Reflection Paper

A Reflection on Whether EMI is a Practical Objective

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At the 2018 CUE Conference, two speakers touched on English-medium instruction (EMI), which has been a trending topic in Japanese education in the past decade (Brown, 2018). The plenary speaker, Kay Irie, gave a talk entitled "Innovation behind the scenes: Challenges and opportunities for universities in Japan," which focused on the challenges her department faced when introducing a new EMI curriculum. In contrast, in a presentation called "Supporting the Transition from EFL to EMI," Howard Brown discussed what he considered the failures of many Japanese EMI programs to date. The differences in perspectives were interesting, and I found myself wondering how my experiences in Japanese universities related to what they described, and whether it is even possible to have a successful EMI program, given the relatively low levels of English proficiency among Japanese university students.

The term English-medium instruction can be a bit vague as there are shifting perceptions of what it means. Brown (2015) uses the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) definition which refers to virtually any class taught in English that does not have the specific objective of teaching the English language itself. This is unlike Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and another term, Content-Based Instruction (CBI), which have primary goals of teaching language through the use of content. These methods rely on authentic (and interesting) materials; however, there is an element of level-specific scaffolding (O'Neill, 2017), unlike a typical EMI approach. The idea of CBI is not limited to just English instruction,

and teachers in other countries have found it to be effective (Douglas, 2017). Two more terms to add to this list of abbreviations are English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and the perhaps more common English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The former is a general description of classes that target the language of certain professions, such as aviation, medicine, or business. The latter is what has become common in many universities in non-English speaking countries, as these institutions start to focus on preparing students for study in an all (or mostly) English-language environment. While Irie suggested the need for a progression from EAP to CLIL to EMI, Brown suggested that EMI students needed simultaneous EAP support in order to be successful. It is worth noting that many Japanese universities are now accepting scores from the Test of English for Academic Purposes (TEAP) test, as it includes listening, speaking, and reading components that aim to evaluate skills that students may need should they join one of the newer programs with an EMI or CLIL focus.

Brown was quite critical of the current direction of many EMI programs in Japan. He said, and I have noticed this as well, that any program in Japan that proclaims itself to be both content-based and in English gets a stamp approval as an EMI course by MEXT. This "approval" allows the university to tick certain boxes when reporting its curricula, which furthermore allows the university to receive government support (this is true for private universities as well). However, this is self-assessed, and it is up to the instructor to make the decision.

I have been approached by staff asking me to include a line in Japanese in my published syllabus that my Western Cultures class is taught in English only. One concern I have is that, given the mixed level of students, I have found that perhaps just 10-20% can follow the content as delivered, and another 80% need varying levels of support, such as writing vocabulary on the board and explaining content in different ways. This is not so surprising, as the classes have a mix of students from different faculties, some of which typically score higher on standardized English exams than others. Also in the class are a number of international students who are often quite capable of handling the content without much scaffolding. Most of these students are actually multi-lingual and a bit older than my first- and second-year Japanese students, and there is

an argument to be made that successful EMI courses in Japan need to focus on more mature and experienced students.

Brown suggested it is necessary to have a reading speed of about 200 words per minute, which would allow students to finish an article in 5 minutes' time. Regarding content, the volume of what Japanese students are asked to handle in Japanese universities is only a fraction of what they would be burdened with in a true EMI situation, such as in an overseas university or in a domestic program with a large number of native English speakers and returnees. Brown (2015) reported that the typical length of an EAP text to be perhaps a fourth of what an EMI text would require, and without boosting the students reading speed they would be unlikely to successfully complete an assignment in a reasonable amount of time. I have seen this myself, where relatively high-level freshmen in a general English class at a 'foreign language' university take 20 minutes to read a single New York Times business trends article of 1,000 words, all the while stopping to check vocabulary in their electronic dictionary. At such a speed it is impractical to have such activities as they detract too much from the limited discussion time in class. Instead I will give these reading assignments as homework, as will most of many of my colleagues. I do know of Japanese instructors who will spend an entire class providing a line-by-line translation of such a text, however, there is no expectation that such as class would be classified as EMI.

This lack of reading fluency is perhaps the biggest obstacle students face when wanting to be successful in EMI classes, be they in Japan or overseas. For decades the focus when reading English in Japanese classes was to translate literature, and these exercises were intensive rather than extensive. In some of my classes, I have tried to inspire students to read more graded materials outside of class, but many are lacking the motivation to read more than the minimum I require.

In Irie's description of the process of setting up a new faculty at Gakushuin University, she discussed how the university originally had hopes of recruiting first-year students with high levels of English. She noted that once the exams had been administered, the incoming classes were not as proficient at English as had been anticipated, and the gap between CLIL and EMI classes was too great. Brown (2018) notes that all but the highest tier universities may have trouble

recruiting highly proficient students ready to join EMI programs. In order to make the program successful, Irie said they needed 200 students per year, but given the actual English ability she realized there was a need to adjust entry requirements and create bridge courses to prepare their students for overseas study.

