English as a Medium of Instruction in Practice

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Setting the scene

This presentation relates the personal experience of training, in a three stage model, six groups of Chinese professors to teach their majors at undergraduate or Master's level in English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI). The groups were located in three top ranked universities in two cities in China and the training was done over a three year period. The 170 professors were experienced teachers of more than 20 different majors ranging through chemistry, law, business administration, meteorology, computer science and many more. These training courses were organized by the British Council which operates EMI all over China in partnership with the local Bureau of Education in the specific provinces where the Universities are located. This tutor is a Registered Official British Council Trainer.

Definition of EMI

For the purposes of this paper EMI will be defined as:

The use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English.

I am not going into the history of the emergence of EMI but suffice it to say that EMI is a growing global phenomenon in all phases of education and educational settings (Dearden 2015) and especially in the higher education echelons. You may have heard of CLIL, for which I am also a trainer, its humbler brother which is more prevalent at primary and secondary levels and which has somewhat different, although related, aims.

The three stage model

Each course consists of three stages conducted in three separate phases during an early month, a middle month and a late month e.g. April, June and October in any one year.

Stage 1 is a 5 day intensive F2F training course held at the University based on the Academic Teaching Excellence (ATE) workbook designed by the British Council in conjunction with staff members at Oxford University EMI research Unit in UK. There are approximately 25 candidates accepted if they meet the entry requirements of at least B2 level competence (CEFR) and the desire to teach their subject in English.

Stage 2, usually 2 months later, is a live remote individual tutorial conducted from the trainers' office, wherever that may be, and the professor's office in China. The individual CP must write a lesson plan as taught in Stage 1, conduct the lesson, complete the reflection form according to set criteria and then attend the remote tutorial through Skype or Zoom. The tutor is given the materials

in advance. She reads them and makes a review to present to the CP on screen sharing. After the 45-minute tutorial the tutor writes a detailed progress report on each CP which she sends with the recording to the British Council, which assess the impact.

Stage 3 is a mixed mode follow up F2F training held at various branches of the University and consists of observations of EMI classes by the trainer and other CPs, workshops responding to needs, individual consultations and meetings with the authorities from the Council and /or the University. Certificates are awarded at the end.

Aims of the course

- To effectively improve the teachers' confidence in using English in the classroom
- To enhance teachers' ability in lesson planning and implementation
- To consider student needs and the use of interactive strategies for effective learning outcomes
- To improve the overall capacity of the teachers who offer the lessons taught in English, thereby exerting a positive impact on the overall teaching quality at the University
- To contribute to the internationalisation strategy of higher education for the University, and to further promote the professional development of the teachers

Stage 1

The Academic Teaching Excellence (ATE) programme content and style of delivery

As the aims of the training course are to effectively change deeply entrenched mind sets about the role of the lecturer in University settings, the course is very ambitious in nature. However, China is set on its course to internationalise its top ranked Universities for a number of reasons: in order to render the University more prestigious, needing to attract foreign students because of falling enrolment numbers of home students through changing demographics, national cuts in HE investment, the need of the state sector to compete with the private sector and the status of English as an international language, particularly in the domain of research publications. The whole system may now be in jeopardy as we move into the post Covid era of Education in HE establishments.

It covers the four complex areas of:

- modification of language used
- presentation skills development
- creating a community of learning and
- strategies for teaching highly academic content in more interactive ways

The classroom used for the training course is a "Smart" classroom which has technology of a high quality plus the possibility of moving furniture to do group work and regrouping for workshops on discussing the benefits, challenges and procedures. Through the use of comparative videos, the professors are encouraged to observe different styles of lecturing in the attempt to make a change from traditional transmission to more use of pair and group work employing interactive strategies, to check comprehension, assess student progress and introduce inclusion, diversity and variety into each session. Readings are introduced to the groups and used in many different ways rather than as straight forward reading comprehension. Different guides are modelled for the professors to try out on themselves and then have available to use later with their students.

Modification of Language Used

All professors take the APTIS test of English and should achieve a B2 level before being accepted on the course but, in reality, there are usually a few professors who fall into the B1 or even A2 levels.

These have typically made a special request to be accepted as they are so keen to learn HOW to teach through EMI. In this topic the tutor explains that there are a number of skills the EMI professor must develop. One is to present their PPTs in English which is not just a matter of translating from Chinese to English but should include some modification of especially dense terms to cater for the international students who may be working in their second language or foreign language.

