

A Case Study of Learning Challenges among Chinese University Students in English-Medium Business Program

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the learning challenges faced by Chinese Business English majors in an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environment. Employing a mixed research methodology, the study conducted a questionnaire survey among 120 Business English majors from a university in Fujian Province and conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 of them. Quantitative data revealed that students encounter the most severe challenges in academic writing and professional terminology. Qualitative analysis further uncovered four core themes: difficulties in understanding and applying professional terminology, anxiety and avoidance of academic oral output, inefficiency in academic literature reading, and unfamiliarity with academic writing norms. The research findings indicate that Business English students in EMI programs face multiple challenges in transitioning from general English to academic English and Business English. Finally, this study proposes targeted suggestions from three aspects: curriculum design, teaching strategies, and learning strategies, aiming to provide empirical evidence and practical paths for enhancing the quality of EMI teaching in China.

Keywords: English-Medium Instruction (EMI); Business English; Learning Challenges; Empirical Research

1. Introduction

Under the background of internationalization of global higher education, English-Medium Instruction (EMI) has become an important way for Chinese universities to cultivate international multi-skilled talents. The Business English major combines the characteristics of language and business knowledge learning and is a typical field for EMI implementation. Students face multi-dimensional challenges in the process of transitioning from general English to academic and professional English, existing research has paid less attention to undergraduate students majoring in Business English in To this end, this study adopted a mixed approach, taking students from a certain university in Fujian Province as the subjects. Through questionnaires and interviews, it explored their specific difficulties learning experiences in EMI courses, aiming to reveal the real predicaments and provide empirical references for optimizing EMI teaching.

2. Research Background and Significance

2.1 Research background

With the deepening development of economic globalization, the internationalization of higher education has become a worldwide trend. English-Medium Instruction (EMI), as an important way to cultivate talents with international competitiveness, has rapidly spread across universities worldwide. The Ministry of Education of China has encouraged universities to offer EMI courses through a series policies, in order to enhance students' international vision and cross-cultural communication skills. Business English, as an important branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), aims to cultivate versatile talents who are proficient in English and well-versed in international business rules, thus becoming a pioneering field for EMI teaching in domestic universities. However, for students who are accustomed to general English learning, suddenly entering an environment where professional knowledge is taught entirely in English poses significant adaptation issues and language challenges.

2.2 Problem statement

Despite the vigorous development of EMI globally, there are significant gaps in existing research. Firstly, most studies focus on EMI teaching in science disciplines such as physics and chemistry, or engineering, with insufficient attention paid to EMI in the field of business, humanities, and social sciences. Secondly, the research subjects are mostly international students or graduate students, and systematic empirical research on Chinese local undergraduate business English majors is relatively scarce. This student group possesses the dual identity of “language learners” and “professional knowledge learners”, and the difficulties they encounter in an EMI environment are unique. Therefore, this study aims to delve into the real experiences and specific language barriers faced by this specific group in EMI professional course learning.

2.3 Research significance and purpose

This study possesses both theoretical significance and practical value. At the theoretical level, it enriches the empirical evidence within the context of EMI (English-Medium Instruction) with Chinese characteristics, deepens the understanding of the complexity of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and particularly supplements research in the field of Business English. At the practical level, the research findings can provide direct and specific references for EMI teachers, curriculum developers, and teaching administrators, assisting them in designing more effective teaching interventions and learning support systems, ultimately enhancing students' learning outcomes and satisfaction.

This study aims to answer the following two questions:

- (1) What is the learning experience and perception of Business English majors towards EMI program?
- (2) What specific learning challenges do Business English majors encounter during their EMI learning process?

