

Feasibility of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in Technical and Vocational Education: A Case Study in Southern Taiwan

Yi-Chein Lin¹, Pei-En Hsieh², & Chiung-Li Li³

Abstract

English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses are gaining popularity in higher education, including Taiwan, due to their links to globalization and competitiveness. Researchers examined the suitability of EMI courses for all students by selecting participants from a technical university in southern Taiwan who had completed a one-semester EMI course. A survey with ten quantitative and two qualitative questions was administered at the beginning and end of the semester to evaluate shifts in student perceptions. The study found that students experienced increased satisfaction, reduced apprehension, and acknowledged the challenges of EMI courses. While they did not believe the course directly enhanced their competitiveness, they reported improvements in listening, speaking, and vocabulary skills. Students also gained confidence and expressed interest in more EMI courses in the future. However, students with lower English proficiency faced difficulties, and there was a need for more time to grasp complex concepts. Suggestions for improvement included using games, adding Chinese elements, and rewarding participation.

Keywords: English-Medium Instruction (EMI), technical, higher education

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Motivation

The "2030 Bilingual Nation Policy" aims to gradually increase the use of English in education in Taiwan, from 12-year compulsory education to higher education. The goal is to position English as the mainstream language of instruction in Taiwan, with the intention of steering talent towards the international stage, attracting foreign individuals to Taiwan, envisioning a global presence, and enhancing international competitiveness.

Taiwan's higher education comprises two systems: universities and technical colleges. To align with the 2030 bilingual nation policy, English-Medium Instruction (EMI) appears essential in higher education. Many higher education institutions encourage teachers to incorporate EMI into their teaching methods. Yet, the question remains: Is EMI truly suitable for technical and vocational higher education in Taiwan?

Having extensive experience teaching in technical colleges, one of the researchers experimented with EMI in her course for a semester. Consequently, the researchers aim to investigate the viability of implementing EMI in technical and vocational higher education.

1.2 Research Purpose and Questions

The researchers aim to determine the suitability of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in technical and vocational higher education in Taiwan, and the specific questions related to this research purpose are as follows.

Q1. How do the students' opinions differ before and after the implementation of EMI?

Q2. What recommendations are made prior to and following the implementation of EMI?

¹Meiho University, No. 23, Ping-Kuang Rd., Nei-Pu, Pingtung 912009, Taiwan

² National Taichung University of Science and Technology, No. 129, Sec. 3, Sanmin Rd., N. Dist., Taichung City 404336, Taiwan

³*Corresponding author, Meihou University, No. 23, Ping-Kuang Rd., Nei-Pu, Pingtung 912009, Taiwan

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Recent Development of EMI in Higher Education

Tsou and Kao (2017) underscored the notable surge in the adoption of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) within educational institutions, propelled by the forces of globalization and internationalization. While bilingual and multilingual education have historically been present in various forms, the recent trend towards employing English as the primary instructional language in higher education institutions, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries, is increasingly prevalent.

In their study, Tsou and Kao (2017) also highlighted that in many EMI contexts, especially within higher education, English may not serve as the native language for any participant, nor is it necessarily dominant outside the classroom. Despite some advocating for a multilingual approach in higher education to bolster student access and academic success (Van der Walt, 2013), English remains the predominant choice as the primary instructional medium, particularly in Asia. This inclination primarily stems from English being one of the most widely taught foreign languages and its pivotal role in publications, technology, and academia in the twenty-first century (Graddol, 2006).

Similar to other Asian regions such as Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia, and Japan, Taiwan views EMI as a potent strategy for advancing university internationalization and has thus embraced EMI across various academic disciplines (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017).

Wei and Hricko (2021) emphasized that the drive for university internationalization serves as a significant catalyst for the implementation of EMI programs. Conversely, Gupta and Lin (2023) noted that many students and instructors are encouraged to adopt EMI as a means to achieve internationalization objectives. However, they caution against uncritically embracing the perceived popularity of the EMI trend without carefully considering its unseen risks and potential side effects.

In summary, the growing adoption of EMI is largely driven by globalization and internationalization. While bilingual and multilingual education have been around for a long time, English is increasingly favored as the main instructional language, particularly in countries where English is not the native language. Despite English often not being the native tongue in many EMI settings, it remains prevalent due to its significant role in global publications, technology, and academia. Taiwan, similar to other Asian regions like Singapore and South Korea, sees EMI as a strategic tool for advancing university internationalization. However, it is crucial to assess the potential risks and unintended consequences of EMI critically, rather than adopting it merely because of its rising popularity.

