

English as a Medium of Instruction in Ukrainian Higher Educational Practices: Challenges and Suggestions

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This paper aims to analyze the current situation with EMI (English as a medium of instruction) teaching in Ukrainian universities. The author outlines the main challenges that teachers and students face and provides certain suggestions on how to address the existing challenges, preserve and improve the efficiency of EMI teaching in Ukraine. In the course of the research, the author relies on his own EMI teaching experience and describes and generalises the experience and solutions offered by the colleagues. The author claims that EMI teaching nowadays has become one of the key elements of the strategy for the internationalization of higher education in Ukraine. More and more Ukrainian universities offer EMI bachelor and master programs which are very popular among international students from various countries. However, effective and rapid switch to EMI teaching turns out to be problematic for most of the universities because they are lacking in teachers with sufficient English proficiency and academic mobility experience. To improve the quality of EMI teaching in the nearest future mentioned two features have to be prioritised and supported by the respective higher education institutions. The author also claims that another important factor that significantly influences the efficiency of EMI teaching is the low English proficiency of the international students. Most of the international students have CEFR level B1, which is consistent with the current enrollment requirements of most universities but turns out to be insufficient for the comprehension of most study materials. The author suggests that changing enrollment requirements to CEFR B2 and adding international language certification to it could help to avoid numerous challenges and complications. As the practical suggestion for teaching philosophical subjects in English, the author, generalizing his own EMI teaching experience, describes the possible strategy of curriculum development and provides some recommendations on topic choice and strategies for teaching philosophical courses in English.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction, curriculum development methodology, internationalization of higher education in Ukraine, international students, teaching philosophy

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Introduction

Currently, Ukrainian education and science undergo a substantial transformation due to the recently enacted legislation. Internationalization of higher education appears to be of great importance within the strategy of pro-European reforms in this field. Increasing the share of international students in the universities is a commonly accepted and important milestone on the way of efficient internationalization (Knight, 2008: 3). Keeping this in view, most Ukrainian universities, both private and owned by a state, became much friendlier and open for international students in recent years. Preparatory departments that provide preliminary Ukrainian language and culture classes, lower entry requirements, comfortable accommodation, and paperwork support – all of those benefits increase the competitiveness of Ukrainian universities dramatically (Liashenko, 2018; Nelipa et al., 2018).

Particular financial and political factors explain why Ukraine attracts more and more international students every year. Ukrainian universities offer a good quality higher education for a relatively lower price if compared to the similar bachelor and master programs of European and Asian universities. Ukrainian university diplomas are also recognized by many countries all over the world and in most cases, graduates will not need to do any further recertification.

Another strategy of marketing and making “customer acquisition” for the Universities easier is an implementation of subject teaching in foreign languages. The geographical location of Ukraine in the middle of Eurasia and the intersection of the eastern and western cultures have numerous advantages for the prospective internationalization of higher education. Bilingualism inherited from being a part of the Soviet Union (Csernicskó&Máté, 2017; Besters-Dilger, 2009) appears to be one of them when it comes to accessibility of Ukrainian education for the residents of all the ex-Soviet countries as well as the former countries of Warsaw Pact. University programs delivered in Russian for the first 20 years of independence had been the only alternative to Ukrainian programs offered for foreigners. Nowadays, more and more Universities decide to incorporate the advantages of teaching in English into their educational practices. Such a step allows broadening the scope of prospective international students and developing international mobility. As a result, subject teaching in English becomes in increasing demand. However, it also appears to be a serious challenge both for the administration of the Universities and their teaching staff because the employment of such teaching in the circumstances of Ukraine is a complex and long-term problem. In the author’s opinion, the possible solution for this problem might be the accumulation and analysis of the existing experience, which unfortunately remains poor.

This article aims to generalize and describe the experience of teaching Philosophy in English for the international undergraduates and Ph.D. students of different majors (International Law, International Business, Software Engineering, Linguistics, etc.) at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and State University of Infrastructure and Technology.

Since there is a substantial increase in the number of international students in Ukrainian universities in the last several years, sharing this experience may be up to date and beneficial for stakeholders such as teachers of arts and humanities who are about to begin working with an international audience or administration staff who are involved in planning and improving study programs. In the article, we will discuss the following points. Teachers’ skills are needed to deliver a particular subject in English. Command of English and teacher-student communication. Philosophy syllabus and topic choice that matches with international students’ needs.

