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Students' Perceptions towards Learning Business Content Through English Medium Instruction: EMI

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Abstract

English medium instruction (EMI) is the use of English language to teach academic subjects where the first language of students is not English. This study was conducted by obtaining students' perspective of attending business lectures that were conducted in English by foreign guest speakers at a public university. The objective was to study students' perceptions towards learning business content through EMI. This research is quantitative research using a sample group consisting of 400 students in the EMI-applied business courses. The data collection tool was questionnaire. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents are willing to attend EMI business lecturers. In addition, the students perceived they have gained new knowledge in an international perspective as well as having the opportunity to practice their English. It was found that there was no significant difference between male and female students' perception. In addition, 94 percent of the students had preference to attend more lectures in English and suggested to continue the activity into the future.

Keywords: perception, English medium instruction (EMI), business

Introduction

There is no doubt that English is the lingua franca of business encouraged through globalization. English is by far the most common language of information exchange across borders, making it a key component for accessing knowledge and expertise. There is strong evidence that English is increasingly a job requirement in all industries and at all seniority levels. In 2011, Thailand attained upper middle-income country (UMIC) status, a change from a developing nation status (World Bank, 2022). And yet Thailand's English proficiency ranking among non-native English-speaking countries is ranked 100th out of a total of 112

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countries. When scoped down to Asia, Thailand ranked 22nd out of 24 countries in Asia. The level of English proficiency is classified as “very low proficiency” (EF English Proficiency Index, 2022).

English language proficiency is one of the desirable skills among global workplaces. It is notable that English is the official language of more than 60 countries, moreover, it is the language of global business. According to Pearson’s survey, 68% of global businesses assess their employees’ English language proficiency and 91% consider it beneficial to the company if employees speak English. Furthermore, 92% of employees worldwide indicated that English proficiency is as an essential factor in career advancement (MacFarlane, 2020). These are worldwide trends and impact Thailand as can be noted by the Thai educational policy makers mandating the advancement of English language teaching and learning to prepare students for economic globalization (Hengsadeekul, Koul & Kaewkuekool, 2014).

Prior research has noted that English medium instruction (EMI) is rapidly expanding in higher education institutions worldwide, with significant growth in recent decades in Europe and East Asia (Thompson, Takezawa, & Rose, 2022; Macaro, Curle, An, Pun, & Dearden, 2018). As a method to improve English proficiency in a Thai public university business school, a pilot program was developed and implemented. The program consisted of inviting foreign guest lecturers to give additional talks to the selected classes with conditions that the guest lecturer must be non-Thai, able to communicate in English fluently, provide 2-3 hours lecture on the topic related to the subject of the course. This study fills the gap of investigation into an Southeast Asian country, namely Thailand, with very low English proficiency and to investigate methods to implement EMI lectures into core business courses.

This study particularly explores students’ perception and gender issues of English proficiency between female and male that has been closely linked to educational success in EMI (Macaro, Curle, An, Pun, & Dearden, 2018). The results of the study have implications for improving the educational experience in an EMI business context. As Airey, J. (2020) commented when noting a lack of student perspective in EMI research “I did find it surprising that there is no mention of feedback... In my experience, interactions with students and the need to report on formalized student course evaluations have been a rich source of material for reflection – particularly if one has the possibility to adapt the questions asked.” This study was conducted to obtain students’ perspective through feedback in order to gain understanding for further implementation of EMI lecturers in Thai business courses.

Background of Issues in EMI research

English medium instruction (EMI) is defined following Macaro, Curle, An, Pun, & Dearden. (2018) as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English.” Macaro went on later to acknowledge the problems with this definition in a 2020 article by mentioning the problem of the definition is due to the differences of EMI concept implementation in the global educational settings in which it is being implemented. He then asked “What do we mean by ‘use’ – how much use? Do we mean exclusively English, or two or more languages in ‘use’?” (Macaro, 2020). Macaro’s concerns are based on

the EMI divide of where EMI research lies in the linguistic or the content area of study. This divide is partial due to content lecturers claim of not being language teachers.

John Airey replied to Macaro's concern of EMI's role in education and is based on his belief that "Disciplines have their own specialist discourses that students need to master. In this respect, I have claimed that all content lecturers are language lecturers, even in monolingual L1 settings" (Airey, J. 2020). Airey suggested to acknowledge disciplinary literacy and defined it as "The ability to appropriately participate in the communicative practices of a discipline" (Airey, J. 2011). He went further to suggest that disciplinary literacy is developed for three sites: Academy, Society and Workplace" (Airey, J. 2020).

