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## Keys for successful English-medium instruction in the Finnish-medium Degree Program in Business Information Systems

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**To promote internationalization and to enable student exchange in the Finnish-medium Degree Program in Business Information Systems (BIS), the second academic year is studied in English. The arrangements of English-medium studies are based on skilled teachers and motivated students as well as the integration of the exchange students into the Finnish study group and active daily English communication. Moreover, the English language plays a significant role in the field of IT. Also for that reason, studying in English can be validated.**

This article summarizes the main empirical findings of the Master's thesis written by Niva <sup>[1]</sup> regarding experiences, opinions and attitudes to English-medium instruction (EMI), the adequacy of English skills, and Finnish in-class communication, based on the research conducted in 2016-2018 in the Degree Program in Business Information Systems (BIS) at OUAS. The study was theoretically based on the concept of English-medium instruction (EMI) which can be defined as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English" <sup>[2]</sup>. Often, an ordinary expression, 'teaching in English', is used as a synonym for EMI.

The degree program in Business Information System (BIS) [tietojenkäsittelyn tutkinto-ohjelma in Finnish] provides students with versatile ICT skills and knowledge about programming, digital products and services for business activities. <sup>[3]</sup> Also, the English language plays an important role in studies, mainly due to vast collections of English resources in the field of IT, and for that reason, also students may benefit from English-medium instruction (EMI). Additionally, an English-medium academic year makes the reception of exchange students possible, internationalizing the daily studies.

Active cooperation between Finnish and foreign students is one of the goals in BIS. Cooperation is based on an educational approach, where all the students have been divided into small teams for cooperative learning purposes, according to a principle that there is at least one exchange student in each team. Although lecturing plays a significant role in studies, most of the practical assignments are completed in teams, with an emphasis on efficient project working skills and teamwork. Seating arrangements with grouped desks in a home classroom make daily team working possible.

### Implementation of the study

Regarding the findings presented in this article, data for Master's thesis written by Niva <sup>[1]</sup> were collected between 2016-2018 in BIS consisting of teacher interviews, student and teacher surveys, and ethnographic participant observation. The surveys for the first-year students covered students' attitudes, opinions, and expectations for the English-medium study year. Teacher interviews and surveys were used to collect teachers' attitudes, opinions and experiences in EMI. The surveys for the second-year Finnish and exchange students gave information about the implementation of EMI in BIS. The study relied mainly on qualitative research methods.

## Opinions about EMI

The question about whether Finnish students in a Finnish-medium degree program should be taught in English weighed arguments for and against. Many teachers emphasized that studies should be held in English due to the necessity of English skills in the field of IT. Counterarguments were also presented. Some teachers asked for the reasons why teaching should be held in English, and some teachers even claimed that it is just senseless, especially without international students. This phenomenon, where a Finnish teacher teaches Finnish students in English, without the presence of international students, was regarded as artificial and unnatural. This argument is in line with Doiz et al. <sup>[4]</sup> who has also found that one of the reasons why teachers oppose EMI is that if there are only few foreign students in campus, there is no point in teaching in a foreign language.

Generally, this kind of distribution of opinions has been visible also in other studies such as Jensen and Thøgersen <sup>[5]</sup> and Pilkinton-Pihko <sup>[6]</sup>. Many teachers think that students learn best when they are taught in their mother tongue <sup>[6]</sup>.

From the perspective of students, 80 % of the first-year students regarded the forthcoming English study year as a positive change or it did not raise any special feelings (n=80). However, 11 % of the students considered an English-medium study year to be a distressing or anxious thought (n=80).

» Our field requires the English language.  
- A teacher

Why would it make sense? We educate work force for Finland's labor market.  
- A teacher

Interesting. I'm looking forward to studying in English.  
- A student

A bit distressing thought.  
- A student

Despite the opposing opinions, the respondents found several benefits and drawbacks in EMI. The benefits from EMI highlighted improved language skills and IT vocabulary for work, future job opportunities, and opportunities for working abroad or in an international company or team at home or abroad.

Correspondingly, the respondents pointed out that EMI could cause a serious deal of harm to studies, regarding limited vocabulary, more challenging studies, communication problems especially due to speaking skills, learning problems, expanding learning disabilities, slower learning, difficult vocabulary in some subjects, poorer learning outcomes, speechlessness, humiliation, consumption of time, a lack of concentration, and misunderstandings. Finally, it was highlighted that poor English skills may build a barrier for studying and lead to strain and stress. Many of these problems, in fact, root in language skills. Many respondents questioned the adequacy of language skills as well as the appreciation of the Finnish language and the commitment to the use of English in teams and in classroom. Difficult and complicated subject matters may be even more complicated when studied and taught in a foreign language.

» I learn to use English in the field.  
- A student

Poor English skills form a barrier for studying.  
- A student

## Experiences in EMI

After studying few months in English, the Finnish second-year students were mostly satisfied with EMI and the common level of English proficiency in class. A big majority of the second-year students described that studying in English has "gone very well". It seems that the Finnish students had gained many positive experiences through EMI such as improved English skills, vocabulary, and speaking skills as well as positive experiences in teams and successful team communication. Some students emphasized that it is positive that the system used in studying forces students to speak English actively. Also, many teachers, after teaching few months in English regarded EMI in BIS as a positive change.

