

Enhancing EMI Environments: Strategies for Active Learning and Student Engagement

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Abstract: *Teacher-delivered lectures, often perceived as conventional and less engaging compared to interactive hands-on games, may not effectively enhance learning outcomes or ignite students' enthusiasm (Hofmann, 2015). When open-ended tasks are applied during class, lectures become less helpful while problem-solving teamwork significantly benefits students (Brennan, 2019). The existing literature, coupled with feedback from students in my 2022 English for Negotiation class, motivated me to write this paper, which aims to explore the preferences of L2 learners when they needed to study a profession in a predominantly English-speaking environment. The course objectives included immersing students in English-speaking contexts and equipping them with negotiation knowledge and techniques. Given the large class size (over 70 students), assessment tasks were designed to encourage teamwork. Accordingly, the pedagogical strategy prioritized micro-scenarios that required active teamwork engagement, reducing the reliance on teacher-delivered lectures. This approach is intended to foster students' enthusiasm for knowledge acquisition. Results from the semester-end survey indicated that content input, particularly key concepts (71.9%; n=41) and techniques (49.1%; n=28), were deemed more important by respondents than learner autonomy (8.8%; n=5) and boosting confidence in using English (22.8%; n=13). Notably, teacher-prepared materials before class (71.9%; n=41), hands-on teamwork (61.4%; n=35), and teacher-delivered guidance (50.9%; n=29) were identified as factors conducive to learning. Conversely, activities requiring English use as scenario practices (57.9%; n=33) and teacher-delivered guidance (43.9%; n=25) were viewed as more challenging. These findings align with the widely accepted notion in EMI implementation that subject content is paramount, with scaffolding tactics playing a crucial role.*

Keywords: *TESOL pedagogy, EMI strategies, language acquisition, L2 learning, content-based instruction.*

I. Introduction

EMI (English Medium Instruction) involves teaching academic subjects in English, excluding English itself; collaboration between content experts and ELT instructors becomes vital with variation in mediums, subjects, and proficiency levels (Smit, 2023). However, not all schools are equipped with sufficient resources and instructors to provide such co-teaching. Since EMI emphasizes language awareness and discursive skills, challenges in language proficiency call for a more integrated and institutionally supported EMI education where

instructors' content identity and language proficiency are expected to grow (Andjelkov, 2022: 316-318). Under such circumstances, EMI teachers are less likely to conduct essential co-teaching alone. They may prioritize either knowledge impartation as the focus while using the second/foreign language as a supplement, or they may act the other way around. It is always a catch-22 situation where L2 students are expected, or expect themselves, to acquire subject content in a language that they are still falling short of.

Consider the course “English for Negotiation” during the 2022 academic year as an example. The instructor leading the course emphasized content input through hands-on teamwork and rigorously adhered to the “No Chinese” principle, ensuring that English was consistently used throughout the class. The course employed a pedagogical trilogy, beginning with teacher-delivered guidance and advancing to student-collaborative tasks based on teacher-designed scenarios. The instructor minimized time spent on initial guidance, placing a premium on active oversight of task progression, and was available as an advisor for the chosen topic, ready to provide additional highly relevant knowledge upon request. The scenario-based tasks were intended to help internalize classroom and textbook knowledge and skills into students' personal learning and application experiences. Given the lack of time for simulated negotiations, student teams presented their post-discussion feedback using the provided worksheet.

Regarding methodology, the observed participants were the students signing up for the above-mentioned course in question while the research tool illuminating problems and potential solutions was the survey (questionnaire). Based on the semester-end survey, exclusively extended to students who had officially enrolled in the course, the majority of respondents were L2 learners with a non-English mother tongue (93.2%; n=41). English proficiency levels varied, with 79.5% of respondents (n=35) in their 3rd year of college study, 9.1% (n=4) in their 4th year or above, 6.8% (n=3) in their 1st year, and 4.5% (n=2) in their 2nd year. The combination of diverse language skills and overcrowded classrooms posed a serious obstacle for the EMI instructor, impeding his close interaction with students.

