

Challenges and Needs of Professional Development for Lecturers of English-medium Instruction

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Abstract

There is an increased use of English as the medium of instruction at the higher educational level in Southeast Asia countries in response to the enactment of an ASEAN Economic Community policy in 2015. Using English-medium instruction is an obvious choice of a university to achieve a prominent status in the international community. As a result, supporting the use of English as the medium of instruction can enhance the expansion of the internationalization process of a university and a country. There is no doubt that the challenges of becoming an English-medium university are tremendous. These papers gives insights into challenges occurring from the contextual factors and further supports that there is a need to develop a systematic professional development program for the English-medium instruction lecturers. Therefore, the paper aims to answer the following questions: (1) What are the contextual factors that should be addressed as challenges in becoming an English-medium university? (2) How can those challenges turn into incentives in developing an effective English-medium instruction status? (3) In which ways

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can a systematic professional development program contribute to the quality of English medium instruction lecturers?

Keywords: English-medium Instruction / Internationalization Education / Higher Education / English Proficiency / English as a Foreign Language / Professional Development

บทคัดย่อ

การเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในระดับอุดมศึกษาในประเทศไทยเคยตื่นตัวออกเฉียงใต้ได้เพิ่มขึ้นเพื่อตอบสนองต่อนโยบายของประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนปี 2015 การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสื่อในการเรียนการสอน กลายเป็นทางเลือกที่สำคัญในการยกระดับมหาวิทยาลัยขึ้นสู่ความเป็นนานาชาติ ดังนั้นการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในการเรียนการสอนได้ส่งเสริมกระบวนการทำให้เป็นนานาชาติของมหาวิทยาลัย บทความนี้เสนอมุมมองเรื่องความท้าทายที่เกิดจากปัจจัยแวดล้อม และสนับสนุนว่ามีความจำเป็นในการส่งเสริมโปรแกรมพัฒนาครูที่ต้องใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสื่อในการเรียนการสอนอย่างเป็นระบบ บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อตอบคำถามต่อไปนี้ (1) ปัจจัยแวดล้อมที่ท้าทายความเป็นมหาวิทยาลัยที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสื่อในการเรียนการสอนคืออะไร (2) ความท้าทายดังกล่าวกลายเป็นแรงผลักดันในการยกระดับสถานภาพของมหาวิทยาลัยที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสื่อในการเรียนการสอน อย่างไรก็ตามได้อย่างไร (3) โปรแกรมพัฒนาครูส่งเสริมคุณภาพของครูผู้ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสื่อในการเรียนการสอนด้วยวิธีใดบ้าง

คำสำคัญ: การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสื่อในการเรียนการสอน / การศึกษาระดับนานาชาติ / อุดมศึกษา / ความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษ / ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ / การพัฒนาวิชาชีพ

Introduction

Over decades there has been an increased awareness among educators worldwide in adopting English as the second language of instruction and as the medium of instruction at the university level in non-English speaking countries. To catch-up with the growth of the globalization era, many universities in Asia, including Thailand, began to give importance to developing English as the medium of instruction within their programs and curricula. One of the main reasons to support the use of English as the medium of instruction is for the university to achieve a more prominent status in the international community. The obvious benefits of enacting English as the medium of instruction in non-English speaking countries assumed advance effective communication in English of the future graduates, and consequently it will benefit the students' career prospects. Despite acknowledging several benefits of becoming English medium universities and being able to make it one of the university policies, it is highly challenging for these English-medium universities to meet and maintain the standards of the international education system. A needs-analysis survey by Zonneveld (1991) reveals that both lecturers and students have doubts in English medium instruction. Some negative points of using English as the medium of instruction pointed out by Zonneveld are: a slow rate of lecture delivery, lack of details, less interaction, lack of appropriate study-materials, and lack of English proficiency of both lecturers and students. Moreover, the issue of the quality and the effectiveness of English-medium instruction in various contexts are of concern among several educators. For instance, Hellekjaer & Wilkinson (2000) specifically state that for the English medium programs, the quality of language development as well as the quality

of staff developments need to be assessed, especially to compare the results across different institutes.