3. Literature Review

3.1 The English-Medium Instruction business program

EMI means English-Medium Instruction, referring to full English teaching in the classroom, while also encompassing bilingual teaching that utilizes both English and Chinese both inside and outside the classroom. Full English teaching can facilitate learners to simultaneously master professional skills and language skills, thereby adapting to the globalization trend of higher education in China[4]. In an EMI environment, English typically plays two roles in the curriculum: as a school subject and as the language of instruction. These distinct roles support different English learning objectives. The primary task for learners in EMI is to cultivate subject ability and subject literacy in English. It has been found that learners' insufficient language proficiency can affect them in various ways, including difficulties in understanding lectures, difficulties in communicating subject content, and requiring more time to complete courses. In observations of EMI courses in Chinese universities, teachers rarely switch to teaching in their native language, except for a few instances to explain various concepts within their subjects.

There have been numerous specialized studies on EMI programs nowadays. Pun and Jin[8] took high school science students in EMI secondary schools in Chinese Hong Kong as their research subjects. They pointed out that even those students with high proficiency in English may encounter some difficulties in understanding unfamiliar scientific topics or some written learning materials in EMI science courses. They developed three models to capture the potential relationship between four elements: Language Interaction in Science Classroom (LISC), English Proficiency (EP), Perceived English Difficulty in Science Classroom (PEDSC), and Students' Self-Concept in Science Learning (SCSL), and students' learning achievements in EMI programs. One of the models demonstrated that PEDSC can directly affect students' performance.

Due to the increasing demand for Business English in recent years, extensive research has been conducted on business. Recently, Business English has also garnered significant attention, as English is regarded as the lingua franca in the international business environment. However, most of the research has been conducted on genre analysis of business writing, discourse analysis of business

communication, or business communication skills and strategies. A study in South Korea found that most respondents had never taken business courses, despite the majority of them being willing to do so[3]. This finding holds important guiding significance for the development of Business English courses.

Although EMI is relatively new in China compared to some European countries, the Ministry of Education has supported, encouraged, and funded Chinese universities, especially those considered prestigious domestically, to offer more EMI courses[10]. Nowadays, the Chinese government is increasingly emphasizing English-Medium Instruction (EMI), highlighting the importance of EMI programs, and there are also some empirical studies on EMI in China. However, the implementation of EMI programs is not always smooth. Currently, the main obstacle to the implementation of EMI in China remains the English proficiency of teachers and students[5].

3.2 Students' perceptions on EMI program

It is widely believed that learners' perceptions of learning play a significant role in their academic performance. Over the past few years, related research has consistently focused on students' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes towards learning. Some researchers have found a strong correlation between learners' perceptions and their academic success. Pun and Jin[7] argued that, from a psychological perspective, students' desire for a bright future may motivate them to learn English through additional language acquisition, which is crucial for learning important subjects in the context of EMI.

Song[9] investigated students' perceptions of China's international EMI master's program from the theoretical perspective of linguistic ideology. Hu, Li and Lei[2] pointed out that participants' academic achievements in EMI are closely related to their perceptions of the EMI program itself. Previous research of education has shown that students' academic performance is influenced by their self-perception of subject knowledge acquisition. In the paper by Pun and Jin[8], learners' perceptions were proven to have a strong positive correlation with their academic success. The higher the level of English proficiency, the greater the enthusiasm for classroom participation, and the more positive the students' cognition towards EMI education. They proposed that learners' difficulties in using English in science classrooms do not necessarily lead to a decline in academic performance. These challenges may actually increase students' motivation to learn. Zhang and Pladevall-Ballester[11] studied the implementation of EMI in three disciplines, including International Trade and Project Management. The study compared and explored changes in students' attitudes before and after EMI courses. The survey results showed that throughout the semester, students' overall perceptions, expectations, and attitudes had a deteriorating trend. All students indicated that regardless of their English proficiency level, they need to continuously improve their English proficiency when learning through EMI, indicating that EMI difficulties are inevitable for all students. This is also the reason why students are less enthusiastic about EMI courses after practical experience.

