



Students' Transitions Through English Medium Instruction Environment: A Kyrgyz Case

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This qualitative exploratory research investigates Kyrgyz students' transition experience in an English Medium Instruction (EMI) environment through the Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theoretical lens. Data were collected from a small purposive sample of students through semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study reveal that the students experienced transitions in the academic, psychological, and social domains of their life. The academic transitions were in the form of gaining linguistic competencies, the psychological transitions were toward changing the students' outlook and their image of self, and the social transitions were toward a readjustment of the students' role in their family and community. Thus, these mostly positive and multi-directional transitions were developmental and transformational *in nature*

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INTRODUCTION

Since its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan has strived to revamp and improve the quality of higher education (Wolanin, 2002) to earn global credibility and recognition for the Kyrgyz HE (KGHE) system (Heyneman, 2011) and to align it to the economic, social and political aspirations of the country (Kaldybaev, 2018). An important aspect of these improvement efforts has been cooperation and collaboration in the field of higher education with other states and non-governmental philanthropic and development organizations (e.g., Russia, Turkey, European Union, United States, Kuwait, the Soros Foundation, and the Agha Khan Development Network). As part of these collaboration activities, these international players, since then, have established a few elite private HE institutions (PHEIs). Internationalization, which implies “integrating an international, intercultural or global dimensions” into higher education (Knight, 2015), has been central to the academic functioning of these PHEIs. One of the central aspects of internationalization is the practice of English medium instruction (EMI) (Galloway et al., 2017). Although there is no universally agreed definition of EMI in the research literature, EMI generally implies using “the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Macaro et al., 2018, p. 19). The EMI practice in these PHEIs is typical of the scenario depicted in this definition. Kyrgyzstan is an English as a foreign language (EFL) country (Ahn and Smagulova, 2021) where both during and after the Soviet occupation “English has [...] played a negligible institutional role and has [...] been

studied as a language subject rather than acquired through its use as a medium of instruction (MOI) for content subjects” (Evans and Morrison, 2017, p. 303). Even outside the academic spheres, the English language plays a negligible role in social, economic, or political life in the country. It has the status of a foreign language and does not figure in the Kyrgyz government’s language policy (Ahn and Smagulova, 2021). The language policy essentially supports and promotes the use of the Kyrgyz language as a national language. Alongside the national language Kyrgyz, Russian is the language of prestige and is widely used in education, communication, commerce, politics, government transactions, publishing, and other private and public spheres of everyday human activities (Kosmarskaya, 2015). It is within this multilingual context of Kyrgyz and Russian language dominance that Kyrgyz students join the PHEIs and experience an EMI environment. Such experiences have usually been described in the EMI literature as having an ambivalent nature (being a boon as well as a bane) in various contexts across the globe. The cause of this ambivalence can be attributed to the want-hate relationship (Lin and Motha, 2020) resulting both from the English language learning improvements as a result of the EMI experiences and the challenges that learning through EMI pose for students. However, not much is known about how EMI practice—introduced as an improvement and internationalization measure in KGHE system by the international players (mainly in the PHEIs established by them)—has been experienced, negotiated, contested, and justified by the students studying in these institutions. This study aims to fill this research gap by exploring the nature of students’ EMI experience in this specific Kyrgyz context.

The significance of the study lies in its being a pioneering study in the under-researched context of Kyrgyzstan. Further, it is hoped that the findings of the study provide important insights for understanding the positionality of EMI and its value from the students’ perspective in a country “where English is not formally a part of the country’s official language policy” (Ahn and Smagulova, 2021, p. 2) and thus contribute to the broader field of EMI research by developing a better understanding of EMI implementation and students’ perspective on this implementation. Further, the study investigates the students’ EMI experience from a multiple and multidimensional transitions (MMT) theoretical framework (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016; Rienties and Jindal-Snape, 2016; Gordon et al., 2017). The use of this framework allows looking at the students’ EMI experience as a process of broader changes and adjustments affecting several areas of student life rather than just their educational or learning life only and therefore, makes it possible to understand the influence of EMI experience beyond the narrow sphere of a classroom and a university. The research question leading this study is: “How do Kyrgyz students experience transitions while studying in an EMI environment in a local PHEI?”

