

English-Medium Instruction for the B&R students: A Blessing for the Internationalization of China's Higher Education?

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Abstract—Internationalization of higher education has grown into a global tendency in recent years, with English playing an ever-increasingly important role in it. In their effort to internationalize, more and more universities in non-Anglophone countries throughout the world are employing English-medium instruction (EMI) for subject teaching, while Chinese universities on the whole are still lagging behind. The current large-scale enrolment of the B&R students might provide a valuable opportunity and driving force for Chinese universities to jump on the EMI bandwagon and thus help promote the internationalization of China's higher education, but the crux of the matter for Chinese universities is to seize this opportunity and take serious actions. This paper makes an in-depth discussion about these issues and then puts forward a number of corresponding countermeasures.

Keywords—Internationalization of higher education; English-medium instruction (EMI); B&R students; Chinese university

I. INTRODUCTION

"Internationalization of higher education" has been a catchphrase in recent years in China. The theme of internationalization of higher education has been abundantly documented. Searching from CNKI, a Chinese retrieval platform of academic papers, between 1990 and 1999, there were only 43 papers on that topic. However, in the next ten-year period 2000-2009, the number increased by a factor of over ten—a considerable increase but still a modest total. Entering the 2010s, this number has grown rapidly at a rate of around one hundred a year. In 2013 alone there were 130 papers—well over twice the number published in the whole of the 1990s.

The explosion of interest in "internationalization of higher education" in Chinese academia signifies that something fundamental is happening in the realm of higher education, and its impact has rightfully been perceived by Chinese scholars. It is now almost a consensus that although internationalization of higher education originated abroad, China should also jump on the bandwagon in order to improve the international competitiveness of its universities as well as better serve its national economic and diplomatic interests, and most up-to-date, help facilitate the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Indeed, at the central government level, a number of policy measures

have been launched to boost the internationalization of China's higher education, the "Double First-Class" Initiative ("Shuang Yi Liu") for example.

A myriad of topics regarding the internationalization issues have been delved into by Chinese scholars so far, as partially evidenced by the aforementioned quantities of research papers. However, to our best knowledge, one topic still remains little explored in the extant research works, which is the role of languages, English in particular, in the internationalization process and its practical implications for Chinese universities. It seems to us that the overwhelming majority of the researchers tend to focus on the "grand themes/topics" in the field of internationalization of higher education, while the related language issues might be considered as too trivial or micro to pay attention to. But we believe that without an adequate dealing with the language issue, the so-called internationalization of higher education is simply about building castles in the air.

The internationalization of China's higher education is undoubtedly making progress, but problems still abound in its path. In particular, poor language proficiency of university teaching faculty remains one of the biggest challenges. With the present advancement of the BRI, an ever-increasing number of B&R students are being enrolled in Chinese universities and EMI (English-medium instruction) is being employed for academic subjects, which provides both pressure and motivation for English to be used on a larger scale. However, EMI teaching in Chinese universities is still in its infancy phase, and many related issues need to be researched. We contend that a wide application of qualified EMI programs in the education of the B&R students can lay a solid foundation for the internationalization of China's higher education. For Chinese universities, the opportunity for more comprehensive and in-depth internationalization are already there, the question is: can it be properly seized?

II. THE TREND OF INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMI'S ROLE

Internationalization of higher education emerged as a trend in the 1990s. Actually, this trend is closely interrelated with a much broader tendency—globalization—which can be

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understood as the integration of economies and societies all over the world, involving technological, economic, political and cultural exchanges made possible largely by advances in communication, transportation, and infrastructure [1]. Globalization has not only shaped the world economy and market but has also influenced tertiary education fundamentally. In the background of globalization, in order to seize the opportunities and address the challenges, governments are vigorously promoting their countries' internationalization of higher education through bi-/multi-lateral cooperation arrangements, while universities are proactively developing their own strategies to internationalize their research as well as teaching [2]. Higher education across the globe is in a period of significant transformation now. Universities are more exposed to and influenced by market forces, and are required to be more responsive to demands from the students, the society, and the state. For some countries, especially those developed ones, higher education is now an important service export sector, with their university campuses attracting tens of thousands of international students from around the world each year.

Internationalization of higher education is conceptualized as having a number of dimensions, such as recruitment of international students, internationalization of the curriculum, research and education partnerships, and so forth. However, in the context of globalization, no matter what dimensions are involved, one basic question has to be answered, that is what language is generally used as the *de facto lingua franca*? It turns out that it is English language. As Manakua (2007) puts it, "the adoption of an international language, i.e. English, has been rapidly increasing in universities around the world" [3]. This special status of English is understandable, taking into account of the past British colonial history, and more importantly, the all-round U.S. dominance in world economy, technology, culture and education in the globalization era.

