

BEHIND THE IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IN AN EMI UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

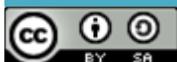
This study aims to examine the improvement rate of students after their one-year study at an EMI university as well as to further explore the challenges and the opportunities they encounter throughout the period. To answer those questions, 100 first-year students from one EMI university were recruited as research participants through a purposive sampling method: 20 participants from A1 - C1 level. The participants were assigned to do a standardized test prior to the start of their study (pre-test) and after their one-year study (post-test). The improvement rate was analyzed quantitatively using T-tests. Data about the challenges and opportunities they encounter to improve their English proficiency was collected through a questionnaire and analyzed qualitatively. The result shows that the improvement of English proficiency is experienced by all groups (A1-C1), with B2 group who get the highest improvement. From the questionnaire, it is found out that writing skill gets the least improvement. The factors that promote and impede their progress are also discussed. This gives valuable information which can affect English teaching and learning materials and methodology in order to maximize the opportunities of studying in an EMI university.

Keywords: Challenges, EMI, English proficiency, improvement; opportunities.

1. Introduction

In the globalization era in which English proficiency determines the competitiveness of an individual or a country, education institutions, especially the higher education ones, are thriving to make sure that their graduates can compete in the global market. One of the policies which is applied to increase graduates' competitiveness is implementing English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) policy. EMI, which is also referred to as bilingual immersion and content & language integrated learning (Dearden, 2014) is often practiced to meet this goal.

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EMI policy has become a significant educational trend (Graddol, 2006) in many countries because being proficient in English is considered as a capital to modernize and develop a country (Hu, 2008) and that English is the language of the top-level business, tourism and education (Vinke, Snippe and Jochems, 1998). The decisions behind the implementation of EMI by many educational institutions are often triggered by the economic concept of globalisation (Collins, 2010) which promises the best opportunities and academic and career advancement for those with proficient English (Crystal, 2012).

Dearden (2014) outlined that there are several important reasons why there is a marked rise in the emergence of EMI policy in educational institutions in ESL & EFL countries. To ESL countries, implementing EMI is deemed as a way a university can maximize subject integration opportunities, enhance education level to compete in a global market as well as attract more international and exchange students to study in their institution. On the other hand, the reason behind the implementation of EMI in EFL countries appear to be more about language acquisition. In Indonesia and Japan, this policy is to raise foreign language skills so that the students can compete in a global market.

The implementation of EMI in EFL countries are often influenced by the requirement of learning in an English-speaking country. It can be frequently seen that institutions applying EMI put the requirement of a certain TOEFL or IELTS score as one of its admission requirements as it is practiced by the universities in English-speaking countries to their international applicants.

Studies in the field of language learning and teaching supports the idea that a second language is learned most effectively when learners are exposed to sufficient input of the target language. Intense exposure to English, which is promised by the implementation of EMI, becomes the rationale underpinning this practice. It is largely based on the idea that second language acquisition is similar to first language acquisition. The rationale for EMI in university level is often based on theories of acquisition which support a naturalistic process of language learning similar to first language acquisition in which learning takes place effortlessly and automatically, with the requirements that there is sufficient exposure to English and the learner is sufficiently motivated feels the need to do it.

Research on EMI has indicated that its implementation has caused improvement on various aspects of language competence, including lexis (Lo & Murphy 2010), speaking (Ruiz de Zarobe 2008), and writing (Lasagabaster 2008). These studies have generally found advantages of CLIL programs over non-CLIL ones. For example, Ruiz de Zarobe (2008) found that the CLIL students outperformed the non-CLIL in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and content.

While there has been an extensive number of studies and a general belief that the implementation of EMI policy can improve English proficiency, only limited study (Lei & Hu, 2014) explores what actually happen during the period of exposing learners to English-speaking environment. This is the gap that this study aims to fill in: explore the opportunities & challenges learners encounter to inform a more effective and responsive teaching and learning policy, method, and material in order to maximize the potential of learning English in an EMI university. In addition to that, this study also aims at measuring the improvement rate among learners with different English proficiency levels to provide extra information for the basis of setting a certain TOEFL or IELTS score as a student admission requirement to an EMI university which is mostly adopted from the implementation TOELF or IELTS score requirement in English-speaking country.

To address those goals, the following research questions are formulated: (1) To what extent does initial language proficiency affect the improvement rate of students in one year?; (2). What are the opportunities and challenges learners encounter during their first year of study in an EMI university?