In what follows, I briefly explore the existing literature on students’ EMI experience to build a perspective for this investigation, followed by a brief explanation of the theoretical background and research design. These brief sections are followed by details of the findings of this study which culminate on brief sections of discussion and conclusion.

AMBIVALENT NATURE OF ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION EXPERIENCE

Students’ encounter with English as a *lingua academia* (Phillipson, 2008) in the contexts where English is a foreign language culminates in a range of student experiences. A substantial body of research in the EMI field focuses on exploring the nature of these experiences. A literature review of this research reveals the contradictory (both negative and positive) nature of these experiences (Tatzl, 2011).

ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION EXPERIENCE: A BANE

A survey of the studies in the negative experiences category revealed the impeding role that the use of English plays in students’ engagement with and their completion of routine academic tasks. The studies reported difficulties that students faced in learning and understanding contents, processing and completing course assignments. An example is a recent study by Aizawa and Rose (2020) in a Japanese context. They reported students’ difficulties in learning vocabulary and grammar, and the impediments they face while participating in classroom interactions, comprehending lectures, and producing course essays. Similar findings were reported from other expanding circle countries such as China (Galloway and Ruegg, 2020), Oman (Ali, 2020), Turkey (Kamaşak et al., 2021), Taiwan (Hua, 2020), Italy (Rowland and Murray, 2020), UAE (Belhiah and Elhami, 2015), Austria (Tatzl, 2011), and Hong Kong (Evans and Morrison, 2011a). The single conclusion attributable to these studies is that the use of English “seriously impeded [students’] comprehension of lectures and textbooks and inhibited the communication of ideas in papers and presentations” (Evans and Morrison, 2011b, p. 206). The studies also reported an increase in students’ workload and associated time management challenges because of these difficulties in understanding, processing and producing academic content basically because of the use of EMI (Tatzl, 2011). The participants of these studies reported spending more time outside the classroom to grapple with the challenge of comprehending course readings and learning technical vocabulary. They needed to use “translation, bilingual dictionaries and websites to cope with EMI-related challenges and difficulties” (Ali, 2020, p. 11) and this consumed a considerable portion of their time. Studies also revealed assessment-related challenges faced by students in an EMI environment. Belhiah and Elhami (2015) found that students were unable to understand exam questions in the English language which necessitated using students’ L1 as a language of exams (despite an EMI environment) to enable them to complete their exams. Additionally, studies also reported the adverse effects of instructors’ insufficient English language proficiency on students’ learning (Yeh, 2014; Zhang, 2018; Qiu and Fang, 2019; Yang et al., 2019; Ekoç, 2020; Hua, 2020). This evinces that the students’ challenges in an EMI environment are compounded by their instructors’ insufficient language proficiency also. The specific problems that instructor-related

studies reported were a lack of interaction in classrooms and a monotonous teaching style of the instructors who due to their low English language proficiency level resorted to merely reading from the textbooks rather than delivering engaging and interactive lecture sessions. This tendency on part of the instructors negatively affects students' qualitative engagement in the learning process. Another negative aspect of the EMI experience in such contexts was students' inability to discuss their problems with teachers, especially in cases where a teacher did not share a first language with students. Students' insufficient English language proficiency obstructed any such discussions. Most adversely, studies also report the negative effects of EMI on students' performance and achievement. For example, Nurshatayeva and Page (2020) reported a decrease in students' GPA and an increase in failures in EMI courses. Studies also reported the negative effects of EMI experience on students' mental and emotional state and social contacts. Psychologically, students suffered "emotional anxiety, stress and nervousness, demotivation, and problems of adjustment" (Hua, 2020, p. 331). Socially, it reduced the element of human interaction and contact within and outside the classroom especially between international and local students (Kim et al., 2014) because they did not share a common first language.

ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION EXPERIENCE: A BOON

While a larger body of the literature focuses on the challenging aspects of the EMI experience, certain studies also reveal positive aspects of the experience. These aspects are mostly related to the advantageous and enabling effects of the EMI experience. The greatest advantage of an EMI experience appears to be an improvement in students' English language proficiency (ELP) or linguistic skills. Belhiah and Elhami (2015) reported an improvement in students' receptive and productive language skills. This gain in return also improved students' confidence in themselves. Similar findings were reported by Yeh (2014) and Tatzl (2011), Vidal and Jarvis (2020) particularly reported a significant improvement in students' essay writing ability. Additionally, Ekoç (2020) reported positive effects of EMI on students' performance in an English proficiency test. Doiz et al. (2013) reported improvement in students' intercultural awareness. However, the beneficial nature of these experiences is strongly mediated by students' previous schooling and English language learning experience. For example, in Aizawa and Rose (2020) study, only students with previous English language learning and instruction experience reported advantageous and enabling effects of a university EMI experience. Similar was the case in Evans and Morrison (2011b, 2017, 2018), Kim et al. (2014), Belhiah and Elhami (2015), Bolton et al. (2017), Chu et al. (2018), and Hua (2020). Bolton et al. (2017) reported the intermediary role of disciplinary background and level of study in positively informing these experiences.

The literature review reported above indicates certain gaps in the student experience related EMI research. Most of these studies are focused on learning and academic aspects of the EMI

experience and thus isolate and characterize EMI experience only as an academic or learning experience and not an experience influencing other aspects of a student's life. Other life domains such as personal, social, cultural, emotional, and psychological domains attract peripheral or no attention in these studies. Most of the studies included in the literature review approach student EMI experience as an isolated event affecting students' academics at a particular point in their academic life as a complex, nuanced, holistic, and transformational life transition affecting the whole person and life of students. Second, the studies approach student EMI experience from a deficit view (Mittelmeier, 2021). This deficit view implies that students find EMI challenging because they lack ELP and that a student's ability (or otherwise) to assimilate into an EMI environment depends on her/his level of ELP. The current study is a diversion because it approaches student EMI experience from a multiple and multidimensional transitions (MMT) theoretical lens which takes a holistic view of an individual's experiences as a continuum (rather than an isolated event occurring at an isolated point in an individual's life without any relation to other points of experience).

MULTIPLE AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL TRANSITIONS

Multiple and multi-dimensional transition posits that individual life and experiences simultaneously exist in multiple (physical, cultural, psychological, and social) domains. All these domains have their complexities (Jindal-Snape and Ingram, 2013; Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016). Any transition in one domain affects other domains also and may trigger transitions there as well (Gordon et al., 2017). The theory can be understood through "a Rubik's cube analogy, suggesting that change in one aspect can lead to changes for the individual in several aspects; changes for one person can lead to changes for [other people related to that person also]" (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016, p. 3). The word transition in MMT theory does not denote linear and sequential "change" (Gordon et al., 2020). Transition in MMT theory is construed as a dynamic, continuous, and simultaneous process "of educational, social, and psychological adaptations due to changes in context, interpersonal relationships and identity, which can be both exciting and worrying" (Glazzard et al., 2020, p. 4).

Placed within the framework of MMT, the student EMI experience can be perceived as an educational and life transition. Students make an entry into EMI to realize certain aspirations and thus the transition into EMI has an element of positivity at the initiation stage. The entry into the EMI environment places a student into a new "context and set of interpersonal relationships" with other people (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016, p. 2). This transition into and through an EMI environment is a dynamic process of various adaptations and changes across several life domains of students. This study will explore the nature of these transitions within the framework of MMT theory by studying the transitions made by a group of Kyrgyz students into and through an EMI environment.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study was conducted using a qualitative research design within an interpretive research paradigm. A qualitative research design is useful in understanding complex issues or experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Further, a qualitative research design is also effective in “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). It has been mentioned that the EMI experience is not merely an ELP related experience of assimilation and the ensuing challenges of studying in an EMI environment but this experience is a dynamic process of transitions starting with an aspiration and affecting various domains of a student’s education and life. The purpose of this study was to develop a detailed and complex understanding of these transitions from the participants’ perspective and through their voice; therefore, a qualitative research design was considered suitable for this study. The leading research question for the study was “How do Kyrgyz undergraduate students experience transitions while studying in an EMI environment in a local PHEI?”