English as a Medium of Instruction. Challenges for the Teachers

First, we would like to focus on the required skills that EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) teachers must have and challenges that they have to cope with in course of their work. Most of them are in the frames of English language proficiency and EMI teaching experience. Concerning the former, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine recommends the CEFR level C1 and considers CEFR level B2 to be a minimal requirement. The latter is mostly a matter of academic mobility and exchange. Obtaining those skills up to the appropriate level sufficient for EMI turns out to be problematic in Ukrainian circumstances.

In the 2020 “English Proficiency Index” (Education First, 2020), Ukraine was ranked 44 of the 100 countries included. Such rank means that the level of English proficiency in Ukraine is moderate on the scale of “Very High – High – Moderate – Low – Very Low.” “Low” level is consistent with CEFR level B1. In comparison, neighbouring Poland holds the rank of 16 and pertains to the countries with a “high” (CEFR B1+) level of English proficiency. Unfortunately, we must admit that there is no positive tendency in moving to the top of the rankings. In 2017 Ukraine was ranked 41st of 71 countries, in 2018 – 43 of 88 countries, and 2019 – 49 of 100. For several recent years, Ukraine either remains on the same level or moves towards the bottom of the list of ranked countries. The conclusions that could be driven from this tendency and figures are that the efficiency of teaching English at all levels of education in Ukraine is not sufficient. Such insufficiency could be partially explained by the English proficiency level of EGP/ESP teachers in Ukraine. According to a recent study conducted by British Council on this matter, only 61 per cent of ESP teachers of each of the 15 participating Ukrainian universities demonstrated the CEFR level C as a result of the “Aptis” test. 39% of tested teachers did not reach that level, and 4 per cent were tested at the CEFR level A2/B1. At the same time commonly, recognized European standards of English proficiency for EGP/ESP teachers are C1 for secondary school and C2 for higher education institutions (Bolitho & West, 2017: 32-39). The report also states that the certain official Ministry standard has not been established yet.

As a result, when it comes to EMI teaching, obtaining a proficiency level higher than B1/B2 appears to be a matter of self-education and essential expenses from the teachers end. The bare-bones budget of most Ukrainian teachers prevents them from taking effective and expensive classes in private language schools. (Monthly payment for such classes may take up to 20% of the total teacher’s monthly income)¹ Moreover, language self-study is a time-consuming endeavour impossible for many teachers due to their workload. Accordingly, a large amount of EMI teachers cannot improve their English proficiency what is confirmed by the statistics presented in the aforementioned British Council study. The study has shown that the average level of English proficiency among the EMI teachers of the 15 most representative higher educational institutions of Ukraine is between B1 and B2 CEFR. An only a small proportion of the EMI teachers had shown the level C1.

Under such circumstances, most of the EMI teachers have to perform “learning by doing,” improving their level of proficiency in course of teaching. Such a way of dealing with the problem may give a positive outcome, but at the same time, it may affect the quality of the classes delivered in English. Key recommendations that the organizers of the “English

¹ The approximate monthly salary of a Ukrainian EMI teacher is between 10000 and 20000 UAH. The average price for the semester of study (4 months) in the leading language schools in Kyiv (British Council, Cambridge First Educational Center, etc.) is about 12000 UAH.

Proficiency Index” give to the higher education institutions aiming to contribute to the general English proficiency improvement are:

- a) “Teach English using a communication-based methodology.
- b) Give students frequent opportunities to speak English through activities like English clubs, theme days, classroom twinning, school trips, and guest speakers.
- c) Provide a forum for teachers to share best practices and get advice about teaching English effectively.
- d) Give teachers a straightforward path to improve their own English.
- e) Include English language requirements for all university majors.
- f) Allow subject classes to be taught in English if both the students and the professor meet the requisite English level” (Education First, 2019: 43).

In the author’s opinion, taking into account the present situation of Ukraine, we still have a lot of things to do, especially about recommendations 4 and 6. The fulfillment of mentioned recommendations will allow breaking the vicious circle of English proficiency limitations in a more fast and effective way.

