

Students' perspectives on English as a medium of instruction in Vietnam: advantages and disadvantages

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Abstract: Using English as the medium of instruction (EMI) is seen as a key approach to globalizing education systems in many countries. Its widespread adoption has led to both benefits and drawbacks for students. This study aims to investigate the positive and negative impacts of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) programs at a university in Northeast Vietnam, as perceived by students. The research involved 137 participants enrolled in a language-focused program at a Vietnamese university. Data collection utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining a questionnaire with follow-up interviews. Analysis of the data revealed that EMI courses had a beneficial effect on learners, improving their job prospects, English proficiency, and social skills. However, the findings also highlighted various challenges faced by EMI students, including difficulties with teaching and learning methods, as well as psychological issues during their learning journey. Several suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) programs in the Vietnamese educational context are proposed, particularly focusing on teaching and learning strategies.

Keywords: EMI program, advantages, disadvantages, Vietnamese setting, EMI students, students' perspectives.

1. Introduction

The global rise of English-medium instruction (EMI) programs in academic settings, driven by the widespread use of English, has led to increased opportunities for universities worldwide (Jenkins, 2000; Tran & Nguyen, 2018; Dafouz & Camacho-Miñano, 2016). EMI facilitates universities in building global reputations, attracting international students, and improving rankings. Countries like Hong Kong, India, and Singapore have embraced EMI due to historical influences, while Vietnam has followed suit, aiming for innovation and competitiveness (Doiz et al., 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2014; Im & Kim, 2015). Decree 14/2005/NQ-CP initiated EMI programs in Vietnam, aligning with the goal of ranking Vietnamese universities among the world's top 200 by 2020 (Vietnamese Government, 2008; MOET, 2008). Research on EMI's impact on Vietnamese learners is growing, though perspectives of EMI students remain underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap and offer insights to enhance EMI program quality in Vietnam.

To achieve this objective, the study aims to address the following two research questions:

(1) What advantages do university students identify in the process of learning an EMI course?

(2) What difficulties do university students encounter when studying in an EMI course?

2. Literature review

In accordance with Dearden's 2014 findings, English is employed as the medium of instruction for academic subjects in regions or areas where the primary language spoken by the majority of the population is not English. Dearden and Macaro (2016) have defined EMI as a comprehensive concept encompassing the instruction of academic subjects using the English language as the medium (p. 456). In other words, English is seen as a tool for effectively delivering academic instruction. Therefore, EMI programs primarily prioritize the acquisition of subject knowledge rather than the attainment of fluency in a foreign language, as emphasized by Uterberger in 2012 (p. 88).

2.1. Advantages of EMI programs

EMI programs in higher education, noted for their dual benefits by Coleman (2006), have gained recognition. They enhance motivation for English learning and improve language skills, including specialized vocabulary, particularly in non-English speaking countries (Chang, 2010; Tatzl, 2011). EMI benefits teachers by increasing English input and output exposure (Ibrahim, 2001; Tatzl, 2011).

Research shows EMI enhances students' social skills and adaptability to academic situations (Phuong & Nguyen, 2019; Senapati et al., 2012; Xiao & Zou, 2020; Byun et al., 2011). EMI courses facilitate resource access and empower students in their fields of study (Alhamami, 2015; Gholami & Zaree, 2013; Başibek et al., 2014). Faculty perceive EMI's potential to boost student recruitment and institutional internationalization. Scholars link EMI outcomes to graduates' competitive employment prospects and higher salaries, necessitating English proficiency (Dang et al., 2013; Lueg, 2015). EMI expands mobility and prepares students for global workplaces (Galloway et al., 2020).