The above discourse pertains to findings of prior research of EMI in Asian Higher Education Business Institutes (AHEBI) as well as for discussions on this research. Based on prior EMI implementation at AHEBI a common issue emerges such as students with low English proficiency face challenges that impede academic performance in EMI courses. Thompson, Takezawa, and Rose (2022) found that Japanese students who had previous experience abroad or preexisting language proficiency as measured by TOEIC achieved higher success in an EMI finance course. The study of EMI for a Ph. D Management program in Indonesia, Pritasari, Reinaldo, and Watson (2019) noted that students low proficiency of English affected the communication skills to meet the current demands of the global economy or future challenges and stated that their findings were similar to what has been described elsewhere, in China, Singapore, Australia, Thailand, Taiwan and Hong Kong. For instance, in a study conducted in China with student's perception of EMI in Principle of Management course with English major students, Li. (2020) suggested that content lecturers should slow their pace of speaking and combine the mother tongue with English when necessary.

In this study, the issue of gender and EMI preference was investigated to ensure that future EMI implementation considered language preference among female and male. The results in prior research on gender and language proficiency has shown that females were found to be more motivated towards language learning (Sunderland, 2000). However, other research has noted that gender and language proficiency should be examined in a cultural context (Macaro & Akincioglu, 2018). In Thailand, prior research found that females were significantly more enthusiastic about EMI and had a preference to attend EMI graduate programs (Hengsadeeikul, Koul, & Kaewkuekool, 2014). L1 and L2 will be used throughout this paper: L1 is First Language and L2 is Second Language. In Thailand L1 is Thai language and for clarity in this study L2 is the English language.

Objectives

1. To study the perceptions of students towards learning business content in English.
2. To study the extent of gender influence towards students' perception of EMI business content.

Benefits of This Research

1. Business schools acquire a deeper knowledge regarding perceptions of students towards learning business content in English.

2. Business schools gain understanding on gender influence towards students' perception of EMI business content and be able to design appropriate class activities.

3. Higher education instructors can apply the findings to develop innovative teaching using EMI to be more efficient and diverse.

Research Methodology

Sample

This study took place with students from a public university at the faculty of business in Northern Thailand. There were 571 undergraduate students participating in EMI lectures. The sample group was selected through convenient sampling technique. At the 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, the appropriate sample size was 400 (Kibuacha, 2021).

Student Survey

According to prior research, the most efficient approach to gathering student feedback for the purpose of leveraging on-going reflection and as a valuable improvement tool in Higher Education Institutions identified the use of questionnaires (Hand & Rowe, 2001; Mandouit, 2018). To determine student's perception of learning business content in a L2 manner and how the EMI activity could be improved, respondents were asked to fill out an online questionnaire on a voluntary basis. Student respondents were informed that their answers would be analyzed anonymously to protect their identities. The questionnaire was conducted in L1 of Thai.

The questionnaire consisted of 4 parts. The first part contained general information of the respondents. The second part contained questions regarding the students' feedback on attending EMI business lectures. The students' responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree). The third part contained yes/no question regarding preference for providing additional English lecturers in the future. The fourth part contained open-ended questions, asking students to suggest topics of interest for future EMI lecturers and to suggest activities to develop their business English skills.

To check for content validity of the questionnaire, the researchers inquired 3 educational experts to evaluate the questionnaire by applying the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC). Based on the criteria for determining IOC, to accept the content validity, the index must be greater than 0.5 (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977). From the analysis IOC in this study, it was found that the IOC values of the entire questionnaire was 0.93 and the indexes of the sub-questions range from 0.67 – 1.00. This indicated the consistency between the questions and the objectives of the questionnaire, and all questions were eligible for use.

The researcher measured reliability or internal concordance with Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient, in which an α value of 0.70 or higher were considered confident (Tirakanant, 2012). The analysis obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.783 which implies this questionnaire had acceptable internal consistency reliabilities and can be appropriately used for data collection.

Results

1. General information of the students

In Table 1, the breakdown of courses and number of student respondents is presented. There were 3 classes that students registered and attended for EMI lecture which included Introduction to Entrepreneurship and Business, Principles of Management, and Communication for Business Results.

Table 1: Student respondents classified by gender and courses attended for EMI lecture

Class attended for EMI lecture	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
Principles of Management	201	78	279
Introduction to Entrepreneurship and Business	46	28	74
Communication for Business Results	25	22	47
Total	272	128	400

2. Students' feedback on attending EMI business lectures

This part answers the first research question “What are the perceptions of students towards learning business content in L2 manner?” Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation of student's perceptions of learning business content in L2 manner through attending EMI business lectures. Based on the results, it is noted that student's feedback strongly agreed with 4 out of 5 questions: 1) The topic of the lecture aligned with the course subject being studied, 2) The topic of the lecture was interesting, 3) Knowledge was gained from an international perspective, 4) The EMI lecturer allowed students to practice their English speaking and listening skills, respectively. The question regarding student's ability to understand the EMI lecturer's English well received the feedback at the agreed level. Based on the result that 4 questions received a strongly agreed, however, the question that directly related about English proficiency showed the researchers there are issues pertaining to English proficiency and understanding of English lecturers.

