

Students' Experiences with English Medium Instruction (EMI) Tertiary Programs in Vietnamese Context: Implications to Curriculum Developers

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Abstract

Along with globalization, the increasing demand for high quality human resources to meet national socio-economic development and the orientation development of Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam have had significant impacts on the emergence of Vietnamese English-medium instruction (EMI) tertiary programs in various fields of study such as Information Technology, Economics, Biotechnology, Aquaculture, International Business. In reality, however, the implementation of these programs has been still a debatable concern among educationalists and educational administrators with respect to its curriculum compatibility with the local context and expected learning outcomes. As a result, this pilot study aims to investigate how students have experienced with EMI tertiary programs in Vietnamese context. Data were collected by in-depth interviews with 20 final-year students of two EMI programs. Findings from the study shed some light for the implementation of EMI tertiary programs in Vietnam. From then, possible implications were proposed to EMI curriculum developers for future effective development of EMI tertiary program in this context.

Keywords: *English-medium instruction (EMI), students' experiences, higher education*

1. Introduction

Emerging as the most prevalent variation of content and language integrated learning (CLIL), the English medium instruction (EMI) has been increasingly adopted in many universities of non-native English speaking (NNES) nations. EMI programs were first originated from European countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, Sweden, and Turkey since the early 2000s (Ammon & McConnell; 2002; Björkman, 2008; Coleman, 2006; Healey, 2008) and then spread over many Asian countries such as India, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, China, Japan, and Korea (Byun et al., 2011; Chang, 2006; Gill, 2006; Kym & Kym, 2014; Naun, 2003). The primary objective of the EMI programs is to equip national human resource with both competency in professional knowledge and proficiency in English language for global integration. In reality, the aforementioned studies have proven that EMI programs have contributed a great deal to accommodating students' content knowledge and English proficiency, enhancing students' learning satisfaction, increasing employability, facilitating international mobility as well as promoting long-term national development (Chang, 2010; Coleman, 2006, Coleman, 2011; Kym & Kym, 2014). Meanwhile, they have also revealed certain problems associated with implementing EMI programs, including lack of administrative support, difficulties in designing curriculum, teaching methodology, teachers' and students' insufficient language abilities, cultural disparities, and social division (Coleman, 2006; Hamid et al, 2013).

In Vietnam, EMI tertiary programs have also been adopted with a different name called advanced university programs (chương trình tiên tiến) since 2008. One significant political move to these programs was the emergence of the project entitled "Innovation in Vietnamese Higher Education" (Decree number 14/2005/NQ-CP dated November the 2nd 2005) of the government (The Government of Vietnam, 2005). Particularly, the objectives of the implementation of Vietnamese advanced university programs are (1) to boost the development of universities ranked with regional and international standards, (2) to improve the quality of EMI-implemented programs in accordance with the comprehensive renovation of Vietnam's tertiary education, and (3) to strive for the target that by 2020 some Vietnamese universities will be ranked among the 200 leading universities in the world" (MOET, 2008). Recently, implementing these programs aims to increase institutional autonomy of many universities in accordance with the neoliberal approaches to higher education reform in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2016).

In fact, there have been 23 universities implementing 35 EMI programs of different fields of study throughout Vietnam (Hai Van, 2016; Minh Huong, 2017). Specifically, the so-called advanced programs have got 3.601 graduates and continued its growth. Review of literature about EMI programs in Vietnam also reveals that these programs have brought about remarkable results such as enhancing students' English language proficiency and professional knowledge, increasing employability chances, strengthening partnerships with foreign universities, and attracting international students (Dang et al, 2013; Le, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2016; Vu & Burns, 2014). However, these programs also face many barriers with regards socioeconomic inequality, national identity, lecturers and students' capacities, pedagogical approach and quality assurance (Le, 2012; Nguyen and Hamid, 2016; Vu & Burns, 2014). Additionally, the tuition fee of EMI programs is paid five times more than that of Vietnamese-medium instruction programs (Nguyen et al., 2016). Despite these barriers, the number of EMI tertiary programs in Vietnam never stops rising. As a result, as a part of the project on the implementation of EMI programs in Vietnamese universities, this pilot study is to investigate how students have experienced with EMI university programs in Vietnam. Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What strengths of advanced programs are perceived by Vietnamese students?
2. What challenges are experienced by these students with the advanced programs?
3. To what extent have students satisfied with these advanced programs?

