

Students' Perceptions of English-Medium Instruction in a Hong Kong University

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine English-medium instruction (EMI) policy implementation in a Hong Kong university by studying the students' perceptions. A survey was conducted in March and April 2014 after which 606 questionnaires were collected. Four factors, "English for career", "English for learning", "English for internationalization" and "Preservation of tradition", emerged that had differential effects on students' university life satisfaction and intention of migration. Though students did not perceive the threat of English in enhancing their subject matter knowledge, they were concerned about their academic results, motivation to learn and in-class discussion due to EMI. Some perceived the risks of traditional language attrition and culture loss in the university. In addition, variations of perceptions of the four factors were found across students of different disciplines. The study also provides implication on the "brain drain" issue since young and educated people have a high tendency of migration.

Introduction

With internationalization and marketization of higher education, the growth of English-medium instruction (EMI) outside the English-speaking Anglo-Saxon countries is phenomenal (Coleman, 2006; Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2013; Wilkinson, 2013). Researchers have examined the reasons of EMI expansion in terms of broader issues such as economic, social, political and educational forces (Tsui and Tollefson, 2004; Wilkinson, 2013) or institutional policies that encourage student mobility (Altbach and Knight, 2007), global university rankings (Hazelkorn, 2009) and English for research and scholarship (Ammon 2001). Other commentators have however argued against the EMI policy (Pennycook, 2002; Phillipson, 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

English-medium instruction has also emerged in Asian countries. But unlike in Europe, few available sources often associate EMI with colonization or decolonization (Altbach, 2004; Majhanovich, 2014). Otherwise, it is yet to thoroughly examine its implementation, especially in higher education (see for example, Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim and Jung, 2011; Hu and Lei, 2014). Also, relatively few studies have addressed the issue from the stakeholders' point of view.

It is important to conduct a study in higher education given its rapid development in the region and the important impact of EMI on the stakeholders.

Hong Kong has complex and fluid linguistic situations. Though Cantonese is dominant, English is regarded as critical for internationalization and an asset for career advancement (Tsui, 2004). Studies of EMI policy and implementation are mainly conducted in the secondary school contexts (Lo and Lo, 2014). In higher education, most universities adopt English as medium of instruction. But the Chinese University of Hong Kong ((literally “Chinese-Language University”)) provides an interesting case as it is the only government-funded research university with a long cherished bilingual (i.e. Chinese and English) and bicultural tradition. Introduction of EMI policy has aroused much controversy in recent years (Choi, 2010; Li, 2013).

Research Questions and Significance of Study

In sum, this paper attempts to examine EMI implementation in a Hong Kong university from the following perspectives. First, we want to study the perceptions of higher education students. In particular, we investigate how this issue relates to their university life satisfaction and academic performance. Second, given the irreversible trend of internationalization (or Englishization) of higher education, we would like to know how students are concerned about the loss of local Chinese culture and language. Third, the study would have implications on the “brain drain” issue since young and educated people have a high tendency of migration. The following research questions are addressed:

1. How do the Chinese University of Hong Kong students perceive the importance of English-medium instruction in terms of their career, learning, internationalization and effect on tradition?
2. How do these factors relate to their university life satisfaction and academic performance?
3. How does the use of English-medium instruction associate with the issue of brain drain? Does it affect the intention of the students to migrate?

Methods and Data Collection

The unit of analysis was the undergraduate students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. A survey was conducted between March and April 2014 using convenience sampling. Students were distributed with questionnaires inside the classrooms and explained of the purpose of the study with instructions. A total of 606 questionnaires were collected. Data were analyzed with descriptive statistical analysis, followed by exploratory factor analysis, ANOVA and multiple regressions.

Besides, the study also included detailed analyses of policy documents and reports published by the university or elsewhere. Information collected was examined in light of the recent theoretical and empirical literature debate regarding the above issues.

Findings and Analyses

After factor analysis and reorganizing some scale items, four factors have clearly emerged with sufficient alpha reliability (ranging from 0.797 to 0.880). They were “English for career”, “English for learning”, “English for internationalization” and “Preservation of tradition” that had differential effects on students’ university life satisfaction and intention of migration. While positive significant effects were found for two factors “English for career” and “English for internationalization” on “University life satisfaction”, the other two factors “English for learning” and “Preservation of tradition” showed positive effects on “Intention of migration”. But no effect was found regarding the four factors on the academic performance of the students.

We note that students have acknowledged the instrumental reasons of English-medium instruction, that is, for career advancement and internationalization of the university. But for the “English for learning” factor, their perceptions were diverse. Though they did not perceive the threat of English in enhancing their subject matter knowledge, they were worried that their academic results, motivation to learn and in-class discussion could be disadvantaged. In addition, some were concerned about a possible “domain loss” (Smith, 2004) that there might be risks of traditional language attrition and culture loss.

We also analyzed the effects of some background variables on the above four factors. We had the following observations. First, gender did not play any effect on these factors. Second, it seems that senior students perceived the importance of EMI for

internationalization to a greater extent than their junior counterparts. Third, wide variations of perceptions of the four factors were found across students of different disciplines. For example, regarding the “English for learning” factor, students of Arts, Education and Social Science faculties did not perceive the effect of EMI on their learning when compared with those from Engineering, Science, Law and Business faculties. They were also more inclined to treat English as a “threat” to the tradition of the university. For the “English for career” factor, students of the business, engineering and law faculties were more supportive to EMI policy, reflecting a pragmatic reality for them. However, students of the Education and Medicine faculties did not share such mentality.

This study tries to present some valuable insights to align the EMI policy with the actual perceptions of the students in an Asian higher education context. Such notion of English language policy also provides short-term (students’ university life satisfactions) and long-term (intention of migration) implications.

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