

*Korean Undergraduate Students' Language Learning Strategies in English
Medium Instruction Courses: A Case Study*

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Abstract

English Medium Instruction (henceforth, EMI) in university courses is expected to have positive effects on university students' English language learning in non-English-speaking countries since they can learn English on campus (Macaro, 2018). For successful second language (L2) learning, efficient use of L2 learning strategies is essential (Oxford, 2017; Cohen & Wang, 2018). The goal of this study is to investigate, through qualitative research, how the experiences of EMI impact students' learning strategies for effective English learning. The data for this research were collected through class observations of 88 students in two EMI classes and in-depth interviews with two focus groups of five students and instructors at a Korean national university from April, 2019 to June, 2019. One of the classes was for first-year students who were taking an EMI course for the first time and the other for second or third-year students who had taken more than two EMI classes before. My data analysis has brought out the following findings: (1) students who had taken more EMI classes used more learning strategies than the others, (2) students used social strategies more often than the other strategies to understand complicated subject matters such as syntax, and (3) students combined different strategies to increase their understanding. The conclusion this research leads to is that students perceive EMI courses as effective and helpful for their English language learning and that more experiences of EMI can increase their use of learning strategies, which would facilitate their English learning.

Keywords: internationalization, English Medium Instruction (EMI), L2 learning strategies, immersion education, higher education

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Introduction

Due to globalization, English has been recognized as an important tool for international communication. One of the goals in English education is to help people to develop communicative competence of English so that they can communicate with people from other countries in English as global citizens. With this global trend having led to the requirement that students reach a higher level in English language ability and that educators teach English as a global language, English Medium Instruction (EMI) as content-based instruction emerged in Korea and other Asian countries such as China, Japan, Malaysia, and Taiwan between the late 1990s and the early 2000s (Naun, 2003). Korean universities implemented EMI courses as a means of higher education to improve their students' English skills as well as to enhance their readiness for the global job market because Korean students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Korea hope to be able to acquire high English proficiency with which they can communicate well with people from other parts of the world (Byun et al., 2011).

For this research, I examined how Korean university students' learning is impacted as they learn their major subjects through EMI courses. I conducted data collection to investigate how Korean undergraduate students enrolled in EMI courses at a national university in Korea study to learn English as L2 (L2: a second language), and how they use their learning strategies for attaining academic English proficiency while taking the EMI courses. I scrutinized how they study their major areas under the EMI policy and examined their language learning strategies in the EMI courses because language learning strategies are key factors in successful second language acquisition (Oxford, 1990, 2014, 2017; Cohen, 1996, 2012; Cohen & Wang, 2018).

Rationale

There are various approaches to English education. The content-based approach is one of them. EMI is a kind of content-based approach which is considered as a way of helping students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) to develop or improve their English abilities while taking classes. It is an alternative to prototypical immersion learning, but its effectiveness differs depending on the context (Swain & Johnson, 1997). In Korea, EMI courses are expected to have positive effects on bilingual education from a pedagogical standpoint because Korean children and students can learn English with no risk of losing their mother tongue Korean. Also, their identity as Koreans remains intact because they learn English at an institution within their home country. The evolving sociopolitical contexts of EMI courses implemented in Korean universities are closely related to globalization, which has had an impact on English language education in the country since English as a lingua franca has come to have significant political and social influences on communities worldwide (Crystal, 2006; Durham, 2014).

