritise linguistic training over pedagogical training. The perception that EMI training is more concerned with the "E" of the acronym rather than the "I", that is, improving English prioritised over improving teaching is a view borne out in other studies. (O'Dowd, 2015). Interestingly, the study finds that some lecturers, after reflecting on EMI training and their EMI teaching, invert this view and state that EMI has to them, in fact, become more about good lecturing in general be it in English or in Spanish rather than about solely learning English so content can be translated from Spanish to English.

In terms of improving certain resources, the study corroborates other studies in showing lecturers could improve their use of questions (Dafouz Milne & Sánchez García, 2013), and would benefit from practising formulating different types of questions including those that engage learners at different levels of thinking.

Likewise, the study shows that opportunities to develop and practise a greater range of functional language used in the classroom would benefit lecturers at the institution. As Macaro (2015) also found, a focus on language used for the management of interactive tasks, including giving clear instructions, wrapping up tasks and providing feedback would be useful as this non-academic day-to-day language of the classroom is something lecturers are less comfortable with. Though lecturers are clearly skilled in using the language of their disciplines, they might be supported in improving the accuracy of their use of content obligatory language and content compatible language. Moreover, support in writing glossaries of key terms/core concepts and help with the pronunciation of these would be beneficial to the lecturers. In addition, lecturers should be helped to use a wider range of techniques for scaffolding disciplinary content language for their students.

As other studies also show (Nunez & Dafouz, 2010; Martin del Pozo, 2016), this study finds that EMI lecturers' use of discourse markers is a weakness. The variety of markers for highlighting lecture phases and transitions could help improve the organisation of lecturers' discourse and help learners' comprehension of content. EMI lecturers might also be helped to improve their lesson plans, by reflecting on stage sequence, planning in interaction, developing more sophisticated language for writing concise learning outcomes and for explicitly describing procedures and rationales.

4.3 RQ3: The questionnaire finds lecturers would appreciate receiving a range of pedagogical support with over 80% finding all items on a list of practical training ideas "quite useful", "useful" or "very useful". Moreover, over 80% of respondents believe engaging in EMI would contribute to their professional development. While survey data shows a positive attitude towards institutional support and training, the tutorials, RTP and observations confirm, as do a host of other studies (O'Dowd 2015, Dearden, 2015; Macaro, 2015; Cots, 2013; Costa & Coleman, 2013), that training in methods adaptation would benefit EMI lecturers. This may be due to the fact that lecturers had previously received little or no methodological support in Spanish or in English.

In particular, the RTP and tutorials show participants highly value the experimental micro-teaching experience, feedback from tutors and peers and also the personalised tutorials culminating in a report. As tutorials are personalized to lecturers' individual pedagogical and linguistic needs

and specific teaching contexts, they are seen as greatly valuable for the tutees and tutor alike. Lecturers also see lesson planning in general and collaborative planning with a language expert as particularly useful for reflecting on teaching and better practice. Observations combined with formative feedback on methods and language use provide opportunities to see strengths and areas to be further developed. Opportunities to collaborate with lecturers from different disciplines and get multiple perspectives on EMI is also seen to be very rewarding. This study suggests that EMI lecturers working with same discipline and different-discipline peers are exposed to different approaches to teaching which allows them to jointly explore EMI issues leading to the creation of a community of practice.

To help abate negative attitudes towards learner-centred tasks, lecturers might be directed towards basic theories of learning and teaching and studies that prove the validity of interaction as best practice in promoting learning. Models of other lecturers using collaborative learning in their disciplines would also help in this respect. Lecturers who are anxious about their level of English proficiency might be led to see that talking less will mean making fewer language errors. This study shows that practice in listening to students, active monitoring and giving learners individualised or small group support are other skills where lecturers need guidance. Moreover, lecturers may be happier to allow learners to do some of the work, if they can see how active monitoring allows them to provide more specific help to their learners through mini-lecturing, clarify misunderstandings and answering doubts.

Finally, though it falls outside the RQs, the study found a surprisingly complex array of EMI teaching practices and different settings at the institution. Consequently, this complicates the possibility of using general EMI teacher training to meet individual lecturers' very specific needs where personalized attention would be ideal. Therefore, it might be expedient, given the limitations of resources, to build in as much individualised support, such as tutorials, into a more generic EMI development programme which would allow lecturers' specific needs to be better addressed.

5. Conclusion

The study explored English-medium instruction at a Spanish university in order to better understand this under-researched concept and for the practical purpose of gathering data with which to inform the development of an EMI teacher training course. It focused on lecturers' attitudes and linguistic and pedagogical needs from the "bottom-up" in order to develop a course that was sensitive to context and fit-for-purpose. It suggests the best path is to be found in working closely with lecturers in order to understand their thoughts and practices and to engage in conversation with them about EMI. This study fills an important gap in understanding of EMI at the institution where little was known about EMI lecturers or their practices. It has generated useful evidence to show areas in which lecturers could be supported but also reveals a number of tensions and sensitive areas at the heart of EMI.

6. References

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