2.2 Advantages and Difficulties of EMI

EMI, touted as the most influential educational movement globally (Kym & Kym, 2014), has been widely adopted due to the perceived range of benefits it offers, spanning from personal to economic gains. Phuong and Nguyen (2019) outlined advantages such as cognitive benefits, increased access to resources, expanded learning opportunities, and enhanced employability prospects. Huang (2009) observed improvements in students' listening, vocabulary, and confidence following EMI courses, while Huang (2015) reported that learners perceived enhancements in productive skills like speaking and listening. Additionally, EMI is believed to bolster job competitiveness (Altay & Yuksel, 2022; Shboul, 2022; Talaue & Kim, 2020; Tamtam et al., 2012).

However, numerous studies have brought attention to linguistic challenges and limitations linked to EMI, encompassing comprehension difficulties in listening, speaking, and vocabulary acquisition (Ali, 2020; Al-Kahtany et al., 2016; Huang, 2015; Martínez, 2016; Ozer, 2020; Phuong & Nguyen, 2019; Tien, 2023; Vu & Burns, 2014; Wächter, 2008), impeding students' learning progress. Additionally, concerns have been raised regarding the linguistic qualifications of lecturers (Huang, 2015; Martínez, 2016; Ozer, 2020; Shao & Rose, 2022; Wächter, 2008).

In summary, while EMI offers numerous benefits, its effectiveness is tempered by linguistic challenges and concerns about the proficiency of both students and lecturers. Addressing these issues is crucial to maximizing the potential of EMI programs and ensuring that they meet their educational and professional goals.

2.3 Some EMI Case Studies in the World

The global popularity of EMI programs in higher education has been on the rise. However, the effectiveness of such programs can differ between countries. In Taiwan, for instance, several studies have highlighted positive outcomes associated with EMI. These include high levels of student satisfaction (Yeh, 2014), undergraduate students' self-reported improvements in listening skills, vocabulary, and confidence (Huang, 2009),

and a general consensus among students that more courses should be taught in English (Chang, 2010; Wu, 2006; Yeh, 2014).

In Japanese university classrooms, students often prefer a silent, seated approach to learning (King, 2013). In contrast, international students in Korea have expressed frustration over a lack of classroom interaction (Kim, Tatar, & Choi, 2014). Studies show that potential EMI faculty frequently exhibit hesitation, which is often linked to low confidence due to insufficient training or inadequate financial incentives (Byun et al., 2011; Morell et al., 2014). Additionally, research suggests that non-native teachers who share the same first language (L1) with their students may be more easily understood than native speakers (Major et al., 2002).

Martínez (2016) discussed a prevalent issue in EMI implementation, specifically the concerns about inadequate English proficiency among both students and lecturers. This "heterogeneity" in language skills is anticipated to be a challenge, particularly in Brazilian EMI contexts, where lecturers need to be well-prepared to manage these differences. Baumvol et al. (2016) surveyed 72 participants at a Brazilian university and found that the majority cited language-related issues as the main challenges in EMI implementation. Specifically, 58.7% of respondents expressed concerns about both teacher and student proficiency in English. In Europe, EMI was introduced to better prepare students for a globalized job market and to leverage transnational opportunities.

Graham et al. (2021) found that Arabic students generally supported the use of English as a medium of instruction, rather than a strictly monolingual approach to EMI. Arabic L1 students expressed positive attitudes toward using Arabic during class discussions but held neutral to negative views on its use in lectures, readings, and assignments. Based on these findings, policymakers, university administrators, and practical course instructors are encouraged to adopt practices aligned with English as the medium of instruction rather than enforcing a monolingual EMI approach.

Pun and Jin (2021) studied 73 students at EMI universities in Hong Kong and found that, overall, students experienced relatively few language and learning challenges. They preferred second-language (L2) learning strategies over first-language (L1) strategies, though first-year undergraduates encountered more difficulties in applying knowledge and relied more on L2 strategies compared to senior students. Wang and Yu (2023) supported previous findings that EMI is not particularly effective for mastering subject knowledge in English as a foreign language (EFL) context. The study also argued that increasing English proficiency admission requirements would not resolve the issue. Additionally, it emphasized difficulties in developing bilingual proficiency among Macau students in both academic and disciplinary contexts in English and their native language.

