STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH-MEDIUM INSTRUCTION PROGRAMS AT A REGIONAL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: This study investigates the challenges students face in English-medium instruction (EMI) programs at a regional university in Vietnam. Data was collected through focus groups with 24 students across three EMI programs. It was found that most students experienced difficulties in lecture comprehension, mainly due to their limited English proficiency and insufficient prior exposure to English listening and speaking skills. In addition, they found it difficult to deal with the overwhelming technical vocabulary of the subjects. Besides, both high- and low-proficiency students had motivational challenges. The former group lacked motivation due to the slow pace and lecturers' frequent use of Vietnamese in mixed-level classes, and the latter due to their limited language ability and lecture comprehension. The findings underscore the need for more tailored approaches to address students' diverse linguistic and motivational needs in EMI program implementation.

Keywords: EMI, Vietnam, challenges, students

1. Introduction

English-medium instruction (EMI) has become increasingly popular in higher education worldwide as a strategy for internationalisation (Macaro et al., 2018; Tsou & Baker, 2021). In Vietnam, the number of EMI programs in Vietnam has risen significantly during the last few decades (Galloway & Sahan, 2021). However, many of these EMI programs have been "implemented in a top-down fashion with little consideration of the context, resources and stakeholders involved" (Galloway & Sahan, 2021, p.10). This, undeniably, leads to specific issues for those who participated in EMI programs, especially lecturers and students. Accordingly, investigating stakeholders' perspectives on EMI implementation is important to guarantee these programs' quality. Against this backdrop, the current study was conducted to explore the stories of EMI students in a regional university in central Vietnam, particularly focusing on their challenges in learning the content subjects via English.

2. Literature review

2.1 Defining EMI

With its popularity, EMI has attracted significant attention from researchers. However, the phenomenon of EMI and its definitions are "inconsistent and problematic" (Macaro et al., 2018, p. 46) in the existing literature. EMI is defined by Dearden (2014) as "the use of English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English" (p.2). This definition yet excludes the Anglophone settings. Meanwhile, Murata and Iino (2018, p. 404) conceptualise EMI as using English "as a lingua franca for content-learning/teaching among students and teachers from different linguacultural backgrounds", hence including Kachru's (1992) inner-circle countries.

Nonetheless, this conceptualisation fails to address the existence of EMI programs in which lecturers and students share the same first language. In other words, generalising EMI is quite challenging since its interpretation varies from context to context and observer to observer (Airey, 2016). Accordingly, in this study, EMI is generally understood as the use of English as a language of teaching and learning for lecturers and students, who may or may not share the same mother tongue. In this meaning, English can be the first, the second, or the foreign language of instructors and learners.

2.2 EMI in Vietnam

The implementation of EMI programmes in Vietnamese higher education has received considerable support from the government and universities (Dang & Moskovsky, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2017). Current EMI programs in Vietnam can be classified into two main types: foreign programs and domestic programs (Nguyen et al., 2017). The first type refers to those developed based on the intellectual cooperation between Vietnamese universities and foreign partners to offer academic resources and activities onshore, which range from teaching and learning materials, curricula, and assessments to degree programs. Meanwhile, domestic programs are those completely developed, administered, and delivered by Vietnamese universities. The number of foreign and domestic EMI programmes has increased strikingly in the country during the last two decades, and the reported figure may not be updated enough to reflect the reality (Ngo, 2019; Galloway & Sahan, 2021). However, in addition to those officially regulated programs, there are also grassroots initiatives where the faculty and lecturers decide to use English in their content classes (i.e. unofficial programs). Although it is impossible to record these bottom-up programmes, acknowledging their existence is necessary for a comprehensive picture of EMI in Vietnamese HEIs.

