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Teaching Career-Oriented Majors in the English Language: Challenges and Opportunities (Kazan Federal University case study)

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Abstract

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Global education environment changes the function of the English language. Nowadays it acts not only as a means of learning but as a medium of instruction (EMI). As part of a study in Kazan Federal University, Institute of Management, Economics and Finance, we identified the gap between the requirements of a current global educational setting and the level of academics' linguistic competence. This paper presents the results of academics' current social portrait survey. During the survey we detected two major issues preventing the academics from teaching majors in English. The first concern is the lack of qualified English speaking academics capable of delivering courses in English (2%). The second considers the percentage of elderly teaching staff educated in the times of Soviet Union, when educational system concentrated upon communism construction and written translation was a dominating practice. The study applies qualitative methodology using a questionnaire designed with closed and open questions. We implemented Pearson correlation coefficient, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient and association index to identify the correlation between age, positions and language proficiency of academics and their desire to teach career-oriented majors in English. Though the teachers' answers varied, they outlined the fact that the younger generation considers career-oriented major teaching using EMI to be an essential part in self-development and career progress. The older generation showed low interest in using EMI at their lectures and seminars. The findings also show that job position doesn't affect the academics' desire to be enrolled in EMI, while the level of their English proficiency influences the desire to teach the subject in English.

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Keywords: English as a medium of instruction (EMI); teaching staff; career-oriented major; English language teaching program.

1. Introduction

Global education environment changes the function of the English language. Nowadays it acts not only as a means of learning but as a medium of instruction (EMI). EMI is usually defined as



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implementation of the English language in the academic discourse in countries or states where the majority of the population are non-native English speakers (Dearden, 2014).

It is worth mentioning that despite unequivocal necessity of EMI intake in academic environment in non-English countries, their attitudes to this phenomenon appear far from homogenous. To illustrate this, Italy and France has met it with fierce resistance, commenting that it violates the “freedom in teaching” on the one hand, and “threats to the national language and an authentic French identity” on the other (Phillipson, 2015). A number of Nordic countries reluct less against EMI implementation although a great deal of concern has been expressed by national language councils and members of cultural elite (Dimova et al., 2015).

Keeping these conditions in mind, it should be noted that little is known about the Russian Federation in terms of EMI phenomenon despite it has always demonstrated a great concern for current educational demands changes (Bagautdinova et al., 2016). Thus, operating under pressure of globalization Kazan Federal University, being the largest higher education establishment in the Volga Region of the Russian Federation, and receiving generous financial support for its development from the government, is deeply involved in the process of internationalization (Bagautdinova et al, 2016). The reasons underlying the trend include the importance of increasing academic mobility indicators as well as the enhancement of the KFU image on the global education arena thus making the University an attractive place for international applicants (Sungatullina et al., 2016). These goals are impossible to achieve without changing the structure of the curriculum and the language of instruction. Therefore, the issue of English as a lingua franca in ever-increasing competitive global tertiary educational setting is acute and requires thorough consideration both at the administrative level and in the academic departments (Fenton-Smith et al, 2015).

Hence, in this research paper we will be guided by the following research questions:

1. Do academics possess sufficient language proficiency and motivation to deliver professional content in English?
2. What is academics' attitude towards English in teaching majors?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. EMI at tertiary level

In the paper under research by English-medium instruction we understand 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 (Dearden J. 2014). It is believed, that teaching the language, or educational content, through the target language increases the amount of exposure the learners get to it, and the opportunities they have to communicate in it, and therefore to develop their control of it (Hafđís I. et al., 2015). What is more, it is a significant growth area, with over half of the world's international students, being taught in English, and universities offering an increasing range of courses in this language (Graddol, 2006).

It is worth mentioning that EMI phenomenon as well as the term itself are relatively new for tertiary environment worldwide (Flowerdrew et al., 1996). Thus, the question on how successfully it works is still quite disputable.