Zhang and Pladevall-Ballester (2022) examined the surge of EMI courses in mainland China as part of higher education internationalization. They found that while students initially held positive attitudes towards EMI, these attitudes tended to decline by the end of the semester. Research on EMI in China remains less developed compared to Europe, with a lack of insights into how students' attitudes change over time or vary between different EMI courses.

Iwaniec and Wang (2023) surveyed 247 students from various Chinese universities and identified that the main motivations for participating in EMI courses were improved job prospects, engagement with international communities, and gains in subject-specific knowledge and vocabulary. Many students also aspired to become bilingual professionals and enjoyed their EMI classes, though external expectations and teaching methods were less influential motivators.

Hamied and Lengkanawati (2018) observed that Indonesian students' English proficiency was not highly precise, but classroom interactions and communication remained effective due to a well-organized pedagogical approach. This structure helped ensure a successful teaching and learning environment despite the proficiency challenges. Conversely, Bolton et al. (2023) found in Phase One of their study that Indonesian university students displayed generally high English proficiency and managed EMI effectively, suggesting a positive experience with EMI in this context.

Lastly, Ambion et al. (2023) found that Filipino college students held a positive perception of EMI's benefits and reported a low level of difficulty with it. The study also revealed no significant correlation between learners' perceptions and gender, suggesting that gender does not influence their views on EMI.

Overall, while EMI has demonstrated benefits and positive perceptions in various regions, challenges such as language proficiency, teaching methods, and cultural preferences continue to impact its effectiveness.

3. Methodology

3.1 Subjects

The study involved a total of 12 participants from a technical university in southern Taiwan, comprising 4 males and 8 females. The initial survey occurred in February 2023, with the follow-up survey conducted in June 2023.

3.2 Research Instrument

The researchers crafted a questionnaire comprising 12 items pertaining to the EMI program, including 10 closed-ended questions and 2 open-ended questions, as outlined in the Appendix. Following this, two experts were consulted to validate the appropriateness and clarity of the item descriptions.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Quantitative data analysis

To address Q1 (How do students' opinions differ before and after the implementation of EMI?), the researchers gathered and scrutinized data from both the initial and follow-up surveys as outlined below.

Table 1: The Overview of Subjects' Feedback on the EMI Survey ($N=12$)

Item	M		SD	
	Initial	Follow-Up	Initial	Follow-Up
1	3.917	4.250	.900	.965
2	2.333	2.083	1.073	1.240
3	3.917	4.083	.900	.669
4	4.167	4.250	.835	.754
5	3.917	4.083	.900	.996
6	4.000	4.167	.853	.937
7	4.000	3.833	.953	1.115
8	3.750	3.833	.965	1.030
9	3.833	4.000	.937	.953
10	4.083	4.167	.793	.835

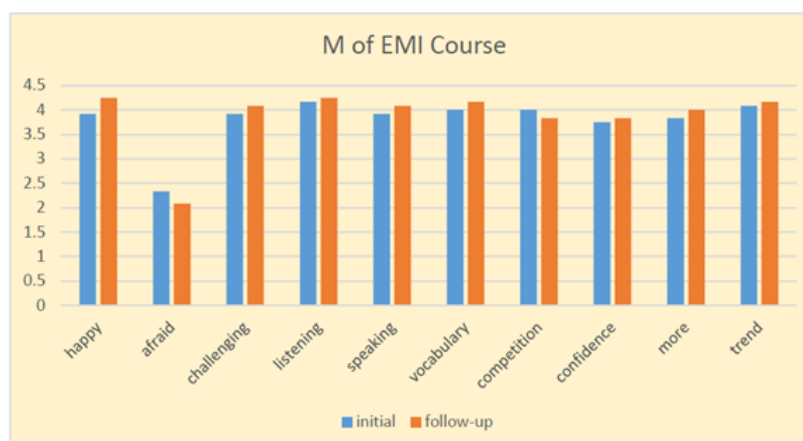


Figure 1: The Comparison of the Mean Scores Reflecting Subjects' Feedback on the EMI Survey

Table 1 and Figure 1 show a significant change in the subjects' perceptions after one semester of the EMI course. For Item 1, "I feel happy about the EMI course," the result indicated that participants felt happier, aligning with Yeh's (2014) findings but contrasting with Zhang and Pladevall-Ballester's (2022) study. Similarly, for Item 2, "The EMI course makes me feel scared," participants reported feeling less apprehensive, which was consistent with Huang's (2009) research. Item 3, "I find the EMI course challenging," suggested that subjects experienced more challenges, a finding that corroborates the studies by Ali (2020), Al-Kahtany et al. (2016), Huang (2015), Martínez (2016), Ozer (2020), Phuong and Nguyen (2019), Tien (2023), Vu and Burns (2014), and Wächter (2008).

