# English For the Medium of Instruction (EFMI) at a University in Hong Kong

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# Abstract

English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) is gaining ground as an internationalizing policy at universities in countries where English is normally used as a second language. However, EMI as developed pedagogy in support of such a policy is yet to establish itself at many such institutions. In a country such as the United States, on the other hand, there is already extensive experience covering several decades on the challenges faced by International Teaching Assistants who use English as a Second Language for their teaching. Many of the challenges they face, and the strategies which institutions have devised to assist faculty instructors who use ESL, have relevance for institutions which are now moving to EMI. As those institutions move towards EMI, they may also need to develop their own language and pedagogy training for their new instructors who use ESL. For universities which aspire to rise in the international league tables, such pre-service teacher education may be essential for the fulfillment of their aspiration

As part of their pre-service teacher education, new instructors at a rising young university in Hong Kong received basic training in English For the Medium of Instruction (EFMI), an original term to articulate this novel reification of a subgenre of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). New instructors found the training helpful but insufficient and expressed a strong interest for additional training in EFMI.

Keywords: English; medium of instruction; pedagogy; teaching assistants.

## Introduction

As China rises in the East, publically-funded universities in its Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Hong Kong are ascending in the international league tables. Four out of seven such institutions are currently listed in the top 100 or so institutions in the QS World University Rankings 2013-14 (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2013) while three of those four are also listed in the top 100 universities of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2013-14 (Times Higher Education, 2013). The ascent signifies education changes initiated in the final years of Hong Kong's colonial period which have made research at its universities more prominent, an interest in global rankings more pronounced, and higher education opportunities among its youth more egalitarian. These three factors as well as the 2012 launch of the American-style, four-year undergraduate degree with a high component of General Education courses imply that Hong Kong has taken elements of the American system for its higher education model as its universities rise in the global rankings. To sustain this trend, Hong Kong's publically-funded universities can be expected to escalate their efforts to compound research and citation output as well as amplify measures to increase internationalization, since these aspects are found in the handful of categories which league table organizations implicitly claim to be able to assess and rank (Times Higher Education, 2013; Quacquarelli Symonds, 2013).

The two legs of research and internationalization which support institutions' aspirations for a rise in global rankings are embodied in some degree in the Ph.D. students which these universities recruit. Working under a supervisor, international and local Ph.D. students can contribute to the research agenda of departments and therefore add to the prestige of the university and support its competition in the global rankings. They may carry out work which extends the range and the depth of a supervisor's own research while being trained and mentored in the research process. Coming from an international background, such Ph.D. students can add diversity to the student body and bring a non-local perspective to their teaching of undergraduates. Many of these Ph.D. students receive considerations which enable them to study for the required three or four years of a Ph.D.; this compact requires that they contribute to the research agenda of departments and to the teaching of undergraduates. For internationalizing institutions, this teaching is increasingly expected to be done in English, regardless of the first language of the teacher. For this kind of teaching, the term English for the Medium of Instruction (EFMI) is suggested in order to distinguish it from EMI policy and to situate EFMI as a sub-genre of ESP.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to present and to analyze a recent effort by an EMI university in Hong Kong to overtly train new Ph.D. students in strategies to improve their English while modeling methods suitable for EMI pedagogy so that they can take up teaching duties. These Ph.D. students are similar to International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) in the United States, so the first objective of the paper is to review the literature on ITAs in the U.S. for features that may be pertinent to the Hong Kong situation. The second objective is to describe the measures taken at the university in Hong Kong for diagnosing new Ph.D. students' level of English, discuss the training sessions which many of those Ph.D. students subsequently took to improve their English, and analyze and discuss results of a survey completed by those Ph.D. students who took the sessions.

## Review of the Literature

A shift towards English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) in many European and Asian universities where English is not the usual first language of students has been discussed by Chang (2010);  Brenn-White & van Rest (2012); de Graff, Koopman & Westhoff (2007); Hellekjaer (2007); Hudson (2009); Klaassen (2008); OECD (2010); Kim & Sohn (2009); Sert (2008); Tatzl (2011); Corrigan (2014); and others. Whether this shift is best attributed to changing

demographics, economic globalization, and financial constraints on institutions  or to humanistic internationalization is less clear and has been the focus of some debate (Brandenburg and de Wit, 2011; Healey, 2008).