2.2. Disadvantages of EMI programs

EMI programs offer benefits but pose challenges for students, including comprehension difficulties, participation issues, and psychological stress. Non-native speakers struggle with lectures and express dissatisfaction with English-taught classes. Participation hurdles include shyness, academic level disparities, and gender inequalities. Anxiety while speaking English affects academic performance. Limited vocabulary and proficiency hinder material understanding, and students prefer native language tests. Despite widespread EMI implementation, research on student experiences, particularly in Vietnamese settings, is lacking. This study at Vinh University aims to bridge this gap, enhancing teaching quality. A similar gap exists at Thai Nguyen University of Information and Communication Technology, warranting exploration to improve teaching quality.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study utilized a mixed-methods approach for data collection and analysis to effectively address the research inquiries. This approach was chosen to leverage the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods, thereby compensating for the limitations inherent in each. As described by Creswell & Creswell (2018, p. 271), mixed-methods research involves the use of "both quantitative and qualitative data, integrates the two, and then draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems."

3.2. Participants

The study included 137 participants aged 19-21, comprising 92 males and 45 females. They were enrolled in three EMI courses: Software Engineering

(16 students), Information System (36 students), and Economic Informatics (85 students) at Thai Nguyen University of Information and Communication Technology. Participant selection was randomized. Instructional materials and exams were in English, with teachers using both English and some Vietnamese in the classroom.

3.3. Research Instruments

Questionnaire

Due to the COVID-19 impact, an online survey was created and shared on social media to gather data from students using a five-point Likert scale. Following methodologies from previous studies, the questionnaire addressed both positive and negative aspects of EMI courses. After a pilot phase involving 30 students, revisions were made for reliability and validity. The questionnaire was also translated into Vietnamese for accessibility. It consisted of four sections: demographics, advantages of EMI, challenges, and an open-ended question for sharing experiences and suggestions.

Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a randomly selected group of 15 students from the pool of 137, identified through the email addresses provided in the questionnaire. The sample included five students from Software Engineering, five from Information System, and five from Economic Informatics. These interviews were conducted online via platforms such as Facebook and Zalo, using the Vietnamese language, and lasted between 10 to 20 minutes for each participant. All responses were recorded with explicit permission from the students. While each interview adhered to the research questions, interviewees were given the flexibility to freely discuss any aspects related to English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in the Vietnamese language.

3.4. Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS version 20.0, yielding a highly reliable Cronbach's alpha score of 0.903. Qualitative responses from interviews, initially in Vietnamese, were transcribed into English and analyzed alongside notes. Ambiguities were clarified with participants. Constant comparison analysis, following Leech and Onwuegbuzie's methodology, was employed to thoroughly analyze the qualitative data.

4. Findings

4.1. Advantages Perceived by EMI Students

The questionnaire comprised 11 items addressing the perceived benefits of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) programs by students. This initial cluster aimed to quantify the positive outcomes that EMI programs offer to learners, covering aspects such as job opportunities, language proficiency, and social skills. The results of this analysis are outlined in Table 1.

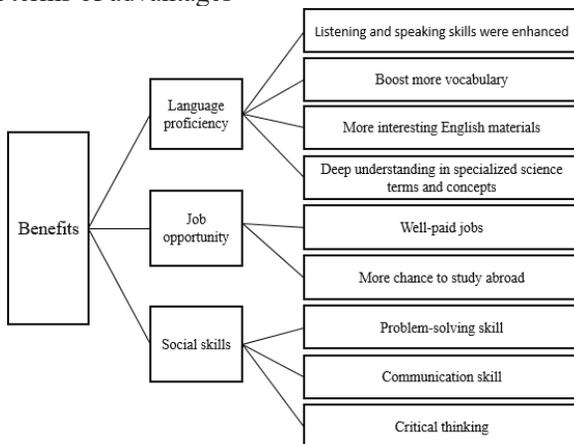
Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations in the Benefits Identified by Students in EMI Programs

Benefits	Mean	Standard Deviations
Job opportunities (4 items)	3.85	1.00
Language proficiency (3 items)	3.69	1.16
Social skills (4 items)	3.58	1.19
Total	3.7	1.11

EMI programs were positively perceived by students, yielding an overall mean of 3.7. All three dimensions received moderate ratings. Job opportunities emerged with the highest score, attaining a mean of 3.85, followed by language proficiency with a respectable mean of 3.69, and social skills were reported with a mean value of 3.58.