In terms of skill enhancement, Items 4, 5, and 6—"The EMI course can enhance my listening skills," "The EMI course can enhance my speaking skills," and "The EMI course can enhance my vocabulary"—indicated that the EMI course significantly improved the subjects' listening, speaking, and vocabulary skills compared to their prior abilities. These results align with the findings of Huang (2009) and Huang (2015).

In terms of competitiveness, Item 7, "The EMI course can enhance my competitiveness," indicated that the subjects did not believe the EMI course would improve their competitiveness. Conversely, Item 8, "The EMI course can boost my confidence," suggested that the EMI course effectively increased the subjects' confidence. These results were consistent with the findings of Altay and Yuksel (2022), Huang (2009), Shboul (2022), Talaue and Kim (2020), and Tamtam et al. (2012).

Looking ahead, Item 9, "I hope there will be more EMI courses in the future," revealed that the subjects expressed a desire for additional EMI courses, which aligns with the findings of Chang (2010), Wu (2006), and Yeh (2014). Furthermore, Item 10, "The EMI course is a trend for the future," indicated that the subjects agreed that EMI courses are likely to become a trend, consistent with Van der Walt's (2013) study.

In short, after one semester of the EMI course, perceptions shifted notably. Subjects reported increased happiness and reduced apprehension about the course, though they found it more challenging. Skills enhancement was evident, with improvements in listening, speaking, and vocabulary. However, subjects disagreed that the EMI course would enhance their competitiveness, although it did boost their confidence. Looking ahead, subjects expressed a desire for more EMI courses and agreed that EMI is likely to be a future trend.

4.2 Qualitative data analysis

To address Q2 (What recommendations are made prior to and following the implementation of EMI?), in the beginning and end of the semester, the researchers prompted the participants to record their reflections and recommendations regarding the EMI course. Subsequently, they gathered and analyzed the qualitative data as outlined below.

4.2.2. EMI Initial qualitative data

(a) Thoughts on EMI Courses:

Disadvantages: Two students (16.7%) indicated that in areas they didn't understand, it was difficult to quickly grasp the content of the EMI course; two students (16.7%) mentioned that the EMI course is only suitable for students with a certain level of English proficiency; two students (16.7%) expressed that there is greater pressure during EMI course classes.

Advantages: Eight students (66.7%) mentioned that EMI courses can enhance listening skills, while three students (25%) highlighted that these courses can improve speaking abilities. Additionally, three students (25%) expressed that EMI courses can expand vocabulary. Two students (16.7%) stated that EMI courses can provide new knowledge.

In short, disadvantages of EMI courses included challenges in quickly understanding content, suitability for students with higher English proficiency, and increased class pressure. Conversely, most students found EMI courses improve listening skills, some noted enhanced speaking abilities, and some saw expanded vocabulary. Additionally, some students felt that EMI courses offer new knowledge.

(b) Suggestions for EMI Courses:

One student (8.3%) suggested incorporating foreign teachers to expose students to different accents; two students (16.7%) recommended having EMI courses primarily in English with supplementary explanations in Chinese; one student (8.3%) proposed offering more EMI courses to enhance listening skills; and one student (8.3%) suggested giving extra credit to students who actively engage in speaking English during EMI courses.

In short, suggestions for improving EMI courses included incorporating foreign teachers for diverse accents, using English with supplementary Chinese explanations, offering more EMI courses to enhance listening skills, and providing extra credit for active English participation.

4.2.3 EMI End-of-term qualitative data

(a) Thoughts on the EMI course:

Disadvantages: One student (8.3%) mentioned that it is more challenging for students with initially poor English proficiency to participate in the EMI course, and they need to listen several times to understand unfamiliar parts.

