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English Medium Teaching in Russian Higher Education: challenges and expectations (Kazan Federal University Case study)

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Abstract

The relevance of the research is justified by the global educational perspectives and transformation of the language instruction. English is predominantly changing its status and is more frequently used for delivering science and arts content. Tertiary teachers and researchers in non-English-speaking countries face the challenge of publishing their research findings in internationally circulated journals, participating in the global conferences and moreover delivering their courses in English. Total “Englishization” which is currently underway leads to the increased requirements to the tertiary institutions in terms of academia language proficiency as well as to their significant efforts to be recognized in the global education arena.

Besides, the global spread of English has led to a linguistic phenomenon of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), when most of its users are non-natives. Thus, English has become very flexible and English medium instruction (EMI) settings are prime examples of this. Many stakeholders consider EMI as a tool for creating opportunities for English learners and users to achieve success in both educational and workplace environments and join a global academic and business community. However, despite the EMI boom, little empirical research has been conducted on the issue leading to the lack of theoretical and practical background. To fill this void the research group aimed at exploration of the EMI phenomenon in the Russian Federation with the special focus on academia of Kazan Federal University, Institute of Management, Economics and Finance. The study methodology was based on the questionnaires and interviews with the tertiary teachers. The results have depicted that despite the pressing need for courses with English instruction in the curriculum, very few universities provide them, both at undergraduate and graduate levels. The reason is quite obvious – low English proficiency of professors and students on the one hand, and poorly-documented methodological framework for using EMI in the classroom, on the other. The situation is further complicated by the lack of advanced training programs for tertiary teachers where they can increase their language proficiency and learn and practice EMI methodology.

Therefore after the exploration of IMEF context in terms of EMI, the authors identified several challenges. Firstly, a significant part of professors who are potentially capable of teaching their courses in English feel quite unconfident about their public speaking in English. Most of them mention problems with students face-to-face communication, accuracy and fluency issue as well as insufficient academic vocabulary and teaching methodology.

On the basis of a pre-course survey the authors have developed an introductory short-term course “English for teaching proficiency” with the view to examine academia requirements and design advanced training program for EMI.

The post-cost survey has revealed that after the course more than half of the participants (65%) became more confident in terms of language accuracy and content delivery, 100 % - in terms of lecture structuring and public speaking skills. Almost everyone mentioned the value of the materials for their own course syllabus design. However, the respondents indicated the urgent necessity to enlarge the course with the view to enhance and practice academic vocabulary and interactive teaching methodology. Thus the study highlights the effectiveness of the chosen approach.

Keywords: higher education, medium teaching.

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Introduction

From many educational perspectives around the globe, teaching English has been immensely transformed, as the language itself has undergone an instructional shift from its position as a foreign language to a medium of instruction. In other words, English is being used to deliver and teach content in the sciences, math, history, business, and engineering both in public and private education at all stages – primary, secondary, and tertiary one. What is more, in many non-English-speaking countries scholars are being pressured to teach classes in English and to publish articles in internationally circulated journals, most of which are printed in English. Increasingly, international level meetings are being held entirely in English. English products of all kinds such as textbooks, journals, academic databases are dominating today's international academic marketplace (Byun et al. 2017, pp. 435-436). In responding to these new challenges, the governments have taken several steps to embed English into the core functions of universities, which is resulting in a concurrent “Englishization” of education and research in higher education all over the world. Besides, the global spread of English has led to such linguistic phenomenon as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The point is that vast majority of English users are non-native speakers which has affected the way English is being used in a global arena. Thus, English has turned out to be very flexible and fluid, and English medium instruction (EMI) settings are prime examples of ELF use. Many stakeholders consider EMI as a tool for creating opportunities for English learners to achieve success in both educational and workplace environments and join a global academic and workplace community.

Notwithstanding the fact that the world is seeing a tremendous boom in EMI as an educational model, little empirical research has been conducted on the issue. Thus, the research group aims to fill this void in its exploration of the EMI effects on language and content learning, teaching delivery, quality of education, and other multi-faceted aspects of EMI at Kazan Federal University, namely the Institute of Management, Economics and Finance (IMEF KFU). Under these circumstances there is a growing necessity for academic teachers to revise their teaching practices to provide high quality tertiary education

and engage students into the learning process. Moreover, ongoing technological progress poses additional challenges to the academic staff inducing them to integrate new technologies into their classrooms and teaching methods (Sungatullina, Murtazina, & Gorelova, 2017).