This ability depends on their level of English and how aware they are of the possible modifications available. This is taught through comparative talks showing a short lecture using dense jargon and one, on the same subject, showing how the language can be modified. Then the professors try to model the skill and show their two versions to their group for critical analysis. This topic is stressed throughout the five days and the professors gain an awareness of the issue gradually.

Presentation Skills

As education in China is generally very traditional, teacher and content centred through transmission to large groups of well-disciplined students seated in rows, the professors follow this style believing it to be the most effective. Some university classrooms hold 200 students in tiered lecture halls. There is much chanting and repetition with students learning concepts off by heart without necessarily understanding them.

This means that the professors don't have to learn classroom management techniques or think about motivation and how to enhance learning through their delivery skills. EMI demands that they improve their presentation skills in engaging their students, motivating them and inspiring them to take a deeper interest in their own learning. The tutor approaches this area by coaching the professors in four components: use of body, use of voice, use of energy and presence. In this topic, lesson planning is included to help the professors concentrate on their presentation skills.

Creating a Community of Learning

In this module the emphasis lies on discussing through readings, video clips and direct comparative instruction how people learn, the value of Socratic seminars, questioning techniques using Bloom's Taxonomy, analysing the complex skills of the "Good Teacher", how to encourage WTC (Willingness to Participate) by learning and practicing elicitation techniques, giving feedback, comprehension and concept checking strategies. The class learns about motivation and how to create a motivating atmosphere in the room through community bonding and understanding the many intercultural issues they are now faced with where international students may behave and speak in very different ways from the Chinese student response they are accustomed to.

This is one of the hardest sections as it is really a matter of acting as a change agent to uproot deeply entrenched societal mindsets.

Strategies for Interaction

Chinese traditional education is instructional and consists of mere transmission of academic content which is then learned off by heart and regurgitated in very lengthy and strict examination settings. EMI, however, insists that lecturers stop the 90-minute lecture and do some interaction with their students to break up the very dense content into appropriately sized chunks. Ninety-nine percent of the professors do not know how to reflect on their lectures and on the outcomes of their teaching and they therefore do not know what strategies they might use. They often complain that the students do not want to study, do not know how to think and do not seem to make connections between concepts and materials, but the professors themselves do not understand how the brain works, how to teach thinking or how to develop cognition.

This section includes a series of workshops on teaching thinking, criteria-based assessment, setting up pair or group tasks, ways of grouping and regrouping, using graphic organisers, scaffolding, understanding cognitive load, trying out multisensory strategies, discussing VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) and understanding brain breaks and break-out groups. Correction, both through written and oral strategies are discussed with plenty of language input. The main aim is to have the students become more independent thinkers who can problem-solve through cooperation and collaboration.

Obstacles and Challenges

a) First Experiences

This is usually the first time most of the professors have experienced this type of teaching and learning, so the first day is vital for setting up the ground rules for interactive group work, what is expected of them and what my role as a facilitator of learning situations consists of. For many it is a shock, as they had expected to have traditional lectures where the lecturer tells them what they would have to do and they simply sit and listen. This new way of working is sometimes also seen as weak and could be interpreted as revealing that the lecturer does not know her subject. Unless they have studied abroad, many see this as Primary School or, at best, Secondary School style teaching and not sufficiently academic for a university setting. In addition, they are not used to giving opinions and some are afraid of recrimination or feel their English is not good enough to speak aloud in front of their peers. Even after the 5-day intensive course some of the professors worry that they just do not have time to do this, so prefer to use the traditional lecture style.

For this reason, the first day must set the scene and give the overall aims of the course in detail while having a group of peers who have never met before feeling comfortable enough to open up and reveal feelings and opinions they may never before have voiced. To achieve this, in part, we start day one with an interactive pair work exercise where everybody must speak about their partner. Day one finishes with the marshmallow challenge, a fun competitive cross curricular challenge which brings out the best in them but for which they have to collaborate in creating the tallest free standing tower, with a marshmallow balanced at the top, all made out of spaghetti sticks, string and scotch tape.

b) Micro Teaching

In the micro teaching sessions which are introduced on the third day of the five day course they have to make a lesson plan for a 6-minute teaching session which must include ONLY one concept and one interaction with a supporting PPT and realia if appropriate. They may work in groups, but the groups must be coherent in terms of subject matter and/or theme. Each professor is tested by the whole class divided into four groups which rotate. In this way each of the four areas are tested and the class gets to concentrate and feedback on only one component each time. The tutor, however, gives a more holistic assessment and takes each professor aside for a private consultation while the groups prepare their speaker to give the feedback. Each professor or group is placed in the "hot seat" and the group's speaker goes through the previously decided points one by one using the praise sandwich.