While pedagogical approaches like Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) are gaining ground in primary or secondary education (e.g., de Graff et al., 2007), the shift towards EMI in European and Asian universities has been more about policy than pedagogy (Corrigan, 2014). When English is being used at universities in, for example, Korea, The Netherlands, Japan, Malaysia, and Germany to teach students whose native language is not English, then the term EMI is applicable. In such cases, teachers might be non-native speakers of English. In order to use EMI to teach at such Asian and European universities, a degree of proficiency in English is already expected and in some institutions it is tested (e.g., Klaasen, 2008). For experienced university faculty whose second language is English, proficiency is already likely. For example, a Dutch professor with native-like proficiency in English may teach her Chinese, Italian, Greek, and Indonesian students sociology (or another 'content' course, or an English language course) in English, which is a second language for teacher and students alike, using methods and techniques which would facilitate learning in the second language. In the higher education context, EMI as pedagogy is here professed to include not just a command of English by the teacher but appropriate approaches, methods and techniques as well as for teaching university students whose first language is not English. For novice teachers whose second language is English, native proficiency may be less likely and many novice teachers at EMI universities are likely to be Ph.D. students.

The contribution to teaching by Masters or Ph.D. students (called Internal Teaching Assistants, or ITAs, in the U.S.) has been the source of much research over the past thirty or forty years in the U.S. The pioneering U.S. university experience may help Hong Kong higher education institutions map their way through similar landscape more deftly. The robust literature on ITAs is exemplified by Bailey's 1984 book. She and the other contributors articulated the parameters of the International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) situation by reviewing research conducted in the 1970s and reconnoitering the landscape at American universities in the 1980s. Bailey (1984) noted that "both linguistic and cultural differences contribute to the difficulties faced by foreign TAs"; issues of English proficiency, cross-cultural communication, and teaching skills "raise some debatable issues". Kaplan (1989) further elaborated the problems which ITAs bring with them as "pronunciation problems, some syntactic problems, some cultural problems, some pedagogical style problems." For ITAs "found to be inadequately prepared in English or in teaching ability, there is often nothing to be done about it" but the problem can be avoided altogether with "advance planning".

Presumably he had in mind a certain level of general English before an ITA even arrives on campus. Within a few years, more than 20 state legislatures had mandated oral English proficiency (Twale et al., 1997) as a result of complaints from students and parents – i.e., voters - and state universities began to institute such tests. Negative impressions of ITAs by undergraduates continued, however, with Fitch and Morgan (2003) illustrating how undergraduates constructed the identity of ITAs "usually…in a negative light", their own identity as victims, education as a commodity for which they should get their money's worth, and the university as a villain. Today, universities across America normally require that ITAs demonstrate their proficiency in English before teaching undergraduates (see, for example: Brown University; Cornell University; Georgia State University; Oregon State University; Temple University; University of Illinois; University of Maryland; University of Northern Colorado; University of Texas; and University of Virginia).

While addressing the immediate need to diagnose which ITAs need language training, limitations of such tests have been identified and improvements to them advocated. Papajohn (1999), for example, examined the influence of topic variation in performance testing of ITAs and observed the "difficulty in sorting out teaching and language skills". He suggested some changes that could be made to testing of ITAs' skills in teaching in English in order to reduce the effect of "presentation style" language which, being primarily one-way communication presumably bears little resemblance to the kind of language which is needed for actual classroom interaction. Para-linguistics was also identified as a feature to take into account, as Jenkins and Paarra (2003) found in their study of 8 ITAs. They concluded that "the least we can do now is to train both ITAs and evaluators to understand the role of non-verbal cues in interpreting communicative intent" which led them to modify their institution's Oral English proficiency test rubric to include "listening comprehension and communicative competence". Saif (2006) reported that some positive wash back occurs when ITAs know they must take a test of spoken English, but he posited an "intricate web of different yet related factors that could enhance or interfere with a test's effects being realized as educational change." Gorsuch (2006) reasoned that "if ITA development is construed as teacher education" then individual academic departments can organize seminars alongside "native English speaking counterparts (TAs)" but if it seen as mainly language education, a centralized program would be better. In her study of 15 ITAs who had not performed well in a three week, pre-service intensive classroom communication skills workshop, she reported that the ITAs "generally found … practica …a positive learning experience".

