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Facing challenges in English Medium Instruction through engaging in an innovation project

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Abstract

This paper presents both the challenges faced by the introduction of subjects taught through the medium of English in one group of the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education at the University of Málaga and the design of an innovation project aimed at responding to such challenges. Firstly, the paper acknowledges the growing trend towards English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Higher Education and explains the defining characteristics of the institutional context in which the aforementioned degree course was offered. Secondly, the conclusions of the evaluation of the first year of the implementation of this partially English-taught programme revealing difficulties and improvement areas pertaining to teachers, learners and resources will be discussed. Thirdly, objectives and concrete actions of the innovation project that a group of teachers is currently implementing will be outlined; the project lies emphasis on collaborative work, language support, collective training in aspects related to, and systematic monitoring and evaluation of the experience. The paper concludes with a reflection on the need to assure the quality of programmes that are completely or partially taught through the medium of English and on interdisciplinary innovation projects as potential interventions intended to face challenges posed by them.

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1. Introduction

In the last 15 years there has been a growing trend across universities in Europe towards English Medium Instruction (EMI). In the early stages this movement affected Master's degree programmes mainly, although it has progressively extended to bachelor's programmes more recently (Wächter & Maiworm, 2008).

EMI has become commonplace in many tertiary institutions –not only in Europe but also elsewhere–, mainly as a reaction to globalisation, and it currently lies at the centre of the strategy of internationalisation of many tertiary institutions around the globe (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013; Gustafsson & Jacobs, 2013; Wilkinson, 2013). Factors such as the promotion of job mobility, employability, staff and student exchanges and joint- and double-degrees substantiate the case for English-taught degree courses (Fortanet, 2008).

EMI at the University of Málaga is a relatively new phenomenon. In the specific case of the Faculty of Education, a group in the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education at the Faculty of Education is partly taught through the medium of English since the academic year 2014-2015. The evaluation of the experience both by students and teachers revealed areas of improvement and challenges that a group of teachers set to address by implementing an interdisciplinary innovation project.

This paper aims at presenting and discussing the most relevant challenges facing EMI in our context, and outlining the main features of the innovation project that is currently being implemented as a collaborative initiative.

2. The Partially English-taught Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education (University of Málaga)

Primarily as a response to the Bilingual School Programme in the Andalusian School System, the Faculty of Education at the University of Málaga decided to partially teach in English one of the six groups of the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education. According to university regulations, no differentiated entry requirements can be established to apply to this particular group although potential students were informed that a minimum Common European Framework for Reference (CEF) B1 English level was strongly advisable.

Although in the first academic year of the implementation of the innovation only 2 (12 ECTS credit points) (out of the 8 subjects in the first year curriculum) were taught in English, they will eventually complete 50% of the total degree credits with subjects taught in English. The information collected from the students at the beginning of the school year indicates that they choose this option because of their expectations to finish the degree with a higher level of English and have better teaching job opportunities.

Neither institutional language integrated support nor any other specific language support is currently provided by the programme. This runs counter to experts' opinion who claim the need of such a plan: "The English-taught degree programme requires a language plan of its own, which will be complementary to the larger university policy and plan... it is a necessity for ensuring a smooth and collaborative transition into English medium" (Marsh, Pavón-Vázquez, & Frigols-Martín, 2013, p. 15).

The teachers volunteered to participate in the experience and no language proficiency entry requirements were established; all the participating teachers so far self-assess their level as at least a CEF B2 although it might have probably been the case, as it has been found in other contexts (Marsh et al., 2013), that one of them overestimated her English competence to teach in English.

3. Evaluation of the first year implementation experience

At the end of the academic year students were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire to evaluate the experience and get information on their perceptions about it. The following conclusions could be drawn from it:

- Students perceived that their expectations had not been fulfilled in terms of English language use in the subjects that were supposed to have been taught in English. Many of them considered that the level of English proficiency of a particular teacher was not high enough to teach in English and, consequently, Spanish was used more often than English in her lessons. Besides, they were not compelled to do all their written assignments in English. Some of them even complaint about not being forced to use English more frequently. Besides, they did not feel that their level of English competence had significantly increased as a result of belonging to the group in which

the programme is partially taught in English. As Wilkinson (2013, p. 16) rightly notes “Students have expectations about the quality of EMI: they expect to learn the content for which they have enrolled, and they expect their language competences to improve” (Wilkinson, 2013, p. 16).

