

## Students' Challenges on Learning EMI Courses at a Technical University in Vietnam: An Investigation from Students' Voices

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### ABSTRACT

**Keywords:** English as a Medium of Instruction, EMI implementation, tertiary curriculum, challenges, students' perspective

In the age of technology development and internationalization, EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) has been seen as a better method for resolving language problems of non-English students than teaching English in a single subject so as to meet the demand for employability in their future profession. However, EMI implementation is still a concern for educational researchers and instructors in many countries, especially in Asian Pacific regions. This research aimed to investigate EFL students' perspectives and challenges in learning an EMI program at a public technical university in Vietnam. To determine the obstacles of EMI learning from students' viewpoint, data were collected qualitatively by in-depth interviews with 18 EMI students in nine different academic disciplines randomly. The findings shed light on EMI implementation for tertiary education, as their perspectives on EMI courses' benefits are quite positive. However, this study also figured out several challenges due to students' poor ability in English interaction, vocabulary shortage, irrelevant course content, EMI lecturers' pedagogical methods, and students' motivations for the EMI course. This study provided some recommendations to help those interested in EMI in higher education enhance and develop EMI courses.

### Introduction

The English language has proven its crucial role in all aspects of society, from the economy and industry to education as the international means of communication (Wright, 2004; Crystal, 2006; Tamtam, Gallagher, Olabi, & Nasher, 2012). In addition, it has been popularly accepted as a main medium of instruction in numerous tertiary education programs in many universities in the world. As a result, English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been established as the most pervasive variety of substances and language-integrated learning at universities of non-native English-speaking nations (Hung & Lan, 2017; Rose et al., 2020; Lin & He, 2019). For instance, plenty of European universities testified the remarkable success in implementing EMI for the reasons of globalization, international employability, student exchanges, and the

qualified market needs of international students (Ammon & McConnell, 2002). In the case of Asian countries, EMI has been known as exemplifying the deeply crucial importance featured in English competence (He & Chiang, 2016). The fundamental goal of the EMI is to outfit public staff with both professional skills and capacity for global integration. In the meantime, researchers have identified certain issues about the EMI programs' implementation, including insufficient administrative support, challenges in planning educational programs, teaching methodology, teachers' and students' limited language ability, cultural discrepancies, and social divide (e.g., Coleman, 2006; Hamid et al., 2013).

Nonetheless, it seems obvious that EMI implementation remains a challenge to all the stakeholders, specifically the learners. According to Byun et al. (2011) and Tong and Shi (2012), the learning content in their EMI subjects appears to be very difficult for students to understand and master, which causes their growing anxieties in their EMI context. In addition, EMI courses have also brought students considerable challenges in lecture comprehension, textbooks or course materials available, tests and exams, interactions and discussion in the classrooms, lecturers' proficiency in language and EMI (Chang, 2010; Al-Bakri's, 2013; Lasagabaster et al. 2018; Tamtam et al., 2012; Lee, Davis & Li, 2021).

In Vietnam, EMI has been regarded as an educational innovation to meet regional and international criteria with the goal of ranking some of the world's top Vietnamese institutions by 2020 (MOET, 2008). Various EMI programs have been introduced and implemented at different levels of education sectors in Vietnam. Those programs have achieved extraordinary results, such as improving students' English language proficiency and professional knowledge, expanding job opportunities, fostering partnerships with foreign universities, and attracting international students (Dang et al., 2013; Le, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2016; Vu & Burns, 2014; Tran, Burke, & O'Toole, 2021). Recently, considerable literature has grown around the theme of EMI implementation in the Vietnamese context to explore the effectiveness of EMI courses and the stakeholders' attitudes toward EMI (Nguyen et al., 2016; Sercu, 2021; Tran, Burke, & O'Toole, 2021). However, little is known about Vietnamese technical students' perspectives towards their EMI learning and what factors students find themselves challenging in their EMI courses, which needs more investigation. Therefore, in recognition of this gap in the literature, this study sought to explore the technical students' viewpoints about (i) their EMI learning experience and (ii) the challenges they faced in their EMI courses. To properly understand the students' opinions about their EMI courses and their own struggling challenges, a qualitative content analysis of in-depth interviews with 18 EFL students in nine discipline academic subjects at a public university in Vietnam was conducted right after they completed their EMI subjects.

## Literature review

### *English as a medium of instruction*

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) refers to the adoption of the English language in teaching content knowledge in academic subjects in non-native English-speaking nations or

nations where English is known as the second or foreign language (Dearden, 2014; Macaro, 2018; Madhavan & McDonald, 2014; Phuong & Nguyen, 2019; Vu & Burns, 2014).