2. Research Methods

This study applied mixed-method for the data analysis. The quantitative research was applied to measure the improvement of participants' language proficiency over a one-year period. On the other hand, the qualitative research was applied to gain in-depth responses from the participants about the challenges and opportunities they encounter regarding the development of their language proficiency while studying in an EMI university. The participants of this study were 100 first-year students in an EMI university in Indonesia from all study programs available in that university, ranging from International Relations, Communications, Elementary Teacher Education, Actuarial Science, Accounting, Management to Engineering study programs. All of

those 100 participants were recruited through a purposive-sampling method grouped based on their initial TOEFL test score acquired during the university English placement mapping. 20 participants represented each of the CEFR levels of A1, A2, B1, B2, and C1 group. This purposive sampling method was applied to ensure that each group was represented by an equal number of participants and, therefore, the improvement rate among those groups are valid.

The instruments used in this study were a pre-test document (TOEIC test), a post-test document (TOEFL test), and an online questionnaire. TOEIC test was chosen as a post-test document because of considering that not all freshmen came from an English-speaking university. Thus, a more general English test would be more accurate to capture the participants' language proficiency level prior to the start of their study and an academic English test, like a TOEFL test, would be better used to measure the participants' English proficiency level after their one-year exposure to an EMI university. To measure the improvement rate of their pre-test and post-test score, the pre-test score (TOEIC score) was first converted to a TOEFL score using the Conversion Table below. Finally, correlation test was conducted to measure the improvement rate of their Pre-TOEFL score and their post-TOEFL score.

Table 1. TOEFL Conversion table

TOEFL			TOEIC	IELTS	CAMBRIDGE SUITE	COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK
Paper	Computer	Internet				
677	300	120	990	9.0		
665	290	118	957	8.5	A	C2
650	280	114	924	8.0	CPE B	
635	270	110	891	7.5	C	
618	260	105	858	7.0		C1
602	250	100	825	7.0	CAE A	
587	240	94	792	6.5	B	
572	230	88	759	6.0	C	
558	220	83	726	6.0		B2
547	210	77	693	5.5	FCE A	
533	200	72	660	5.0	B	
520	190	68	627	5.0	C	
508	180	64	594	5.0		B1
496	170	60	561	4.5	PET	
484	160	56	529	4.5		
472	150	52	496	4.0		A2
460	140	48	463	4.0		
447	130	44	430	4.0		
433	120	40	397	4.0		A1
420	110	36	364	3.5	KET	
407	100	33	331	3.5		
392	90	29	298	3.0		
376	80	25	265	3.0		
358	70	22	232	3.0		
342	60	18	199	3.0		
325	50	15	166	3.0		
310	40	12	133	3.0		
300	30	8	100	3.0		

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The online questionnaire consists of several likert-scale statements to measure their perception towards the improvement they think they have acquired on four language skills (Speaking, Listening, reading, and Writing). In addition to that, some open-ended questions were designed to capture their responses on what are the factors that give significant impact to the improvement of their English proficiency.

Data collection happened in two stages:

1. Stage1:Pre-test,beforethetstartoftheacademicyear(September2018)
2. Stage2:Post-test,aftercompletingaone-yearstudy(September2019)

A TOEIC test was conducted in stage 1, with coordination with President Development Centre. A TOEFL test was conducted in stage 2 along with the distribution of online questionnaire at the end of the test.

Data was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results of the participants pre-test and post-test were compiled and the improvement rate of each group (A1-C1) was measured by conducting a T-test. On the other hand, the responses on the online questionnaire were analysed qualitatively.

3. Findings and Discussion

To answer the first research question, the improvement rate of each group wasmeasuredby doing a correlation test (T-test) toward the pre-test and post-test score. The results of each group were presented below.

Improvement Rate of A1

Table 2. A1 Paired Sample Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	PreA1	333.2000	20	3.99473	.89325
	PostA1	356.2500	20	29.03152	6.49164

Based on the table above, the average of pre-test in A1 is 333.2. After the implementation of the method, the average score of A1 improves to 366.25. The improvement (23.05 points) should be tested by paired sample t-test to see whether the improvement is significant or not. The paired samples t-test results may show in the table below.

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The table above shows that t-score is -1.527 that is significant in error level of 0.143. This level is higher than maximum error level that this research may tolerate: 0.05. Based on this result, it can be summarized that there is no significant improvement of TOEFL Test score before and after action. Or the action did not improve the TOEFL score in A2 Group.

Improvement Rate of B1

Table 6. B1 Paired Sample Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair1	PreB1	459.1000	20	2.40394	.53754
	PostB1	479.2000	20	31.34964	7.00999

Based on the table above, the average of pre-test in B1 is 459.10. After the implementation of the method, the average score of B1 improves to 479.2. The improvement (20.1 points) should be tested by paired sample t-test to see if the improvement is significant or not. The paired samples t-test results may show in the following table.