Table 2: Students' Feedback on attending EMI business lectures

Feedback	Gender	N	Mean	Level	SD
The topic of the lecture aligned with the course subject being studied	Female	272	4.65	Strongly agree	0.605
	Male	128	4.57	Strongly agree	0.623
	Total	400	4.56	Strongly agree	0.614
The topic of the lecture was interesting	Female	272	4.44	Strongly agree	0.669
	Male	128	4.41	Strongly agree	0.620
	Total	400	4.43	Strongly agree	0.645
Knowledge was gained from an international perspective	Female	272	4.38	Strongly agree	0.708
	Male	128	4.43	Strongly agree	0.728
	Total	400	4.40	Strongly agree	0.718
Students could understand the English lecturer well	Female	272	3.78	Agree	0.887
	Male	128	4.05	Agree	0.929
	Total	400	3.86	Agree	0.98
The EMI lecturer allowed students to practice their English speaking and listening skills	Female	272	4.32	Strongly agree	0.727
	Male	128	4.23	Strongly agree	0.865
	Total	400	4.29	Strongly agree	0.796

Table 3: Gender difference on students' perceptions of EMI lectures

Students' feedback		Statistic	p	Mean difference	SE Difference	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
The topic of the lecture aligned with the subject studied	Student's t	-0.232	0.817	-0.0152	0.0655	-0.1439	0.1136
The topic of the lecture was interesting	Student's t	0.551	0.582	0.0386	0.0701	-0.0991	0.1763
Knowledge was gained from an international perspective	Student's t	-0.666	0.506	-0.0510	0.0766	-0.2016	0.9966
Students could understand the English lecturer well	Student's t	-2.808	0.005 *	-0.2711	0.0966	-0.4610	-0.0813
The lecture allowed students to practice their English speaking and listening skills at the highest level	Student's t	1.031	0.303	0.0855	0.0829	-0.0775	0.2485

Note: * $p < 0.05$ significance level

To answer the second research question “To what extent does gender influence students’ perceptions of EMI business content?” The result in Table 2 showed differences appear between female and male answers. To ensure the differences were relevant, a t-test analysis was performed, and the p-value was used to analyze the difference as shown in Table 3. The result of students’ feedback on attending EMI business lectures classified by gender show a balance with no statistical differences between male and female. There was statistically significant difference ($p < .005$) only in “Students could understand the English lecturer well” with mean of 3.78 for female and 4.05 for male. The result denies clarity towards the role of gender influencing student’s perception of EMI business content. On the main issue of benefiting from EMI lecturers there is no significant difference between the genders. However, further studies are

necessary to clarify the significant difference of not understanding the English lecturer well and how that affects the benefits of EMI lectures based on student' gender in increasing their English proficiency.

3. Students' preference for providing additional English lecturers in the future

In reference to the yes/no question of whether students would like to attend additional English lectures, student's response showed a significantly higher answer on "yes" at 377 students out of 400.

Table 4: Preference for additional English lecturers

Preference to attend more lectures in English	Yes	No	Total
Female	259	13	272
Male	118	10	128
Total	377	23	400

4. Students' suggestion on topics of interest for future EMI lecturers and activities to develop their business English skills

Open-ended questions were applied to retrieve answers for the last research question, "How can the EMI activity be improved to meet student's needs to increase English proficiency?" In response to the question asking for topics of interest for future EMI lectures, the students provided five themes consistently as follows: 1) sharing real business cases of other countries, 2) human resource development in other countries, 3) crypto currency, 4) investment, and 5) future business challenges.

In addition, the suggestions for activities to develop students' business English skills, five consistent responses occurred: 1) arrange more lectures similar to the EMI lectures in this course, 2) increase the opportunities to attend EMI lectures more often and in other business courses, 3) provide handouts or reading materials along with the lecture, 4) increase activities in order to provide more interaction between the English-speaking lecturer and the students, and 5) provide Thai-subtitles.