Some studies defined EMI with the bilingual approaches according to the amount of English used in comparison with the native language in that the courses were instructed (Dearden, 2014; Hamid, Jahan, & Islam, 2013; Wannagat, 2007). For instance, Swain and Johnson (1997) classified EMI into two versions full EMI, in which only English was used in the curriculum, and partial EMI, in which English can be taught less than 50% of the EMI curriculum. Moreover, in some other studies, EMI was considered as a teaching and learning approach that focuses on academic subjects through the medium instructions in English, which focused on not only content knowledge but also the English language in terms of communication and cognition (Marsh & Laitinen, 2005; Phuong & Nguyen, 2019; Tamtam et al., 2012).

In order to address the objective of this study, EMI was seen similarly to Yen and Thong (2019, p. 89) as an "innovative approach" in which English is used as the medium instructed by non-native lecturers to teach academic disciplines to EFL students.

### *EMI implementation*

As a result of internationalization and globalization, EMI has been expanded in all continents at all levels of educational settings (Dearden, 2015; Galloway et al., 2020; Macaro et al., 2018). EMI teaching and learning has been widely applied in Education in Europe, Asia, and Africa by virtue of recognizing its inevitable benefits.

In Europe, according to Madhavan and McDonald (2014), EMI adoption in tertiary Education in France was common, particularly in major programs taught in English, such as business, sciences, and social studies. The main objectives were to create a new generation of students who were scientifically and technologically educated and conversant in English (Kirkpatrick, 2014). For instance, in Norway, the number of EMI programs at the master's level at the University of Oslo was estimated to have increased significantly between 2003 and 2009, from 40 Masters' projects to 800 distinct courses and projects (Hellekjaer, 2010). In Turkey, EMI was also noted as a workable solution for non-native English nations to 'survive in the international market' (Collin, 2010, p.97). In another research conducted by Tatzl (2011) at an Austrian university, the EMI master program was investigated, and it was reported that the participants expressed a positive perception of the effectiveness of their EMI courses on their English language competence, especially in speaking skills. Hence, EMI was noted as offering the "greatest benefits" of EMI in student encouragement and language skill development.

Regarding the Asian implementation of EMI, in 2005, 74 EMI graduation projects in Japan were submitted to 43 Japanese colleges (Huang, 2006 cited in Le, 2016). As part of the public-sector-funded "Global 30 Project," the Japanese government planned to create EMI arrangements for 157 projects by 2014 (Huang, 2006 cited in Le, 2016). As a result, in 2017, EMI was employed at over 300 universities in Japan (MEXT, 2017). Meanwhile, in Korea, all the tertiary educational levels have introduced and applied EMI courses to foster students' English competencies for their global working situation in the future.

In Vietnam, EMI has been received at the tertiary level for several years at various open and private colleges and some high-level instructional classes. This work has been in pilot at the

auxiliary level since 2013 in roughly 20 gifted schools, with one to two weekly math and science assignments (Le, 2016).

EMI for natural scientific studies in some schools has been decided by the Ministry for Education and Training since the academic year 2011-2012 (MOET, 2013). It is a part of the National Foreign Language 2020 project, which aims to ensure that Vietnamese students can keep up with scientific and technological advancements, mostly published in English, and students can practice their English and improve their language skills (MOET, 2013). According to a poll by British Council in 2014, Vietnam was seen as a trending country in the use of English as a tool in all stages of education, including elementary, secondary, and higher Education (Dearden, 2015).

EMI projects in Vietnam, called advanced university programs, have been implemented since 2008. The rise of the task "Advancement to Vietnamese higher education" (Announcement number 14/2005/NQ-CP dated 2nd November 2005) was a major political step towards these programs of public authority (The Government of Vietnam, 2005). In fact, 23 Vietnamese universities have adopted 35 EMI programs in diverse fields of study around the country (MOET, 2013, cited in Le, 2016). According to the literature on EMI programs in Vietnam, plentiful benefits of EMI implementation have been gained, such as improving students' English language skills and professional knowledge, expanding job opportunities, establishing international partnerships, and attracting international students (Dang et al., 2013; Le, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2016; Vu & Burns, 2014).

The universities in Vietnam consider EMI to improve the quality of scholarly research and education, generate qualified alumni for the country's industrialization and modernization, and compete for student enrolment and remuneration with other higher education institutions (Manh, 2012).

In short, despite the popularity of EMI implementation in the world, the students' challenges in learning EMI have been under-recognition in various issues of students' English competencies, their language skills, and their expressions of content knowledge based on different contexts, from Europe to Asia, at all educational levels.