According to the survey pursued under support of British Council, EMI is allowed more in private institutions rather than in public ones (Dearden J. 2014). Besides, most faculties of higher educational establishments are overwhelmingly unaware of EMI policies. They suffer from a written guidance on how to teach within EMI framework (Mardanshina et al., 2014). Finally, most of institutions at tertiary level tackle lots of questions about exams, namely, what language should they be in, or what is being assessed, the English or the subject context (Tallón-Ballesteros, 2014).

Taking into consideration all these obstacles, it would appear that the EMI phenomenon is in a state of flux (MahaEllili-Cherif, 2014). From country to country EMI is being promoted, rejected, refined and sometimes even reversed (Dearden J. 2014).

2.2 Historical background of English language teaching in Russia

English language is a common lingua franca across the globe, which is currently affecting diplomacy, commerce, culture, national language in addition to educational policies of a particular country. It is useful to highlight in this regard that BrajKachru's World Englishes model (Kachru'sBraj B. 1991), where the expanding language circle is evidently becoming larger than that of inner and outer, has already become axiomatic.

Russia is currently engaged in the modernization process of educational programmes and policies throughout the country, where technologies and foreign languages are playing the leading roles. The introduction of the second foreign language as a compulsory subject for secondary schools in Russia denotes the fact that the government admits the necessity of foreign languages acquisition by the younger generations. Frequently, children are exposed to language immersion even at an earlier stage, while they are attending kindergartens, since the knowledge of a foreign language is considered to be a symbol of prestige and high-rank.

Foreign language acquisition is an integral part of curricula in higher educational institutions (HEIs) of Russia. The range of foreign languages presented at Russian universities differs depending on their bias with English dominating in most cases (Ismagilova et al., 2014). A great urgency in the involvement of universities into academic mobility programmes and international scientific collaboration fosters HEIs to increase the duration of students' exposure into the English language (Galishnikova, 2014). Recently Institute of Management, Economics and Finance within KFU enlarged the period of English teaching to Bachelor students from 198 classroom hours to 468 classroom hours correspondingly. Thus, Russia is facing "English language boom", which will gradually lead to the extended number of potential academics mature both in core curriculum and English language likewise (Zalyaeva et al., 2014).

However, educational language policy during the Soviet period of time deeply varied from the modern one. Though the Soviet government introduced certain novelties into a foreign language teaching in 1950s, the basis of the educational system was concentrated upon the ideology of communism construction. All the texts implemented for educational purposes lacked authentic features and couldn't be used as a means for interaction, since they were isolated from their natural

environment. Moreover, the amount of students' exposure into the English language acquisition was relatively low (2 classroom hours per week for school leavers in 1961) and the emphasis was mainly laid on English texts translation. Another challenge for English language acquisition was the predominance of German language in most schools (80%), with only 12% of English at a secondary level (Mirolyubov, 2002). As a result most students who got the education at that period of time were deficient of speaking skills and possessed rather narrow vocabulary.

With the Soviet Union collapse in 1990s, educational language policy improved immensely. Progressive methods accompanied with modern educational facilities were introduced into the system of secondary and higher education. Nevertheless a great layer of the population, including academics employed in the structural unit under discussion, who were born and acquired education in the Soviet Union are incompetent in the English language speaking, have a serious gap in the knowledge of this language or have certain fears about using it as a means of delivering a lecture to students.

3. Methodology

The researchers have undertaken a quantitative and qualitative study in the English Language proficiency of the teaching staff. One hundred and fourteen academics from KFU, namely the Institute of Management, Finance and Economics, participated in the online English-language proficiency test as well as the oral interview conducted by the English language academic department staff. The on-line test checked the reading and writing skills, whereas the interview was intended for checking speaking and listening skills. Ten highly qualified English language professionals conducted the interview and ranged the teaching staff into 5 broad groups in accordance with the Common European framework of references (CEFR) A1–C1.