According to the interviews, EMI students noted improvements in their listening and reading skills. Additionally, students expressed that EMI courses enhanced their confidence in communication, attributing it to the expansion of ideas and backgrounds that facilitated longer conversations. Active participation in extracurricular activities was also cited as contributing to increased self-assurance. The thematic representation of their responses is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. EMI students' responses in the interview in terms of advantages



Interviewees didn't mention writing skills,

but emphasized the importance of vocabulary and specific concepts in learning. They noted an expanded vocabulary and deeper understanding of scientific concepts in English. Software Engineering students credited their self-study skills' development to substantial workloads.

4.2. Difficulties perceived by EMI students

The questionnaire comprises 24 items addressing the difficulties encountered by students in EMI programs, categorized into five groups: comprehending lectures, engaging in class discussions, psychological factors, study materials, and testing and evaluation. Descriptive statistics were conducted using SPSS software, with the findings outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of difficulties perceived by EMI students

Difficulties	Mean	Standard Deviation
Coping with testing and assessment (5 items)	3.79	1.12
Accessing learning materials (3 items)	3.7	1.13
Engaging in class discussions (5 items)	3.6	1.19
Comprehending instructors (4 items)	3.57	1.26
Managing psychological aspects (7 items)	3.46	1.30
Total	3.6	1.2

As depicted in Table 2, alongside challenges related to participating in class discussions, reading study materials, and difficulties in exams, understanding teachers also emerges as a prominent issue for students in EMI programs, with mean scores of 3.6, 3.79, and 3.57, respectively. The qualitative data echoed these findings, with the majority of interviewees expressing similar struggles during their learning journey. An illustrative excerpt is provided below:

"Building connections with teachers and peers is challenging for me, regardless of my understanding of the subject matter or any supplementary lessons, simply because I struggle to communicate with them in English. English has become an intangible barrier, instilling fear within me. It has unintentionally created a divide, separating me from everyone else." (Student 2)

Furthermore, psychological obstacles were highlighted by a majority of students as a significant challenge encountered in the EMI program (mean = 3.46). As expressed by Student 1 during the interview:

"Expressing myself entirely in English is quite

challenging for me. I frequently fear criticism for mispronunciations, which subsequently triggers anxiety about whether my peers and teachers can understand what I'm saying". (Student 1)

These challenges could stem from various sources, such as their previous experiences in learning English before joining these EMI programs.

"I didn't have the chance to engage with English early on; my exposure came later. Upon entering university, simply listening and comprehending what the teacher was saying posed a challenge for me. I struggled to participate in discussions with both the lecturer and my peers." (Student 3)

In EMI classes, students face various challenges stemming from subjective and objective factors, as supported by qualitative interview findings outlined in Table 3. Overall, students' perspectives on EMI courses are multifaceted. While they appreciate the benefits such as job prospects, improved English proficiency, and enhanced social skills, they also encounter difficulties related to teaching methods and psychological barriers during their learning journey.

Table 3. Theme frequency from EMI students' answers in the interviews

Theme	Frequency
Difficulty in understanding instructions in English from teachers	13
Trouble in discussing with peers in English	13
Anxiety raised when speaking English	11
Hesitation in participating in class activities	9
L1 preference in examinations	14
Shyness with local English accents	10
Lack of vocabulary	7
Time spent on preparing before class	5
Limited productive English language in examinations	14
Limited interactions with instructors	12
Preference for the use of both L1 and L2 in class	15
Teacher support	13
Need for more English classes before entering the academic courses	15

5. Discussion

Question 1: What benefits do students derive from participating in an EMI course?

According to responses from the questionnaire, a significant number of students perceive the EMI program as a pathway to promising career opportunities and further education, aligning with insights from interviews where students anticipate lucrative career prospects and enhanced possibilities for studying abroad through EMI courses. This

aligns with previous research by Galloway et al. (2020), indicating EMI students' readiness for the global stage and recognition of English proficiency as crucial for future endeavors.

Moreover, students reported in the questionnaire that EMI courses significantly improved their English proficiency, particularly expanding their vocabulary, enabling better understanding of scientific terms or concepts, which may lose essence when translated into Vietnamese. This dual benefit aligns with Coleman's (2006) perspective on EMI curricula serving both academic and language learning purposes. Interviews highlighted benefits primarily in receptive skills like reading and listening comprehension, consistent with Başıbek et al.'s (2013) findings.