2. Literature review

2.1. Realities of EMI implementation

The practice of EMI programs embraces not only significant success, but also certain challenges. Regarding its positive outcomes, EMI in different tertiary contexts is proven to improve both European and Asian students' target language proficiency together with subject content acquisition (Chang, 2010; Coleman, 2006), receive their preferences and learning satisfaction (Coleman, 2006; Kim, 2002), and enhance student-centred approaches in which students do not depend on their professors' knowledge transmission (Byun et al., 2011). Additionally, EMI increases not only students' but also lecturers' exposure to English comprehensible input and their use of English comprehensible output thanks to learner-centered activities (Ibrahim, 2001). Noticeably, EMI also encourages facilitating international mobility as well as promoting long-term national development (Chang, 2010; Coleman, 2006; Coleman, 2011b; Kym & Kym, 2014).

In the meantime, challenges emerged from EMI implementation are also recorded. In the context of India and Tanzania, EMI raises the question of inequality in the society in which people of middle and upper classes are easier to access EMI and then have more opportunities to hold power and influential positions in the society (Annamalai, 2004; Neke, 2005). In Vietnam, the operation of EMI is inhibited due to insufficient national and institutional provision for language education policies (Le, 2012). Further challenges are also found in different EMI contexts such as barriers to EMI lecturers in the Netherlands due to higher demands to language use and teaching skills of subject content (Vinke et al, 1998), difficulties in communication with English between Turkish students and their professors (Sert, 2008), students' and lecturers' limited English language competence, insufficient teaching and learning resources, as well as inappropriate pedagogic strategies (Chang, 2010; Coleman, 2006, Coleman, 2011a; Coleman, 2011b; Kym & Kym, 2014, Hamid et al., 2013; Le, 2012). In Asian context, the challenges to EMI also arise from importing Western curriculum and teaching methodology since Asian students are in contrast with Western students such as dependent, passive, undemocratic, reluctant to challenge authority (Holliday, 2005). Along this line, Le (2012) argues that imported materials written for English native speaking students can cause obstacles to local students. As a result, the implementation of EMI tertiary programs can challenge not only those of management level, but also those who directly implement such programs.

2.2. Influential factors to EMI programs

Based on the realities of EMI implementation, it is evident that, to implement EMI successfully, it needs to take into account of factors which can be summarized as follows.

2.2.1. EMI Administration

As mentioned earlier, the implementation of EMI in higher education in NNES contexts is related to reforms in administrative tertiary organization. The first factor influencing such changes is of EMI administration which is connected to policy makers, program developers or coordinators. Specifically, there should be more financial support from the government for smooth and effective EMI performance (Byun et al., 2001). At the institutional level, universities are also required to anticipate appropriate EMI actions to logically allocate the governmental funding (Williams, 2015). More importantly, Williams (2015) emphasizes that policy makers are recommended to identify the demands of teaching in English from faculty members and diverse needs from students to particular EMI courses. Supporting this concern, Brown (2014) explicitly explains that EMI programs may develop more successfully if program administrators recruit qualified faculty of sufficient status, provide support to lecturers and students of EMI programs and encourage communication among EMI stakeholders. For EMI students, there should be general English courses delivered by the faculty level since they have less contact with English and fewer English resources out of the classroom environment (Chang, 2010; Doiz et al., 2012; Ibrahim, 2001).