The exchange students' experiences have been mostly positive, even though some negative aspects have arisen. The exchange students were happy with their personal experiences and English skills. Working together with Finnish students has given an opportunity for them to see how Finnish people work as well as an opportunity to learn something new about Finnish culture and the city. Also, an exchange student found it positive that students are forced to speak English.

Despite all the positive experiences in EMI, both Finnish and exchange students have faced communication problems, especially at the beginning of the term. Also, a lack of the adequate English vocabulary has slowed and hampered team working. Moreover, differences in working habits and language skills have caused some challenges.

» Studying in English is going well.  
- A student

You are forced to speak English with others.  
Everything takes more time.  
- An exchange student

## Adequacy of language skills

One of the most noteworthy result in the study concerns the adequacy of language skills. Teachers' language skills seem to divide the students. All the exchange students and most of the Finnish students were mainly satisfied with teachers' language skills, in contrast to some Finnish students who have taken up a more critical attitude towards teachers' language skills, due to teachers' pronunciation, limited vocabulary, grammar, and answering questions in class. According to the students, clear presentations, clearly-defined tasks and lesson structures are more important in EMI than in Finnish-medium instruction (FMI), because, at worst, inadequate English skills may lead to contradictions, learning problems, misunderstandings, and lower grades.

Moreover, the Finnish students paid attention to the change of the medium of instruction from the native language to the second language. It seems that the level concerning teachers' ability to communicate and answer questions in Finnish cannot be reached in English and for that reason, some students were disappointed.

This finding is in line with Pilkinton-Pihko <sup>[6]</sup> who has found that answering questions spontaneously can cause some difficulties to teachers as well as explaining matters in different ways. It has been argued that many teachers agreed that academic standards fall when the medium of instruction is changed <sup>[5]</sup> <sup>[6]</sup> as well as that educators feel that they lose details, because their English is less precise <sup>[7]</sup>. Moreover, Airey <sup>[7]</sup> has stated that often teaching in English results in a pedagogical change, leading to lessons with less flexibility, jokes, asides, and real-life examples.

Four fifths of the Finnish second-year students were satisfied with their own English proficiency or consider their English skills otherwise as adequate. But there were some students in class whose language skills were inadequate. Some students have even avoided all English communication. Also, the exchange students paid attention to the variation in the Finnish students' language skills. Despite the occasional challenges in communication, the exchange students as well as the teachers regarded Finnish students' language skills generally as adequate.

» Teachers' language skills have caused problems for teaching more complicated concepts and subjects. Teachers cannot answer students' questions as thoroughly and competently as in Finnish either.  
- A student

Some teachers speak very good English, and even if there are mistakes, I understand what they are trying to say.  
- An exchange student

Sometimes it is also difficult because all students have a different level of English.  
- An exchange student

## Finnish communication between students

The amount of the Finnish language used in student communication in various student teams varied considerably. Some teams seemed to use mainly English in their daily communication whereas in some teams the amount of the Finnish language was considerably higher. Most of the Finnish students admitted that they speak Finnish every now and then, ranging from rare to more frequent daily occasions. The reasons for Finnish communication include e.g. asking a question or asking for help, the need of getting quick responses or language support, sharing a personal issue, avoiding misunderstandings, repeating an issue, answering a question presented in Finnish, making asides, or just chatting "this and that" during a break. The teams which consisted exclusively only of Finnish students used mainly Finnish in all discussions. Also, other teams used Finnish, also with a teacher, if no exchange student was present.

Many exchange students considered Finnish communication acceptable, especially if it did not happen too often. In some cases, the Finnish language, however, made exchange students feel embarrassed, especially if they thought of being an object of Finnish discussion or a reason for complaints, due to different working habits or opinions.

Concerning Finnish communication and its effect on foreign students, many Finnish students adopted a significant practice of translations. After Finnish discussions in teams, the content of discussion was translated into English and explained for foreign exchange students in English. The translations seem to make the use of the Finnish language more acceptable.

» Sometimes it is quite difficult when they start to speak Finnish but most of the time it is great.  
- An exchange student

Sometimes also a teacher and Finnish students spoke Finnish in class. An exchange student mentioned that Finnish was used "quite often" when a Finnish student asked a teacher a question or a quick answer was needed. In fact, the Finnish students described that they have mostly used Finnish with a teacher when they have needed personal guidance or instructions, talked about personal issues, or when a teacher spoke Finnish to them at first. Other reasons for Finnish communication with a teacher include frustration, a quick inquiry, a roll call, sudden exclamations, a need for solving a complicated problem, a total lack of understanding, or otherwise too complicated explanations.

