

# English-Medium Instruction for International Students from the Belt and Road Countries: Necessity, Challenges, and Countermeasures

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**Abstract**—Remarkably comprehensive economic and social outcomes have been achieved since the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was unveiled in 2013. With the RRI being well under way, an ever increasing number of students from the Belt and the Road (B&R) countries are flowing to China to pursue undergraduate or postgraduate degree programs, which calls for large-scale implementation of English-medium instruction (EMI) across Chinese universities. As a new thing, however, EMI for students from the B&R countries is facing a host of problems and even controversies. This paper, by drawing upon the authors' personal EMI teaching experiences and taking global EMI tendency into consideration, discusses the necessity as well as the major challenges for EMI programs in Chinese universities, and finally puts forward the corresponding countermeasures. In the contemporary globalization and internet era, it is imperative to use English as a major teaching language. Chinese universities should push forward EMI courses for the B&R students in spite of the difficulties.

**Keywords**—English-medium instruction (EMI); International student; the Belt and Road (B&R)

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since it was unveiled by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his state visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in the autumn of 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative has taken a center role in China's foreign economic and trade relations. With the advancement of the BRI in recent years, more and more international students from the countries along the B&R are being enrolled in Chinese universities across the country for degree programs. According to the statistics of China's Ministry of Education, 489,200 international students were studying in Chinese universities in 2017, among which 241,500 were degree students, including undergraduates and postgraduates, and more than 60 percent of the international students were from the B&R countries. Taken together, it is easy to learn that a majority of foreign degree students studying in Chinese universities are from the B&R countries. In the wake of deepening and realizing of the BRI, B&R countries are destined to remain the largest source of international degree students for Chinese universities for the coming years.

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Few B&R students who are enrolled in Chinese-medium instruction programs and studying together with Chinese students are fairly good at Chinese. The great majority of the international students choose to take EMI programs to pursue their degrees. Taken at face value, this might be understandable since virtually Chinese is not the first language (L1, the language which a person has learned from birth or within the critical period) of the B&R countries, except Singapore, where English is widely taught, learned, and used there. A further study of the subject reveals that the underlying causes might be a little more complicated. Notwithstanding, never before have Chinese universities encountered such a big influx of international students who need EMI degree programs. More and more universities are scrambling to make ends meet in terms of faculty, textbooks, teaching programs, library resources, and so on, and naturally, a string of hitches, perplexities and even controversies regarding EMI have followed.

As EMI lecturers in Nanjing University of Science and Technology in China, the authors of this paper all have rich EMI teaching experience in international students for years, especially those from the B&R countries. Our co-teaching EMI course "Introduction to China's Foreign Trade" was awarded as the *Quality Program for International College Students in Jiangsu Province* by the Education Department of Jiangsu Province in 2018. Taking into consideration the B&R progress, the internationalization of China's higher education, and the development trend of EMI in the world, as well as our personal EMI teaching experience, we assert that EMI for international students from the B&R countries is essential despite of the present problems and difficulties. The future for EMI in Chinese universities is promising, but complete and thorough planning with hard work is required on the part of teaching staff, universities, as well as relevant education authorities.

## II. THE NECESSITY OF EMI FOR THE B&R STUDENTS

EMI is almost identical in meaning to "Instruction in English" (Quan Ying Yu Shou ke) in the Chinese context. But technically and academically speaking, EMI refers to "an instructional practice in which English is used to teach non-language academic subjects (e.g., finance, medicine, engineering, and science)" [1]. In addition, in her widely

circulated report “English as a medium of instruction—a growing global phenomenon”, Julie Dearden, an Oxford University scholar, defines EMI as “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” [2]. In other words, EMI is an approach to teaching academic subjects, rather than to teach English by using English (EFL, English being taught as a foreign language). As English is literally not the L1 in any of the B&R countries, teaching professional courses in English for the B&R students falls into the category of EMI. Under the present circumstances, the necessity of EMI for the B&R students mainly lies in the following several aspects.