- When asked about what type of support (human and material resources) should be provided to the students in the partially English-taught programme, the availability of language assistants in the lessons and English courses concurrently with the degree programme are the most frequently demanded types of support.
- They claimed that changes had to be made in order to improve the programme –particularly regarding the use of English by both students and teachers.

The evaluation of the first year of the programme from the perspective of the staff revolved around the following issues:

- Regarding the medium of teaching and when discussing and interacting with the students, teachers found it difficult to cater for a mixed-level group; this particular challenge has also been detected in other research studies (Marsh et al., 2013; Strotmann et al., 2014).
- Both teachers who directly participated in the experience recognized the importance of improving their proficiency level in English.
- Neither of them thought that relevant changes to their personal mainstream methodological approach were deemed necessary when teaching through the medium of English.
- The students’ communication weaknesses in some activities demanding interaction and/or the expression of sophisticated thoughts and reflections were seen as a limiting factor for using English in activities such as oral discussions and debates, and for setting academic written assignments in English.

Some reflections are in place pertaining to the evaluative information provided by both students and staff. Students perceive the need for some kind of language support and provision that the institution, however, fails to provide. Besides, they seem to demand a high level of English competence from the teachers and they admit that learning through English also requires a high command of English from them. Teachers and learners also seem to agree on the need to improve their proficiency in English. In order to teach and learn cognitively complex and demanding disciplinary content, a high level of proficiency is indispensable. Research evidence suggests that limitations in language ability may hinder students from expressing and exploring complex concepts (Met & Lorenz, 1997; Airey, 2009), and this conclusion is equally applicable to staff, who has also been found to face difficulties with non-subject related interactions and classroom management language (Dafouz & Núñez, 2009; Strotmann et al., 2014). In this respect, although TOEFL 550 seems to be a common benchmark in some institutions (Marsh et al., 2013, p. 18), the target for staff to reach a CEF C1 seems entirely reasonable.

In addition, and contrary to some teachers’ expectations, a high level of competence in English is not the only skill that is crucial for effective EMI. Teachers also need to impart knowledge, promote cognitive and metacognitive skills, engage in sophisticated thought-provoking interaction and design instructional materials in which the learning of the instructional and subject-related language is integrated with subject content knowledge (Klaassen, 2008). It is thus imperative that teachers engage in some form of methodological training to teach in another language, and recognize and cater for the students’ difficulties to academically perform and express themselves in the foreign language.

4. Integrating Content and English at the Faculty of Education: An Innovation Project

As a response to challenges and difficulties faced during the early stages of the implementation of this partially-taught in English programme perceived by students and staff, a collaborative interdisciplinary innovation project was designed (and later approved and financed by the University of Málaga Vice-rectorate for Academic

Organisation and Teaching Staff[†]). In line with authors such as Wilkinson (e.g., 2008) and Gustafsson and Jacobs (2013), we chose to use the term Integrated Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE) over the umbrella term Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) since, as Gustafsson and Jacobs (2013) argue, this latter term is originally linked to school –rather than to university– contexts and “there are issues peculiar to higher education, such as disciplinarity, which make this CIL approach distinctly different in the higher education context” (p. iii).

The main project objectives and associated actions may be summed up along the following three lines: professional development for effective EMI, language provision, support and resources, and monitoring and evaluation of the experience.

