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Understanding International Students' Learning Experiences of English as a Medium of Instruction Courses

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Abstract: This study aims to understand international students' learning experiences in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) courses in a private Korean university. By using mixed-method research, this study collected two data sources, including 1) an online survey (n=46) and 2) an individual in-depth interview (n=4) at the end of the 2022 Spring semester. The study results are summarized as follows. First, EMI courses could enhance international students' content knowledge development effectively. Second, EMI courses could improve international students' English proficiency in terms of reading and vocabulary ability. Third, international students showed high satisfaction with EMI courses and are willing to take EMI courses continuously. However, the interview analysis showed that it was challenging for a few international students to improve their English speaking ability due to limited opportunities to speak English during graduate-level courses. These study results suggest several recommendations to provide practical EMI courses for teaching diverse international students, including English language learners in higher education.

Keywords: *English as a medium of instruction, English language learners, higher education, international graduate students.*

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Introduction

English is considered a lingua franca today (Jenkins, 2014). English is a mediated language in various fields, including business, science, etc. The role and status of English play a prominent role in the global world, specifically in international higher education (Cheng, 2012). In globalized higher education, the medium of instruction should be English if the educational aim is to prepare university students to have an international career. Many higher education institutions attempt to attract more diverse international students to teach and learn English (Hengsadeekul et al., 2014; Kao et al., 2021; Karakas, 2017). For instance, since the 2010s, Korean higher education student populations have become more diverse. Considering this diverse student population, many higher education institutions in Korea modified courses to adopt English as a medium of instruction (EMI) courses to accommodate international students (Kim et al., 2014).

The EMI course can be defined as using English to teach academic subjects in countries where most of the population's first language is not English (Dearden, 2014). The primary focus of EMI is that international students are exposed to English learning while studying the content simultaneously. Thus, ELLs can develop English language skills and content knowledge without separating language instruction (Kirkpatrick, 2017). Many studies have explored the benefits of ELLs' language improvement and content knowledge development (Baker, 2021; Hengsadeekul et al., 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2017).

However, the previous studies lack research on international students with EMI implementation in Asian higher education, including Korean higher education (Lee et al., 2021). Thus, there is a strong need for a more in-depth investigation of how EMI classes could influence international students' content knowledge and English language proficiency. Therefore, the following research questions were designed.

Q1: How did international graduate students report their content knowledge after taking EMI classes?

Q2: How did international graduate students self-report their English language proficiency after taking EMI courses?

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Q3: How did international graduate students report their course satisfaction after taking EMI courses?

Literature Review

Concerning the number of international students worldwide, EMI has become a recent trend in higher education (Baker, 2021; Chu et al., 2018). Many universities in the Asian context are increasing the proportion of EMI courses because EMI can be considered the assessment indicator of a university's global ranking (He & Chiang, 2016; Ra & Baker, 2021). For instance, Kirkpatrick (2017) argued that there had been a continuous increase in Asian higher education moving to provide EMI courses and programs for teaching English language learners (ELLs).

The EMI assumes that English learning occurs when presented material appears in a meaningful context, primarily focusing on content through the target language. ELLs can learn the target language most successfully in this environment when they feel that the content and information, they acquire are exciting and useful (Kao et al., 2021). Therefore, the teaching materials in EMI classes should reflect the international students' needs to develop content knowledge and language skills (Baker, 2021).

Specifically, international students perceive the EMI content should be relevant to increase their motivation for English language learning. Thus, EMI lecturers should start with what international students already know at the beginning of the lecture (Corrales et al., 2016). Then, EMI lecturers should select and deliver the teaching materials associated with international students' academic needs and interests.

Several studies reported that EMI could positively impact ELLs' attitudes and satisfaction (Reilly, 2019; Yeh, 2014). For instance, Reilly (2019) found that ELLs showed positive attitudes toward EMI courses. Similarly, Yeh (2014) found that ELLs responded positively to EMI courses because they could receive many academic benefits, such as improving English proficiency and being exposed to a multilingual environment.

Concerning EMI courses on ELLs' language proficiency, Cosgun and Hasirci (2017) showed that EMI courses could enhance ELLs' reading and listening skills. However, Belhiah and Elhami (2015) reported that ELLs could feel challenged taking EMI courses due to their low English proficiency. Therefore, previous studies have summarized that educators planning to provide EMI courses should consider ELLs' language proficiency before setting up EMI programs in higher education.