2.2.2. EMI Lecturers

At the micro level, the adoption of EMI is not an automatic movement of top-down language policy (Dang et al, 2013). In other words, lecturers of EMI tertiary programs also share vital roles in implementing the objectives promulgated by EMI policy makers. Generally, the EMI instructors are required to possess good command of English, qualification, pedagogical competence, and disciplinary competence to become successful and ensure the quality of EMI programs (Doiz et al., 2013; Kym & Kym, 2014; Vu & Burns, 2014). More specifically, EMI programs further need lecturers' sufficient ability to conduct courses in English with eligible language performance such as pronunciation, accent, fluency, intonation, and non-verbal behavior (Yeh, 2012). Furthermore, EMI lecturers are demanded to spend more time learning and looking up in a dictionary for vocabulary of technical terms and teaching language in English (Vinke et al., 1998; Wilkinson, 2005). Concerning classroom activities, Wilkinson (2005) relates the role of EMI lecturers to specific activities such as creating more time for student participation and discussion to build their confidence, adapting to code-switching between L1 and L2 for effective subject content explanation so as to clearly explain it to students and respond thoughtfully to their queries (William, 2015, Jeon, 2002, Vu & Burns, 2014).

2.2.3. EMI Students

Being as important as lecturers, EMI students also keep key roles in implementing EMI. In other words, students' insufficient command of English are believed to cause poor participation and academic achievement in English-medium courses (Doiz, et al., 2011; Li, & Miller, 1998, Yeh, 2012). Related to this view, Kym and Kym (2014) also mention learning outcomes of EMI can be affected by students' background knowledge or field-specific knowledge of the subject. In other words, students who own advanced language proficiency and field-specific background knowledge would gain more advantages from EMI programs than those without (Joe, 2010 cited in Kym & Kym, 2014). Sharing this view in relation to students' classroom participation, Wilkinson (2005) implies the vital position of students in EMI classrooms as spending more time speaking out and intervening in lectures or discussions so that they can become enthusiastic about the subject or domain. Furthermore, adopting EMI should embrace the gain of bilingualism, so students must think locally but act globally (Nettle & Romaine, 2002). This means that students need local languages to express national identities and English language to

communicate as global citizens. As a result, obtaining knowledge of intercultural communication is necessarily gained by most learners who study English as a second language (Byram, 1997) since language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of language (Brown, 1994).

2.2.4. EMI Pedagogic Strategies

Another factor influencing the effectiveness of EMI performance will be pedagogical strategies employed in English-medium teaching. These strategies include (1) adjusting language by slowing down rate of delivery, simplifying sentence structures, and restricting choice of vocabulary, (2) simplifying content by reducing the density of new information, (3) using additional support with slides and specialist terms, (4) adjusting teaching methods which emphasize more on student participation and discussion, and (5) code switching which means using the target language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms (Vinke et al., 1998; Wilkinson, 2005; Yeh, 2012).

2.2.5. Other supports to EMI Teaching and Learning

Along with the above influential factors related to stakeholders, the implementation of EMI programs can be influenced by other issues related to external factors. In other words, there are a number of influential external factors concerned for the successful EMI programs such as the quality of print materials, textbooks, classroom facilities to support the use of digital materials, social pressure, post-Confucian culture (Dang et al., 2013; Vu & Burns, 2014). Especially, the findings also highlight the importance of carefully designed EMI programs for the local context. Explained more specifically, Le (2012) shares this view by indicating that there might be incompatibilities between imported EMI curriculum from Western programs and the appropriate EMI curriculum significantly influenced by the Asian educational culture. Additionally, other factors such as the roles of parents and educators in universities where EMI programs are implemented are significant in response to economic globalization. (Baldauf, Kaplan, & Kamwangamalu, 2010 cited in Dang et al, 2013). Sharing this concern, Lueg (2015) mentions other influential factors related to the implementation of EMI programs such as a close connection between EMI graduates and potential employers who can offer jobs that require both English language proficiency and professional knowledge, and a closer relationship with internationally employed alumni as another way of EMI students' job orientation. Furthermore, the procedure of student recruitment should be also concerned since adequate English entry requirements enable EMI students to access EMI learning program successfully (Le, 2012).