Some researchers have looked beyond pre-service testing and training and have turned to studying in-service, ongoing negotiation of meaning between ITA and student, with mixed results. Pointing to the "nationwide concern that the foreign-born instructors linguistic problems influence US higher education adversely", Chiang (2006) noted that "problematic understanding may arise from linguistic deficiencies" such as use and pronunciation of individual words as well as grammar. Cultural differences were also contributors to misunderstanding, which "does not always go unnoticed." She concluded that training programs for ITAs tend to aim at improving linguistic proficiency but just as important is the need for ITAs and American college students to negotiate meaning with each other in an ongoing, interactive process. Li and others (2011), while accepting that "ITA language use essentially functions as an ongoing reciprocal process of meaning negotiations", between American students and ITAs, issued caveats, however. When negotiation of meaning involved drawing students' attention to mispronunciations in order to check for the correct pronunciation, it "may serve as an important factor that causes students to react negatively towards their teaching" (ibid). Reinhardt (2013), using an applied genre analytic approach pioneered by Bhatia, found in his study of office hour consultations where ITAs and their students had to negotiate meaning that by "developing awareness of how academic power may be negotiated internationally" ITA's are more likely to achieve pragmatic and professional success.

Around the time that the university system in the US was beginning to notice and address issues with ITAs, plans were being laid in colonial Hong Kong for the large-scale expansion of the higher education system. Since that time the system has emerged from an elitist system with restricted enrollment and limited international reputation to a more egalitarian system with increasing enrolment and a flourishing international reputation. While a Cantonese-speaking, secondary school graduate fifty years ago would aspire to become an undergraduate at one of the two universities, today several universities have been crowned as among the world's best in the international league tables. Due to matters of 1) colonial legacy (e.g., Mellor, 1992; Poon, 2002), 2) institutional EMI policies and 3) the importance as a *lingua franca* (e.g., Crystal, 2003; Crystal, 2006; Bolton, 2008), the role of English in each of these cases - individual and institutional - carries great weight.

Generally, publically-funded universities in Hong Kong officially use English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) (e.g., Hong Kong Polytechnic University[1], 2014; Hong Kong University of Science and Technology[2], 2014). Disparities between official policy and actual practice have been studied in Hong Kong - with Kember and others (2001), for example, referring to "the myth of English as the medium of instruction" in universities in Hong Kong - but EMI with all its attendant problems is not a unique Hong Kong phenomenon. Rather, EMI appears to be part of a nascent, intercontinental systemic shift in higher education (Corrigan, 2014). In contrast to the inroads EMI is making as an internationalizing *policy* at many higher education institutions in countries where English is normally used as a second language, however, EMI is yet to develop as a mature *pedagogy* in support of such a policy at many such institutions (ibid).

While many of the problems that U.S. researchers have documented are applicable to Hong Kong, universities in this Special Administrative Region of China face an additional triple challenge. Many new teachers at such institutions are: 1) teaching at a tertiary institution for the first time in a socio-cultural-educational matrix different from what they previously experienced; 2) teaching in their second language; and 3) teaching students who are learning in their second language.