Advantages: One student (8.3%) mentioned that EMI courses facilitate communication with foreigners.; one student (8.3%) pointed out that EMI courses are challenging and boost confidence; two students (16.7%) stated that EMI courses allow them to learn more English knowledge from teachers; one student (8.3%) noted that EMI courses offer more video content related to the course material; one student (8.3%) indicated that EMI courses enhance understanding of English; six students (50%) emphasized that EMI courses improve speaking and listening skills; one student (8.3%) felt a significant improvement in their English through EMI courses; one student (8.3%) mentioned that EMI courses involve more interaction with teachers; one student (8.3%) stated that EMI courses increase vocabulary, and one student (8.3%) mentioned that EMI courses can provide a language environment to stimulate students' interest.

In short, disadvantages of EMI courses include challenges for students with poor initial English proficiency, who may struggle with content. However, EMI courses facilitate communication with foreigners, boost confidence, and provide more English knowledge from teachers. Benefits also include more video content, enhanced English understanding, improved speaking and listening skills, increased vocabulary, more teacher interaction, and a stimulating language environment.

(b) Suggestions for EMI Courses:

One student (8.3%) suggested offering EMI courses on a long-term basis; another student (8.3%) suggested incorporating games into EMI courses; another student (8.3%) suggested incorporating some Chinese into EMI courses; and one student (8.3%) mentioned that interaction with the teacher during EMI courses could be awarded bonus points.

In short, suggestions for EMI courses include offering them long-term, incorporating games, using some Chinese, and awarding bonus points for teacher interaction.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results, the researchers drew some conclusion as the following.

Firstly, the study participants face several challenges, such as (1) language barrier: non-native English-speaking students may encounter difficulties in comprehending specialized terminology and participating in class discussions, (2) learning pressure: learning in an unfamiliar language environment can create stress for some students, especially when required to verbally express themselves, and (3) cultural differences: stepping into diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, students may need to adapt to new learning styles and teaching methods.

Secondly, the subjects in the EMI course experience several advantages, including (1) language skills enhancement: EMI courses provide an opportunity to improve English language skills, which is crucial for future career development and international communication, (2) global perspective: learning in an English-language environment helps cultivate a global perspective, enabling students to better integrate into the globalized academic and professional fields, and (3) cross-cultural exchange: EMI courses facilitate cross-cultural exchanges among students from diverse backgrounds, fostering a broadened outlook and promoting diversity of thought.

Thirdly, the subjects enrolled in the EMI course encounter several drawbacks, such as (1) challenging nature: EMI courses may pose higher academic demands on students, especially in terms of language proficiency and subject-specific knowledge, (2) subject comprehension: students might face difficulties in grasping complex subject matter due to language comprehension barriers, and (3) mismatch for some students: some students may find it challenging to adapt to learning in a non-native English environment, potentially requiring additional support.

6. Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

6.1 Implications

Based on the results, the researchers suggest that when teachers use English as the medium of instruction, they need to balance the delivery of both English language and academic expertise. When teachers themselves are not native speakers, conveying professional knowledge in English may create a sense of distance, making the classroom appear flat and lacking in interactive engagement between teachers and students. This gap can widen the learning disparities among students. Therefore, before promoting the widespread use of English in higher

education, it is essential to first strengthen bilingual education in compulsory education (elementary to high school). Once the bilingual teaching model in compulsory education matures, efforts can then be intensified in promoting bilingual education in higher education. This way, using English as a teaching tool and language of learning can deeply take root in Taiwan's educational system.

6.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While the current study offers findings with both theoretical and practical implications, its design has some limitations. Future research could address these by recruiting a larger number of participants and including additional variables, such as participants' gender, major, and English proficiency, to enhance the generalizability of the results.

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Appendix

EMI Survey					
1. I feel happy about the EMI course.	5	4	3	2	1
2. The EMI course makes me feel scared.	5	4	3	2	1
3. The EMI course, I find it challenging.	5	4	3	2	1
4. The EMI course can enhance my listening skills.	5	4	3	2	1
5. The EMI course can enhance my speaking skills.	5	4	3	2	1
6. The EMI course can enhance my vocabulary.	5	4	3	2	1
7. The EMI course can enhance my competitiveness.	5	4	3	2	1
8. The EMI course can boost my confidence.	5	4	3	2	1
9. I hope there will be more EMI courses in the future.	5	4	3	2	1
10. The EMI course is a trend for the future.	5	4	3	2	1

Note: 5-strongly agree; 4-agree; 3-neutral; 2-disagree; 1-strongly disagree

11. Share your thoughts on the EMI course, including its strengths, weaknesses, and any challenges you may have encountered.

12. Provide your recommendations for the EMI course, such as suggestions for supporting measures or incentives.