Although many studies have been conducted on EMI courses for domestic students, limited research has been done concerning international graduate students' perceptions, attitudes, and satisfaction toward EMI courses (Kim et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2021). Thus, this study fills the gap in the literature to explore EMI courses on international students' content knowledge, English language proficiency, and course satisfaction.

Methodology

Study Participants

The current study was conducted at a Korean private university. The university in the study is located in the South region of South Korea. The university has diverse international students from all over Asia, including China, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, etc. For international graduate students, studying abroad in Korea could guarantee them promoted academic status for their future careers. For instance, many Chinese international students studying abroad in Korea need to earn graduate degrees to upgrade their job status in Chinese universities. In this study, all international graduate students, such as general education majors, participated in the EMI courses as elective courses. Table 1 shows detailed demographic information from survey participants.

Table 1. The Demographic Information from Survey Participants

Components		N=46	%
Gender	Male	9	19.6
	Female	37	80.4
Semester	First semester	12	26.1
	Second semester	10	21.7
	Third semester	8	17.4
	Fourth semester	16	34.8
Graduate-level	Master's	19	41.3
	PhD	27	58.7

Table 1. Continued

Components		N=46	%
Previous EMI experience	Yes	16	34.8
	No	30	65.2
Previous learning English period	Less than five years	7	15.2
	6-10 years	20	43.5
	11-15 years	14	30.4
	16 years or more	5	10.9

Table 2 shows the interview participants' background information. All interview participants were doctoral candidates and female students. They identified their English proficiency levels as either beginner or intermediate levels. They also mentioned that they started learning English in China as a subject to take the Chinese national college entrance exam. Among them, two of them had taken EMI classes previously.

Table 2. Background Information of Interview Participants

Number	Gender	Graduate-level	Previous English studying years	English proficiency level	Previous EMI experience
S1	Female	Ph.D. First semester	Five years	Beginner	X
S2	Female	Ph.D. Second semester	Ten years	Beginner	X
S3	Female	Ph.D. Third semester	Eight years	Intermediate	0
S4	Female	Ph.D. Fourth semester	Twelve years	Intermediate	0

Data Collection and Analysis

This research includes two data sources, 1) an online survey and 2) an individual interview. Firstly, an online survey was made from previous studies on international students' content knowledge, English proficiency, and course satisfaction with EMI classes (Corrales et al., 2016; He & Chiang, 2016; Kim et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2021). Then, after extracting the survey items from previous studies, the research team modified some survey questions to fit the current research's purpose. As a result, a total of 25 survey items were conducted. Specifically, the survey items consisted of 1) ELLs' personal information, 2) ELLs' perceptions of the content knowledge, 3) ELLs' evaluations of their English proficiency, and 4) ELLs' course satisfaction after taking EMI classes. Table 3 shows detailed information about the reliability of the survey.

Table 3. Information about the Survey

Components	Contents	Total Questions	Cronbach's α
1. Personal information	Gender, Grades, Department, Previous EMI courses, years of English learning, etc.	8	X
2. Content knowledge	Understanding content, textbook and course materials, Improvement of content knowledge, etc.	6	.857
3. English proficiency and communication skills	Four language skills, including reading, writing, speaking and listening, etc.	9	.936
4. Satisfaction with EMI classes	Satisfaction with course format, willingness to retake EMI courses, the recommendation to other types, etc.	5	.962

Before the post-survey was distributed, the research team provided informed consent forms for study participants. Finally, SPSS 26 was used for quantitative data analysis to carry out descriptive statistics.

After the survey was finished, the research team recruited one-on-one interview participants. As a result, four international Chinese graduate students voluntarily participated in an individual interview. The interview took about 40-50 minutes via the Zoom platform. Interview questions explore international students' reflections after taking EMI classes. For recording and transcription purposes, all Zoom interview discussions were video-recorded. Concerning qualitative data analysis, a thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data (Clarke, & Braun, 2017). Firstly, the research team transcribed all interview data sources. After transcription, the research team collaboratively generated initial codes and searched for themes. After coding and theme development, the researchers defined several themes in detail. As the last step, the team created the final report for interview analysis.