2.3 Challenges for EMI students

Previous studies have mentioned considerable language-related challenges for EMI students. In other words, the biggest obstacle for students to successfully complete EMI programs is related to their language proficiency. For instance, Korean students in Cho's (2012) and Kim's (2011) studies complained about their language skills, especially their limited listening skills. Similar language challenges have been reported in studies conducted in Vietnamese EMI programs. Drawing on data from student interviews, Nguyen et al. (2017) underlined that many Vietnamese students in their investigated EMI programs struggled with lecture comprehension, reading materials, writing assignments, interaction with teachers and in-class multi-party exchanges. The main reason for this low level of proficiency lies in the lack of adequate English requirements for students to be admitted into their EMI programs. In a recent study, Galloway and Sahan (2021) reported language-related challenges for Vietnamese students when attending EMI courses. Low student English proficiency was reported to hinder content comprehension, particularly in understanding vocabulary, lectures, and exams. In the study of Hoang and Tran (2022), two-thirds of their student participants indicated that they could comprehend only about 50-60% of the lessons. Their EMI lessons were generally characterised by teachers' monologues, and about 43% of the students hardly or never responded to their teachers' questions during lessons because of their low English proficiency, lack of confidence, low learning motivation, and lack of related disciplinary knowledge. Language-related challenges are still reported even in

programs with a policy stipulating an initial year of English language tuition before students enrol in their specialist subjects. For example, Pham and Barnette (2022) found out that many participants in their study experienced a shock in transitioning from the first year with its primary focus on the English language to their second year learning their content subjects in English. These students could not understand their teachers' spoken English, whether the teacher was Vietnamese or foreign. Accordingly, they could not take note of their lessons.

In addition to fundamental language-related challenges such as taking notes, comprehending grammar structures or understanding lectures, EMI students also experience more specific academic literacy challenges such as essay organisation or technical vocabulary. For example, Luu and Hoang (2022) reported that their student participants find technical terms difficult regarding the quantity and meanings of these terms in their EMI subjects. Meanwhile, Lam, Phan and Nguyen (2022) collected data from 288 questionnaires and 27 interviews with EMI engineering–technology students and found that students struggled with subject matter content and vocabulary.

These self-reported challenges in students' EMI learning align with the lecturers' perspectives. Complaints have been made across contexts concerning students' ability to survive or benefit when taught in English. For example, Doiz et al. (2011) and Choi (2013) reported lecturers' concerns about students' proficiency as a barrier to success in EMI programs. Related findings can be found in other contexts, such as Turkey (Basıbek et al., 2014), the UAE (Rogier, 2012), or Indonesia (Floris, 2014). Vietnamese lecturers of EMI programs share the same alarms about students' low levels of English proficiency. Vu and Burns (2014) highlight the diverse language abilities in their investigated EMI programs, leading to the challenges for lecturers to improve the ability of low-level students, especially when it was combined with content teaching. Likewise, a comprehensive study conducted in Thailand and Vietnam by Galloway and Sahan (2021) reveals that most lecturer participants worried about their students' low proficiency, as students could not understand lectures, vocabulary and exams. Their students also could not write, read, or communicate in English effectively.

Previous studies have underlined the challenges EMI students face in their programs in Vietnam. However, most existing studies are conducted in officially regulated programs (e.g. Galloway & Sahan, 2021; Luu & Hoang, 2022), while voices from unofficial programs are underrepresented. Accordingly, this paper will focus on the challenges students perceive from three EMI programs at a regional university. Two of these are bottom-up initiatives from the lecturers themselves without any specific documents regulating language use and thus can be considered unofficial programs.

3. Methodology

Qualitative data presented in this study was collected via focus groups with students. Focus groups were selected because of two reasons. First, "there may be safety in number", and those participants who assumingly think of themselves as having nothing to contribute can feel more relieved (Barbour, 2007, p. 42). Second, before fieldwork, potential participants preferred to discuss issues in groups rather than conduct one-to-one interviews with the researchers. 24 students participating in this study were selected through a convenience sampling method. They come from three EMI programs. The first one is an EMI foreign program in Business

Administration (Program LK1), while the other two are domestic programs in American Studies and International Studies (Program NB2 and Program NB3). For these two programs, there is no official policy regulating the use of English as the language of teaching and learning; hence, they are considered examples of unofficial EMI programs, as mentioned in Section 2 above.