Translations seem to be rather important for exchange students regarding also Finnish teacher-student discussions. According to the exchange students, Finnish communication between a teacher and Finnish students is mostly considered as acceptable, especially in case of personal communication. Nevertheless, the exchange students' attitude to Finnish discussions, concerning e.g. common classroom or team discussions such as team assignments, is uncompromising and unconditional: general instructions, including clarifying details for team assignments, should always be given in English. Additionally, an exchange student saw the language choice as a question of equality.

» As long as these conversations or their content is translated into English afterwards, if it was important, I don't mind these small chats.  
- An exchange student

As long as it concerns every student in some way, teachers should always talk English.  
- An exchange student

## Supplementary findings

The study revealed that although teaching in a foreign language is often more demanding and requires more effort <sup>[4]</sup>, it seems that the teachers, over ten years of experience in EMI, cannot find any differences between preparation for English-medium and Finnish-medium instruction. Moreover, teachers experienced that teaching in English succeeds although teaching in English is strenuous and painful to some extent, especially at the beginning of the career. This finding is in agreement with Pilkinton-Pihko <sup>[6]</sup> who also observed that teaching in English can be more strenuous at least to some extent although there are teachers who does not perceive any difference to the native language.

EMI as a phenomenon builds on internationalization in origin. Nevertheless, according to the teachers, the English language does not make an international higher education institution which requires the presence of international students at university. To boost internationality in a higher education institution, the teachers highlighted that the English language is the only option if international students are assumed to study here, leading to the necessity of international degree programs where Finnish and foreign students could study together. Also, Lasagabaster et al. <sup>[8]</sup> has found that the most important factor in the internationalization of university is the presence of international students in the university, in addition to the use of English in research and having different nationalities in campus.

» Internationality does not arise from the English language, but it does not arise without the English language either. Internationality arises from other languages and cultures you hear and see here.  
- A teacher

## Conclusions

Based on that good English skills are necessary in the field of IT, EMI has chances of succeeding in BIS. Complete unanimity on EMI among students and teachers cannot be reached. The majority supported EMI but some opposed. Although chances of succeeding exist, there are still teachers and students who think that Finnish students in a Finnish-medium degree program should be taught only in Finnish.

Regarding the success of EMI from the perspective of language skills, students' language skills seem to be mainly adequate, making studying in English possible, although studying in English seems to be more time-consuming. To achieve similar disciplinary results as a first language education, students just need more time <sup>[9]</sup>. Moreover, students' positive attitude to EMI, due to job opportunities and the IS discipline, make EMI possible. Regarding this positive attitude, <sup>[10]</sup> has emphasized that the effectiveness of EMI relies on the characteristics of the academic discipline and the career plans of the students.

As one of the most fundamental decisions about the ways of implementing EMI, exchange students' integration into the Finnish student group as well as the division of student teams, consisting of at least one international student and Finnish students, and teamwork were the keys for success. Despite the English-only policy, both students and teachers used Finnish as a medium of communication. Perhaps, it should not be expected that Finnish is not used, because Söderlundh <sup>[11]</sup> has found that the native language is used in connection with teaching in all EMI courses, but it is mainly used in interactions that are preparatory to the actual teaching. According to Evans and Morrison <sup>[12]</sup>, students use more local native language than lecturers who spoke the local languages in EMI classes, often requested by students.

According to the study, Finnish discussions were regarded as acceptable from the perspective of the exchange students, if the content of discussion was translated into English for them afterwards, excluding personal communication. All the common instructions and lecturing should, anyway, be given in English.

## Future considerations and recommendations

EMI in BIS has chances of succeeding although targets for development can be found. To prepare first-year students for an English academic year, preparatory activities should be considered because language skills and their potential influence on learning outcomes explain most of the negative opinions. In fact, 31 % of the first-year students would regard a preparatory English course as rather necessary or necessary (n=59). Other preparatory activities, such as language counselling or mentoring programs, could be worth considering as well as requirements for demonstrating language proficiency before entering the institution. Language training is important also for teachers.

As long as exchange students are integrated into Finnish student groups, EMI in BIS may succeed. On the day, when no exchange student is actively present, the rationality of the current educational approach, including EMI, should be re-evaluated. This statement is supported by Evans and Morrison<sup>[12]</sup> who have claimed that local students have no, or only little need or desire to speak English among themselves, but communication with international students for academic and social purposes is different. The presence of international students in interactional situations make local students switch the language to English.

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### Metatiedot

**Nimeke:** Keys for successful English-medium instruction in the Finnish-medium Degree Program in Business Information Systems

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**Tiivistelmä:** Good English skills are important in the field of IT. For this and other reasons, the second academic year in the degree program in Business Information System (BIS) is taught and studied in English. Based on the study by Niva [1], most of the students and teachers in BIS support EMI, but some think that Finnish students in a Finnish-medium degree program should be taught only in Finnish. As one of the most fundamental decisions about the ways of implementing EMI, exchange students' integration into the Finnish group as well as the division of the student teams consisting of at least one international student and Finnish students and active working in student teams were the keys for success. Finally, EMI may succeed in BIS although opinions, attitudes and experiences in EMI, the adequacy of language skills, and Finnish in-class communication provoke discussion.

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