The lack of experience appears to be the second major challenge that may be faced by the EMI teachers. By this, we mean not only the active EMI teaching experience which in most cases is completely absent but the “passive” experience of being involved in the professional activity performed in English as well. Academic mobility, a common thing for European and American education and science, is the only efficient way for prospective EMI teachers to acquire the essential skills by observing and practising under the supervision of experienced foreign colleagues. In our opinion, there are at least two obstacles on the way of using this opportunity by Ukrainian teachers. First is a pandemic of COVID-19 that led to a suspension of numerous international mobility programs. The second is legislation issues that make the process of mobility approval too complicated and time-consuming. For the last several years Ukrainian government has improved many regulations in this field, but there are a lot of changes that still must be implemented to make the overall process simpler and more efficient. In the meantime, the only option that is available for those teachers who would like to improve their EMI teaching skills is online video courses on either specialized online platform (“Coursera,” “GetSmarter,” “Udemy,” etc.) or YouTube. Taking such courses will provide EMI teachers with useful, practical examples to creatively follow in their future teaching. On the other hand, active practice is also a crucial part. Our experience has shown that switching to English in all possible research activities such as academic publications, conference speeches, panel discussions, etc. not only helps with breaking the wall of isolation within certain local research paradigms but also with English fluency improvement. The same could be mentioned regarding using English translations of any specialized literature needed for teaching and research as primary in case reading the original text is not possible.

Command of English and teacher-student communication

Sufficient English proficiency is important not only for EMI teachers but also for students enrolled in the course. Students’ proficiency limitations can substantially impact the efficiency of teaching.

After seven years of EMI teaching experience in different higher educational institutions in Ukraine, we must admit that the English proficiency of international students in Ukraine is

not always sufficient for effective participation in the learning activities. The vast majority of international students of non-linguistic majors could be placed between B1 and B2 (CEFR) in terms of their English proficiency. However, within a single academic group, there could be students with A2. The level of C1 is common mainly for the student whose major is linguistics. For other majors, it appears to be rather a rear case. Moreover, the majority of the international students demonstrate inconsistency in levels of different language skills. For instance, their reading skills may be at B1 while speaking, listening, and writing at A1-A2.

In our opinion, the reason why such a situation occurs is that most of the universities in Ukraine do not require international students to provide proof of their English proficiency, such as international language proficiency certificates (ILTS, TOEFL, FCE, etc.) Entrants' proficiency is mostly being verified by universities themselves during the entry exams and enrollment. International certificates, on the other hand, can guarantee the consistency of all the students' language skills and the accuracy of the certified level.

Another reason is relatively low language proficiency entry requirements (Level B1 CEFR) that in most cases prove themselves not to be sufficient for the subjects being taught. In the case of philosophy and other humanities, the linguistic complexity of the study materials is far beyond the skills and vocabulary range of CEFR level B1.

Considering such a peculiarity almost every EMI teacher in Ukraine faces, to make the teaching more efficient, it is strongly recommended to begin with the English proficiency placement test. It can be performed both in oral and written form depending on the skill which is more required for completing the assignments of the course. In the case of the philosophy course, which consists mainly of speaking and reading activities, a short oral task that initiates the discussion within the group of students can provide a clear picture of the student's English proficiency level for the teacher. In our case, we begin the course with a short impromptu presentation that students do to introduce themselves and talk about their experience in philosophy.

Arranging such kind of placement tests is not the only complication that appears to be effort and time-consuming. Limited students' English proficiency implies other repercussions for the teacher himself and the general flow of student-teacher interaction. First of all, such a course requires a curriculum, specially designed to address mentioned proficiency peculiarity. A teacher has to spend extra time looking for and creating teaching materials of different complexity as well as developing various strategies of materials delivery and explanation. Choosing the easiest materials and the easiest way of presenting them is not always a good option because it would not be able to address the needs of students with higher language proficiency. Moreover, teachers have to spend at least half the time more on feedback and noticing, asking and addressing questions and changing strategies after each point of a lesson to make sure that students with low English proficiency are still in the loop of the material being taught. In fact, instead of developing one general curriculum, the EMI teacher must come up with at least three "regular," "simplified," and "the simplest" versions in terms of vocabulary and grammar used.