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The participants for the study were purposively selected (Given, 2008) information-rich (Emmel, 2013) individuals from a senior year undergraduate cohort of an English medium private university (given the pseudonym of UniversityX in this research). UniversityX is in a remote and isolated semi-urban area. The university offers two undergraduate majors. Most of the courses in these majors are taught by international English-speaking faculty. The students must attend a preparatory year program that includes two intensive academic English courses before they can embark on their undergraduate studies. In addition to EMI, the university also supports an English immersive environment on its fully residential campus. To recruit participants for the study, email invitations were sent to 28 senior year students studying Computer Science and Media majors. Only 13 of them (5 male and 8 female) agreed to participate. All ethical considerations and requirements (Iphofen and Tolich, 2018) were fulfilled before the data collection process started.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected through in-depth individual semi-structured interviews (Given, 2008) conducted online due to COVID-19 imposed social distance restrictions. The average time of completing these interviews was 39 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English because English was the only shared language between the researcher and the participants, and also because the participants were fluent in English. The data was analyzed following the two-cycle process explicated by Miles et al. (2014). In the first cycle, the transcribed data of the interviews were coded and in the second cycle, these codes were condensed into themes. This entire process was

manually done. The credibility of the data analysis process was ensured through the process of member check and peer audit (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

FINDINGS

The findings indicated multidimensionality and multiplicity of transitions. These transitions occurred in the academic, psychological, and social life domains of the students. These transitions were not isolated—not occurring into the confinements of a single domain but were simultaneous and interlaced. In this section, for better organization, these transitions are presented and grouped separately under academic, psychological, and social domains; however, their intertwined nature is expounded in the discussion section.

Affective Transitions: Emotional Distress

The participants’ initial transition was from a non-English medium environment into an English medium environment. This shift entailed an academic challenge. This challenge emerged from the ability and performance deficiency that the participants faced in their new environment. They experienced this deficiency because of their inadequate English language proficiency.

In the beginning, I wasn't that good in English because of my educational background based on the Russian language with my native Kyrgyz [language]. The most difficult part was studying science subjects in English since the vocabulary was completely new for me. And I needed to study things like several times, and I even remember times when I got assignments wrong. I had to like redo my assignments again and I continued till last minute and took a long time like sometimes a whole day and I kept on like this working and more working. (Excerpt from Student 11 interview)

The phenomenon captured in the excerpt is typical of the depreciating influence that students can experience when transitioning from a non-EMI to an EMI environment. The participants of this study experienced similar influences. Coming from a Russian or Kyrgyz medium of instruction background, the participants found themselves inadequately prepared for performing in an EMI environment. This inadequacy negatively impacted their academic performance. They were unable to achieve to the same extent and level that they did in their non-EMI environment. This phenomenon of depreciation in the students’ ability and performance can be understood through the dichotomy of “learners” and “users” (Blaj-Ward, 2017). As mentioned earlier, the basic principle of EMI is to teach content subjects in English without any goal of language learning tied to such teaching. Thus, the student participation in EMI study is premised on their role as English language users rather than as language learners. The role of a user is more demanding than the role of a learner and requires a better level of linguistic ability. If students are linguistically underprepared for adopting the “user” role, then they may experience a reduction in their academic ability and performance. Apparently, the participants of this study faced a similar phenomenon. They, because of their English language proficiency, found themselves inadequately prepared to assume the “user” role and struggled to deal with

the academic demands of EMI study and this inadequacy negatively influenced their achievement. This finding confirms similar previous findings in the existing research (Tatzl, 2011; Bolton et al., 2017; Chun et al., 2017; Aizawa and Rose, 2020). Aizawa and Rose termed the phenomenon of an initial ability and achievement reduction as “taxing induction” and reasoned that it happens because of students’ lack of familiarization with the “tasks required for EMI study” (p. 6). In the case of the participants of this study, their taxing initiation into an EMI environment and into their new role as English “users” was characterized by academic difficulties.

Academic Transition: Developmental Culmination

The findings indicate that the initial taxing induction into EMI and its negative influences did not persist. The students were able to change the situation for themselves through an investment of extra effort. This extra effort culminated in linguistic and academic achievements. The linguistic gains were evident through their reporting an improvement in their English language productive skills and vocabulary after all these years of EMI study. The students perceived they transitioned into linguistically more proficient and knowledgeable individuals during their EMI study. They reported an improvement in their productive skills.