Only a few countries' L1 (Language 1, the language that a person has learned from birth or within the critical period) is English. For the universities in the non-Anglophone countries, developed and developing alike, in order to pursue the internationalization goals, English should not only be taught as a foreign language (EFL), but also, and more importantly, be employed as the medium of instruction (EMI). Indeed, in recent years, there has been irrefutable evidence that the world is experiencing a rapid increase in the teaching of academic subjects through the medium of English in countries where the L1 of the majority of the population is not English [4]. EMI is now a growing global phenomenon taking place primarily in tertiary education, with more universities mandating English as the teaching language for more academic subjects.

The emergence of EMI in higher education is better exemplified in a 2014 report by Julie Dearden, an Oxford scholar. Titled "English as a medium of instruction—a growing global phenomenon" [5], this report presents the findings of a study conducted in fifty-five countries/regions round the world. Its main conclusions are: 1) the general trend is towards a rapid expansion of EMI provision; 2) there is official governmental backing for EMI. According to Julie Dearden's report, the reasons for EMI introduction at the tertiary education level can be summarized as twofold, one is to provide opportunities for

native students to study or work abroad, and the other is to attract international students. Both two goals fall into the category of internationalization of higher education.

III. EMI FOR THE B&R STUDENTS AND THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

The expansion of China's higher education has outstripped any comparable examples in the world during the past forty years. For instance, in 1978 the gross enrollment rate was only 1.55 per cent. Forty years later, it was forty per cent in 2018. Presently China has the world's largest number of on-campus university students, which totaled 37 million in 2018. By contrast, China's pace to internationalize its higher education was less impressive for a long period of time. Even though there were a certain number of foreign students studying in Chinese universities, but they were in China mainly to study Chinese language and culture, usually on a short-term basis. But since the unveiling of the BRI in the fall of 2013, a completely different picture has emerged.

Propelled by the BRI, the growth trend of international students coming to China to study is unprecedented in Chinese education history in terms of intensity, scale, and scope, as is shown in Fig. 1. It is noteworthy that: 1) the share of degree students substantially increased; 2) more and more universities got involved in the education for international students; and 3) there was a hike in the B&R student percentages, which rose from 45.4 per cent in 2014 to 64.85 per cent in 2017, according to China's Ministry of Education. This means that presently the bulk of the international degree students are from the B&R countries. It can be reasonably expected that the share of the B&R degree students will continue to rise in the upcoming future.

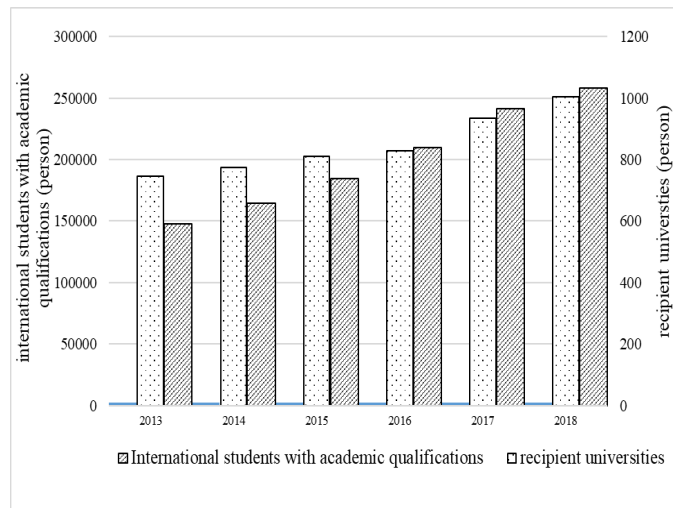


Fig. 1 Growth of International Students and Recipient Universities in China

Source: Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China

Because English is the one and only language that can cover all the B&R countries, as well as the fact that Chinese is not an easy language to master and literally none of the B&R countries' L1 is Chinese, English is naturally used as the medium of instruction for the overwhelming majority of the

B&R students. Under the circumstances, a growing number of Chinese universities begin to introduce their EMI teaching programs to cater to the B&R students' needs. According to a report issued by the CUCAS (China's University and College Admission System), in 2014, of all the universities which enrolled international students, only fifteen per cent conducted EMI programs. It is estimated this percentage is much higher today. However, as a new phenomenon, EMI teaching for the B&R students has presented many challenges to the universities.