The interviewees have also participated in a sociological research, where they answered open and closed-ended questions and revealed their experience of using English language in the classroom, their own perception of the language proficiency level as well as their expectations and fears of teaching and learning in English. Basing on the respondents' answers we divided them into 5 broad groups in accordance with age and their positions in the institute.

We implemented Pearson correlation coefficient to identify the correlation between age, positions and language proficiency of academics and their desire to teach career-oriented majors in the English language. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (RCC) served as a tool for assessing how well the relationship between two variables can be described.

4. Results

The authors implemented Spearman RCC (p) and Student's t-test (t-test) to identify the relationship between the variables: X1 (age), X2 (job position), X3 (level of English proficiency) and Y (the academics' desire to teach majors using EMI). This coefficient revealed the extent of statistical dependency and its trend:

Table 1. Variables correlation (age, job position, language proficiency)

Coefficient	X1 / Y	X2 / Y	X3 / Y
p	-1	-0.25	0.3
t-test	0	1.35	1.75

The approximation error (\bar{A}) is 5-7% which signifies the high level of formula fitting to the benchmark data:

$$\bar{A} = \frac{0.28}{5} 100\% = 5.52\% \quad (1) \qquad \eta = \frac{\sum (\bar{y} - y_i)^2}{\sum (y_i - \bar{y})^2} = \sqrt{\frac{9.055}{9.466}} = 0.978 \quad (2)$$

Empiric correlation ratio (η), we applied, serves as a tool for measuring the extent of dependency between X1 and Y:

The value received indicates the fact that the younger the teacher is the more ambitious he/she is about teaching majors using EMI.

The Spearman RCC emphasized that the dependency between the job position (X2) and the desire to teach majors using EMI (Y) is weak or even insignificant. We obtained the values from the following equations:

$$p = 1 - \frac{\sum 6d^2 + A + B}{n^3 - n} \qquad A = \frac{1}{12} \sum (A_j^3 - A_j) \qquad B = \frac{1}{12} \sum (B_k^3 - B_k) \quad (3)$$

where j – number of bindings to variable X2, A_j – amount of similar ranks to variable X2, k – number of bindings to variable X2, B_k – amount of similar ranks to variable Y. To verify the results of our calculations we implemented Student's t-test and obtained the following:

$$T_{kp} = 2.776 \sqrt{\frac{1 - 0.245^2}{6 - 2}} = 1.35 \quad (6)$$

To define the dependency between the level of English proficiency (X3) and the desire to teach using EMI (Y) we used the same equations and revealed the values given below:

$$p = 1 - 6 \frac{14}{5^3 - 5} = 0.3 \quad (7) \qquad T_{kp} = 3.182 \sqrt{\frac{1 - 0.3^2}{5 - 2}} = 1.75 \quad (8)$$

As we can see that p is lower than t-test meaning that the rank correlation coefficient is insignificant and the dependency between the variables do exist but weak.

5. Discussion

Given that the present study questions the idea of academics' sufficient language proficiency and motivation to deliver professional content in English, the key points put in the questionnaires concerned their background, experience, level of language and desire to teach majors in English as well as their attitude to EMI training applicability. The core respondents' audience included teachers under 35 (see Figure 1):