I learnt writing these essays. I can now write better. I can provide details and I can give examples and persuade someone on my point. I can also speak better now. I can talk of details now. Now when I prepare some sort of speech in English, I bring a lot of examples unconsciously. It is now always like this. Maybe it is because I learned how to write English essays and papers something like this. It is more comfortable now to speak in English to express myself. (Excerpt from Student 02 interview)

Compared to the initial struggle, a perceived improvement in students’ confidence in their writing and speaking skills is apparent. This change in the participants’ proficiency level in their English language production skills can probably be explained as a transition of struggling learners (that the students were at the initial stage of their learning) into capable users (that the students are at the point of collecting data for this study) (Blaj-Ward, 2017).

The other aspect of the linguistic gain was vocabulary learning. The students reported an increase in their knowledge of English language vocabulary. This new knowledge was helpful not only in facilitating comprehension of material and expression of ideas but also in developing and expanding the students’ content-specific knowledge.

I learnt a lot of new words of my major. I did not know them before. They made read[ing] many things easy now. Then you know when you get familiar with words in this language, you get access to a lot of literacies and information of your major, you can read easily. Now I read more things and quickly, I understand them and can talk in class about them. (Excerpt from Student 02 interview)

These gains in productive skills and vocabulary knowledge are in harmony with the previous findings from Tatzl (2011), Belhiah

and Elhami (2015), and Rose et al. (2020). Rose et al. (2020) conclude that one of the main benefits of EMI is an improvement in students’ English language proficiency and the findings of this study support this conclusion.

Psychological Transitions

The academic changes that the students experienced through their EMI study were closely intertwined and interlaced with psychological changes. These psychological changes occurred in all three sub-domains of affect (in feelings and emotions), behavior (the attitude and the resultant action), and cognition (in beliefs).

Affective Transitions: Emotional Distress

An emotional response is a concomitant part of any challenging transition. The participants of this study reported academic difficulties while transitioning into an EMI environment. This academically challenging transition was with its due emotional distress. The depreciatory influences on academic performance and achievement that the students experienced during their initial academic transition into the EMI environment had negative emotional influences.

I felt stress and even could not sleep at night in the beginning because I felt that I need to learn more and understand more and that I am missing something while I am sleeping. For sure I had anxiety because I was worried a lot about my understanding of the subject. I did not want to seem stupid girl. Of course, it affected my confidence. I felt vulnerable. (Excerpt from Student 12 interview)

The extract highlights the extent of the emotional problems that students can face while adapting to the demands of an EMI study. The academic challenges at the initial stage of an EMI study affect emotional problems. This phenomenon also highlights a connection between English language proficiency, academic performance, and emotional distress. In the case of the current study, the students’ inadequate English language proficiency is the underlying reason for the academic and performance adjustment difficulties and the negative emotional response. While the findings in this study confirm similar findings by Yeh (2014), it contradicts the findings by Zhang (2018) who reported that students’ “low English competence was not an impediment to EMI content learning” (p. 360). In the case of this study, it is apparent that low English competence was a reason for the students’ initial inability to learn and progress and also for their emotional distress.

Behavioural Transition: Investment of Effort

The emotional distress influenced a change in students’ effort investment behavior. The following excerpt is representative of this behavior change.

I started realizing that I need to work hard after classes to catch up with others and understand better. So, while others were having fun and partying, I was studying in my room. I understood that I can learn in English, and all this depends on practice and hard work. I also understood that asking questions from a teacher is ok; in the beginning I did not ask questions in class since I did not want others to think that I don’t know something. After some time, I changed my

understanding. I realized it helps and that other people are ready to help. I felt better and better. (Excerpt from Student 6 interview)

The excerpt indicates the attitudinal and behavioral adjustment which is manifest through the investment of effort and the use of teacher support. This behavior change is interpretable as the students' way of handling the initial academic maladjustment and the ensuing emotional distress. The trigger of this attitudinal and behavioral adjustment is the students' belief of possibility and trust in their ability which was that learning through EMI is possible and can be done. The attitudinal and behavioral transition and the belief in possibility led the students into the action of investing more effort and seeking teacher support. These two elements helped them overcome their initial academic difficulties and resultantly also the emotional distress caused by these difficulties. The outcome of overcoming the academic maladjustment is the academic gains that the students reported in the academic transitions section. This finding reflects that students' positive "beliefs of capability" had a "positive influence on their confidence" (Thompson et al., 2019, pp. 3, 2).