A number of standardized test scores are now being accepted by Japanese universities as a part of their English language entrance requirements, but Japanese public high schools in general only focus on the EIKEN and GTEC. Scores from IELTS and TOEFL are also being accepted; however, preparation is left to cram schools. I have spoken to Japanese high school teachers of English, and they readily admit that the amount of reading and writing practice students get in high school is generally insufficient to get the students up to a level that would qualify them for a full-on EMI program or overseas university study. Once out of university, the TOEIC test becomes the focus, which is the test that over 2,500 Japanese companies use for setting proficiency goals (Japan Today, 2013).

The truth of the matter is that very few Japanese high school students are anywhere near the required level to succeed in a local program where subject matter is taught only in English (sometimes referred to as an overseas EMI program). Returnees, depending on their experiences, may be able to do well in such programs, but the requirements are quite high. Many American university undergraduate programs require a minimum TOEFL iBT score of 70 to 80, and elite institutions 100 (Muniz, 2017). The average Japanese TOEFL taker scores just 71, whereas Chinese speakers average a score of 79, and at the highest range are the Dutch who average 100 (ETS, 2017). The indigenous exam Eiken is more affordable than the TOEFL, and the test sites are country-wide. Students may think they are doing well by passing level 2 by the end of high school, but although this is the target of MEXT, the reality is even level pre-1 requires only a short writing sample, and the grading rubric is designed to pass a majority of the test takers.

Due to these deficiencies, overseas universities understand that in order to attract Japanese students, they need to provide EAP and ESL preparatory

programs that allow students to come to their institution despite lacking the necessary standardized TOEFL or IELTS test scores. This experience can be good for the students, as they can make great strides when immersed in a language, but it is not a given that after 12-24 weeks of study they will be able to handle university-level classes.

It is worthwhile asking the question why Japanese universities are being encouraged to offer EMI classes in the first place, given the small number of students who are actually preparing for them. Universities rely on tuition from students, and as Irie mentioned, if enough students are not qualifying, then the entrance requirements will be relaxed. English-medium instruction allows Japanese universities to appeal to international students who do not speak or read Japanese (Brown & Bradford, 2017; Susser, 2017), but it is likely that importing international scholarship-dependent students and adding in a few returnees will not provide enough of a financial base for continuing a large-scale EMI program.

Since it is unlikely a significant number of high-proficiency Japanese students will be coming out of the high schools anytime soon, universities need to consider how these programs will fare in the future. The internationalization of businesses and shift by some high-profile companies such as Rakuten and Fast Retailing to have meetings in English does make the news and might provide motivation for students, but it is still a tiny fraction of the total number of companies in Japan (Tanaka, 2018). Some companies are using TOEIC scores when screening job applications, as well as providing incentives for current employees to do improve their scores, though such scores alone are no guarantee of fluency (Kansai Gaidai Alumni News, 2015; Murai, 2016). Some Japanese I know have told me their companies have goals and incentives, and I know teachers who do TOEIC lessons on site at companies in order to prepare employees who may be slated to go overseas, yet how much companies weigh the value of good English skills when hiring new graduates is still not clear and is an area ripe for research. It is logical that students who successfully complete an EMI program will probably be ready to do well in the international arena, but the key is that they not lose their motivation due to difficulty and drop out.

Given the challenges most non-native speakers of English face, one solution

some EMI degree programs use is a student-centered methodology to increase involvement (Zhang, Zheng, Zhang, & Zhang, 2019); however, as Susser (2017) notes, these programs still end up relying on a high percentage of lectures, which is to the detriment of the students and hurts retention. Brown concluded his presentation with a warning that even motivated students drop out of EMI programs when faced with the harsh reality that their language skills are not good enough, and if such programs are going to succeed, more will need to provide ongoing support. To me this makes sense, although I feel that the EMI drive is an impractical objective handed down to universities by a government eager to boost the image of Japan's universities quickly. A more logical approach would be to provide much more time for English study in the elementary and junior high school, and then focus on CLIL in high school and university. As a teacher I enjoy teaching subject matter I am interested in, and I think this is true for many others. A large number of English language instructors I know with master's degrees in TESOL earned them after receiving a bachelor's in an entirely different subject. Brown acknowledged as much but noted in his talk that finding native English-speaking lecturers who are up to date in their respective fields and able to adjust to the Japanese university culture is challenging. I believe a more likely solution is to hire Japanese who have very high levels of English and good teaching skills, but finding people with just the right skill set is not easy. Once found, however, these teachers may be highly motivated, as their passion may lie in history, art, the environment or business. Giving them the opportunity to teach Japanese university students such subject matter in English, albeit with some CLIL or CBI scaffolding, is most likely the best approach for all.

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