Since English communication ability is perceived as crucial in Korea, Korean students have greatly endeavored to acquire English so that they can communicate well in the language. Many Korean students go abroad to study in a country where English is a native or official language, hoping that gaining the experiences of being immersed in such an environment would help them to acquire English in a short time. However, it often turns out to be impossible, as pointed out by Combs (2012), who argued that

“There is still no evidence that children can learn a second language well in just one year, regardless of the approach used” (p. 80). Moreover, the students’ parents have been willing to make sacrifices to support their children’s studies and English acquisition in an English speaking country, taking on massive financial burdens regardless of their socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, many parents’ efforts to help their children acquire English in a short time were unsuccessful, resulting in their families being left in financial debt due to the high expenses for the students’ education overseas. These situations led me to inquire about how Korean students are studying English at a university in their home country where EMI courses are taught to undergraduate students by Korean professors. In this study, I looked into how beneficial Korean undergraduate students consider EMI courses, and whether they find opportunities to access academic English in EMI courses helpful for the improvement of their English abilities in college. Moreover, this study will provide new information about the challenges and issues EFL students encounter in relation to their learning strategies in EMI courses, showing how their learning strategies contribute to the enhancement of their motivation and the achievement of their goal of improving their English skills.

Theoretical Frameworks

This research is grounded in the theoretical framework of comprehensible input in second language learning (Krashen, 1985, 1989) and the sociocultural approach to second language development (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) as well as the conceptual framework of higher education in EMI courses (Macaro, 2018). Researchers have argued that English medium education such as EMI courses, immersion or bilingual programs in multilingual settings can provide an enriching repertoire to linguistically homogeneous English learning students through the maximal use of the target language (Swain & Johnson, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 2013). Nonetheless, while direct exposure to the target language L2 is important, how much students comprehend L2 is just as critical. According to the Input Hypothesis (IH) in second language acquisition research, comprehensible input with consistency is an essential environmental factor for successful second language acquisition since students are believed to naturally acquire a second language by receiving comprehensible input in their learning environment (Krashen, 1982, 1985). This study is designed to examine how Korean university students’ language learning strategies are utilized for attaining comprehensible input in addition to how their language learning strategies and their L2 development are associated with the EMI courses.

Children can develop and build their language competence through sociocultural interactions in social environments (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotskians (Swain & Lapkin, 2013; Lantolf & Appel, 1994) extended Vygotsky’s theory of mediation to children’s language learning and development. One of the conceptual approaches to the learners’ interactional strategies involved in language learning is a sociocultural theoretical perspective on second language learning, which theorizes a mediation of sociocultural interaction. Within EMI classrooms, students are to interact with their teacher and peers in English, which is their L2. From a sociocultural perspective of language learning, the learners’ communicative interactions can contribute to their L2 learning.

Many scholars have conducted research on language learning strategies to identify social language learning strategies employed in various sociocultural contexts (Donato & McCormick, 1994; Oxford, 1990, 2014, 2017; Cohen, 1996, 2012; Cohen & Wang, 2018; Ellis, 1997; Macaro, 2001; Reiss, 2011). Oxford (2014) stated that language learning strategies in relation to diverse learning circumstances and individual differences have complexity and flexibility. English Language Learners (ELLs) often use strategies related to specific attitudes or techniques intentionally to improve their English skills. These strategies are associated with increasing their motivation and self-regulated learning (Ames & Archer, 1988; Dörnyei, 1998). Social strategies are considered to be effective in making L2 language learning less stressful and fun. Likewise, EFL students' social language learning strategies in both individual work (e.g., trying to speak in L2 more often with peers or pay attention to what other students say) and group work (e.g., studying with friends to finish their course task or homework and/or reading the textbook together with classmates) are intended to provide the students with opportunities for sharing opinions or cooperating with their peers (Reiss, 2011).

Research Questions

This study presents how Korean university students' language learning strategies were practiced and changed when encountering difficult situations and challenges in understanding the content of English lectures. I scrutinized and analyzed the data I had collected by surveying two EMI classes with a questionnaire and conducting classroom observations and in-depth interviews. For this research, I developed such research questions as follows:

1. How do EMI courses at a Korean university affect undergraduate students' language learning strategies to understand the content of English lectures?
2. What language learning strategies do the students adopt to obtain comprehensible input? Why?
3. What differences are there in the use of the students' language learning strategies when they work in a group and individually?