Table 7. B1 Paired Sample Test

		Paired Differences	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)				
		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
Pair1	PreB1 – PostB1	-20.10000	30.60598	6.84371	-34.42404	-5.77596	-2.937	19	.008

The table above shows that t-score is -2.937 that is significant in error level of 0.008. This level is lower than maximum error level that this research may tolerate: 0.05. Based on this result, it can be summarized that there is significant improvement of TOEFL Test score before and after action in B1 Group. In other words, B1 group get

Behind the improvement....

the most advantages of English proficiency improvement. Their English proficiency improves significantly just by spending one year studying at an EMI university.

Improvement Rate of B2

Table 8. B2 Paired Sample Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 PreB2	518.0500	20	14.83763	3.31779
PostB2	543.4500	20	24.47227	5.47217

Based on the table above, the average of pre-test in B2 is 518.05. After the implementation of the method, the average score of B2 improved to 543.45. The improvement (25.40 points) should be tested by paired sample t-test to make see whether the improvement is significant or not. The paired samples t-test results may show in the following table.

Table 9. B2 Paired Sample Test

		Paired Differences			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
					Lower	Upper	
Pair1	PreB2 – PostB2	-25.40000	19.90610	4.45114	-34.71634	-16.08366	-5.706 19 .000

The table above shows that t-score is -5.706 that is significant in error level of 0.000. This level is lower than maximum error level that this research may tolerate: 0.05. Based on this result, it can be summarized that there is significant improvement of TOEFL Test score before and after action in B2Group.

Improvement Rate of C1

Table 10. C1 Paired Sample Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 PreC1	571.9500	20	18.18176	4.06556
PostC1	574.1000	20	27.99229	6.25927

Based on the table above, the average of pre-test in C1 is 571.95. After the implementation of the method, the average score of C1 improved to 574.1. The improvement (2.15 points) seems too small, and should be tested by paired sample t-test to see if the improvement is significant or not. The paired samples t-test results may show in the table below.

Table 11. C1 Paired Sample Test

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Paired Differences Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
				Pair1 PreC1- PostC1	-2.15000			

The table above shows that t-score is -0.408 that is significant in error level of 0.688. This level is higher than maximum error level that this research may tolerate: 0.05. Based on this result, it can be summarized that there is no significant improvement of TOEFL Test score before and after action. Or the action was not improved the TOEFL score in C1 Group.

Overall Result

Table 12. Improvement Rate among Groups

Group	TOEFL Improvement	t-value	Sig	Summary
A1	23.05	-5.398	0.000	Significantly Improved
A2	9.45	-1.527	0.143	No Improvement
B1	20.1	-2.937	0.008	Significantly Improved
B2	25.40	-5.706	0.000	Significantly Improved
C1	2.15	-0.408	0.688	No Improvement

Based on the table above, the biggest improvement is B2 Group. It is proven by t-test result that shows that B2 t-score is the highest. Therefore, it can be summarized that the method was most effective for B2 Students Characteristics. The improvement in B2 is in line with language theories which require a certain threshold of English score to

get admitted in an EMI university (Coleman, 2006). Interestingly, not only proficient users who seem to benefit from the EMI policy.

In the table above, it can be seen that the A1 group also benefit significantly from the EMI environment to a percentage of improvement which is really close to that experienced by B2 group. This merits further research.

Learners' Perceptions on their English Improvement

To answer the second research question, learners' perceptions on their English improvement are collected through a likert-scale which ranges from 1 to 5, with 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.

Table 13. Perceptions on English Improvement Based on Skills

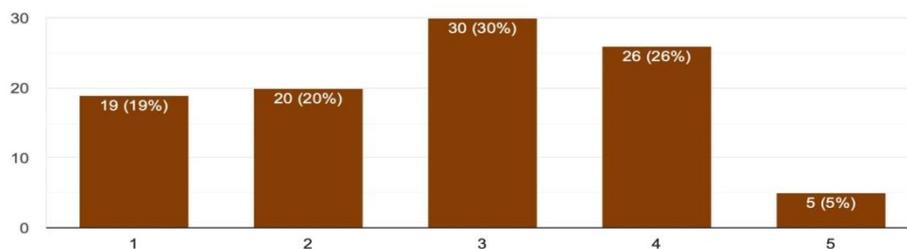
Skills	Agree/ Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
Speaking	69%	23%	8%
Listening	62%	28%	10%
Reading	69%	23%	8%
Writing	60%	35%	5%

From the table above, it is clearly seen that the skill which the participants reported to have improved most significantly are Speaking and Reading. Also, the data show that two-thirds of the participants perceive that improvement happen to the four language skills, with Writing skill considered as the area with the least improvement compared to the other three skills. It is further captured in the open-ended question that writing is the most difficult skill to improve. This could be linked to their difficulty in reading academic textbooks. In one of the Likert-scale, it was found out that almost one-third of the participants (31%) claimed that it was difficult for them to understand written course textbooks or academic materials and almost one-third of them (30%) were ambivalent. The difficulty of grasping knowledge in a scientific and academic language was experienced by more than half of the participants. This can be seen in the following graphic.

