The effects of English-medium instruction on language proficiency of students enrolled in higher education in the UAE

Submitted by

Dawn Rogier

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Signature:  Dawn Rogier

Date:  June 26, 2012
ABSTRACT

This research seeks to discover what happens to students’ English language skills while studying in English-medium classes in UAE universities, and to look at how this compares with what instructors and students think happens to students’ English proficiency during the four years of study. This is explored through a retrospective panel study using a test/retest method to investigate score gains on the IELTS exam after four years of undergraduate study. Student and teacher beliefs about how English-medium instruction (EMI) affects language proficiency, the need for language support after admission, and the selection and delivery of course materials are discussed in conjunction with the research findings, leading to recommendations for institutions whose primary goal in using EMI is to increase proficiency. This research continues the exploratory research of Elder and O’Loughlin (2003) and O’Loughlin and Arkoudis (2009) regarding score gains in IELTS after a course of study, but this study is situated in a society where the language of instruction is not the language of communication for the students outside the university and at home.

The research findings indicate that there is a statistically significant score gain in all four of the English-language skill areas that are tested by the IELTS exam after four years of EMI for the participants in this study. The most gain occurred in the area of speaking, followed by reading, writing and then listening. Results from questionnaires and interviews indicate that students and teachers have different perceptions regarding language ability and the problems associated with the use of English for instruction. Students generally do not feel that studying in English causes problems for them, and they rate their ability in listening, reading, writing and speaking as good to excellent. On the other hand, teachers do not feel their students’ language ability meets expectations for students studying in an English-medium environment and think that their students are especially weak in the areas of writing and listening. Teachers feel that they must make adaptations to course content and assessment criteria due to students’ language ability. The research indicates that institutions whose goal it is to increase language proficiency through EMI need to have clear instructional goals in place for language development along with support systems for teachers and learners throughout the entire educational experience and not just in pre-academic support programs.
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LIST OF ACRONYMS / ABBREVIATIONS

ADEC    Abu Dhabi Education Council
ANOVA   One-way between-groups analysis of variance
CBI     Content Based Instruction
CLIL    Content and Language Integrated Learning
CEPA    Common Educational Proficiency Assessment
EAI     English-aided instruction
EME     English-medium education
EMI     English-medium instruction
EFL     English as a Foreign Language
ESL     English as a Second Language
FNC     Federal National Council
GPA     Grade Point Average
GSC     General Secondary Certificate
GSS     Graduating Senior Survey
ICLHE   Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education
IELTS   International English Language Testing System
KHDA    Knowledge and Human Development Authority
MOE     Ministry of Education
MOHESR  Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
PCA     Principal Components Analysis
SLA     Second Language Acquisition
TESOL   Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages
TMI     Turkish-medium Instruction
TOEFL iBT Test of English as a Foreign Language administered via the Internet
TOEFL   Test of English as a Foreign Language
UAE     United Arab Emirates