3. Methodology

The current study employed a qualitative case study design (Creswell, 2013, Yin, 2014) to explore the students' experiences with advanced programs in a Vietnamese university. The qualitative approach seems more appropriate for this study since it is a form of in-depth interpretive enquiry which attempts to describe, explain and discover more about the world under investigation than was known before (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

3.1. Sample and sampling technique

The study is qualitative and thus purposeful sampling was utilized since this kind of sampling can allow one to select people who can best help to understand the phenomenon in focus (Creswell, 2013). The targeted samples were final-year students of two advanced programs in a Vietnamese university since they were those who could give deeper understanding of what had happened to their advanced programs than students of other years. Additionally, the period of exposure to the practices with advanced programs will bring the different perceptions and ideas.

The interviewees involved eleven female students and nine male students who were at the final year of two advanced university programs.

3.2. Data collection

In this study, in-depth semi-structured interviews were used as the main tool to explore what students had experienced with EMI programs in a Vietnamese university. Semi-structured interviews have proved to be an appropriate and fruitful data collection tool in research into educational issues because they are “the main road to multiple realities” (Stake, 1995, p. 64). Also, interviews are the best way to find out what other people think in mind, provide important insights and identify other sources of evidence (Burns, 2000; Merriam, 2009), as well as allow greater depth than other methods of data collection (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The following themes were investigated through the students’ interviews: (1) the strengths of advanced programs, (2) the challenges with advanced programs, and (3) the extent of preference with advanced programs.

4. Discussion and Finding

4.1. The strengths of advanced university programs

Three major strengths of advanced programs in a Vietnamese university were perceived by the student participants, namely students’ knowledge and skill development, well-supported facilities for learning and teaching, and employment prospect enhancement.

In terms of students’ knowledge and skill development, the interview results indicated that students could improve their content knowledge thanks to the imported curriculum, imported teaching materials of advanced programs, as student 11 explained:

We students obtain the content knowledge not only in Vietnam but also from other countries. Such knowledge help us a lot in doing research because the foreign techniques are more successfully applicable than Vietnamese ones. (Student 1)

Additionally, the student participants revealed that more learner-centred activities had been implemented such as group work, self-study, presentation, so their skills could be more enhanced. Some students shared this view as:

Everyone has chances to present many times. We also know how to read foreign materials and synthesize information. Our skills has been significantly improved. (Student 6)

Students of advanced programs have better language skills than those of ordinary programs. Their skills of group work, presentation are also better...especially our reading skills since we were taught in English with a lot of vocabulary of content subjects. (Student 15)

My communication skill has been improved. (Student 7)

Another major strength of advanced programs indicated by the interviewees is well-supported facilities for learning and teaching provided from the programs. Particularly, the result showed that class-room distribution, learning and teaching facilities, funds for learning activities, oversea field-trip were mentioned. Students commented on this concern as:

We study in a class which is not very crowded, so there are more chances of interaction between teachers and students. (Student 2)

Our class is well-prepared with high-tech equipment compared to other ordinary classes. (Student 5)

Students of advanced programs have more chances to go oversea field-trip. (Student 16)

We are well-supported with suitable classrooms, computers...We also study with new foreign learning materials and do not pay for such materials. (Student 8)

A further positive aspect of advanced programs indicated by the participants is to enlighten their prospects of employment and higher education. As mentioned by some students, this concern is particularly revealed as:

I can get higher opportunities of studying abroad and receiving scholarships.
(Student 17)

When I graduate from this advanced program, I have more chances to work in foreign countries. (Student 3)

The findings were in line with the achievements of EMI programs with respect to students' achievement in language proficiency and subject content acquisition discussed by Chang (2010) and Coleman (2006). However, the interview results are slightly different from Holiday's (2005) and Le's (2012) views of challenges with importing Western curriculum to passive and dependent students.