3.3 Learning challenges of EMI business program

The study by Alhassan, Ali, N. and Ali, H.[1] revealed that students faced a series of challenges, which were perceived to have negatively impacted their academic performance and project experience. Additionally, a range of challenges encountered by students were listed in this paper. They analyzed these challenges from five perspectives: lack of relevant business background, medium of instruction, communication, teachers' lecture delivery speed, and lack of writing skills. Pun and Jin[7] conducted a study focusing on Chinese Hong Kong university students to explore the challenges they encountered in EMI (English-Medium Instruction) courses. The challenges analyzed in this study encompassed language and learning challenges, primarily involving communication with peers, communication with professionals, logical writing, content comprehension, knowledge application, and learning adaptability. Contrary to other researchers, they found that students did not encounter significant difficulties in language and learning. They also highlighted the significant role of gender in language learning, noting that male students often performed better in communication with peers and were more inclined to seek additional support from others. Morrison and Evans[6] discussed the challenges that non-native speaker (NNS) undergraduate students might face when writing academic texts in English during their first year at an English-medium university in Chinese Hong Kong. They analyzed these challenges from three perspectives: differences in teachers' expectations, reading, and information search between secondary school and university. The study revealed that vocabulary, academic adjustment, and writing were the most significant challenges for students during their initial eight weeks of studying at an EMI university.

3.4 Research innovation

In summary, existing research provides a solid theoretical foundation and methodological reference for this topic. However, most studies are limited to Europe, America, or Chinese Hong Kong, and tend to focus on science and engineering disciplines; they overlook local Chinese undergraduate business English students. Additionally, few studies comprehensively cover all aspects of Business English courses, including written writing skills, oral skills, and communication strategies[3]. This study will conduct supplementary research in these areas. Since this study will examine the learning challenges encountered in various aspects of business English courses from a macro and comprehensive perspective, involving multiple categories, it adopts students' perspectives as the research angle.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study adopts a mixed research methodology. Initially, extensive data is collected through quantitative surveys to identify the most significant areas of challenges. Subsequently, qualitative interviews are conducted to provide in-depth interpretation and contextualization of the quantitative results.

4.2 Research context and participants

This study was conducted in the Business English major at a university in Fujian Province. This major offers courses such as International Finance and International Trade, and its core courses all adopt the EMI (English-Medium Instruction) mode. The study employed cluster sampling, distributing questionnaires to juniors and seniors. Based on this, purposive sampling was used to select 15 students with different levels of achievement for interviews, in order to maximize the diversity of information.

4.3 Research tools and data collection

4.3.1 Quantitative survey

For questionnaire survey, this study utilized the Likert five-point scale (1 = no difficulty at all, 5 = extremely difficult). The questionnaire design encompasses five dimensions: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary. It is distributed through the "Wenjuanxing" platform.

Collected data will be analyzed by conducting descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS to depict the overall distribution and severity of challenges.

4.3.2 Qualitative interview

The semi-structured interview was based on the preliminary analysis results of the questionnaire. This study designed an interview outline covering the following aspects: overall opinion on the EMI course, specific difficulties encountered in various skill areas, coping strategies adopted, and suggestions for teaching. Each interview lasts about 30-50 minutes and is recorded with permission.

For all the qualitative data collected, this study transcribed the interview recordings word-for-word to generate textual materials. The thematic analysis method are utilized to conduct an in-depth analysis of the text, following five steps: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes.

5. Data Analysis and Results

5.1 Quantitative data results

The descriptive statistical analysis results indicate that the perceived levels of difficulty among students are ranked from high to low as follows: academic writing, particularly writing academic papers and writing business reports; professional terminology, and understanding professional terminology in textbooks and using terminology in oral communication are the most challenging aspects of it; academic oral communication, where participating in classroom discussions and giving academic presentations are the main pain points; academic reading; and listening comprehension.

5.2 Qualitative data results

The thematic analysis of the interview data extracted four core themes:

The fog of technical jargon: Students generally reflect that technical terms are the “first hurdle”. S12 said, “When the teacher explained ‘discounting cash flow’ in English, it took me half a day just to understand the phrase, and I couldn’t follow the calculation principles he explained later at all.”

Silent participants: Out of fear of making mistakes and losing face, students often choose to remain silent. S7 admitted, “I know the answer, but I have to translate the Chinese into English in my mind first, and I have to check if the grammar is correct. By the time I finish thinking, the topic has already moved on.”

