The opportunities of learning English in English Medium Instruction (EMI) science classes in China

Jiangshan An

University of Oxford, Department of Education, United Kingdom

Teaching academic subjects through English in countries where English is not an official language has become a rapidly rising global phenomenon. In China, driven by the increasing demand from Chinese students to study abroad at the university level and a growing population of foreign teachers, a special EMI program has emerged. It entails foreign native English speaking teachers teaching Chinese students a foreign high school curriculum. This context presents a unique EMI model because of the native English speaking teacher population, whose English proficiency is up to standard and can not use students’ first language. This may lead to a different classroom discourse, compared to the heavily researched discourse with bilingual non-native teachers.

This study explores the foreign teachers’ and Chinese students’ beliefs about teaching and learning English in EMI science classes, particularly through teacher-student interaction and their actual interaction in class, underpinned by the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996). 8 schools in China were visited, involving 15 foreign science teachers, and approximately 400 students. 33 lessons were video recorded. Analysis of the questionnaires, pre- and post-lesson interviews and lesson recordings suggest that most teachers recognized the role of comprehensive input, feedback and students’ output in English learning, while the majority of students did not. Effort of providing comprehensive input (e.g. repetition, using synonyms) was clear whereas providing feedback and eliciting students’ output were scarce. The impact of the absence of the students’ L1 is also discussed. The different beliefs teachers and students hold is considered to be an important factor impeding teachers’ successful use of interaction to facilitate the learning of English and the language of science.


Keywords: immersion education, classroom interaction, EMI.