Additionally, EMI courses played a vital role in enhancing students' social skills, as outlined in Table 1. Participants unanimously agreed during interviews that EMI courses contributed to improving problem-solving and critical thinking abilities, with communication skills specifically highlighted by 10 students.

Question 2: What challenges do students encounter when learning in an EMI course?

This study explored the academic landscape for EMI students at the tertiary level, assessing factors like participation in class discussions, access to learning materials, performance in tests and exams, understanding lecturers, and students' psychological aspects. Insights were gathered through a semi-closed questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

A notable finding was that over 70% of students cited difficulty in taking tests as the main reason for assessment task failures. Interviews revealed struggles in articulating ideas due to limited vocabulary, consistent with prior research. Additionally, almost half of the students faced challenges in connecting with instructors and classmates during discussions, often due to anxiety and varying English proficiency levels. Difficulty in comprehending textbooks or course materials written in English was another common obstacle, compounded by specialized vocabulary.

Furthermore, about two-thirds of students struggled to grasp their instructors' English proficiency, hindering understanding of lesson content. Psychological issues like anxiety and insecurity were prevalent, impacting students' ability to demonstrate comprehension and engage in

discussions. Parental pressure for high scores also contributed to negative sentiments towards English-related assignments.

Overall, English language proficiency emerged as the primary factor influencing students' learning experiences in EMI courses, significantly affecting ease and effectiveness of learning.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This study aimed to explore the perceived benefits and challenges encountered by EMI students studying specialized subjects in English. Positive outcomes reported by students included enhanced job opportunities, language proficiency, and social skills. Recommendations include implementing EMI programs in Vietnamese universities to improve students' English proficiency and social capabilities, potentially increasing their motivation for future careers. It's suggested that EMI student selection processes become more rigorous, incorporating English proficiency requirements or well-designed placement tests. Additionally, universities should develop tailored English courses for students at different proficiency levels to enhance the EMI learning experience.

Challenges identified by students align with previous research, including difficulties in testing and assessment, accessing materials, participating in class discussions, understanding lectures, and managing psychological aspects, largely due to limited English proficiency. Creating an environment conducive to linguistic skill development and active participation

is recommended for EMI instructors. Flexibility in using both the students' native language and English can facilitate better comprehension.

Students enrolled in EMI classes should recognize their roles as global citizens and leverage technology and extracurricular activities to enhance speaking and writing skills. EMI teachers should design diverse teaching activities to scaffold students' knowledge before diving into course content.

However, certain limitations, such as sample size, data collection period, and research tools, should be acknowledged. Future studies should aim to increase the number of participants, extend data collection periods, and incorporate additional tools like observation to ensure more robust findings.

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Sử dụng tính cá nhân hóa trong (tiếp theo trang 119)

Qua việc kết hợp giữa giáo viên, công nghệ, và cộng đồng học tập, chúng ta đã có cơ hội định hình một chiến lược học ngoại ngữ linh hoạt và sáng tạo. Công nghệ học máy và trí tuệ nhân tạo đã mở ra khả năng theo dõi và tối ưu hóa quá trình học tập cá nhân, giúp sinh viên phát triển không chỉ về kiến thức ngoại ngữ mà còn về các kỹ năng mềm quan trọng như sự sáng tạo, tự lập, và khả năng giải quyết vấn đề.

Với sự tích hợp chặt chẽ giữa cá nhân hóa và công nghệ, chúng ta đã chứng kiến sức mạnh của mô hình học tập hiện đại trong việc khám phá và phát triển tiềm năng của mỗi sinh viên. Chiến lược này không chỉ giúp họ đạt được thành công trong việc học ngoại ngữ mà còn tạo ra những người học viên tự tin và sẵn

sàng đối mặt với thách thức của thế giới đa ngôn ngữ hiện đại. Tính cá nhân hóa không chỉ là xu hướng mà còn là chìa khóa mở cánh cửa cho một tương lai học tập đa dạng và phong phú.

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