This proves to be a challenge for both the micro teacher and the assessors for many reasons. For most of them the time is too short when they are used to giving 90 minute lectures. They have to incorporate too many new skills and they have not had enough time to incubate these new ideas to be able to adequately put them into operation. The criticisms are often unrealistic in being too weak and the assessors are too interested in the content of the mini lesson to be objective. They have never observed their peers before. They find it fascinating and want to admire and respect

their peers' knowledge, rather than to criticize their methodology.

c) Change Stories

During the setting up and doing of activities/ tasks they learned to follow instructions, stick to task, to cooperate and collaborate, to listen, to help struggling others and to accept the value of peer teaching. Almost all declared verbally that the course had changed their way of thinking about the delivery of their lectures and that they needed to do more reading and researching into their understanding of the Teaching/Learning process. Several CPs showed such gains in confidence that even the other CPs commented on their transformations. Privately they told the tutor they had felt the change and cherished it.

d) Reflection time

Much learning was derived from their being STUDENTS again, in some cases after many years of being a lecturer with little time for reflection (one of the CPs was a Vice Dean). So these five days of reflective practices were invaluable. They admitted that they felt very nervous about doing their MTs in front of their peers but that it was an invaluable experience that they had not had the opportunity to ever enjoy before. They were especially grateful for the detailed interview with the course tutor directly after the MT and said so with obvious sincerity.

They felt they had developed in their presentation skills in many detailed ways which helped them to be more self-critical. Almost all pointed out that they would take on board the suggestions made by the tutor and their peers in their future work.

e) Course booklet and tutor adaptations.

Depending on the overall competence of each of the 6 cohorts it was a struggle every day to get through the timetable and often it was simply impossible. There were so many new concepts for them to comprehend in the teaching/learning process that the tutor was forced to go slowly, so sometimes she just stabbed at a concept and repeated it in different ways or scaffolded it by going back to basic concepts to remind all how pedagogy works.

The tutor believes it was not only to do with a lack of language proficiency but also a lack of thinking skills at the level of the HOTs (Bloom) which one might assume academics to have mastered already. However, due to the very traditional education system of learning everything off by heart without deep understanding or construction of personal knowledge the contents always carry more importance than the delivery. In some groups the tutor felt she was doing a lot of "hand holding" to project them into the necessary receptive mode for new information to be converted into knowledge.

f) Participation in the course

Every group started off with some skepticism but the tutor was able to convince them of the value of the approach by challenging them with quality tasks. As they grew in confidence with this new methodology their responses became more sure-footed and fluent. By Day 3 they could understand the nature of the demands made upon them, they were paying attention in a very concentrated way, discussing at a high level in their groups, responding to strategy work positively, enjoying themselves through doing instead of just listening and using the criteria for their MT evaluations at an almost professional level.

They were a little surprised at how the regrouping could be both intimidating and liberating and they began to question how they could do it themselves in their classes, which ranged from 6-160 students in one class.

Successes and failures

After Stage 1 the percentage of successes to failures is usually diverse but after Stage 2 it starts to narrow when the CPs feel they are getting individual attention to their idiosyncratic problems. Their lesson plans can sometimes be erratic but they all have many questions and many comments in their personal tutorials. The majority report a change in their own thinking and a feeling of positive relationships developing between themselves and the student body. They begin to see how the students become engaged in the lessons for the first time and often the CPs are shocked at responses their own students start to produce using this methodology. After Stage 3 the tutor always begins to see many more successes than failures.

It is generally accepted that each university that has been involved in the programme should set up their own best practice SIG (Special Interest Group) and meet on-line or F2F to share and discuss progress, student reactions and faculty responses. The EMI team at the British Council is setting up free webinars as from the end of May to convene these SIGs and help push them forward to maintain interest and momentum.

There may be many obstacles and challenges, but in each of the six cohorts the impact is clear producing far more successes than failures.

Further Reading

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