Results

Survey Results

Table 4 shows questions and descriptive statistics for the EMI course survey. The survey result revealed that most international students positively evaluated the effectiveness of EMI courses.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Survey Questions

Components	Questions	M	SD
Content Knowledge	1. I can understand the contents of the EMI curriculum.	3.65	.924
	2. I can understand the textbooks and PPT slides written in English.	3.70	1.051
	3. I can understand and remember the specific contents in English.	3.54	.912
	4. I think that EMI lectures deepen my knowledge of the field of study.	3.89	1.059
	5. I think the EMI class helped me improve my content knowledge.	4.04	.893
	6. I can learn a lot of content knowledge through EMI class.	3.93	.879
English proficiency and communication skills	1. I can refer to major terms in English.	3.65	.849
	2. I can identify critical keywords in the PPT slides or textbooks written in English.	3.76	.923
	3. I think the EMI class helped me improve my English proficiency.	4.00	.789
	4. I can improve my ability to speak English through EMI class.	3.91	.839
	5. I can improve my reading skills in English through EMI class.	4.04	.842
	6. I can improve my ability to listen to English through EMI class.	4.07	.854
	7. I can improve my ability to write English through EMI class.	3.83	.926
	8. I can improve my English vocabulary skills through EMI class.	4.04	.842
	9. I can improve my knowledge of English in my major through EMI class.	3.93	.904
Satisfaction with EMI classes	1. I think the curriculum of EMI classes is effective.	4.04	.815
	2. This EMI class increases my interest in my major field.	3.93	.879
	3. My overall satisfaction with EMI classes.	3.93	.904
	4. I am willing to retake EMI classes next time.	3.91	.985
	5. I would like to actively recommend EMI classes to other students (to my classmates).	3.91	.890

The survey results are as follows. First, EMI classes could positively enhance the content knowledge of international graduate students. International students responded that they could deepen their understanding of the subject knowledge ($4.04 \pm .893$) and major-related fields (3.89 ± 1.059) written in English materials.

Second, EMI classes could positively enhance the English proficiency of international graduate students. They self-evaluated that EMI classes could help improve their English language proficiency. Specifically, they rated that their English vocabulary skill ($4.04 \pm .842$), reading ability ($4.04 \pm .842$), listening ability ($4.07 \pm .854$), and writing ability ($3.83 \pm .926$) could be improved. Third, international students responded that they were generally satisfied with EMI classes ($3.93 \pm .904$) and thought these classes were efficient ($4.04 \pm .815$). Thus, their willingness to take EMI courses in the future was strong ($3.91 \pm .985$).

Findings from Interviews

The interview data analysis can be divided into three categories: the influence of EMI courses on 1) ELLs' content knowledge, 2) ELLs' English proficiency, and 3) ELLs' course satisfaction. Firstly, all interview participants mentioned that they prefer to take EMI courses because their Korean language level is low. This finding indicated that if graduate course lecture was only conducted in Korean, they could not be able to understand the content, and they would have to rely on a translation app.

"If the lecture happened in Korean, it could be challenging for me to understand the lecture because my Korean language ability is pretty low. So, I strongly prefer the EMI course because we have all experienced learning English in China. Also, the professor is non-native English faculty, so he does not use complicated words to explain key concepts. However, he speaks slowly to understand the content" (S1).

All interview participants mentioned that EMI could increase their understanding of content knowledge and the content area. For instance, they had not learned specific concepts of the learning community. However, with the EMI course, they better understood the content knowledge in their major.

"In China, I had not learned about learning-community and community-based learning. So, while reading many materials in English during EMI courses, I could better understand educational terms and concepts in my major. On the other hand, if I only read materials in Chinese, I might not have been exposed to this concept and the recent trend in the education field" (S2).

Most interviewees mentioned that their listening and reading abilities improved regarding their English proficiency in EMI courses. In addition, they could build their listening ability due to repeated lectures in English. However, in terms of speaking, they mentioned that it is still challenging because they did not have much opportunity to speak in English during the synchronous Zoom class. Finally, they said that EMI helped them write a research report or paper since their assignments consisted of writing many literature reviews and research papers.

"I think my reading and listening ability improved thanks to the EMI course. I am pretty confident in reading materials in English. However, I still felt a lack of it in terms of speaking. The graduate EMI course was mostly theory-driven; I could not speak much English during the EMI course" (S3).

In terms of EMI course satisfaction, most interview participants responded to the EMI course positively. Moreover, they strongly prefer EMI courses because they could enhance their English ability to become an international scholar and gain global competence. Thus, they want to take EMI courses continuously in the following semesters.