Cognitive Transitions: Sense of an Able Self

The academic gains achieved because of effort investment lead to a cognitive transition of self-beliefs in the students. They develop a sense of their academic selves as confident learners and proficient English language users.

I think now I feel more sure (sic) of myself because of my knowledge, English and the skills that I learnt learning in this English education. I was really dependent before this. Now, you see I started to be brave. I can elaborate more in English, there are many things I can say in English. I don't have to translate them into Kyrgyz or Russian. Now I think I am more confident. I have some sort of advantage because of English language since like majority of information is in English. I feel confident that I can learn faster and quicker now. (Excerpt from Student 04 interview)

The connection between the students' competence in productive skills and their self-confidence belief is obvious. The excerpt is also a clear indication of the distinct advantage that English language proficiency brings for the students and the positive influence that this ability has on their sense of self-worth. The feeling of vulnerability (reported during the initial academic transition) is now replaced with a self-belief of proficiency and ability.

Cognitive Transitions: Intercultural Self

Kim et al. (2017) mention that the interaction dynamics among students, faculty and curriculum in an EMI environment have the potential to develop intercultural awareness and outlook among students. Rose et al. (2020) share the same opinion and concluded that one benefit of the EMI experience is "the development of internationally minded students" (p. 2150). The findings of this study confirm these aspects of the EMI environment. The participants of the study reported developing into engaged citizens with an ethnorelative and global outlook.

Before I was like very patriotic. Now I am more critical about things; like how things are going, and I started to compare and examine all those different things happening in my country. And then I see

the issues with these things and that is why I am a bit more critical toward my country now. I started to question most of the things that are in my community. It [EMI experience] changed my perspective. (Excerpt from Student 04 interview)

It appears that the participants' EMI experience led to a positive outcome of adopting a new way of thinking and perceiving. The students transitioned into more aware and outward-looking individuals. They reported adopting a tolerant attitude to culturally and socially contentious issues.

I am more open minded now. I speak on several sensitive topics like Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) and I [am] kind of tolerant now. It was a little aggressive when I talked about it before. Now, I am kind of like there is like liberal part of me wakes up you know. I start to be more open minded. I became friends with people from different countries without caring who or from these people were. This was because of English I can talk to them and understand them. Like English education is always connected with growth in my opinion. (Excerpt from Student 05 interview)

LGBT is a controversial issue in Kyrgyzstan and a discussion of the topic can incite a strong reaction (Geyer, 2020). The interviewee's mention of speaking on LGBT denotes a transition in attitude toward prevailing controversies in society. It shows the level of open-mindedness that the students have developed during their EMI experience. In this excerpt, this change in attitude is equated with growth which is linked to the EMI experience. In totality, this change into engaged, outward-looking, tolerant beings can be interpreted as the students' transition into a new intercultural global identity because of their EMI experience.

Social Transitions

The findings reveal transitions in the social domain also. The influence of academic and psychological transitions permeates the social domain by affecting transitions in the social relationships of the students. These transitions show a readjustment of students' roles and relationships vis-a-vis their family, friends, and community. The transitions, though mostly positive, harbor a stressful aspect as well.

The positive aspect of the transition is embedded in the students' relationship and status within the family. The findings show an increase in their self-worth vis-a-vis their status in their family.

My family now listen to me. They think I know more. They started to listen to my ideas, listen to my voice. Recently, my father asked me for some business ideas, and I give him some very good ideas. They even asked my idea how to design our new house. (Excerpt from Student 12 interview)

The perceived change in family attitude is contributory to the positive self-worth of the students. Self-worth and self-esteem are interrelated. Self-esteem stems from the students' success in their EMI study and it positively affects their self-worth and their inner sense of being important to their families.

However, while we see a positive change in the family relationship domain, the students' relationships with the wider community of friends and acquaintances are marred

by some stressors. The following excerpt is illustrative of these stressors.