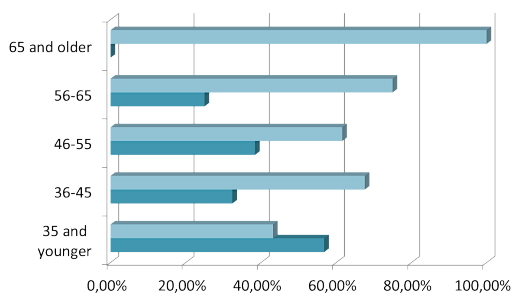


Fig. 1 Academics' willingness to teach using EMI

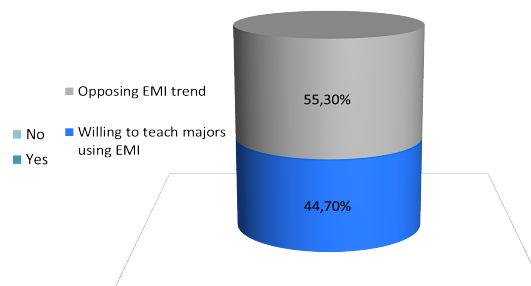


Fig. 2 Academics' age in relation to their desire to teach majors using EMI

As we can see from the chart (see Figure 2), 44.7% of respondents reveal their positive attitude to teach majors in English whereas 55.3% oppose the trend. The matter is connected with the fact that the overwhelming majority of respondents (more than 50%) belong to the under 35 years age group born after 1980s when the significant changes in the state foreign language policy resulted in the improved attitude of schools and youth to linguistic proficiency. Thus, academics under 35 demonstrate greater willingness and openness to any tertiary education innovations due to globalization including using English as a medium of instruction. Hence, we can observe a strong connection between the academics' age and their desire to educate in the English language.

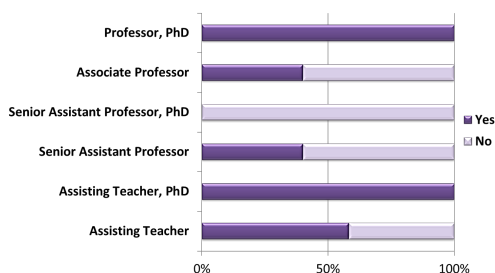


Fig. 3 Academics' job position in relation to their desire to teach majors using EMI

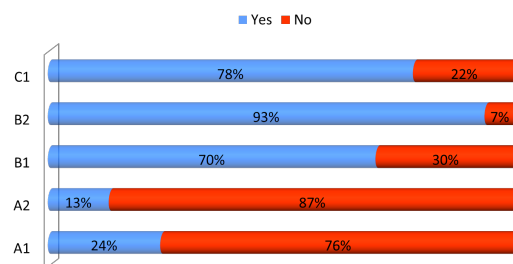


Fig. 4 Academics' English proficiency level in relation to their desire to teach majors using EMI

In contrast to a heavy dependency between age and desire to use EMI in teaching, there is no correlation between academics' job position with the latter issue (see Figure 3). On the one hand, this observation could be determined by unwillingness of elderly teaching staff (who predominately hold Professors' and Associate Professors' positions) to adopt to modern educational changing policies; on the other hand, young teachers (holding Assistant Professors' and Senior Lecturers' positions) who are rather flexible and able to think critically do not see any incentives to alter their teaching philosophy either.

We should note that the respondents' appreciation of EMI for teaching majors does not mainly arise from their level of English proficiency (see Figure 4). It means that teachers' linguistic literacy does not increase the desire to practice EMI training. The case is explained by the lack of linguistically proficient students regardless teachers' language competence.

During the survey the respondents emphasized motivational and demotivational factors for EMI training. Motivational factors include the English language level and academic mobility opportunities improvement; increase of one's own professional competence and competitiveness in the international

educational market; acquiring of valuable experience; opportunity to use authentic materials; expanded research connections.

Demotivational factors comprise low level of the English language awareness of both teachers and students; prevalence of students who are linguistically illiterate; the curriculum of the major is structured in accordance with Russian Federation requirements and is not applicable internationally; Increase of the work load; feedback decreasing due to increased complexity of learning materials for students.

6. Conclusions

The divergence in academics' answers demonstrates that EMI in language teaching shapes out in multifaceted and largely unfamiliar situations and needs to be studied in detail in order to enhance the quality of language teaching at tertiary level. On the one hand, it is determined by instructors' linguistic insecurity due to their age or job position; lack of methodological base or students' insufficient English knowledge. On the other hand, the appreciation of EMI for language teaching as the way of attracting multilingual and multicultural audiences gives hope that the challenges can be turned to opportunities based on such values as friendly atmosphere, increased cultural awareness as well as maintaining and sharing of tolerance.

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