II. Literature Review

Input is often facilitated by teachers and classmates in an EMI class, while clear and understandable input is essential for content and language learning (Costa, 2023). Adequate input is necessary for both content and language acquisition. However, challenges may arise if the input is not tailored to the linguistic needs of average L2 students, potentially hindering comprehension. Students are found to be more influenced by self-efficacy and intrinsic goals than by English proficiency, and this is why instructors are recommended to incorporate progressively delivered content, relevant daily examples, and systematic pedagogy to enhance comprehension and engagement (Zhou, 2023). Both students' readiness in terms of background knowledge and their proficiency in English, even if minimal, should not be overlooked (Siegel, 2020).

Content-based programs without sufficient language support risk negative outcomes. Addressing this requires urgent implementation of individualized language support, collaborative teaching, and ongoing program evaluation, emphasizing the importance of meeting student needs in language-content integration (Han, 2023). Lack of language support poses a potential risk, especially for average L2 students. The emphasis on customized language support and collaboration is requisite to address individual needs and prevent negative

outcomes. Vietnamese universities and the government expect EMI to improve students' language skills, and both students and teachers were optimistic about students' language improvement through EMI despite ignorance of any potential negative impacts of EMI, such as potential disadvantages for students with weaker English skills (Tran, 2021). Optimism is positive, but there is a need for awareness of potential drawbacks, especially for students with weaker English skills. Ignorance of these challenges may lead to unpreparedness in coping with the needs of all students.

It is suggested that while initial challenges exist, the pedagogical integration of content and language can be valuable for university students to improve their English skills and gain confidence in using the language since the more exposed students are to it, the greater the observed benefits seem to be (Moratinos-Johnston, 2018). Recognizing EMI-affected challenges matters to immediate stakeholders. However, it is vital to recognize that the benefits of exposure might not be uniform for all students, and some may face prolonged difficulties without targeted support. Students transitioning to EMI primarily identify as content-focused learners aiming for knowledge acquisition, but they are also concerned about language learning aspects including vocabulary expansion and receptive skill development when in need of support that caters to the class type (Moncada-Comas, 2022). Meeting students' content-focused goals is in line with course objectives, but support mechanisms should be in place to address language learning aspects.

Students may struggle without adapted assistance in vocabulary expansion and receptive skill development. Their confidence in English plays a significant role in shaping their attitudes and influencing their future educational decisions, despite the fact that not all students share equally positive views about EMI (Bukve, 2018). Active participation in collaborative efforts, taking initiative, embracing leadership roles, and offering constructive feedback are ways in which individuals can leverage teamwork to enhance their self-confidence (Bradley, 2023). While confidence is also a key factor that motivates students to learn, it is essential to deal with the varying attitudes among students. Some may have reservations or negative views about EMI, and understanding these perspectives is believed to entail effective support and improvement.

This literature review highlights the critical interplay between content, student collaboration, and pedagogical challenges in optimizing learning within English-dominant environments. It emphasizes the centrality of specialized language support and collaborative teaching to mitigate negative outcomes, particularly for average L2 students. The authors stress the importance of managing challenges related to language proficiency, student attitudes, and potential drawbacks of EMI to ensure comprehensive readiness for specific subjects. While noting the optimism surrounding EMI's potential benefits, the review underscores the need for targeted support in vocabulary expansion and receptive skill development, recognizing that exposure alone may not uniformly benefit all students. The multifaceted relationship between students' confidence in English, diverse attitudes towards EMI, and the role of teamwork in enhancing self-confidence is explored, shedding light on the nuanced dynamics influencing learning outcomes in English-dominant educational settings. The review concludes by emphasizing the significance of understanding and effectively supporting different student perspectives to bring about an inclusive and satisfactory EMI experience.

III. Results

In the aforementioned "English for Negotiation" class, the teacher made efforts to create a "whole English" environment but faced challenges as L2 learner engagement remained low. To tackle with this, he adopted flexible strategies such as circumlocution and bilingual communication, highlighting the need for balance between content mastery and language acquisition. Such being the case, students in class were allowed to speak any language with which they felt comfortable whenever necessary.

The lowest percentage is for the statement "Students anticipated that the current class type is helpful for autonomous learning" (n=5; 8.8%). Other survey items with relatively low percentages included "Students felt that taking this course contributes to boosting confidence in using English" (n=13; 22.8%) and "Students believed they can learn from hands-on practice or put what they learn to hands-on practice" (n=14; 24.6%).