### *Students' challenges in EMI learning*

The rapid growth of EMI in non-English speaking nations has resulted in a substantial corpus of study. This study reviewed the challenges of students' interactions at EMI classes, vocabulary shortage, course content, EMI lecturers' pedagogical methods, and students' motivations in this session for our investigation. The study's findings revealed a significant number of issues that students confront when learning lectures provided in English (Airey & Linder, 2006; Byun et al., 2011; Chang, 2010; Evans & Morrison, 2011a, 2011b; Hellekjaer, 2010; Klaassen & Graaff, 2001; Miller, 2009; Taguchi & Naganuma, 2006; Vinke et al., 1998).

### *Interaction in EMI class*

According to some research (Pun & Macaro, 2019; Sahan et al., 2021), the student's interaction with their teachers appeared to be limited, which made the students lack opportunities to present and express their content knowledge in EMI lessons. As a result, the students seemed to take a

largely passive role in their EMI classrooms. Similar findings were also pursued by Kaur (2020) 's qualitative research as the researcher revealed three key issues of students' passiveness, their ignorance of other people's contributions to interactions, and code-switching into the majority language. Meanwhile, similar findings of the interactions contributed to content and language learning were also disclosed in An, Macaro & Childs (2021).

### *Vocabulary shortage*

According to Chang (2010), vocabulary plays an essential role in the ability to acquire the EMI lecture content. However, due to unclear context and misunderstanding expressions, students had to overcome plentiful problems in acquiring adequate vocabulary knowledge (Keuk & Tith, 2013). This obstacle may cause students to lose track of lecture content and be unable to take notes. Hence, they have to wait to copy what their teachers write on the board later then.

### *Course content*

As mentioned in students' lack of vocabulary, course content in EMI poses great challenges to students' EMI learning. Several research confirmed that EMI students encountered considerable difficulties in comprehending their EMI course content in terms of expressing opinions, listening, reading, and writing related to their EMI course knowledge (Le, 2016; Macaro et al., 2018; Pun & Jin, 2021; Vu & Burns, 2014, Tran, Burke, & O'Toole, 2021). According to Bielenberg (2004), EMI students had challenges in tertiary Math and Science courses due to vocabulary problem issues. In addition, Pun and Jin (2021) revealed that 1<sup>st</sup> year students faced greater challenges relating to knowledge application in their EMI courses.

### *EMI lecturers' teaching methods*

With the significant expansion of EMI programs, numerous studies have examined teaching methods in EMI contexts from teachers' perspectives (Thompson & McKinley, 2018; Tange, 2010; Yuan, 2021). Most of EMI teachers reported that they faced challenges in lecturing EMI due to their L2 language competence, especially their ways of expressing ideas and finding equivalent terms for content knowledge (Le, 2016; Tange, 2010). In addition, Thompson and McKinley (2018) noted that many EMI teachers have the propensity to concentrate solely on a topic while providing very little linguistic help in their instruction. This can be largely attributable to the ineffectiveness of the present EMI teacher preparation program, which seems to provide content teachers with poor language and literacy training within or outside of their own field (Lasagabaster et al., 2018). However, these issues of EMI lecturers paid less attention to students' views. They still found that their EMI teachers did their best to lecture EMI with understandable content explanations and clear L2 expressions during their lessons (Le, 2016; Hung & Lan, 2017).

### *Students' motivations*

There have been demands for research (Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011; Pokay & Blumenfeld, 1990; Stoyanoff, 1997) to examine the connection between acquiring content through the L2 and motivation for language learning. The key rationale is that more motivated students might choose to engage in English topic study on their own, and this motivation might contribute to their success. This finding was relevant to the one presented by Le and Nguyen



(2022), which confirmed that students' motivations play a crucial role in their engagements and their satisfaction with EMI courses. The more motivated students become in their EMI learning, the more successful they may be in their EMI courses (Rose et al., 2019).

In Vietnam, EMI has been increasingly focused on in the tertiary education system with the attempt to internationalize and attain the higher-ranking quality of the universities. In spite of the development of EMI teaching and learning, it is still argued how students are perceived when they learn EMI and what obstacles they encounter in their EMI, especially for technical students – who are consumed with a lower level of English competence than others. As a result, this research was conducted in an attempt to bridge this research gap in the EMI learning context.

## Methodology

The current study aimed to answer the two following research questions with the aim of exploring the students' perspectives towards EMI learning and what challenges they are facing in their EMI learning:

RQ1. What are the students' perspectives toward their EMI learning?

RQ2. What challenges did the technical university students encounter in their EMI learning course?

A qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 18 technical students was conducted. All of those students were sampled randomly. They were from nine different EMI classes and were asked for the agreement to join in the interviews. They were interviewed after they completed their EMI courses. Their academic disciplines were CNC Technology, Professional Experience and Career Planning, Software quality assurance, Face detective technique, and Transmission Technology. Five of them were female, and the rest of 13 were male. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted virtually via the technological tools of Zalo video calls and Zoom video conferencing. 10 interview questions of their personal introduction, their EMI description, their EMI learning experience and challenges, and recommendations were asked in Vietnamese – their first language in order to easily understand and express opinions. All the interviews ranged from 12 to 17 minutes per one. Afterward, the data was recorded, numbered from S#1 to S#18, then transcribed into English with the support of some experienced colleagues at my university. Then, the data were analyzed and categorized into common themes with the aim of deeply exploring the students' perspectives, experiences, and factors affecting them in their EMI implementation.

## Results/Findings and discussion

In this part, the findings were presented in categorization and thematic analysis from students' interviews in three main aspects: (i) the reasons why the interviewed students chose to study EMI, (ii) their perspectives towards EMI learning, and (iii) their challenges during EMI learning.

### *Students' reasons for enrolling in EMI classes*

Regarding the reasons for taking EMI courses, it should be noted that this is the first time students have been offered to choose to study their academic subjects in English at this university. Therefore, many reasons for the students' choices to register for an EMI course were disclosed.

The most significant reason from the interview data revealed by more than half of the interviewees (12 out of 18) was that the subjects were one of the compulsory subjects that they had to study in their curriculum. The S#2 reported that *"we have no choice as this is the obligatory subject required in our program for semester 7 so that we can graduate and get the Bachelor's degree within 4 years"*. Nevertheless, some students (6 out of 18) revealed that they selected to study the EMI courses because they were aware of the usefulness and benefits they could gain from them for their study and future career, together with the improvement in their English language competencies.

*"I chose to study this EMI course so that I can enhance not only my English language but also my major knowledge for my future job. Honestly, I don't like learning English but I still selected this subject in English version to improve both my English skills and my major so that I may be confident and get great advantages with my job interviews in the future..." (S#6).*

Meanwhile, only one of the interviewed respondents expressed the reason for intending to study and work outside of Vietnam. Some of the students shared their opinion when selecting EMI courses:

*"Well, I did not know this course would be implemented in English. I logged in and enrolled on the course on the online system as usual. However, at the first lesson of the course, the lecturers told us this course was implemented in English. We, at first, were so surprised and quite nervous, but we thought this would be a good chance for us to improve and practice our English besides learning our majors..." (S#12)*

This reason was discussed in detail and resulted from the students' ignorance to their course registration. Some respondents said, *"Oh, I planned to learn this course during my first semester of the school year so I just clicked to choose without noticing it would be in English or Vietnamese..." (S#11, S#12).*

In short, the main reasons for taking EMI courses from the investigated students can be labeled as "a compulsory part of the program" and "benefit awareness for study and future career". However, these reasons were somehow different from the findings presented by Dieu (2021), which demonstrated both instrumental and integrative motivation as reasons for attending these EMI courses. This finding supports Le (2016)'s research on EMI implementation at private and public universities in Asian contexts.

### *Students' perspectives towards EMI learning*

The role of the students in successful innovation is invariably accepted as important (Fullan, 2007). Therefore, it is essential to explore the students' perspectives to ensure the success of any innovative education plan. In the study, students were asked to share their perceptions about

how they feel about their EMI learning and whether the EMI program is beneficial to them or not.

As it can be thematically analyzed from the interviews that the benefits of EMI courses perceived by students were categorized into six aspects, the students' greatest concern for enhancement of academic vocabulary and technical terms for their majors turned out to be the first and foremost benefit when 15 out of 18 interviewees mentioned it. As shared by S#5:

*"This course will create a new experience for technical students, and I will have more chances to know more technical terms in mechanical engineering as well as present my knowledge in English. This would create a very beneficial English learning environment for students."*

The second biggest benefit from the interview data is the student's awareness of their ability to update their major knowledge during their EMI learning. 14 out of 18 students confirmed their positive perception that they could be more updated with the technological content knowledge that they learn from their EMI courses and materials. For instance, S#7 said:

*"I actually like all the knowledge I can gain from my EMI course. I feel so updated with the content knowledge about the current application trend of Artificial Intelligence and Face Detective Techniques worldwide, which I can only find in some short Vietnamese articles or magazines."*

or *"...I think that when I attended the EMI lectures for CNC technology course, I found more useful and informative technical knowledge than ever. At first, I thought it would be one of the hardest subjects in that semester and I even thought of failing this course. However, the more I learnt this EMI course, the more I found it beneficial and relevant to my majors. This subject is very good for me to learn both English and my content knowledge.." (S#14)*