#### A. English as the Largest Common Denominator in Language Use along the B&R

According to recent research conducted by some Chinese linguists, there are fifty-three official languages in the sixty-five B&R countries, among which only a couple of languages, such as Russian, Arabic, and English, are widely used across countries and English is the only language that can cover the whole R&R area. Indeed, in the contemporary era of globalization and the Internet, the status that English enjoys as the only global lingua franca is already well entrenched and can hardly be challenged by any other languages. This uniqueness of English as a language is largely due to the comprehensive dominance of the United States in the world economy, culture, education, science and technology.

#### B. EMI Widely Employed in Education among the B&R Countries

In recent years, the world has witnessed a rapid expansion in teaching academic subjects through EMI in countries where L1 is not English. EMI is now a growing global phenomenon taking place primarily in tertiary education, but elementary education is quickly catching up [3]. This has already taken place within the B&R countries. The aforementioned Oxford scholar, Julie Dearden, conducted a study from October 2013 to March 2014 to investigate the current situation of EMI regarding country-specific features, subjects being taught through EMI, and important variables according to educational phases. Among the fifty-five countries/regions investigated, thirty-two were B&R countries. The main conclusions of her study demonstrate that there is a general tendency towards rapid expansion of EMI provision at all levels of education and official governmental backing is common for EMI in these countries/regions.

#### C. EMI Conducive to the Internationalization of China's Higher Education

With China increasingly deepening its reform and opening up to the outside world, the internationalization of China's tertiary education is now put high on the country's agenda with more funding from the governments at all levels. Generally speaking, the internationalization of higher education refers to the process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching/learning, research and service functions of a university, with growing use of English as a medium of research and instruction [4]. In their pursuit of the

internationalization of education, Chinese universities cannot make an exception in the world trend by employing Chinese language as the one and only medium of instruction. As a matter of fact, a massive intake of the B&R students who need EMI programs can give Chinese universities an advantageous opportunity to make English as the main medium of instruction. The embedding of more and more EMI programs in daily teaching, for the B&R students and Chinese students alike, together with the related research and service work, can lay a solid foundation for Chinese universities to pursue their goals of internationalization.

### III. CHALLENGES FACED BY EMI FOR THE B&R STUDENTS

Based on a survey report published in 2015 by the CUCAS (China's University and College Admission System), of all the universities which could enroll international students in 2014, only 15 percent of them had English-medium instruction programs. With the ever-increasing enrollment of the B&R students in the past couple of years, introduction of EMI at the university level in China has gradually been universal and more EMI programs are now available. However, EMI teaching for the B&R students in Chinese universities is still in its infant stage and facing a series of challenges, particularly in the linguistic and pedagogical aspects.

#### A. English Language Proficiency

English language proficiency poses the biggest challenge to EMI teaching/learning. Like in many other non-Anglophone countries, there is a chronic shortage of linguistically qualified EMI teachers in Chinese universities. According to our survey and observation, university EMI instructors are basically the same teachers who also teach Chinese students. A considerable proportion of these teachers have no experiences either in studying in English-speaking countries or in studying English major. This results in the fact that many EMI teachers have difficulties in oral communicating with their international students in and off class. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to say that Chinese EMI teachers should take all the blame. As a matter of fact, not all the students from the B&R countries are native English speakers and many of them may have their own problems in spoken English. Communication is a two-way process; it may be equally hard for Chinese EMI teachers to understand international students' English [5]. Anyway, low-level English proficiency in general and poor oral English in particular of both teachers and students hinder teaching process of the academic subjects and thus compromise the quality of EMI education.

#### B. EMI Teachers' Teaching Styles

EMI teachers' teaching styles in the classroom seem unattractive to international students. In a traditional classroom of a Chinese university, a teacher usually plays the role of knowledge provider while Chinese students, sitting quietly in their seats and taking notes, are positioned as knowledge receivers. A classroom is basically a platform for a teacher's solo performance. But international students, most of who are brought up in a different educational way, may find this type of instruction alien. On top of this, again, EMI teachers' low-level English proficiency can also affect negatively instructional

practices. International students often find it very hard to understand the course concepts because the teacher does not possess adequate English language resources to explain course content in a clear way. Whenever international students ask questions or challenge the teacher's teaching, the latter either sidesteps or simply asks students to read the textbook or consult on the Internet. Gradually, international students may lose their interest in studying and some of them even drop out of school for the above-mentioned reasons.