4.2. The challenges of advanced university programs

The results pointed out two main factors challenging the implementation of advanced programs in this research context, namely internal and external challenges.

With regard to external challenges, these interviewed students claimed lecturers' issues, curriculum issues, limited sources of qualified lecturers, high tuition fee as the most challenging factors hindering their study with advanced programs.

The comments on lecturers' issues related to pedagogic strategies and language abilities were:

Vietnamese lecturers were still influenced by the traditional teaching methods...Some lecturers sometimes had difficulties with teaching in English, so it prevented their knowledge transmission and their explanations to students' queries. (Student 2)

The advanced program required lecturers to teach content knowledge in English, but some lecturers only showed their lessons' slides in English, did not explain much, and asked us to learn by heart. (Student 5)

In comparison with foreign lecturers' teaching methods, some Vietnamese lecturers' did not focus on the main content of the lessons and unclear lesson outlines (Student 8)

The number of lecturers who could teach advanced program classes was limited. Vietnamese lecturers' teaching methods required students to learn by heart and their assessment also focused on what we learnt by heart, not on the knowledge we understood. (Student 9)

Vietnamese lecturers' pronunciation caused difficulties for students' understanding. (Student 13)

Some foreign lecturers did not know Vietnamese students' abilities. Although they provided a lot of knowledge, the knowledge we obtained was limited. (Student 14)

The issues related to curriculum were revealed as:

The number of credits in advanced programs is more than ordinary programs. The content of some courses was repeated. This semester has two to three repeated courses. (Student 4)

I felt that the curriculum of advanced programs required students to study a lot with many basic courses which were not related to our major. (Student 7)

There were more theoretical courses than practical ones. These courses were appropriate in the context of foreign countries where provided enough equipment. (Student 14)

The time distribution for our class was not logical because lecturers often were busy with their oversea business trip... We must stop for three weeks without doing anything, but we need to study many courses in limited time when these lecturers came back. (Student 10)

The time distribution for foreign lecturers in Vietnam was very short, but they must teach us many courses. Therefore, I did not have time to discuss and learn more. Also, we did not obtain enough knowledge if we study those courses at the same time. (Student 12)

Some courses were not taught as scheduled in the curriculum, some courses of background knowledge were arranged to teach after some main courses. (Student 9)

It was very hard for students to look for references since we did not know where journal articles were from. (Student 13)

Some English course books were translated into Vietnamese which did not have the same meanings, so I could not understand clearly if it was important to my content knowledge. (Student 15)

The challenges to advanced programs were also related limited sources of qualified lecturers. The comments were:

The number of lecturers teaching advanced classes was limited. The total number of lecturers was about twenty, but the number of courses was over fifty of over 150 credits. Therefore, each lecturer must be responsible for teaching about two courses. The problem was that we had to receive the same source of knowledge and depended on their available time. (Student 20)

The findings are in line with previous studies (Chang, 2010; Coleman, 2006, Coleman, 2011a; Coleman, 2011b; Kym & Kym, 2014, Hamid et al., 2013; Le, 2012) regarding inhibitors from lecturers' language proficiency and pedagogic strategies to the implementation of EMI programs. Especially, code switching was also indicated as one major challenge to both non-native and native EMI lecturers in this study. However, the findings are not similar to previous studies in terms of lack of qualified EMI lecturers and curriculum issues emerged from EMI programs such as course arrangement and time distribution in the study context.

Regarding internal challenges, the findings indicated particular concerns stemmed from the student participants' capacities of EMI learning and language proficiency. For example:

We are still passive. Sometimes we do not know how to summarize the main ideas of the lessons...Although I used to study English as a major, I still faced difficulties in reading materials...It took time to get familiar with materials and content knowledge. (Student 1)

I faced difficulties with English language. In the first semester, I did not completely understand the lesson content, even did not know what the exam questions required. (Student 19)

At the beginning, I did not know what lecturers transmitted. I also had problems with different learning styles.