Meanwhile, 12 out of 18 interviewees indicated learning EMI as an advantage for their future job. About two-thirds of the interviewed students indicated their beliefs about easier opportunities to get a job in the future with EMI learning experience:

*"I believe that the knowledge I gain from my EMI course will help me much to get a better job in the future. I can also get more opportunities for a better position and higher salary if I can apply what I have learnt in my EMI course to my working performance in the future..." (S#8).*

Moreover, one of the indispensable strengths of EMI courses is the benefit for students' language competence. The more deeply students delved into their EMI courses, the more they acquired their major knowledge as well as their English competence. From the interview data, 13 out of 18 interviewed students confirmed their improvement in English language proficiency through studying EMI courses. S#10 endorsed that

*"One of the certain advantages of attending these EMI courses is English competence development. As I was aware that I had to understand my disciplines adequately, I had to read more materials in English. This made me more acquainted with English vocabulary and gradually improved my English, especially my reading skills..."*



In addition, S#15 affirmed her internal motivation in learning English and major as a benefit of participating in her EMI course of CNC technology:

*"As usual before, when I attended the English class, I was frightened of expressing my opinion or raising my voice in English. But when I had to register for my CNC major, I had to prepare much before my EMI class. I had to search and explore the knowledge for the topic and prepare our presentation so I had to practice my English well so that I can demonstrate my knowledge better. As a result, this became a really underlying motivation for me to improve my English."*

Furthermore, 11 out of 18 respondents illustrated their confidence in their English communication after attending EMI classes.

*"After a semester of learning, searching, and expressing my major in English for my EMI course, I think that my English communication is much better than ever before. Because my friends and I had to prepare much for our upcoming lessons, presentations, debates, and tests in EMI class, we became more familiar with English and speaking English in our class. This made us no longer afraid of speaking English in front of the teacher or classmates. We felt more confident in our communication in English..." (S#10)*

In short, those favorable opinions on the advantages of EMI courses demonstrate that practically all students were completely aware of these benefits. Most of them concurred that the EMI course would greatly benefit their majors and English proficiency. This result was similar to Dieu's (2021) claim that EMI usage is increasing because English is a potent language of success. According to the data gathered, the EMI course is essential and well-regarded to students' university programs because of EMI's indisputable advantages. Previous research by Vu and Burns (2014), Dang et al. (2013), and Le (2012) also found that similar students' views of EMI were shared.

#### *Students' challenges during EMI learning*

From the interview data and analysis of the data, five challenges were categorized thematically as listed below: (i) the students' interactions in their EMI classes, (ii) the students' lack of vocabulary, (iii) irrelevant course content, (iv) the EMI lecturers' pedagogies, and (v) students' motivations in their EMI class. The results and discussion would be described and explained specifically in this part.

#### *Students' motivations in EMI classes*

This research raised interview questions 3 and 4 to explore how motivation affected and challenged students' EMI learning. The overall finding disclosed that students at first hardly felt motivated about their learning EMI due to compulsory registration, but later then, they found themselves more motivated in their studies thanks to the benefits they gained.

*"Actually, at first, I wanted to register the Vietnamese Medium of Instruction (VMI) classes but there was no available room left so I had to register the EMI instead. I was quite nervous. But after the course, I found this would be an interesting experience in my study and I got much more benefits than I had expected." (S#16)*

About two-thirds of the final-year students explained that *"...because we studied English for 6 semesters in the first three years. At our final year before graduation, we did not have any chances to study English so we think that if we register for our EMI class, we can keep on learning and practicing our English in the related-major learning environment."* (S#2). This resulted in one of the biggest motivations for them to learn EMI. The other related motivation was counted on the English learning environment as the interviewed students found their EMI class as the learning environment for their English speaking and discussion (33.3%) as S#17 confessed that

*"Honestly, I found my EMI classes as one of the good learning environments for me to practice my English speaking and discussion so that my English can be improved much. Since we had to use English during most of the class time, we were required to use English to express our opinions, present the content knowledge, and discuss and debate among classmates. This made us challenging as well as motivated..."*

Meanwhile, another motivation was reported as students' belief in gaining new learning experience in their undergraduate study (38.9%): *"We have never learnt any EMI courses before so I was so curious about this course. I wanted to attend this course to see how it differed from VMI and experience the new learning style to achieve the new goal..."* (S#9). Furthermore, 27.8% of the students confirmed their favor of learning the academic content in English and their fancy of choosing the EMI lecturers:

*"At first, I really liked how my favorite lecturer taught us in some VMI courses in the second and third years. So, when I saw his name in registering for my Face detective technique course, I selected it immediately so that I could get the chance to continue being taught by him. When I realized it was an EMI course, I was quite surprised, but I still believed as I knew my favorite teacher was extremely good at English."* (S#6)

However, about five out of 18 students admitted to having little or no enthusiasm to attend EMI classes because they were forced to or as they had few or no other options. These students revealed that they only wanted to complete this course as a compulsory subject in their university program. They shared their hesitation and worry in learning content knowledge in English with much more workload of preparation and studying before EMI lessons:

*"To be honest, my friends and I were fear of learning our major in English languages, which meant we had to spend much more time on preparing our next lessons, such as searching the topic, reading and comprehending, translating the scripts or looking up the new technical terms. Even though we could only understand about 50-60% of that knowledge when we self-studied before the class"* (S#2).

The consequences of this problem led to demotivation during their EMI learning. They expressed their ignorance in the benefits of EMI learning. They just wanted to pass this course only: *"I just expected to pass the final exam of this course so that I could graduate from the university in time as I am currently tired of studying and I want to go for work as soon as possible..."* (S#10). Meanwhile, despite their expectation of continuing English learning with EMI lessons, language competency also made their motivation more and more reduced as they confessed their deliberate attempt to comprehend the knowledge in English. S#17 admitted that

*"I cannot understand most of what my EMI lecturer delivered. It is also hard for me to acquire academic knowledge or systemize what I have read. Therefore, my friends and I are rather fearful for preparation and readiness for EMI lessons. This made me quite less motivated and more stressed in my EMI learning..."*

These findings are similar to those found in Le and Nguyen (2022), Vu and Burns (2014), Dang et al. (2013), and Le (2012) to some extent of students' positive perspectives of their EMI teachers and challenges on their learning characteristics even though the result of this finding revealed their compulsory register for EMI courses. This interesting finding showed the students' quite more positive perceptions than others.

### *Students' interactions in EMI classes*

The next two questions interviewed the informants about their interactions with teachers and peers in their EMI classes.

On the question of teacher-student interaction in their EMI courses, the interviewees revealed supportive communication in general with their EMI teachers with practical assistance in explaining the content knowledge and technical terms. Specifically, most of the respondents expressed that *"as we cannot understand all of the content knowledge lectured in English so we usually ask our EMI lecturers to explain again and give more examples for us to clarify that kind of information, even after the lesson..."* (S#17). In addition, a new vocabulary was mentioned as one of the most question-raised issues between teacher and student interaction. It is disclosed that whenever the students were unable to understand any new words or technical terms in English, they would ask for clarification and explanation from their EMI lecturers. They also reported, *"My questions to my lecturers were mainly about the new vocabulary or any technical terms I cannot understand during the lessons. My lecturers then briefly explained and gave examples for me to more easily comprehend."* (S#18). Moreover, one of the most interesting findings is that investigated students seemed more interactive with their teachers on their EMI class group online tools (Zalo groups, Facebook groups) than face-to-face in their classrooms. They described that *"...we can ask any questions about our exercises, homework, and materials in our group so that our teacher will respond to us instantly. As we can text our messages, we can express our opinions or questions clearly so that our teachers can easily determine our problems and reply to us instantly."* (S#8). In short, the interactions between EMI teachers and students appear to be more often and responsive because they were together experiencing teaching and learning their academic knowledge in a foreign language, not in their L1 language as before. These verbal and written interactions between teachers and students may result in their enhancement not only in their content knowledge but also in their English language competence.

Meanwhile, in the case of the peer interactions among EMI students themselves, the most interesting and significant finding presented from data analysis was their L1 usage during their discussion time in EMI classes. Most of the interviewees (16 out of 18) reported that when they were asked to work in groups or pairs with their classmates, they often used their Vietnamese to discuss and explain their ideas. Later then, they presented their discussion in English in front of the class. *"When we participated in group discussion, we preferred and mainly discussed in*

*our native language because we were not confident about our English speaking and we thought it would be time-saving to express our opinions to our friends. After that, we collected our ideas and tried to express in English for our group presentation..." (S#17).* This resulted in little improvement in English competence during their peer interactions together with their EMI learning outcomes in terms of English instruction.