"I liked the EMI course over the Korean lecture. It did help me improve my English academic skills. Thus, I like to recommend this EMI course to my other course classmates. Also, if I decide to write my thesis in English, I need to take more English writing courses in EMI format" (S4).

Discussion

The study focuses explicitly on ELLs' perceptions, attitudes, and satisfaction after taking EMI courses. The study results are summarized as follows. First, study results show that EMI courses could facilitate understanding the course content materials for international graduate students. This finding is closely relevant to previous studies' results regarding the positive influence of the EMI courses on ELLs' content knowledge, which could lead to ELLs' higher achievement and a better understanding of the lecture materials (Kao et al., 2021; Tsou & Kao, 2017).

Secondly, EMI classes could develop ELLs' English proficiency. The international graduate students self-reported that their English proficiency level showed improvement due to EMI classes. Specifically, they self-reported improving their reading, vocabulary, and listening abilities. Previous studies have also demonstrated that EMI classes could be beneficial in preparing ELLs to develop English proficiency. Third, international graduate students showed high satisfaction with EMI classes. Several studies have also documented ELLs' positive satisfaction after taking EMI classes (Reilly, 2019; Yeh, 2014).

However, interview analysis in this study showed that a few ELLs still lack an understanding of English lectures due to limited English proficiency. Also, when speaking English during the EMI classes, it was challenging for them to participate in classroom discussion sessions. Thus, it could be challenging for some international students to increase their academic language skills dramatically via a one-semester (2021). Previous studies also state that improving academic language skills in a short period could be challenging if ELLs had not previously been exposed to EMI courses (Lee et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This study aims to understand international students' learning experiences in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) courses in a private Korean university. By using mixed-method research, this study collected two data sources, including 1) an online survey (n=46) and 2) an individual in-depth interview (n=4) at the end of the 2022 Spring semester. The study results are summarized as follows. First, EMI courses could enhance international students' content knowledge development. Second, EMI courses could improve international students' English proficiency in terms of reading and vocabulary ability. Third, international students showed high satisfaction with EMI courses. However, the interview analysis showed that it was challenging for a few international students to improve their English-speaking ability due to limited opportunities to speak English during graduate-level courses. These study results suggest several recommendations to provide practical EMI courses for teaching diverse international students, including English language learners in higher education.

Recommendations

This study can provide several recommendations for educators in higher education to provide EMI courses for ELLs. First, it was found that the EMI courses are beneficial in supporting international students' academic content knowledge in higher education. Thus, it is recommended that various content courses be modified and use the EMI approach so that international students can develop academic English while developing content knowledge. Many empirical studies proved the effectiveness of implementing EMI courses for international students (Lee et al., 2021).

Second, the quality of EMI faculty is critical to providing EMI courses. Previous studies have also shown that the EMI faculty's ability to convey the lecture in English was essential to EMI programs in higher education (Qiu & Fang, 2019). Thus, it is suggested that universities provide several workshops for EMI faculty to develop their teaching competency in content delivery and focus on academic English via EMI courses (Qiu & Fang, 2019). In addition, future researchers should further examine the effectiveness of faculty training for EMI courses, such as intensive faculty workshops in diverse higher education settings. The quality of EMI faculty is the key to successful EMI programs in higher education.

In addition, recent studies have shown that implementing the translanguaging approach for EMI courses is very important (Ra & Baker, 2021; Song, 2019). Several empirical studies have suggested that EMI faculty should utilize ELLs' diverse linguistic resources to create a multilingual environment for EMI courses (Huang, 2021). These studies have documented the benefits of the translanguaging approach in various content-learning courses in higher education (Huang, 2021; Ra & Baker, 2021; Song, 2019). In alignment with this recent trend in translanguaging practice in EMI courses, future researchers should explore how this approach can be successfully incorporated with diverse language learners in various higher education settings.

Limitations

Although this study shows several benefits of providing EMI courses for ELLs, several limitations should be noted. First, this study only focused on Chinese international graduate students who attended one private university in Korea. Thus, findings from this study could not be generalized to the various higher educational contexts where many diverse international students took the same EMI courses. Therefore, future studies need to explore EMI courses that include diverse linguistic backgrounds from different countries. In addition, this study's survey sample number was relatively small. Therefore, a follow-up study with a larger sample size should be conducted to examine how EMI courses could enhance ELLs' content and English learning in various educational contexts.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Chung: Conceptualization, first draft. Choi: Editing, Final draft, data collection and analysis.

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