The findings related to internal challenges in this study are compatible with previous literature (Hamid et al., 2013; Le, 2012) regarding EMI students' English language competence and imported materials as inhibiting factors to students' learning with EMI programs.

4.3. The extent of satisfaction with advanced university programs

When being asked about to what extent the student participants feel satisfied with advanced programs they are attending (see Table 1), the most common answer among advanced program student respondents is "satisfied" with 12 responses, which accounts for 60%. The second common answer is "neutral" with 4 answers, accounting for 20%. Over one-sixth of the participants responded that they completely felt satisfied with the programs. Only 5% of interviewees stated "dissatisfied" and none of them mentioned "completely dissatisfied" as their general views to the advanced programs.

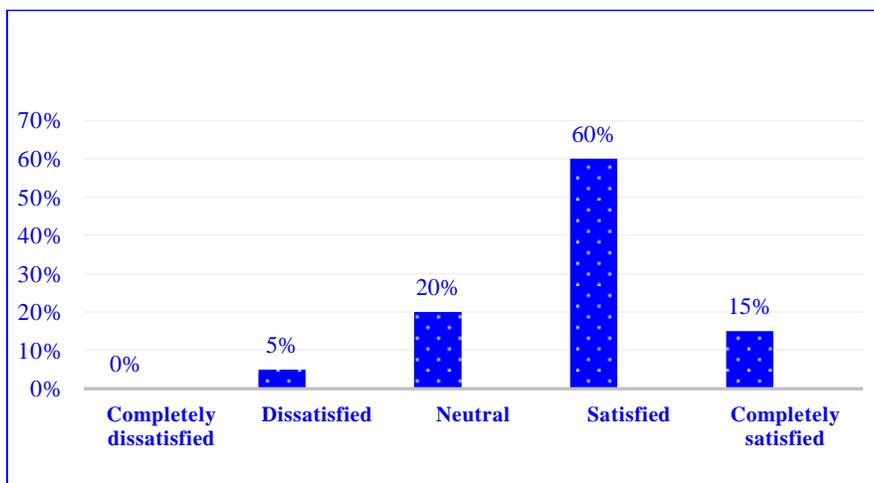


Table 1. Students' satisfaction with advanced programs

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The current pilot study with final-year students of two advanced programs in one Vietnamese university reveals the students' experiences with the implementation of EMI programs. Overall, the participants felt satisfied with these two programs along with positive aspects although they also shared their views of certain challenges as inhibiting factors for the current implementation of these two EMI programs in Vietnamese context. From the inhibiting factors for the implementation of EMI programs figured out in the current study, various suggestions are proposed as follow.

First and foremost, EMI administration should be more concerned in this context. First, the program administrators need review the current curriculum to have more appropriate and logical course arrangement. Second, there should be a careful consideration into imported curriculum to adapt well to the current context of Vietnam. Third, the well-prepared recruitment of sufficient qualified non-native lecturing staff for EMI programs should be implemented. Meanwhile, training workshops, seminars and especially more foreign exchange programs should be regularly delivered to subject content lecturers of EMI programs. Further, EMI students should be chosen more strictly by English entry requirements or a well-designed English test to enable EMI students to access EMI courses more successfully.

In addition, the roles of EMI lecturers and students in this study context should be more enhanced. Specifically, the lecturers of EMI programs should spend more time working with students and feel willing to adapt to code-switching between L1 and L2 for more effective subject content transmission so that they can clearly explain content knowledge to students and respond thoughtfully to their concerns. For EMI students, they must be aware of their roles in these advanced programs as global

citizens so that they can think locally but act globally as well as use local languages to express national identities and English language communication.

Further research also needs to be conducted with EMI administrators, EMI lecturers in different contexts of Vietnamese universities to have deeper insights into the reality of EMI program implementation in the context of Vietnam. In addition, there should be more research instruments such as data analysis, survey questionnaires to ensure the research reliability and triangulation. Furthermore, follow-up research should be undertaken to propose appropriate models to implement EMI programs in Vietnamese universities.

6. References

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