Discussions

The research results have shown that students are enthusiastic to attend EMI business lectures and students' eagerness are based on factors such as topics of EMI lectures should be aligned to course topics as well as interesting which allows for obtaining a global understanding of the business issue presented. The results also showed that students would like more interaction with the EMI instructor as a method to use their second language of English as well as providing additional materials to fully understand EMI lecturers. The findings confirm that students with low English proficiency are willing and able to attend EMI lecturers and perceive they have gained new knowledge in an international perspective as well as having the opportunity to use English as their L2. The results concur with previous research that purported the benefits of EMI as method for students to simultaneously acquire both English skills and content knowledge

making it an ideal learning situation for learners to achieve both goals (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003; Coleman, 2006; Smit & Dafouz, 2012).

The results also align with the discourse of Macaro and Airey. Macaro questioned the definition of EMI and through the questioning acknowledged that research was needed in implementing EMI in a bi-lingual manner. However, Macaro's vision for further EMI research is between EMI teachers (content specialists) and English language teachers. The findings in this research show that students with low English proficiency are eager for EMI when the course is conducted in a bi-lingual manner as can be deemed from the answers regarding understanding English lecturer at an agreed level (medium level) and the request for Thai subtitles. While Airey acknowledges that the content lecturers are language lecturers due to the specific language of the discipline, he is also aware that content lecturers do not consider themselves language teachers. Our findings present an alternative role for the English content lecturer to only focus on sharing business content while the Thai business content lecturer ensures the discipline language is understood.

In terms of gender differences in student perspectives regarding EMI lecturers the result concurs with other research studies that stated that there was lack of understanding of the role that gender has in attending EMI courses or its potentially influential factor on success in EMI courses (Macaro & Akincioglu, 2018; Thompson, Takezawa, & Rose, 2022). However, a pertinent observation was noted by Macaro & Akincioglu. (2018) that 'if EMI is a shift in the way that English language learning is delivered (Shohamy, 2012), males might become more motivated as content subjects would not carry the same gendered label as language learning'. Further study is needed to understand the role of gender and the benefits of EMI lectures as a tool to increase English proficiency.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study was conducted into student's perspective of attending L2 lectures. The findings will aid in developing future EMI lecturers by offering the researchers the knowledge to implement further activities focused on increasing English proficiency.

The implications from investigating student's perception of attending EMI lectures in a bi-lingual manner can aid other Asian business schools in implementing EMI into the curriculum in three areas; ensure: topics are of interest for students, and they have background knowledge of the topic, implement activities that will strengthen English proficiency and bi-lingual interaction can help students with low English proficiency. Firstly, the study found that students' topics of interest for future EMI lectures are based on trends of business such as crypto currencies and future business challenges. As well as topics students are majoring in such as human resource development and investments while requesting an international perspective or perspective from another country. This implies that students are curious about the world around them and are aware that English is the most common language of information exchange across borders which motivates students to attend EMI lectures and to seek new knowledge. At the same time students believe they are improving their own English proficiency.

Secondly, activities should be developed to coincide with the EMI lectures such as having student presentations in English focusing on students' feedback of what they heard and learned as well as students conducting further research on the topic. It is important to ensure the EMI lecturer is available to answer questions from students and the course should provide further readings on the topic in English. In this manner students will have further opportunities to increase their English proficiency.

Thirdly, the bi-lingual approach used in this study allowed students the opportunity to first learn the content in their L1 and then apply the content knowledge when attending a L2 lecture on the topic. This bi-lingual approach puts the responsibility of ensuring students understand content in both languages on the L1 lecturer. However, if correctly implemented, such as the L1 uses both languages in teaching and learning activities then the role of the L2 is to give further content and engage with the students as method to practice their English skills and not to teach the language.

Limitations of this study are due to issues regarding EMI, gender, and English proficiency. For example, a measuring tool was not applied to measure the success in the EMI lecture or to measure an increase on student's English proficiency. This begs the question of what the best type of measurement tool is to determine increased English proficiency or what factors should be measured to deem success in a bi-lingual course. Is it a standard test such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEIC) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS)? Rose, Curle, Aizawa, & Thompson (2020) noted that prior studies conducted into EMI and student academic achievement using TOEFL, TOEIC or IELTS have been contradictory whereas some studies found a correlation between scores and academic achievement and other studies found no correlation. Research into EMI as a tool to increase English proficiency requires further rigorous studies. Few long-term studies, such as following students in Higher Education from first-year student to senior years, have been conducted on EMI and its benefits towards increasing English proficiency for academic, workplace and society. Such a study would be of value in understanding EMI and its role in increasing English proficiency.

Thailand's English proficiency ranks as very low among non-native English-speaking countries and in Asia. This study offers method to increase English proficiency along with suggestions of implementation. With the use of the internet apps such as Zoom and MS teams it is possible to offer EMI lectures and at the same time the L1 instructor is ensuring content is well understood by students and can be used by the students in their studies and future careers.

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