Six focus groups were conducted with 24 students, including two groups from Program LK1 (LK1.G1 and LK2.G2), two groups from Program NB2 (NB2.G3 and NB2.G4) and two groups from Program NB3 (NB3.G5 and NB3.G6). These students, coded from S01 to S24, were in their third and fourth years and, thus, had considerable experience in EMI learning. As regulated by their program policies, these students did not need to take screening English tests upon entry, and they perceived their English levels differently. Five students were confident in their English proficiency, six were quite confident but not always, and the rest were unsatisfied with their language level. During the group interviews, students shared their EMI experience, particularly their challenges when learning their content subjects in English and how they overcame these challenges. All the focus groups were conducted in Vietnamese, yet participants could switch to English whenever they liked. Each focus group lasted from 30 to 57 minutes and was conducted online via Zoom or offline at the university cafeteria, depending on students' preference and convenience.

Data was transcribed in Microsoft Word and then imported into Nvivo 11 to be organised into themes related to challenges in the EMI learning experience. The six-phase framework of thematic analysis, developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87), was employed in this study. It includes (1) familiarising oneself with his/her data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report.

4. Findings and discussions

As mentioned in the literature review, the biggest challenge reported by EMI students in previous studies is related to language, which is also the most salient finding in the current study. Students who perceived themselves to have low English proficiency often struggled to understand lectures and experienced a lack of technical vocabulary. Meanwhile, those proficient in English often found it challenging to keep themselves motivated in a mixed-level class where their instructors used more Vietnamese than they had expected prior to the course.

4.1 Difficulty in lecture comprehension

About two-thirds of the students agreed they initially needed help understanding the lessons. They believed their English proficiency needed to be improved to feel confident in their EMI journey. Accordingly, they struggled a lot to comprehend their EMI lectures. The sudden exposure to so much English scared them; thus, having their content subjects in English was so perplexing that they suffered a lot. Such adjectives as "unsecured" (bất an), "discouraged" (chán), "difficult" (khó), "stressed" (áp lực), or even "depressed" (trầm cảm) appeared quite often in the data when students described their initial feelings for their EMI modules.

Extract 1

In the beginning, it was tough to study, and it sounded scary. It was my first time studying History in English [...] We also studied Geography in English. I didn't find it interesting to learn History in Vietnamese, now studying it in English is so much more challenging (NB2.G3.SV10)

Their inability to understand EMI lectures resulted from several factors. First, students had few chances to practice listening skills in previous education, as their high school lessons focused more on exam-formatted activities such as grammar exercises or reading comprehension. Second, as illustrated in the extracts below, the language knowledge and skills gained from their previous English lessons in high schools and the language knowledge and skills required to complete their EMI courses did not match.

Extract 2

I think English at university and English at high school are worlds apart. Completely different. The way we speak and the way we listen are so much different. Being here, our preparation is like starting from zero […] when we are at university. There are so many differences. For example, apparently, when you major in International Studies, there are so many disciplinary words. Those vocabulary we don't know. And of course, the teachers in high school did not speak English all the time and so quickly, like here @ (NB2.G4.SV13)

Extract 3

When I was in high school, I was not very good at English. I didn't have a lot of chances to practise listening or speaking. I only read short passages for reading comprehension and answered questions like True/ False. But now I am totally lost. So many new words, so much new knowledge. I struggled a lot (NB3.G5.SV20)

Lecture comprehension has been reported as problematic in EMI courses across various settings worldwide and in Vietnam (e.g., Galloway & Sahan, 2021; Hoang & Tran, 2022; Pham & Barnette, 2022). Accordingly, what is reported here re-confirms the current reality of EMI implementation at the tertiary level and calls for solutions and considerations, especially when an increasing number of Vietnamese universities are implementing EMI programs in the regime of institutional autonomy (Nguyen et al. 2016).