The burden of reading: Reading all-English textbooks and cases is extremely time-consuming and inefficient. S4 said, “I have to look up a word in the dictionary dozens of times for one page of text, and it takes me an entire afternoon to read one case study. I simply can’t finish all the readings assigned by the teacher.”

The confusion of writing: Students are not clear about the norms of academic writing. S9 wondered, “I think what I wrote is Chinglish, and I don’t know what a good business report should look like, and what’s the difference between it and an ordinary essay.”

5.3 Data verification

The quantitative and qualitative results are highly consistent and complementary. Quantitative data reveals that writing and terminology are the areas where challenges are greatest, while qualitative data vividly explains how these challenges manifest specifically in the learning process of students and the psychological impacts they bring, such as anxiety and frustration, making the research findings more comprehensive and credible.

6. Discussion and Suggestions

6.1 Comprehensive discussion

This study validates and deepens the general consensus from literature reviews regarding the learning challenges faced by EMI students, while also revealing the specificity of challenges faced by Business English majors. The research findings indicate that the perceived order of challenges by students - academic writing, professional terminology, academic speaking, reading, and listening - clearly outlines the core obstacles in their transition from English for General Purposes (EGP) to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). This finding partially echoes previous research, which suggests that language proficiency affects academic performance, but this study further highlights that expressive skills, such as writing and speaking, pose greater difficulties than receptive skills, namely reading and listening. This aligns precisely with the high demands of business disciplines on productive and communicative abilities.

The four themes emerging from the qualitative data vividly illustrate the underlying reasons behind the quantitative data. These challenges are interrelated, forming a vicious cycle: unfamiliarity with terminology leads to inefficient reading and difficulty in comprehension, which in turn triggers anxiety and silence in classroom participation, ultimately culminating in frustration during academic writing tasks that require comprehensive output.

The fundamental reason lies in the fact that many current EMI programs in Business English suffer from a disconnect between content and language support at the practical level. Course design often assumes that students already possess sufficient academic English proficiency, while teaching primarily focuses on imparting professional knowledge, lacking explicit and systematic instruction in academic language skills such as argumentation, genre analysis, and terminology strategies. This scaffolding-deficient model leaves students feeling confused in the complex professional discourse community.

6.2 Teaching implications and suggestions

Based on the findings in Chapter 4, this study addresses the core challenges in EMI teaching of

Business English and proposes specific and actionable suggestions for different stakeholders, forming a systematic support framework. Teachers should provide precise scaffolding, such as adopting process-based writing instruction, pre-teaching professional terminology, creating a low-anxiety oral language environment, and teaching reading strategies. Curriculum designers need to build systematic support, including offering academic English courses synchronized with professional courses, promoting team teaching between professional and language teachers, and integrating resources such as terminology databases and writing software. Students should actively form study groups, actively utilize writing centers, campus resources, and online resources for precise improvement, and employ metacognitive strategies to manage the learning process, turning passivity into initiative.

6.3 Research limitations and future research directions

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, as a case study, the sample is only drawn from one university in Fujian Province, and the universality of the conclusions needs to be verified by more research. Secondly, the research is mainly based on students' self-reports, and future research could incorporate methods such as classroom observation and text analysis for triangulation.

6.4 Conclusion

This study empirically reveals, through a mixed-method approach, the multidimensional and systematic language challenges faced by undergraduate Business English majors in China during EMI projects. The core of these challenges lies in the dual deficiency of academic literacy and professional language proficiency. These challenges are not solely a matter of students' abilities; they also reflect the inadequacies in the current EMI curriculum design regarding the integration of content-language. To truly achieve the original intention of EMI in cultivating internationally competitive professionals, it is necessary to abandon the simplistic mindset of teaching solely in English and shift towards an integrated approach of learning through English and with the support of language. This requires a collaborative effort from teaching administrators, curriculum designers, teachers, and students to jointly build an EMI teaching ecosystem with clear goals, adequate support, and positive interactions.

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