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It is still difficult for me to understand course materials (journal articles, textbooks, etc) written in English.

100 responses



Graphic 1. The difficulty of grasping knowledge

Factors Supporting Improvement of English Proficiency

There are three major factors which play an important role in the improvement of learners' English proficiency, they are lecturers, major association (BEM) and students' club and communities. It is interesting to see that the factors which support the improvement of their English proficiency lie on their interaction (active engagement) with their teachers and peers rather than their exposure to English language materials in textbooks, movies, games, etc. This can be observed in the following figure.

My English proficiency has improved because of the following factor(s) ...
{you can tick more than one option}

10 / 100 correct responses

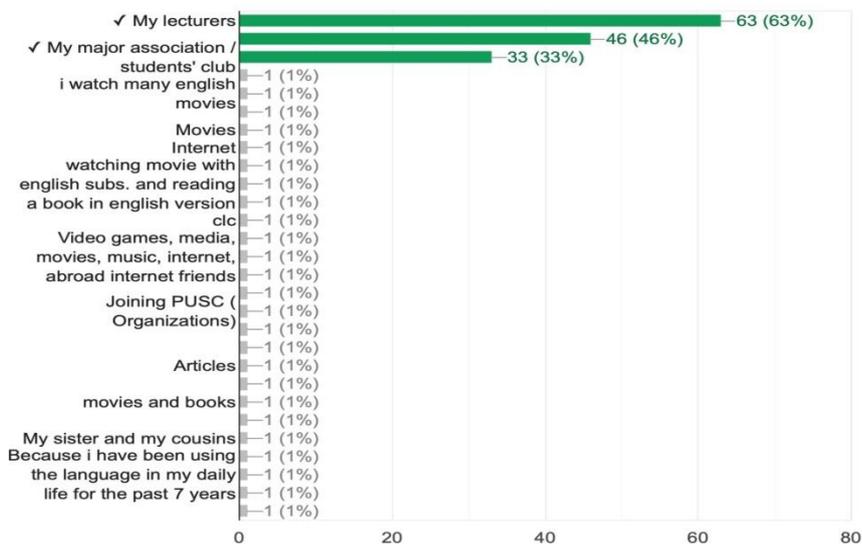


Figure 1. Factors Supporting Improvement of English Proficiency

Furthermore, the open-ended questions reveal that the advantage they get out of studying in an EMI university is higher motivation and confidence to use English. They admit that they get more motivation to improve their English because it has become a need and that they also see that they are not the only one who got average English. This

is in line with a study conducted by Moratinos-Johnston, Juan-Garau & Salazar-Noguera (2018).

The other advantage recurrently reported by the participants is feedback from peers and lecturers. It seems that students feel positive towards feedback. Instead of seeing it as a criticism, many of them admit that feedback is something they expect to get especially from lecturers to improve their English proficiency.

Factors Impeding Improvement of English Proficiency

The first most significant factors which participants reported to impede the improvement of their English proficiency is students' preference to speak Indonesian language out of classrooms and during group discussion, especially when the presence of a lecturer is not there to help them when they do not know the words or feel uncertain about the grammar of their sentence. It implies that students grouping should consider the existence of the more proficient students to help their less proficient peers when using English outside classrooms.

Another challenge reported by participants are errors spoken by their friends. These were reported to trigger them to get trapped into making the same error. Errors are often ignored, not corrected as they do not always feel good correcting their friends' English especially when errors happen here and there. It can be understood that error correction is an important thing to give as its absence can lead to the downgrade of English proficiency (Amara, 2015; Erdogan, 2005). This gives implication to further study which focus on training students several ways of giving error correction. In addition to that, there should also be a culture promoted by the stakeholder to maintain students' positive view towards correction, not as something demotivation or humiliating but as something constructive.

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirms the existing research on how intense exposure to English language use accelerate the improvement of English proficiency. More interestingly, this study has expanded the scope of the implementation of EMI. It has been widely researched that only proficient users are considered able to function well and to benefit from an English-speaking institution. Those studies might back up the policy behind making a certain TOEFL or IELTS score as the requirement for university admission.

However, this study reveals that even the non-proficient user of English benefit significantly from the EMI policy. the result shows that the A1 group benefit significantly from the EMI environment indicated by the improvement rate of that group which is really close the improvement rate experienced by the B2 group. it indicates that there could be some major differences of the implementation of EMI policy in an English-speaking country with that in a non-English-speaking country. This merits further research.

In addition to that, more focus should be given to the development of English proficiency which involves human interaction. It is found out that learners benefit a lot from their interaction with their teachers and peers rather than the printed materials. It is recommended that EMI university provides a student's club or language centre which could be an informal way of students to acquire English through its use in a daily communication. The implication of how online platform could accommodate these needs merit further research.

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