### C. Inadequate Support from the Universities

EMI programs still need more support from universities. This mainly refers to EMI teaching resources and management systems as well as the qualified management personnel. For instance, many universities do not have or need to upgrade the English-version teaching management system for the international students and overall there is not the adequate administrative staff who can communicate effectively with international students in spoken English.

## IV. COUNTERMEASURES TO PROMOTE EMI FOR THE B&R STUDENTS

With the smooth advancement of the BRI, more and more B&R students are expected to come to China to pursue degree programs. According to the Study in China Program issued in 2010 by China's Ministry of Education, as many as 150 thousand international students will be studying in Chinese universities for degrees by 2020. Now it is safe to predict that the majority of these students will be from the countries along the B&R. Facing these oncoming inflows of international students, it is imperative for Chinese universities to take stock of the situation and take steps to perfect EMI teaching for the B&R students.

### A. To Establish English as the Main Medium of Instruction in Teaching Conventional Subjects

In order to pursue the goals of education internationalization, Chinese universities, especially those top-tier ones, need to give prominence to English as a medium of instruction in curriculum design, whether they already take in international students or not. As the Latin in the globalization era, English is "uncritically viewed as linguistically, culturally and economically important for China's development" [6]. Julie Dearden's report demonstrates that there is a contemporary global shift from English being taught as a "foreign" language to English being used as a medium of instruction for other academic subjects, and Chinese universities cannot afford to lag behind for long. So enough resources, including staff and financial outlay, should be put into the EMI programs and English be employed as the sole medium of instruction or alongside with Chinese in more academic subjects. When this is fully implemented, there is no doubt that the universities are well poised for EMI teaching for the B&R students.

### B. To Train and Introduce Competent EMI Staff

The importance of having adequate qualified EMI lecturers cannot be overemphasized in the implementation of the EMI

programs. In particular, a teacher's fluency in spoken English plays an essential role in determining the quality of EMI teaching. According to Julie Dearden's report, "the ability to explain difficult concepts" and "the ability to create an interactive environment" were considered to be the most important attributes of an EMI lecturer, and we contend that these two attributes are all dependent on a good command of spoken English. This is no easy job based on our observation but must be achieved on a step-by-step basis. Aside from recruiting the Chinese who have completed their higher education in Western country universities, Chinese universities should ramp up efforts to train in-service EMI teachers in a variety of ways, such as short-term training courses, demonstration classes, expert lectures, and set up standards for qualification for the profession. In addition, an excitation mechanism regarding EMI teaching should be established in order to produce a virtuous circle.

### C. To Provide EMI Programs with Quality Auxiliary Support

Based on the current regulations of China's Ministry of Education, universities are responsible for enrollment and cultivation of international students. So universities have a duty to enroll those international students who have sufficient spoken /written English proficiency and possess the necessary educational background from the B&R countries. Besides this, English-version information management systems of various kinds for international students should be established and maintained and information upgraded. On top of this, adequate Anglophone staffing for teaching affairs should be arranged. Last but not the least, the education authorities should also provide their support for EMI programs in terms of preferential policies and funding.

## V. CONCLUSION

The quality and scale of EMI degree programs for the B&R students in Chinese universities are closely and inherently related with the ongoing BRI and the internationalization of China's tertiary education. In the context of globalization, the pace at which universities are internationalizing and English is being used as the academic lingua franca is accelerating. Mainly due to linguistic and pedagogical reasons, the employment of English as a medium of instruction for international students is not all plain sailing in China. In spite of the prevailing challenges and difficulties, Chinese universities, with the support of the education authorities, should confidently embrace EMI to achieve the planned objectives in their cultivation of the B&R students.

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