Limited proficiency also substantially impacts students' performance in the classroom. Along with studying the subject itself, they must do a significant amount of English learning. On the one hand, it might seem beneficial in terms of consistent language skills improvement. On the other hand, the drawbacks of such a "steep learning curve," in our opinion, outweigh the benefits. For students with A2-B1 CEFR levels, such an approach may become too overwhelming, preventing them from acquiring the necessary volume of skills and knowledge

in all courses. For philosophy courses, in particular, lack of proficiency leads to poor student-teacher and student-student interaction in the classroom. Students limit their presentations mainly to reading out loud the materials they found on the internet or recommended sources instead of creatively reporting their research results and opinions regarding the topic. The same goes for the written assignments. Most of the materials students hand in turn out to be copied and pasted fragments from different sources.

Philosophy Curriculum and Topic Choice for International Students

Taking into account all mentioned above, efficient teaching philosophical disciplines and other humanities in English requires special teaching and communication strategies. This section of the paper is focused on some of them developed and successfully practised by EMI teachers. First, we will dwell on the topic choice for the philosophy curriculum developed for international students of non-philosophical majors (International Law, International Business, Linguistics, IT technologies, etc.) Next, we will describe two existing student books for teaching international students.

Dwelling on the topic choice for the philosophy curriculum, we mainly rely on our curriculum development and teaching experience for international students of the majors listed above. After two years of teaching, it became clear that topics selection for international students will be different from the one we've been using for Ukrainian students. Keeping in mind English proficiency limitations, cultural and religious differences of the international students, some of the topics had to be adjusted, simplified, added, or extracted. Students have shown more interest in the history of philosophy as well as the possible ways of the practical application of their knowledge. That is why the historic part of the course had to be expanded and references to the history of philosophy and history of culture added to the theoretical components of each topic. Since there are two types of classes within the course (lectures and discussion classes), it makes sense to approach the theoretical part during discussions. In contrast, the historical part is better approached in the form of an interactive lecture. Establishing the balance between theory and history this way made the course more accessible for approaching by students. The increase of accessibility was proved by the increased number of students involved in the discussion of every topic (70-80% after the changes in comparison to 40-50% before the changes) and better assessment results.

Typical philosophy course in most Ukrainian universities consists of 15 lectures and 15 practical classes. Here are some ideas on the EMI philosophy curriculum composition that may make the approach of the subject easier for the international students. In our opinion, the introductory topic should be presented as the set of answers to the questions that every student may ask about studying philosophy. One of the good examples of such a Q&A introduction to philosophy was given by Nigel Warburton in his book "Philosophy: the basics" (Warburton, 2013). Next topic that can help students effectively comprehend the variety of possible questions that are in the scope of philosophy we devote to the description of its main subfields. Among various subfields that we describe, more attention is being paid to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and logic. The next topic introduces the concept of the worldview from theoretical (definitions) and practical (presentation of historical types of the worldview: myth, religion, science) perspective. Several following lectures and discussion classes we usually devote to the brief overview of the history of philosophy. The practice has shown that introducing myth, religion, science, and philosophy is not just a mere definition

but as the historical types of the worldview with the cultural references makes it easier for the students to comprehend the peculiarities of each period of the history of philosophy. After the history of philosophy, we recommend moving to the selection of topics all titled “Philosophy of...”. We noticed that for some reason, topics “Philosophy of religion,” “Philosophy of art,” “Political philosophy,” “Philosophy of law” draw more students attention and interest than for instance, topics “Philosophy of mind,” “Philosophy of science” and “Philosophy of language.”

As for the study materials and sources, taking into account limitations with English proficiency, the good option would be to add links to short video lectures with subtitles to each topic. The amount and complexity of reading should also be carefully considered because there is a high chance that for most of the students in the group, the successful accomplishment of the reading assignment may turn out to be impossible.

A working option to address such an issue with reading assignments is the composition of the special student books. As successful examples, we would like to mention two recent student books designed to address most of the above-mentioned linguistic challenges and facilitate EMI teaching of philosophical courses.