Theoretical background

Internationalization and language teaching in Russian Universities

Among many challenges Russian Federation faces today is the one of integration into the new global educational environment by involving Russian universities into internationalization and globalization processes. In this sense, the problem of national education system internationalization in general and internationalization of its separate educational and business entities in particular become very important (Koudelková, Strielkowski, & Hejlová, 2015). Internationalisation has been a major development of the 1990s and 2000s, but Russia has fallen behind its international competitors, and dropped from being near the top of the table in the latter days of the Soviet Union to being a second-division player, attracting only 2% of the international educational market in 2007 (Frumina, 2016). However, global trends towards increasing internationalisation in higher education in Russia have accelerated over the past few years. More and more Russian higher education establishments are embracing or expanding their international work such as dual degree programmes, academic faculty exchange, student recruitment and joint research. These activities support both the wider economy as well as the development of the institutions themselves, for example, through increasing the range and quality of degree programmes offered and enhancing research output.

However, despite the growth and further demand for international links and partnerships, there remain a variety of challenges. English language proficiency can be considered one of the key barriers. A university's approach to English, the capacity of its staff, the policies or assessment frameworks it follows can all impact the whole spectrum of internationalisation issues. For example, publishing research in English means it can be disseminated more widely; the capacity of faculty and staff enables partnership building and collaboration; and English language skills make international opportunities available to students (Frumina, 2016).

While Russian language is mandated as the medium of instruction for all degrees in Russia, there is leeway in the regulations which permits courses to be delivered partly or wholly in a foreign language. However, the following academic opinion offers a more sober evaluation of the situation. Tailoring courses in English for international students poses great challenges for Russian experienced professors. Most of them graduated from the university during the Soviet era when the role of English was diminished due to the political reasons. Thus, lots of academics now have no adequate language competence (Frumina, 2016, p. 118). The lack of English-medium courses at Russian universities has a negative impact towards the internationalization process. The result of low level English proficiency is that Russia has developed relatively few English-medium courses to attract foreign students.

English for academics

The English language proficiency of academics has already been highlighted as one of the obstacles in the way of introducing courses using English as a partial or total medium of instruction, both in face-to-face and distance programmes. It acts as a barrier at many levels. Firstly, it restricts any input or even reference to English-language sources on undergraduate courses and means that students have no reason to learn any English. It explains why students enter university with a low level of English but feel that this low level is quite adequate. It also demotivates students in EAP classes, explaining why students

place all EAP needs at the bottom of their perceived needs. Secondly, at graduate level, it impedes the introduction of English-medium master's courses for international students, both in face-to-face and distance modes. This in turn makes it difficult for Russia to increase the numbers of overseas students from outside the former Soviet Union and the income they generate. Thirdly, there is an adverse impact on collaboration in scientific projects and research dissemination. Russian academics face difficulties while submitting the articles to the international journals or presenting papers at international conferences. Finally, the restrictions on international research programmes and publications for Russian universities are reflected in poor scores in international university rankings.

Therefore, there is a growing awareness of the need for a course in English for academics for Russian academia, but meeting this need has been hampered by the lack of any published materials. Tomsk Polytechnic University has developed a PDP for the university academics which embraces a course in General English, English for Academic Purposes, English for Engineering, and a Presentation Skills Course (Frumina, 2016, p. 121). The similar EAP programme for academics from a broad range of disciplines was developed at St Petersburg State University by E. Rokhlina.

It has become apparent that the fundamental issue of EMI course within the Russian framework is low English language proficiency of academics at Russian universities. This obstacle has serious implications both internally and externally. Internally it undermines the aims and motivation of English language programmes for university students: because the academic staff make few English-language demands on their students, the students have little motivation to study English seriously or attain high levels of proficiency, and the ESP teachers often feel their efforts are frustrated. Externally, the limited dissemination of research is a factor contributing to the low rankings of Russian universities in international league tables.

The challenges described coincide with those experienced by Kazan Federal University, Institute of Management, Economics and Finance. The contradiction between the University management orientation on the internationalization and internal faculty non-ability to meet the requirements made authors examine the problem from the academia perspective and consider tools for boosting tertiary teachers' language proficiency.

Research methods.

The research was organized among 30 faculty members of IMEF from various professional departments ranking from teaching assistants to full professors. Their English language proficiency was estimated as B1-B2 (according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), and most of them had minor experience of using English as a medium of instruction in teaching professional subjects. The authors have developed an introductory course "English for teaching proficiency" with the idea to familiarize the academia with the EMI concept and to obtain a deeper understanding of the teachers' needs in terms of English language instruction. Therefore, the course commenced and finalized with a survey, which was aimed at estimating the target participants' expectations from the course and their subsequent matching with the course results.