4.2 Lack of technical vocabulary

The students reported challenges in dealing with technical and non-technical vocabulary in EMI lessons. Among the various reasons why students failed to comprehend their EMI lectures, the lack of technical vocabulary presented a considerable obstacle to keeping track of lecture content; hence, students could not take notes of their lectures. Students mentioned that the high number of technical vocabulary encountered in lectures caused difficulties in their comprehension of input. They also had to spend much time looking up the meanings of the subject-specific terms in the dictionary or online when reading English materials before class. Previous studies have found this problem (Chang, 2010; Hu & Lei, 2014; Luu & Hoang, 2022; Lam et al., 2022). It should be noted that both students with low and high English proficiency struggled when dealing with technical vocabulary, as illustrated in the extract below.

Extract 4

Even when I am good at English courses, I don't think I can completely understand everything in my EMI lessons. I guess I am only 60% to 70% confident in my lecture comprehension because I don't have much technical vocabulary. I have to spend a lot of time learning technical vocabulary at home (LK1.G2.SV4).

Although students attended English-supported courses within their university programs and were expected to learn more vocabulary in these courses, most participants felt that they were not happy with the content provided. There was a lack of consistency between these general English courses and what they really needed for their EMI lessons, particularly in terms of disciplinary vocabulary. This reported problem aligns with previous studies in Vietnam (Pham & Barnette, 2022).

Extract 5

General English is simpler, while disciplinary English is related to politics for us. It's about politics, it's difficult. If we misuse those words, they are connected to other things. Wrong meanings entail many more troublesome issues. So, we often worry about using the wrong keywords in English. (NB2.G3.SV9).

Besides, students in this study felt panic about their disciplinary knowledge. In other words, lecture comprehension was considered problematic for students as they had to "struggle" to learn both English and the content knowledge simultaneously. The content in Programs NB2 and NB3 is especially linguistically demanding as American Studies and International Relations majors belong to social science disciplines, which are reiterative and holistic with an emphasis on qualitative content. Consequently, there are a number of technical terms and disciplinary vocabulary that are already new to students in Vietnamese, let alone in English. The extract below illustrates this combination of language and content challenges.

Extract 6

Geopolitics has nothing to do with the subject of Geography I learnt before @@ It turned out to be about politics, and we were totally puzzled. And who are those men? Those men that we learnt, so far away, I had no idea. I had never heard of those names before even in Vietnamese (NB2.G4.SV17)

4.3 Lack of motivation

The challenge related to motivation was found in the interview data with both high- and low-proficiency students. This is a consequence of the two abovementioned challenges. On the one hand, high-English-proficiency students complained that their EMI classes were a bit slow and not challenging enough. As mentioned in previous studies, EMI students often expect to acquire discipline knowledge and learn how to convey meaning in the content area in English (Komori-Glatz, 2017; Vo et al., 2022). However, since there were mixed levels of English among students in the investigated programmes, some lecturers often had to slow down their teaching pace and spoke Vietnamese for most of the class. This catered to the needs of weak students, but at the same time, it may lead to the disappointment of strong students. They could not achieve the dual benefits that are often advertised in EMI: their English proficiency could not improve while their disciplinary knowledge

Extract 7

When I attended the introduction session of the program, the consultants told us that we would study everything in English. That's why I enrolled in the program, because I thought I would study everything in English. But it was not like that. My classmates were not good at English, so we had to wait for them. We spent a lot of time translating things from English to Vietnamese and that's a waste of time (LK1.G1.SV3).

On the other hand, low-proficiency students struggled to overcome the challenges mentioned above: lecture comprehension and lack of vocabulary. This led to an emotional challenge for some participants, who often experienced a loss in direction and lacked self-confidence. They may also have felt demotivated because they did not know what to do to master the programme as expected.