First is a student book, “Lectures in the History of Ukrainian Culture,” by professor Sergii Rudenko (Rudenko, 2019). The composition and the content of this book allow the student to easily comprehend the minimal required amount of information. In terms of language complexity, it has been designed in a way that students with levels B1-B2 will not have critical difficulties when working with it. Apart from addressing the supportive needs of the course itself, according to the author’s idea, this student book is also designed to assist with students’ English proficiency improvement. In this regard, professor Rudenko claims the following “In our humble opinion, there is one more advantage of this book for a wide range of non-English speaking readers from the lexical point of view. This book also could be useful as a glossary of English equivalents of typical and the most representative objects (pieces of art, religious, educational, scientific movements, etc.) of Ukrainian culture” (Rudenko, 2019: 5-6). As for the students with a better command of English, this book provides them with a brief schematic outline of the main topics as well as with profound recommendations on further reading.

The second example is a student book, “Analytic Philosophy and Philosophy of Language,” written by Dr. Oleksandr Kylyk (Kulyk, 2018). As it could be seen from the introductory notes, the original idea for this book was to make it useful both for subject studying and English learning simultaneously. The author chooses the so-called “Hard-CLIL” (Content and language integrated learning (Ball, 2016)) methodology for the composition and presentation of the materials in the book. He explains that in the following lines. “There are two kinds of CLIL techniques: one is a language-led approach; the other is content-led. The term “Soft CLIL” is used to describe supporting content learning in language classes; the term “Hard CLIL” is for supporting language learning in content classes. My course is based on “Hard CLIL” (Kulyk, 2018: 8). Language learning purposes of this student book have been achieved by putting certain classroom content assignments in the form of language learning exercises that allow focusing on learning new vocabulary items along with content ideas of the philosophy of language. Dr. Kulyk claims that his student book has been designed to address the needs of students whose English proficiency level is B1+. However, the composition of the book and its further reading suggestions make it a convenient guide for higher proficiency students.

Conclusions

EMI teaching in Ukraine is a relatively recent phenomenon that due to its numerous peculiarities requires further attention and research. In this paper, we tried to generalize and describe our EMI teaching experience in the field of philosophy for international students. As a result, we can outline several important points and challenges that any EMI teacher should keep in view before and during his classroom work.

First, EMI teaching requires a certain level of English proficiency. In our opinion, it should be not less than CEFR C1, which is rather a rare case in the reality of Ukrainian higher education. To support such an opinion, we provided some figures from the “English Proficiency Index,” and recent British Council reports on EMI teaching in Ukraine. We must admit that the current professional training of prospective teachers in philosophy is not oriented toward further EMI teaching. This means that teachers who would like to teach their professional courses in English have to self-improve their command of English as well as revise all their knowledge and materials in English because translation is not the option. All those steps are effort-, time- and funds-consuming and unfortunately, teachers mainly have to deal with those challenges on their own. Certain obstacles with academic mobility, which is the only effective way of gaining the necessary EMI teaching experience, is another problematic factor. Gradual changes in the prospective teachers training programs, focus on English proficiency, providing better access to academic mobility and wider institutional and financial support could make the situation with EMI teaching in Ukraine better in the next decade.

We also discussed a problematic situation with the English proficiency of most international students in Ukrainian universities. Particularly the situation with the inconsistency of students’ fluency within the same academic group when levels could vary from A2 to C1. The average students’ level of B1, which is an entry requirement for most universities, appears to be not sufficient for comprehension of the materials of the course that makes the process of teaching challenging both for teachers and students. Teachers have to develop a special curriculum with the possibility to address the needs of students with a different command of English. Students, being not able to fully comprehend the study materials, can get only limited mastering of the course. To facilitate the teacher-student communication and increase the efficiency of EMI teaching, we suggest including international English proficiency certificates (TOEFL, IELTS, PET, FCE, etc.) in the list of entry requirements for EMI master and bachelor programs. In our opinion, the best long-term solution for this problem also would be establishing proficiency level B2 as the minimal enrollment language requirement.

Finally, we discussed peculiarities of the EMI philosophy curriculum development and shared our own experience on the possible topic choice and order based on the international students’ preferences. We also briefly discussed two recently published student books for EMI teaching of special philosophical courses written by professor Sergii Rudenko and Dr. Oleksandr Kulyk. We find those student books being successful attempts to address existing challenges, preserve and improve the quality of EMI teaching in Ukraine.

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