The interactions between students and their teachers and peers are crucial for fostering their academic interest and general enhancement of their English competence (Furrer et al., 2014). In summary, teacher-student and student-peer interactions in the current research are considered to be in line with previous studies to the extent of determining students' learning EMI positive experiences (Pianta et al., 2008; Patrick, Ryan & Kaplan, 2007). Even though the finding of benefits from classroom interactions in EMI classes is similar to that found in research by An, Macaro & Childs (2021), Sahan, Rose and Macaro (2021), Murray and Pianta (2007), and Pianta et al., (2008) to the extent of its pivotal and contributed aspects to content and language learning. However, the remarkable finding of an interaction between teachers and students is their virtual ebullient communication via online class groups before and after their lessons. This can be inferred that EMI lecturers appear to facilitate and support their students interactively after their lecturing time, which is a dearth in contrast to earlier findings.

### *Vocabulary shortage*

As mentioned in the literature review, students' lack of vocabulary range was raised, and in-depth interviews from students' responses in their interviews, especially the amount of specified vocabulary in their majors. Five out of the informants shared that they lacked the vocabulary in their majors, so they hardly comprehended all the knowledge delivered by their EMI teachers, and it was so difficult for them to express their ideas and opinions in English. *"Our vocabulary comprehension is so weak and limited that we cannot understand all that my teachers lectured in English. It was only about 50% of the lesson that I can acquire..." (S#7).* The amount of understanding of their EMI lessons admitted by most of the investigated interviewees (12 out of 18) was only about 50-70%. This resulted in the problem of the vocabulary shortage raised by students' EMI learning. This caused their lessons more challenging as learners could only gain the main ideas from their lessons and spent much time guessing new words or using Google – an online tool for translation into their L1 language. However, there is still an interesting finding from students' perspectives that IT-majored students found it much more comfortable to learn English terms, *"... to some extent I found EMI is quite easier to understand than VMI as we can define the English technical terms exactly. We only got troubles in translating those terms into Vietnamese so we found EMI course is better than VMI for our major study..." (S#11).*

These findings are similar to Chang's (2010) about the crucial role of vocabulary in comprehending content knowledge. These are still in the same line with Keuk and Tith (2013) about students' problems in acquiring the EMI academic content despite the clear context of this current study. Moreover, the amount of EMI comprehension is only over half, so this can cause another challenge to their lecture content understanding. Therefore, it is highly recommended for adequate preparation of English language competence for EMI learning.

### *Academic content*

Generally speaking, the investigated respondents hardly comprehended almost all the academic content delivered by lecturers or from textbooks. The challenge of understanding their content knowledge in EMI lectures unavoidably resulted from the lack of vocabulary range. Specifically, they had to encounter problems raised about their skills, expressions and knowledge acquisition.

Thematic analysis of informant responses showed that most interviewees could not completely understand their lessons in English. Most (about 67%) reported that they could only comprehend 50-70% of their EMI academic content. S#9 shared,

*"it takes us longer to study and acquire EMI lessons than VMI ones because we must spend time code-switching what we heard in English into Vietnamese. Besides, we had to spend a lot of time preparing for our next lessons, such as looking up new vocabulary and searching more related information on the Internet. However, we still found it difficult to understand the exact meaning of academic content from our preparation..."*.

This finding revealed the challenges of content acquisition from students' EMI learning practice due to incomplete academic comprehension. This was similar to that found in Chang (2010) who reported that the percentage of students' EMI lesson comprehension was about 50 to 70%.

On the question of skill challenges during their EMI learning, the interviewees listed all the skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing as enormous obstacles to their EMI learning, especially listening and speaking skills. More than half of the informants (13 out of 18) expressed their difficulties in listening comprehension during their EMI lessons.

*"It was so hard and stressful for me to keep listening all the English content because my listening skill is not good. I cannot understand all the words I listen. I cannot have time to take notes while listening to the lecture. I usually had to skip note-taking. I think I can comprehend about 50% of the lectures, which made me feel under pressure to study and search for more understanding after the lesson..."*, said S#10.

Meanwhile, other EMI students talked about their impediments of speaking skills and expressing their opinions in front of the class.

*"I myself found it much more challenging to conquer my hesitation and shyness to share my opinions or ideas in front of my classmates in English. I did not find myself confident in speaking English. I was very nervous and worried that my teacher and friends could not understand what I said..."*, reported S#11.

In summary, these findings were in line with Bielenberg (2004) to the extent of content understanding challenges due to limited vocabulary. Moreover, the reason in this study was more specifically delved into technical term acquisition and skill competence because of their academic subject features.

### *EMI lecturers' pedagogies*

As EMI lecturers' teaching methods were pointed out in the previous studies, it is indispensably questioned and evaluated in this study. Surprisingly, the interview analysis showed that

respondents completely trusted in their EMI lecturers' language competencies and pedagogies. Most informants (14 out of 18) showed their positive perspectives that their EMI lecturers had good and very good English proficiency, especially good pronunciation, good speaking skills, and clear accents to understand.