From the American higher education experiences with ITAs, several lessons may be extrapolated for universities in Hong Kong to strengthen EMI teaching by Ph.D. students. The list is not meant to be exhaustive, some universities may already be considering such measures, and the list may change over time. At present, however, the following can be taken from the American university experience with new Ph.D. students who are likely to become ITAs:

1. Recognize that even if Ph.D. students who are non-native speakers of English provide an acceptable, documented level of English at a high intermediate level or better before admission to study, it may not mean the candidate has the higher level language skills needed to teach in EMI;
2. Require a pre-service teacher education courses for all new Ph.D. students who will become novice teachers, focusing on the Hong Kong and institutional context and pedagogy appropriate for EMI teaching of Hong Kong undergraduates;
3. Implement accepted tests of English proficiency and communication skills with clear descriptors of the different levels and kinds of teaching, if any, possible at that level for all candidates who will be expected to teach and 1) do not have English as their native language or 2) did not graduate from an EMI university;
4. Require that those who did not achieve a level for specific kinds of teaching to take a course to improve their overall English proficiency: such a course should aim to help candidates improve their general English if need be as well as specialist English in their disciplines, in addition to including strategies for learning through ongoing interaction and negotiation of meaning with students and peers to encourage ongoing scaffolding of their language and communication skills;
5. Offer additional workshop and seminars to sustain gains which candidates have made in the English classes;
6. Organize, in addition, practica as appropriate if candidates already have a high intermediate level of English;

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[1] "28. Medium of Instruction 28.1 English is the medium of instruction (the only exceptions are for a small number of programmes/subjects which have got special approval to be taught and examined in Chinese, due to the nature and objectives of the programmes/subjects concerned). Chinese could only be used in small group discussions/tutorials/practical sessions if and when necessary."

[2] "1. Medium of Instruction. Unless otherwise approved by the Senate for a specific course or program of study, English is the medium of instruction and assessment at the University."

7. Implement such changes with the cooperation of departments and faculty development units;

8. Recognize that this kind of systemic change will be long-term and implement stopgap measures to help assure quality in the short to midterm.

## Method

In this section, the background of the university under study is presented, the interviews for new Ph.D. students are discussed, and the content and organization of supplementary sessions is described.

### Background of the University and the Launch of the EFMI Seminars

The university is a comprehensive, publically-funded university recognized as one of the top 100 or so around the world. The university has admitted more than 200 Ph.D. students every year for the past few years and looks set to significantly increase the number in the coming years. In recent years anecdotal information was reported from the teachers of a pre-service teacher education course about the low English language skills of many new Ph.D. students. Therefore, commencing in 2013, diagnostic interviews were conducted the first two weeks to determine who should enroll in two, two-hour "supplementary sessions". The supplementary sessions would consist of strategies training so that the Ph.D. students who were deficient in their general English could be taught how to help themselves learn English.

### Interview Format

A diagnostic interview was developed. In the first part, the candidate read aloud a never-before-seen passage in English (which they could not take away) to an imagined classroom of undergraduate students, in order to evaluate pronunciation, stress and rhythm, intonation, and overall intelligibility; in the second part, the candidate was engaged in unrehearsable and impromptu speaking; in the third part, the candidate was asked to explain an object (drawn randomly from a bag) to the imagined classroom of undergraduate students, in order to evaluate ability and skill in explanation strategies in English.

## Results

Results of the interview and the supplementary sessions are presented in this section.

### Interviews

Of 188 candidates interviewed, 105 were requested to attend the supplementary sessions, including four candidates who did not attend the pre-sessional diagnostic.

### Supplementary Training Sessions and Survey

Two supplementary sessions of two hours each were scheduled for candidates diagnosed as needing them, with a teacher to student ratio of about 52:1. Attendance was not formally recorded but a rough headcount indicated some candidates did not attend the sessions. Candidates were taught and trained in three speaking/listening strategies, as well as explanation strategies; they were also provided with a rationale for extensive reading in English and encouraged to read a Hong Kong English newspaper, for example, on a daily basis. The focus of the strategies was for the students to become ongoing, autonomous learners of English. One such focus included strategies for improving listening comprehension (i.e., input) since it is needed for correct pronunciation (i.e., output). In many cases, the students had studied English for many years and

believed themselves to be good at reading. The sessions therefore aimed at moving existing competency to actual performance; i.e., help them bring knowledge of English gained through input like reading into use of English, and expanding the repertoire of English available.  The survey on the outcomes of the strategy sessions is presented below.