Among respondents with a positive attitude in the survey, the highest percentages were found in "Enhancing daily life negotiation skills" (n=41; 71.9%), "Being able to use English appropriately in negotiations" (n=30; 52.6%), and "Being able to employ negotiation techniques effectively" (n=28; 49.1%). Other items with higher percentages included "Appropriately using domain-specific terminology" (n=26; 45.6%), "Enhancing independent thinking skills" (percentage similar to the previous), and "Boosting teamwork spirit" (n=24; 42.1%).

Regarding the efforts made by students in taking this course, 57.9% (n=33) of respondents in the survey mentioned they reviewed the teacher's uploaded PowerPoint materials before class. Additionally, 68.5% (n=39) of respondents indicated that they independently searched for information online, constituting the highest percentage. Other notable efforts include "Learning through teacher lectures" (n=38; 66.7%), "Interaction with the teacher during class" (n=34; 59.6%), and "Collaborative online research within a team" (n=33; 57.9%).

In terms of classroom activities deemed most helpful for their learning, students identified "Teacher's pre-class announcement of negotiation concepts and skills" (n=41; 71.9%) as the most beneficial, followed by "Attentive listening to the teacher's in-class lectures" (n=36; 63.2%), "Participation in team discussions and scenario exercises" (n=35; 61.4%), and "Teacher-delivered lectures on negotiation concepts and skills" (n=29; 50.9%). The activity with the lowest agreement level was "Participation in team mid-term reports" (n=9; 15.8%).

The respondents were also asked to identify highly-relevant elements in taking this course, and according to the survey results, the highest agreement was on "Key negotiation concepts and techniques" (n=45; 78.9%), followed by "Fundamental negotiation knowledge" (n=42; 73.7%), and "Vocabulary buildup" (n=30; 52.6%). Items with the lowest percentages include "Speaking English" (n=11; 19.3%), "Listening to English" (n=13; 22.8%), "Writing in English" (n=19; 33.3%), and "Reading in English" (n=20; 35.1%).

Regarding classroom activities that appeared challenging to students, as reflected in the survey, the highest percentage of respondents found "Scenario exercises" (n=33; 57.9%) most challenging, followed by "Teacher-delivered exposition of the course content" (n=25; 43.9%), "Self-search for learning materials" (n=24; 42.1%), "Scenario-based role play" (n=23; 40.4%), with the lowest being "equal division of teamwork labor" (n=12; 21.1%).

When requested to identify negative factors influencing learning in this course, the respondents regarded

the following items as typical: "Lack of interest in negotiation" (n=19; 33.3%), "Frequent disregard for teacher's pre-class announcements on online platforms" (n=18; 31.6%), "Being late to class" (n=17; 29.8%), "Not fully engaging in team activities during class" (n=16; 28.1%), "Paying less attention to teacher-delivered detailed key points in class" (also n=16; 28.1%), and "Speaking too much Chinese instead of English with classmates" (n=15; 26.3%).

With regard to learning outcomes, in-class activities had a significant impact. 75.5% (n=43) of students stated that "Scenario discussions deepened my understanding of the negotiation basic concepts," while 73.7% (n=42) mentioned the same for "Scenario discussions regarding negotiation techniques." Equally, 73.7% (n=42) felt that scenario discussions were helpful for clarifying their learning, and "Role play in scenario simulations deepened my understanding of negotiation basic concepts" had a similar response rate at 71.9% (n=41). Furthermore, 68.4% (n=39) admitted that role play in scenario simulations was beneficial for clarifying what they learned about negotiation. In terms of teacher contributions, 71.9% (n=41) of respondents agreed that "Teacher guidance enhanced my understanding of negotiation key concepts," 82.5% (n=47) believed it was true for "Teacher guidance enhanced my understanding of negotiation techniques," 56.1% (n=32) noted that "Teacher guidance sparked my curiosity," and 75.5% (n=43) felt "The teacher inspired me and was ready to give advice."