Extract 8

There was no screening test for our program, so I just got into the program and did not expect that it would be this challenging. I worked hard, but I think that's not enough. You know, working hard does not always lead to success. Sometimes, I feel like my teachers and my classmates have to bear with low-level students like me. That makes me bored, and I think like, "ok even if I read before classes, I still can't get what's going on in the lectures". Yah actually some students dropped the program after their first year (NB3.G6.SV22).

Few studies have discussed the motivational challenges that EMI students suffer. Instead, they mainly focus on the challenges around students' linguistic and academic abilities (Pham & Barnette, 2022; Ruegg, 2021). However, this study adds one more challenge in terms of motivation. It reports that low-proficiency students had to face a lack of motivation due to their inability to cope with lecture comprehension and the lack of technical vocabulary (as mentioned in 4.1 and 4.2). Meanwhile, high-proficiency students lacked motivation because their courses were mainly conducted in Vietnamese and not as challenging as they wished.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the challenges students face in three EMI programs at Hue University. Students enrolled in the programs without any screening tests or sufficient English requirements, leading to diverse language abilities in the classes. Most student participants were not confident in their English proficiency and had difficulty comprehending lectures in English. The participants also experienced a shortage of vocabulary, so they struggled to deal with reading materials and take note of the lessons. In addition, both high- and low-proficiency students had motivational problems. While the former group often found their EMI classes slow and not challenging enough, the latter group suffered from issues related to linguistic issues and occasionally wanted to give up their study.

This study is limited to qualitative data and conducted in only three EMI programs at a regional university. However, it addresses a significant gap in the current literature by looking at unofficial EMI programs in Vietnam, as most existing studies only look at officially regulated programs. Besides, the study suggests several implications for different EMI stakeholders. First, there should be English screening tests and specific language proficiency requirements. This will help potential learners be aware of the course's linguistic demands and ensure the program's quality (Pham & Barnette, 2022). Second, there should be ongoing language support throughout the EMI program, which aids students in coping with the linguistic and even academic challenges they face as they progress through their EMI journey. Teachers should also develop teaching strategies that cater to the diverse needs of EMI students and help them overcome challenges. They should avoid "assumptive teaching", that is, the practice in which they simply assume that students understand the lecture (Ball & Lindsay, 2013). More training programs on EMI teaching strategies should be organised, as professional development is still missing in many EMI contexts

(Dearden, 2014). Finally, long-term studies tracking students' progress and experiences throughout their EMI programs can provide deeper insights into the evolving nature of their challenges and the effectiveness of implemented solutions.

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NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN TRONG CÁC CHƯƠNG TRÌNH GIẢNG DẠY BẰNG TIẾNG ANH: GÓC NHÌN CỦA SINH VIÊN

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này tập trung tìm hiểu những khó khăn mà sinh viên của ba chương trình giảng dạy bằng tiếng Anh ở Đại học Huế đối mặt trong quá trình học tập của mình. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập qua phỏng vấn nhóm với 24 sinh viên. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy vì năng lực ngôn ngữ hạn chế, nhiều sinh viên gặp khó khăn trong việc hiểu bài. Một khó khăn khác là lượng từ vựng chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh quá cao. Ngoài ra, sinh viên cũng gặp các khó khăn về động lực học tập. Sinh viên giỏi tiếng Anh cảm thấy tốc độ bài giảng chậm và không hài lòng với việc giảng viên sử dụng tiếng Việt nhiều trong lớp. Trong khi đó, nhóm sinh viên còn hạn chế về mặt ngôn ngữ thì mất động lực khi không theo kịp bài và thiếu tự tin. Kết quả nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của việc triển khai các chương trình giảng dạy bằng tiếng Anh theo hướng phù hợp hơn với nhu cầu ngôn ngữ và động lực đa dạng của sinh viên.

Từ khóa: EMI, Việt Nam, khó khăn, sinh viên