| **Survey on** Supplementary Training  Sessions<br>**[Responses: 93 - 96 per question]** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.  I am from:<br><br>☐ Hong Kong (**3 respondents**)<br><br>☐ Mainland China **86 respondents**)<br><br>☐ Other (write country name) (**4 countries; 6 respondents**) ] | | | | | |
| | *Strongly Agree* | *Agree* | *Neutral* | *Disagree* | *Strongly Disagree* |
| 2.  The sessions helped me understand my **strengths and weaknesses** in English. | 52 | 38 | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| 3.  The sessions helped to model or show me **methods and techniques** which I can use in my own teaching in the future. | 53 | 41 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 4.  The sessions helped me strengthen my overall **listening skills** in English. | 32 | 50 | 12 | 2 | 1 |
| 5.  The sessions helped me strengthen my overall **speaking skills** in English. (95 responses) | 36 | 43 | 14 | 1 | 1 |
| 6.  The sessions helped me strengthen **my explanation strategies** in English. | 50 | 35 | 9 | 1 | 1 |
| 7.  The sessions modelled examples of **effective teaching techniques and methods** to improve my own teaching in English. (96 responses) | 49 | 43 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| 8.  I feel **more confident** about teaching in English after taking the supplementary sessions. | 32 | 43 | 19 | 1 | 0 |
| 9.  The sessions helped me understand about *sense groups* when speaking in English. | 46 | 40 | 6 | 0 | 1 |
| 10. The sessions helped me understand about *stress, rhythm, and intonation* when speaking in English. | 49 | 35 | 10 | 1 | 1 |
| 11. I could use **additional sessions** to improve my English for teaching. | 38 | 46 | 10 | 1 | 1 |
| 12. I find Strategy One (**using an on-line dictionary**) helpful for pronunciation. | 42 | 43 | 8 | 0 | 1 |
| 13. I find Strategy Two (**using DVDs with English subtitles**) helpful for listening and speaking practice | 42 | 37 | 14 | 1 | 0 |
| 14. I find Strategy Three ("**Read and Look Up**") helpful for speaking in sense groups. | 52 | 32 | 10 | 1 | 1 |

## Discussion of Results

### Interviews

Although the diagnostic interviews were intended only to identify who should attend the supplementary sessions, several observations were made: 1) Candidates from Hong Kong,

Europe, North America, the Middle East, and (usually) South Asia did not need the supplementary sessions even if they were new to HK; 2) Almost all candidates from top tier universities in China did not need the supplementary sessions even if they were new to HK; 3) Candidates from all other universities in China did need the supplementary sessions if they had been in HK less than 2 years; one year was marginal and the candidates were not ready yet at one year.

Linguistic and cultural differences, which Bailey (1984), Kaplan (1989), and Chiang (2006) noted in ITAs in the United States, were also observed in many of the interview candidates, especially those from mainland China. Cultural differences were expressed by them during many interviews regarding the amount of time devoted to work in Hong Kong, which was noticeably more than candidates were used to, and time for reflective thinking or leisure, which was far less than many were used to. The lack of such time for reflection and leisure could be expected to make adjustment more difficult not just to the Western-influenced culture of Hong Kong, but to the educational culture of the university, which had been established during the last decade of British colonial rule and maintained a globally-engaged stance. Besides the cultural differences, linguistic differences were observable in two domains: spoken Chinese and spoken English. Most students from the mainland had difficulty expressing themselves in spoken English and they remarked that their spoken Chinese was Mandarin rather than Cantonese, the latter being the majority spoken first language in Hong Kong and parts of southern China.

**Supplementary Training Sessions and Survey**

Two, two-hour supplementary sessions were developed for students who were identified through the interviews as lacking English proficiency for teaching. The content covered in the sessions included several means to help students develop their spoken English. Listening excerpt exercises based on the American television show 60 Minutes were developed. The excerpts provided broadcast-quality, standard American English. Around these, explicit activities related to the development of stress, rhythm, and intonation as well as how to use a dependable pronunciation dictionary and learning to speak in sense groups were developed.