4.1. Professional Development for Effective EMI

This innovation project engages participants in collaborative interdisciplinary training and practice. Both language and non-language specialists are fully aware that there is a need for teamwork and cooperation and this need has been corroborated in previous EMI tertiary education experiences: “Developing an English-taught degree programme requires coordination and, especially at the outset, more staff collaboration than may be considered essential in a domestic language programme” (Marsh et al., 2013, p. 26). Among others, the following actions have been planned to achieve this goal of professional development for EMI:

- Shared reflection about competences required when teaching in English and identification of particular skills that need to be acquired and/or further developed. These discussions take place both in periodic project meetings and in forum discussions in the UMA e-learning platform. Additionally, teachers who have already taught in English are actively encouraged to share their experiences with those who will do so later in the programme.
- Discussions on relevant information on EMI at tertiary institutions (official documents, reports, articles, etc.), also by posting messages on forums.
- Organisation of workshops and talks delivered by university teachers with experience in EMI, particularly from the field of teacher training, in connection with detected areas in need of development. Past professional development events like these have been highly valued by the attending teachers.
- Formative classroom observation; language specialists observe content teachers teach in English and provide formative feedback –typically by means of an observation rubric– the focus of which is previously agreed upon between the observer and the content teacher.
- Assisted structured materials development; a consensus has been reached to develop language and content integrated tasks with the assistance of a framework designed to include subtasks aimed at discipline related content teaching and skill development in listening speaking/oral interaction, reading and writing in English.

4.2. Language provision, support and resources

In order to mitigate the lack of institutional language provision for this partially-taught programme in English and in view that both students and teaching staff perceived the need for language courses and language support, the innovation project planned the following actions:

- Students from the Degree of English Studies complete their 6 ECTS Practicum placement (*Prácticas Externas*) providing language support to students and staff; among their duties (they arise from the analysis of demands expressed by both students and staff) are the editing of instructional materials in English, language assistance in lessons, the organisation of workshops on aspects of language learning, conversation lessons with students on subject topics, language advice and practice concerning proficiency levels and CEF B1 and B2 exams, classroom

[†] This innovation project approved and financed by the Vice-rectorate for Academic Organisation and Teaching Staff of the University of Málaga (Code: PIE15-100) was planned to span two academic years (2015-2016 and 2016-2017).

observations of oral activities/presentations and subsequent report writing on aspects of language use (e.g. communicative effectiveness, language fluency and accuracy, etc.), lesson preparation with staff, recordings to be included in subject-related glossaries and search for textual and audiovisual resources in English relevant to subject content.

- Repository of textual and multimedia resources; we understand that the availability of subject-specific classified and commented resources in English reduces teachers' preparation time and may increase students' exposure to relevant content and professional discourse in the foreign language.
- Glossary; one of the difficulties faced by students when participating in EMI is that related to subject matter terminology and academic instructional language according to information provided by students and teachers who participated in the first year of the experience of EMI; this led the project members to decide on the design of a on-line glossary of terms organized by subject topics/units in which each term includes the translation into Spanish, examples of use and a link to an audio file.
- Workshops on specific academic skills; project members intend to advise the Deanery on contents that language courses should cover after analysing students' language weaknesses (e.g. academic writing); these courses will be delivered by language specialists and financed by the Deanery.

4.3. Monitoring and evaluation of the experience

One of the objectives of the innovation project is the monitoring and evaluation of the programme with the aim of detecting areas of improvement; this involves the construction of data gathering instruments such as evaluation questionnaires, interview protocols, classroom observation and evaluation rubrics, etc., obtaining and analysing information, writing up conclusions and reports, disseminate them and propose courses of actions to stakeholders and decision makers.

5. Conclusions

EMI initiatives in higher education are on the increase in our context. Conditions, however, are not optimal and programmes that are completely or partially taught in English are launched with no specific attention to quality assurance. Higher Education institutions should establish requirements and provide resources so that teaching quality is not compromised and students can benefit from language development possibilities (Marsh et al., 2013).

The first year experience of a partially English-taught bachelor's degree programme has revealed major challenges regarding lack of integrated language provision and support, language competence level in students and staff, and mixed-level groups.

In order to face these challenges, a collaborative interdisciplinary innovation project was initiated. We are fully convinced that no attempt to introduce a change in the medium of instruction will ever be successful if the teachers involved do not share, work together and collaborate in group discussions, needs identification and collective solutions.

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