Like all of them [acquaintances] are saying, “he’s arrogant.” They created some sort of tension rather positive vibes. This is because now I question most of the things in my community. I became more vocal than I used to be. I learnt not to agree with everything that people say. They do what older people say and think it’s absolute and cannot be challenged. But now I am not afraid raising my voice and defending my point and this is why they think I am arrogant. I have lesser friends now than I used to have before I started university. (Excerpt from Student 03 interview)

The social relations stressors are caused by the non-conformist attitude of the students. The students, because of their EMI study, have developed a new critical outlook that no more matches the existing norms of their community. The critical outlook is perceived by the community as an attitudinal and behavioral anomaly and strains the relationships of the students with their immediate community outside the university. This change in relationships can also be interpreted as the students’ adjustment problems in the community after having adopted an intercultural global identity. The students’ positive change in relationships with the family and their strained relationship with the immediate community is a confirmation of Glazzard et al. (2020) elucidation that “during transitions individuals may lose the relationships that have previously contributed to positive or negative self-worth and they may receive different feedback from new relationships which can have a positive or negative effect on self-concept” (p. 9).

DISCUSSION

The current study explored the nature of the EMI experience of a group of Kyrgyz students within the framework of multiple and multi-dimensional transitions theory. The findings revealed that the participants experienced transitions in the academic, psychological, and social domains of their life. These transitions were non-linear, dynamic, multi-layered, and intertwined across the domains (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016).

The transition into the new academic domain of the EMI triggers academic transitions. The transitions in the academic domain were developmental. The academic transitions endowed the students with cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in the form of knowledge of vocabulary and English language production skills. These transitions were manifest in the students’ competencies of writing and speaking and a better knowledge of English language vocabulary. Viewed from an acculturation perspective (Berry, 2005), the gain of cultural capital in the academic domain was made after the initial stressful transitions of acculturation to the new EMI environment. Once the students made a successful assimilation and integration in this new environment, their development started, and the initial stress was replaced by a sense of success and satisfaction because of their productive language skills development. Placing the findings related to the cultural capital gain in this study within

the perspective of the previous research, it can be concluded that the students’ gains in productive skills and vocabulary knowledge confirm the findings of the studies by Kim et al. (2014); Belhiah and Elhami (2015), and Aizawa and Rose (2020). However, the study by Aizawa and Rose establishes a connection between the language skills gains and the previous English language learning experiences of the participants, but this current study does not establish any such link as it was beyond the scope of this study.

The influence of academic transitions permeates the psychological domain. The transitions occurring in the psychological domain are transformative. These transitions transform the students’ dispositions and their concept of self. Viewed from a Bordieuan perspective, these transformations represent the evolution of a new habitus. The development of the new habitus results from the students actively responding to the EMI environment and the affordances present in this environment. This shows the students’ ability of affective adaptation ensuing from their interaction with the environmental factors (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016).

The academic and psychological transitions influence social life transitions. These transitions are redefining in character. They are manifest in the role adjustment of the participants vis-à-vis family and immediate community. Though transitions in the social domain enhanced the social capital of the participants within their families, the same transitions had diminishing effects on this social capital within the extended social circle of the students’ community. The participants’ status and role within the family gain value due to their possession of the new cultural capital (of English language skills and knowledge) and new habitus. However, the same possession makes relations with friends and acquaintances stressful. The cause of this stress is an element of incompatibility between the participants’ newly adopted habitus of the students to the social field characterized by the larger community.

CONCLUSION

This research study investigated the transition experience of a group of Kyrgyz students studying in an EMI environment through the lens of MMT theory. The findings reveal the developmental, transformational, and redefining influences of the transitions on the students. The findings also confirmed that EMI experiences are not always challenging and negative, but they have positive aspects as well. While the study can be credited with viewing the students’ EMI experience from an MMT theory perspective and being a pioneering study in the Kyrgyz EMI higher education context, the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts within and outside Kyrgyzstan. This is a typical inherent limitation of all qualitative studies. Further, this study was narrowly focused on the role of EMI only and did not probe other contextual elements such as the role of the curriculum and its contents, the influence of the diversity in campus, the role of the faculty, students’ life activities, and an immersive English

medium environment. These elements may also have played a role in defining and influencing the transitions experienced by the participants. A more comprehensive study is recommended to explore the interaction of these elements in shaping the overall nature of these transitions. Finally, the study collected the participants' perspectives at a particular point in time. The nature of this perspective was retrospective. However, transitions are a continuum by nature, and they occur over a prolonged and sustained period. Therefore, for any future research into these transitions, a longitudinal study is recommended.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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