Methods/Design

EMI is one of the alternative ways of English education adopted in Korea which is intended to challenge Korean students to develop and enhance their English communicative competence and capacity of becoming global citizens. To find out how effective EMI courses are, what problems they have, and how to overcome them, it is necessary to research English learners' perspectives of EMI courses. For this purpose, I conducted a case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2017) on two undergraduate EMI courses at a Korean national university through a qualitative research methodology to look into the categories of the students' language learning strategies in the process of their L2 learning and how they perceive the effectiveness of the EMI classes for the improvement of their English proficiency. I analyzed the students' language learning strategies and scrutinized my data from the learners' perspectives to find out how they prepared to study as well as how they resolved the difficulties they encountered in the EMI classes. I examined how they use their language learning strategies to improve their English abilities in such a social setting as an EMI class at a university in Korea.

The EMI courses aim to (1) improve the students' four skills of English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing by teaching the major subjects in English, and (2) foster and enhance their competence of academic English. With this research, the Korean undergraduate students will have an opportunity to look into their own experiences in an EMI course and their language learning strategies.

Participants

I conducted my research at a Korean national university, which is a flagship national university in South Gyeongsang Province, Korea because the school provides EMI courses for undergraduate students. I selected 88 students to collect data on their perspectives on the EMI courses during one semester. The participants in this case study are freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Although the courses were mainly for the students who were majoring in English Language and Literature, they were open to other majors, also. The students earned three credits by taking these courses. The students enrolled in the EMI courses listened to the professors' lectures given in English more than 90%. When taking the EMI courses, the students met in a classroom three hours every week, participating in class presentations and group discussions.

Data Collection

This research is a case study of two EMI courses at a national university in Korea, which was conducted by focusing on the learners' perceptions and strategies to acquire English. For data collection, I conducted a questionnaire survey, class observations, and interviews with 10 students and 2 professors in the two EMI classes at the university. I observed the EMI courses once a week for three months to see how the students behaved in the EMI classes and looked into their English language learning strategies. I conducted uncontrolled non-participant observations for my data collection to find out how the students in the two EMI classes performed their learning strategies when interacting with their professors and their peers on a weekly basis from April to June 2019. I observed the students' participation in the EMI classes, focusing on how they listened to the professors' lectures delivered to them in English, how they asked questions and engaged in discussions, and how they engaged in individual and group work.

Data Analysis

The theoretical frameworks that I adopted in this research facilitated my data analysis and interpretations to examine how the EMI courses can benefit linguistically homogeneous English learning students with the maximal use of English as their target language. I utilized theories of language learning strategies in second language acquisition (Oxford, 1990, 2014, 2017; Cohen, 1996, 2012; Cohen & Wang, 2018; Reiss, 2011) to interpret my findings of language learning strategies into four categories: metacognitive, cognitive, social, and compensatory strategies. I conducted a qualitative analysis of the data from the observations, interviews, analysis of the data from focus group interview data, classroom observation recordings, field notes, and the students' works in the EMI classes. Afterwards, I conducted data-driven coding for the data including the interviews that I had transcribed, finding common themes across the collected data, according to the codes I had created, and categorized

the data along with their characteristics in relation to my research questions (Gibbs, 2008). Subsequently, I analyzed the overall data.

Results

The findings from the focus group interviews were integrated with the information collected from the class observations. From the data analysis, three themes emerged from the findings of this study, which were related to the use of the students' language learning strategies in the EMI learning for obtaining comprehensible input.