This paper aims to answer the following questions: (1) what are the contextual factors that should be addressed as challenges in becoming an English-medium university? (2) How can those challenges turn into incentives in developing an effective English-medium instruction status? (3) In which ways will a systematic professional development program contribute to the quality of English-medium instruction lecturers?. Based on a thorough literature review in which analytical analysis and synthesis of the reviewed content emerge four categories of a challenge confronted by most English medium universities. Concept matrix developed by Webster and Watson (2002) is used in analyzing and synthesizing the relevant literatures. This article aims to provide insights into challenges occurring from the Thai contextual factors. Furthermore, the article also points out a need and supports an establishment of a systematic professional development program for the English medium instruction lecturers.

Challenge one: The non-English speaking environment and the supporting system

What is the rate of exposure to the English language in the Thai context? In the Thai context, English is taught as a mandatory subject from the elementary education level; however, the language of their daily use is their mother tongue, Thai, which can also be in a variety of dialects. Consequently, most Thai students bring their mother tongue to the English classroom. Students tend to fall back on their native language when doing group discussions because it is easier for them. They also tend to use their native

language more than the target language when asking or answering teachers, if the teacher permits. So, it is a big challenge for the teachers to monitor and balance the use of native language and the target language in the classroom. Teaching the content of the academic knowledge in English is considered a double duty for most non-native English speaking lecturers. Therefore, to deliver the expectation without proper support from the system can bring much suffering to all agents. In which way the university's top managers provide systematic support to their lecturer, so that it will contribute to the quality of English-medium instruction? This is the issue that the English-medium university must seriously consider. Has the university done its part in selecting only qualified lecturers and also equipping the new lecturers' pedagogy for the English-medium instruction environment?

Challenge two: English proficiency of teachers and students

Sometimes there is finger pointing to one another as the rationale to explain the failure of the use of English-medium instruction in a particular context. There are always at least two sides of the story. At a Thai university where English is used as the medium of instruction, a frequent complaint from many lecturers is that students have limited English proficiency; consequently, content learning suffers. While some lecturers may point the finger to students' inadequate English proficiency as the cause of lacking an understanding of the content, some students on the other hand also complain about some teachers' English proficiency, as well as their professionalism. First, the issue of students' proficiency should be examined. It is true that there is always a report that EFL teachers are faced with low proficiency and low motivation of EFL students. For

example, Fareh (2010) reports that some EFL teachers comment that their students “are unable to think, can’t learn, and do not want to learn” (p.3602). These statements may also be true to some extent in the Thai context. As for teaching and learning English in the Thai context, a study by Chaihiranwattana and Nookua (n.d.) investigated 338 Thai students’ attitude towards learning English and found that 80.6 % of students have a positive attitude towards learning English. Thai students in this study agree that learning English is important because it is useful in getting a good job; therefore, studying English should start as early as from the first grade. Another study by Pawapatcharandom (2007) investigates the English language learning problems of Thai students. It is reported that Thai students have problems in all English skills, mostly on writing, listening, reading and speaking respectively. Furthermore, they also have problems with sociocultural rules and barrier to intercultural communication as well. These studies help us see that we need to handle the challenge related to Thai students’ English proficiency immediately if using English as the medium of instruction is the ultimate goal of the university. Second, the issue of teachers’ quality should also be examined. Qualified English medium instruction lecturers are expected to possess at least the academic knowledge and English language proficiency. A shortage of qualified English teachers or English-medium instruction teachers is not only problematic in Thailand, but also in the other countries in Asia and in the Middle East. Several studies in the field of EFL, such as in China and Arab countries, reported that lacking qualified English teachers and lacking adequate preparation of teachers are the major problems of teaching and learning English whether as the subject itself or as the medium of instruction (You, 2011;

Fareh, 2010). The issue of qualified or quality English teachers and English-medium instruction teachers is also a concern in the Thai context. Mackenzie (2005) points out that quality of English teachers in Thailand in general is considered low; as a result, it reflects on the quality of Thai students as well. The paradox of this issue is that while the English-medium university may think that the selected lecturers of its context have fairly high English language skills in general, a study by Klaassen (2001) points out that students are dissatisfied and concerned with non-native English speaking lecturers' fluency; limitation of vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties.