Feedback from students attending the sessions was very positive, as indicated by the survey completed by more than 90% of the students attending the sessions. This high level of satisfaction may be attributed in part to the materials and teaching methodology but it is also attributable to students' appreciation for being provided with training which had been absent or deficient in their previous education and which they now recognized is essential for their careers as Ph.D. students. Almost 90% of the students completing the survey from the supplementary sessions were from universities in China where opportunities for exposure to standard spoken English were limited in the extreme. The chances to have supplementary sessions of any sort conducted in EMI were themselves a treasured opportunity for these students. To be able to learn some strategies for self-improvement of English was an additional opportunity for which they seemed genuinely grateful.

While the sessions were successful in exposing students to ways for how they could improve in those areas, it does not necessarily mean that the students would improve. During the first of the two supplementary sessions, they were asked to set realistic goals for practicing strategies; during the second supplementary session, few indicated that they had fulfilled all their goals for practice. It is inferred that the other demands on their time and resources - such as their doctoral research, cultural and institutional adjustment, and lack of instrumental motivation – were factors inhibiting them from spending time practicing the strategies.

As seen in the table in the previous section, the survey consisted of one question (item 1) about the country from which they came; 13 statements (items 2-13) about the supplementary sessions

and the effect it had on them and for which they could respond on a 5 point scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree; and two questions (items 14 and 15) asking them for additional suggestions and comments. Out of 105 students, 95 completed the survey; all came from Asia and 90% came from mainland universities. Responses for items 2-13 indicated that the students were very satisfied about the sessions, with satisfaction (i.e., any positive response above "neutral") ranging from 79% to 97% on individual aspects of the course. A very high level of satisfaction was reported for items 2, 3, 6, 7, 10, and 14. For these items, the survey respondents reported that they had a clearer idea of where they were strong and weak in English and that the session provided ways to help them improve their teaching, explain things better in English, and speak with better stress, rhythm, and intonation.

## Conclusion

The paper has looked at EFMI training for new Ph.D. students, mainly from outside the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, who were expected to take up teaching duties at a publically-funded university in Hong Kong in English as a Second Language (ESL) during their program of Ph.D. studies. The author has also suggested the term 'English for the Medium of Instruction (EFMI)' for such for teaching in ESL and in the process reified EFMI as a new subgenre of ESP.

The kinds of issues reported in the literature which ITAs using ESL to teach at American universities have faced are also the kinds of issues which these new instructors at the university in Hong Kong in this study face. The implications for universities, who aspire to ascend the league tables of best universities in the world, be they located in Hong Kong or elsewhere, are significant. First, English for the Medium of Instruction (EFMI) in Hong Kong's EMI universities is new ground whose acceptance will need to be gained but the potential for future studies are enormous. The same is also true for other Asian and European universities which are switching programs and courses to EMI. Development of the EFMI concept in terms of both functional-notional language, and EMI methods and techniques enveloped in the language, will be needed. As of this writing, the university under study is embarking on that very path by offering a regular university course in EFMI.

Furthermore, while needing to be customized for the higher education context in Hong Kong or elsewhere, many good ideas can be drawn on from the U.S. experience and from what has been done in Hong Kong, as reported in this paper. They range from studying the effects of changing language requirements for Ph.D. admission to the establishment of language testing for Ph.D. students in Hong Kong or elsewhere who are expected to teach, and from the design and implementation of courses designed for English language development of Ph.D. students to the effects of such courses on teaching. Studies of attitudes of undergraduates towards Ph.D. students who teach, Ph.D. students' identity formation as teachers, and other areas also hold the potential for research. The direct effects of such research could mean better understanding of the situation and better teaching for undergraduates, while indirectly it may facilitate or sustain a university's trajectory into the highly competitive top ranks of the world's universities.

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