To begin with, there exists an acute shortage of faculty members who are able to deliver quality EMI teaching. This poses the biggest challenge in the EMI implementation. Many EMI teachers lack overseas study or working experiences and their oral English proficiency level is low. On the other hand, English proficiency problems also occur on the part of the international students. Secondly, a number of EMI instructors tend to stick to the traditional teaching approaches, and there is literally no interaction between the teacher and the students in the classroom, which most students find alien. Thirdly, some universities enroll international students with a main aim to improve their positions in the university rankings, but relatively little attention and resource is allocated to the EMI programs. Last but not least, there is a paucity of comprehensive, consistent, top-down policies and regulations concerning EMI program offerings, rewards, and punishments, etc.

It is widely agreed upon that EMI programs constitute the basic building blocks in a university's internationalization. For Chinese universities, sending a number of students or teachers abroad for training is easy, which is just shallow internationalization, while providing enough quantities of quality EMI programs for the international students is a daunting task, which is nevertheless deep internationalization. Through the expansion of EMI programs, more majors and academic subjects are taught in English, and more teachers frequently use English in their teaching and research, which is definitely conducive to the internationalization of China's higher education. In a sense, the quantity and quality of EMI programs forms a litmus test of the progress of the internationalization of China's higher education. Chinese universities should fully take advantage of the enrollments of the B&R students to advance the internationalization process by introducing more high-quality EMI programs.

IV. MEASURES TO PROMOTE EMI TEACHING FOR THE B&R STUDENTS AND BEYOND

A. A university's EMI offerings are often seen as a simple but powerful indicator of its commitment to internationalization [6]. For Chinese universities and education authorities as well, in order to better serve the BRI and avoid being marginalized in the future international higher education competition, there is urgent need to overhaul the EMI policy and take serious actions to perfect EMI programs for the B&R students. Most importantly, let actions count. To Attach Greater Prominence to English as a Medium of Instruction

EMI has become the prevailing practice internationally for a long time, but in Chinese universities today, not so many

teachers and staff are aware of it. As an evidence, a search in the CNKI reveals that so far there is no publications with "EMI" and "international students" in the title. Without properly drawing upon EMI experiences from other non-Anglophone countries, it is hard to say how far EMI teaching for the B&R students can reach. To have a vision for tomorrow's internationalization, from the Ministry of Education to the rank-and-file EMI instructors, enough attention should be paid to and adequate resources allocated to making English as a major medium of instruction. Broadly speaking, the future EMI degree programs should benefit willing Chinese students as well, so to empower them with more ability to study or work overseas and better serve the country.

B. To Increase and Keep EMI Teachers' Motivation Level

To become a qualified EMI instructor is a daunting job. A teacher needs not only to possess enough professional expertise, but also, and very importantly, to have a good command of English, oral English in particular, plus cross-cultural communication skills. All these take time, effort and a lot of self-practice. Universities surely can recruit the Chinese who have obtained their PhD degrees from English-speaking countries, or train in-service EMI teachers in various ways, but the question is: how to motivate these teachers into devoting to EMI teaching? Presently most Chinese universities are inclined to prefer scientific research to teaching. Many EMI teachers do not think their efforts and hard work are properly rewarded. It is the job of policy makers, universities and the education authorities alike, to give EMI teachers a stable expectation by formulating consistent policies.

C. To Properly Roll out EMI Programs for the B&R Students

With a quantum leap of the scale of the B&R students over the past couple of years, more and more universities have began to enroll international students for degree programs. However, a number of these universities, second/third-tier universities in particular, are obviously short of qualified EMI faculty and other necessary supporting conditions. We believe that poor quality EMI teaching is detrimental to international reputation of China's higher education in the long run. In order to forge a strong China's higher education brand, strict feasibility studies and a proper roll-out policy are needed. On the university level, which majors and academic subjects are qualified for EMI teaching, on the national level, which universities are entitled to enrolling international students, both the university and the education authorities should make their right decisions.

V. CONCLUSION

The recruitment of international students is the centerpiece in any universities' internationalization activities. Taken into consideration that English is spoken at a useful level by around 1.75 billion people worldwide—that is one in every four people [7], it is a wise move and a good start on the part of Chinese universities to introduce EMI degree programs for the B&R students. A successful application of EMI teaching can

be beneficial not only for boosting Chinese universities' international competitiveness as well as raising their positions in the university rankings, but also for cultivating professional talents for the B&R countries and projecting China's soft power internationally. Only when serious and systematic measures taken to ensure the quality of the EMI programs, would EMI for the B&R students be a genuine blessing for the internationalization of China's higher education.

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