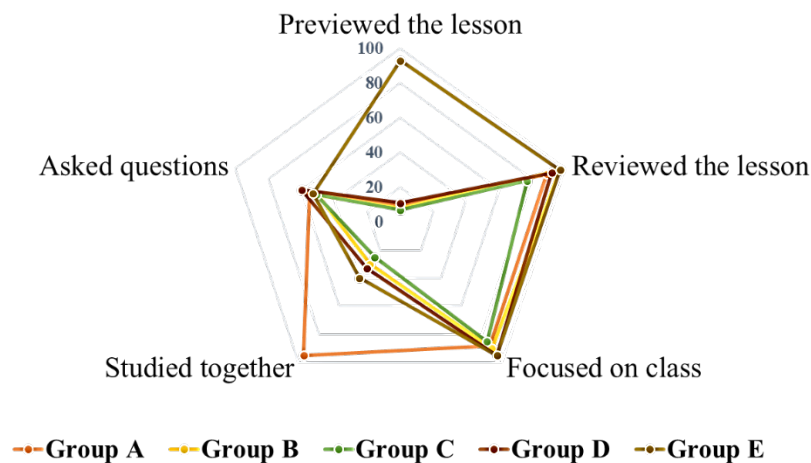
1) Use of more language learning strategies (henceforth, LLS) in EMI

Students used more language learning strategies (LLS) in the EMI than in the non-EMI classes. This is because EMI is an immersion instruction conducted in English only for the Korean students. Naturally, the EMI courses were harder for them, so they had to study more in the EMI than in the non-EMI courses. Oxford (1990) stated that “[l]earning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (p. 8). Students described how they did in EMI as follows:

Table 1 *Students' Descriptions*

Student A: “I have to study more with various learning strategies in the EMI course than in my first language instruction courses. It’s hard for me but it’s English immersion learning.”
Student B: “After the EMI course, I always reviewed what I learned and marked what I did understand or need to learn more before I forget. In comparison to the Korean instruction class, EMI is much harder for me and English instructions are easily forgettable, so I have to study more.”

Figure 1. How I did in EMI



The graph in Figure 1 above shows what ten students in the focus group did more in the EMI than in the non-EMI courses. In the EMI classes, students had higher motivation for English learning to improve their English abilities. They did more reviews for the class lessons, were more focused in class, and studied terminologies more in the EMI classes than in the non-EMI classes. However, there were differences found in previewing among the students. For example, only two students did a preview for most of their EMI classes, that is, over 90% of the classes during the spring semester while others did a preview for less than 20% of the classes. Most students stated they studied alone in preparation for the EMI classes while only two students mentioned they preferred to study together with their classmates.

2) Use of social strategies for complicated subject matters

It has been brought out that students use social strategies when faced with complicated subject matters.

Table 2 *Students' Descriptions*

Student C: "I prefer a group study"

Student D: "When I study with my classmates, I can ask one of them about several things I don't understand or missed in EMI class"

Student E: "We study together to share the content of EMI because it is too much for me"

3) Integration of different LLS to increase their understanding in EMI courses.

Additionally, it was found that students used different strategies. For example, they used not only cognitive language learning strategies, taking notes of key points, but also social language learning strategies, by listening carefully to what their peers say and asking the professor and/or students questions in the EMI classes. The students said, "I study alone for reviewing, but I study together for a difficult EMI course", showing that they used social language learning strategies as well as cognitive language learning strategies. My participants were the students who began learning English from elementary third grade under the 7th curriculum. Therefore, they have kept studying English since they were around ten years old.

When in high school, they used only cognitive language learning strategies such as taking notes of key points or making summaries of new information, but while taking EMI in college, some students made study plans and some students noticed that there were gaps or weaknesses in their English. They stated, "I developed my high school English language learning strategies further and used more strategies while taking EMI in college." Therefore, it could be inferred, from my in-depth interview analysis, that the students integrated cognitive LLS with metacognitive LLS or integrated cognitive LLS with compensatory LLS to increase their understanding in the EMI courses and improve their English abilities.

Conclusion

With the data from a case study focusing on college students' perceptions about the effectiveness of EMI and their language learning strategies in the two EMI courses at a national university in Korea, this research has shown how Korean university students endeavor to enhance their academic English competence with the use of various learning strategies. Additional research on EMI courses will be needed at various levels to further identify students' English language learning strategies and their roles in the development or improvement of their English proficiency. It is important to look into how students are studying and how their learning strategies contribute to their English language learning to find better ways to teach and learn English.

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