The authors employed quantitative data collecting approach and the participants in both surveys were exposed to 18 Likert-scale questions and 1 open-ended question which were focusing on five key issues:

- The importance of English language proficiency and accuracy for tertiary teachers when delivering a lecture.

- The relevance of interactive teaching methodology for delivering a course.
- The importance of public speaking skills in teaching
- The issues of syllabus design in English.
- Teachers' expectations for the course versus its results.

The methods of descriptive statistics were used to analyze the results of the survey.

Results and discussion.

The results were interpreted separately for the pre-course and the post-course survey according to five indicators mentioned.

English language proficiency and accuracy.

More than half (62.3%) of the respondents highlighted the importance of English language accuracy for a lecturer, however, only 5.3% of the teachers involved considered themselves proficient English speakers experiencing no difficulties in communicating with students. Moreover, there were no respondents fully confident in their English speaking accuracy with approximately 47% absolutely lacking assurance in their English speaking skills.

This overall negative trend can be explained by relatively low exposure of teachers in IMEF into the English language environment. The academic staff rarely engages into the English language interaction within the classroom and have scanty opportunity to attend the workshops held by the foreign speakers. Thus, there is a great urgency in the construction of a solid framework where the teachers' English communicative skills can upgrade profoundly.

Interactive teaching methodology.

In the EMI environment a highly engaging instructor is considered to be one of the major keys to success. Indeed almost half of the participants (47.3%) highlight the relevance of the interactive teaching methods for the EMI course results. However, only 5.3% believe they are highly experienced interactive methods' users. The respondents admitted the relevance of experience in modern teaching methods since it strengthens students' both hard and soft skills, enhances students' motivation and knowledge and contributes to the successful acquisition of the material exposed. The participants confirmed the fact that the integration of English language practice combined with innovative and interactive teaching techniques training is particularly preferable within IMEF framework.

Public speaking skills.

An ability to speak in public is considered to be one of the major professional features for a teacher at all levels let alone EMI settings. For a classroom communication to be more efficient and the academic achievements of the students to be more vivid a teacher should demonstrate rhetoric and linguistic knowledge. Speaking in a foreign language poses multiple challenges to a teacher including emotional confidence and language intelligibility. Among the respondents only 34% felt fully confident when speaking in Russian with almost no one when speaking in English. Inevitable frustration can be evoked by the pronunciation issues, grammar patterns as well as inevitability of spontaneous speech during Q&A sessions.

Syllabus design.

The international requirements to the syllabus design are different from those accepted in the Russian Federation. Therefore, tertiary teachers have to adapt their courses to the international standards. Most of the survey respondents were either at the initial or in the middle stage of the syllabus development

process with only 21.1% having completed the procedure. The diverse assortment of requirements to the syllabus design as well as lack of pedagogical and methodological background is the issue that the academic staff in IMEF is challenged with.

Teachers' expectations.

As a result of the course more than half of the teachers (62%) expected to boost their academic vocabulary, 53% - to practice public speaking skills, 42% hoped to go deeper into lecture structuring and navigating language, 42% believed they would increase their classroom management skills and 84% regarded the participation in the course as a chance for career progression. Some respondents mentioned the importance of academic vocabulary practice together with professional terminology and grammar issues.

After the survey the authors have tailored a 36 academic hours introductory course "English for teaching proficiency" with the major focus on EMI in the ELF context and the requirements it sets to those teaching in English, syllabus design and lecture structuring, the benefits of interactive methods in the classroom as well as to the presentation structuring and delivering.

Participating in the post-course survey 57% of respondents admitted their increased English language proficiency, 64% became more confident in terms of language accuracy, 71% highlighted the relevance of the course materials for their own course syllabus design, 50% enhanced their academic vocabulary and 71% - public speaking skills. Moreover 71% of participants became more confident in lecture structuring and using interactive teaching methods.

However, teachers felt the need for a deeper academic vocabulary upgrade and public speaking practice and most of them proposed to increase the course at least to 72 academic hours.

Conclusion

The research conducted in IMEF revealed the fact that the university is currently and steadily integrating into the global academic environment. It is obvious that this ongoing change presupposes transformation of the educational process, curriculum design, teaching approach compiled with the teachers' and students' attitude to the English language. The needs of the academic staff in IMEF require their upgrade not only in the English speaking skills but in classroom management and interactive teaching. Thus, the EMI course tailored for the academic staff will involve these two dimensions of the teachers' demands to enhance the quality of the education provided within the framework of Kazan federal University.

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