Challenge three: professionalism and an understanding of education dimensions of the lecturers

How often do lecturers reflect on their teaching philosophy and practice? When students fail the course, do lecturers ever question their teaching practice? Many lecturers may still think that being a university lecturer is just to give a lecture in front of the classroom and assign homework. If that is the case, obviously this means anyone can teach. In fact, there are several dimensions of education that the university lecturers need to understand and have. They need to continuously develop their professional competency. In addition, the English-medium instruction lecturers need to be aware of their English language proficiency as well. Regarding You (2011) the issue of lacking quality English teachers in China has become significant, and this also apply to the Thai context. What does a qualified or a quality teacher mean? Actually, besides having knowledge and skills of the teaching profession, professionalism and competences are also required. These days, teachers of

all education levels are asked to reflect and examine themselves regarding their practice. Teachers must be able to defend their pedagogical decisions. It is important to know what to teach and how to teach, but to be more critical and ask further of the question 'why we teach, what we teach, the way we teach' will also help us be more critical of our pedagogical knowledge and practices. It is our responsibility as teachers to ask ourselves these questions, as well as to reflect on our teaching practices. Furthermore, the English-medium university also needs to reflect on its policy and the plan of action. While an English-medium university in Netherlands is willing to state that the professional development there "seems to be in its infancy with respect to English medium instruction at tertiary education" (Klaassen, 2001), would Thai higher education be able to accept that the professional development, especially for English-medium instruction lecturers, is lacking and needs immediate attention and support?

Preparing lecturers for the English-medium instruction environment is essential (as a recommendation)

Teachers or lecturers can be one of the major influences on students' learning in the Thai context. It is obvious that there is a major shift in teaching and learning when decided to use English as the medium of instruction. Obviously, active teaching and learning behavior is necessary. Besides possessing the academic knowledge of the field, acquiring the ability to use the first language and the target language interchangeably is a desirable quality of the English-medium instruction lecturers. It is agreed that becoming English-medium instruction lecturer is quite demanding in its nature; therefore, these

lecturers need a support system to help them achieve their expected roles. It is important for the English- medium university to recognize their needs and further assist them in a form of professional development. Several studies in European context have also supported that staff development for English-medium lecturers is extremely important and is very urgent to the situation (Vinke, 1995; Klaassen, 2001). Furthermore, Uys et al. (2007) reveal that professional development is needed for both pre-service and in-service English – medium instruction lecturers in southern Africa. As for the situation of the English- medium instruction in the Thai context, Lemjinda (2007) report that adopted professional development program for the in-service lecturers has been questioned regarding its practical outcome because lecturers fail to apply the new knowledge and skills in the classrooms. He further suggests that six key features of professional development need to be reflected upon prior the enactment of the future professional development program. The six key features involve perceived need, clarity, complexity, work-ability, implementation and support, and advocacy. Despite some negative report on adopting professional development in the Thai context, it is strongly suggested that the issue of the professional development of the English–medium instruction lecturers in the Thai context continue to need more reflection and research.

Conclusion

The sole purpose of this article is to identify the challenges of being an English-medium university in a Thai context. Consequently, it can lead to recommendations in considering a systematic professional development as an

alternative which may influence the quality of English-medium instruction status of its context. As we are moving towards internationalization and globalization, English skills are considered a more practical tool used in our daily communication. Therefore, we must be aware of and put in more effort to raise the English proficiency level of both teachers and students to the international standard. This paper identifies three major challenges of becoming an English medium university in the Thai context: (1) dealing with the non-English speaking environment and the supporting system (2) dealing with (low) English proficiency of teachers and students (3) dealing with professionalism and an understanding of educational dimensions of the lecturers. It is further recommended that the first step in dealing with these challenges, the English-medium university needs to provide a systematic professional development for these English-medium instruction lecturers. It is emphasized that the systematic professional development program must be taken seriously, in both policy and action, as the channel to improve the quality of the lecturers. Education research has pointed out and emphasized that professional development is essential for all teaching levels; it is a necessary requisite (Johnson & Swain, 1997). There is no doubt that the university lecturers possess the knowledge of subject contents; however, they need to realize that the big challenge of being the English-medium lectures is beyond delivering the subject contents. They need to constantly reflect on their professional competences related to their pedagogical stance, and sometimes they cannot do it alone. It is obvious for the English-medium university to recognize that these lecturers need a strong support in a form of a community of practice and systematic assistance from the university. However, it should be emphasized that a successful professional

development also requires the application of the principles of self-directed learning and life-long learning relevant to specific knowledge and attitudes towards EFL and ESL teaching and learning in addition to the possession of content knowledge of taught subjects.

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