Students' overall evaluations of the course yielded two items with the highest agreement rates at 71.9% each (n=41): "What I learned in this course helped me use English more effectively or appropriately in negotiations" and "What I learned in this course provided me with insights to solve problems in different ways." Other items affirmed by the respondents included "What I learned in this course was applicable to practical or professional work" (n=40; 70.2%), "What I learned in this course was applicable to negotiation scenarios" (n=39; 68.4%), "What I learned in this course was applicable to daily life" (n=36; 63.2%), and "What I learned in this course was applicable to English-speaking situations" (n=35; 61.5%).

While minimizing direct instruction, the teacher's impact manifested in carefully chosen materials, structured hands-on activities like scenario discussions and role play, and a supportive atmosphere created for student team collaboration.

IV. Discussion

Utilizing the presented data, the enhancement of learning in English-dominant environments could have been strategically approached through a targeted focus on content enrichment, collaborative methodologies, and effective resolution of challenges. The nuanced examination unfolds as follows.

In terms of content enrichment, the observed data suggested an opportunity for bettering the class structure to better facilitate self-directed learning, especially given the limited number of students who perceived the class as conducive to independent learning. A recalibration of the class dynamics, placing a heightened emphasis on instilling confidence in English usage and incorporating more hands-on activities, could have significantly amplified the course's relevance and engagement levels. These interventions were integral to an overarching strategy of elevating content quality.

Concerning collaborative learning, despite students expressing a positive inclination towards activities

cultivating real-world negotiation skills and English fluency, the full potential of collaborative learning remained untapped. A pronounced emphasis on teamwork, necessitating concerted efforts from both students and instructors, could have harnessed the latent benefits inherent in collaborative approaches, thereby elevating the overall learning experience.

A noteworthy challenge was the imperative to enhance existing methods or introduce complementary tactics to bolster traditional teaching approaches. Complex activities such as scenario exercises and teacher-delivered exposition could have benefited from enhanced bilingual and pedagogical support, contributing to a more holistic and comprehensive learning environment.

The students' distinct preferences for key negotiation concepts and techniques, juxtaposed with lower percentages for language skills, placed great weight on specific exercises designed to engage second language learners, aligning more closely with the subtleties of negotiation studies.

Examining teacher contributions, students who responded positively to understanding negotiation key concepts, techniques, and the teacher's role in sparking curiosity stressed the indispensable nature of teacher-guided instruction. The teacher's preparedness and role as an encouraging advisor further accentuated the constructive impact on the learning atmosphere.

Identified negative factors, such as a lack of interest in negotiation and disregard for pre-class announcements, signaled areas necessitating motivation and engagement strategies. The teacher's role in incentivizing higher learner autonomy and presenting compelling cases highlighting the importance of the discipline could have yielded more positive outcomes.

The positive impact of interactive and immersive learning experiences was evident in outcomes such as deepened understanding through scenario discussions and role play. Additionally, the development of tacit knowledge, including gaining problem-solving insights and effective English usage in negotiations, stood out as tangible achievements resulting from these experiences.

In short, the optimization of learning in English-dominant environments entailed a meticulous fine-tuning of content delivery, a strategic emphasis on collaborative methodologies, effective resolution of challenges, and a recognition of the pivotal role of teacher guidance and interactive learning activities. Implementation of these multifaceted approaches within an EMI context was poised to facilitate an engaging and effective educational experience for students enrolled in negotiation courses.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the investigation into EMI in the context of the class in question has shed light on key aspects affecting learning in English-dominant environments. The reciprocal influence between content, student collaboration, and pedagogical challenges emerges as a multifaceted dynamic instrumental in optimizing the educational experience. The challenges ranging from language proficiency variations to large classrooms value the need for a more integrated and institutionally supported EMI education.

The identified challenges also call for the adjustment of existing methods, introduction of complementary tactics, and enhanced bilingual and pedagogical support for complex activities. The distinct preferences for key negotiation concepts and techniques, coupled with lower percentages for language skills, all the more explain

why exercises specially designed matter to L2 learners, aligning with the nuances of negotiation studies.

The positive impact of interactive and immersive learning experiences, such as scenario discussions and role play, is evident in outcomes like deepened understanding and the development of tacit knowledge. Therefore, the optimization of learning in English-taught environments involves a refinement of content delivery, a strategic emphasis by collaborative means, effective resolution of challenges, and a recognition of the pivotal role of teacher guidance and interactive learning activities.

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