*"My EMI lecturers acquire great English language proficiency and academic knowledge. They can lecture and explain all the aspects of our major content in clear and easy-to-understand ways. Some of them have much experience lecturing and presenting the content knowledge in English. We admire our EMI lecturers much..." (S#7).*

Additionally, the interview results showed that most of the students (16 out of 18) expressed their admiration and respect for their lecturers' lecturing and sharing, besides their excellent pronunciation and speaking of English.

*"My EMI lecturer has taught me in another VMI before this course. I admired him very much as he usually gave us advice about our major study and English learning. He often recommended some materials in English for us even while we were learning VMI. He often suggested that we should improve our English ability for future jobs." (S#15).*

With regard to their teaching methods, about one third of the interviewees reported that their lecture delivery was quite fast to catch up with, but they felt acceptable when their teachers spent 10-20% of the lecture explaining in Vietnamese for deeper and clearer understanding. Moreover, it can be noted that even with adequate English and pedagogical ability of the EMI lecturers, EMI students would love their teachers to give lectures with more exciting and interactive activities than reading materials and presenting ones so that they can eagerly participate in the class activities. Student #13 said,

*"It was so stressful for us to read many kinds of English materials and present our comprehension in front of the class also in English. This is quite different from what we learn in an English class. I do hope that we can participate in more activities, such as games, to activate our prior knowledge and use for academic content..."*

From the students' positive perspectives and experience to content lecturers' English ability and pedagogy, the finding was contrary to Goodman's (2014) arguments that were adopting EMI has become a real challenge as it is really difficult to find academic staff who are both proficient in English language skills and in content knowledge. The finding was similar to Thompson and McKinley (2018) in terms of the way EMI lecturers delivered their lessons solely. This result can explain more about the reasons for choosing EMI courses as interest in lecturer's teaching methods as mentioned before. As a result, EMI lecturers can consider a translanguaging, code-switching approach for their EMI teaching context (Nguyen, 2022).

## Conclusion

This study explored the students' perspectives and challenges on EMI courses at a technical university in Vietnam. Qualitative research of 18 in-depth interviews was used to explore the students' perceptions and challenges in learning EMI courses. The results from this study are consistent with previous studies in the literature on EMI in different contexts in terms of



exploring students' positive perspectives on EMI courses and some challenges, including (i) their positive experience in interactions in EMI classes, (ii) students' problems in acquiring academic vocabulary, (iii) incomplete academic content comprehension, and (iv) teachers' quite good language proficiency and pedagogies. Nonetheless, this study showed the differences in confirming the benefits of virtual interactions within online class groups before and after the EMI lessons among teachers and students. This research also revealed the specific reasons for incomplete academic content comprehension for technical term acquisition and major features.

From the findings and discussion, the study suggests several recommendations for students' readiness and practice in learning EMI courses at the higher education level. Content and language teachers should develop more self-study skills and close collaboration to exchange language and pedagogy. In addition, they can prepare some activities for warm-ups or games to revise and activate students' knowledge and vocabulary so that they can be more confident in their EMI lessons. Meanwhile, EMI lecturers should "localize" these academic contents by adding examples related to Vietnamese things so that students can easily imagine and understand the meaning. In the class, important knowledge should be highlighted so that students can understand which information they should write down in their notebooks. Moreover, EMI lecturers should focus on helping students to improve their writing and note-taking in English.

For students, they should prepare well for their English language proficiency before enrolling in the EMI courses and generate motivation for EMI courses because of EMI benefits. Specifically, it is better for them to enhance their listening and speaking skills, for instance, their pronunciation, presentation skills, and expressing opinions in English. Moreover, they should spend much more time not only on acquiring technical vocabulary but also on their academic content besides self-preparing their writing skills and note-taking skills in English so that they can keep up with the EMI courses.

However, this study still remains some limitations for further studies. Firstly, the scale of the research was small, further studies on EMI lecturers' views and experience can be conducted. In addition, further research should be carried out using quantitative methods so that the data size can be more sufficient and larger, or mixed methods can be used to triangulate the results through statistical analysis. Moreover, the research can be expanded in some universities that implement EMI programs for more general results and discussion.

In summary, this study revealed distinctive findings in aspects of virtual teachers' and students' interactions, students' absolute beliefs in EMI teachers' language proficiency and pedagogies, and their challenges and rationale of majored subject features besides some similar aspects of previous studies. Moreover, this study also suggests some key insightful considerations for better implementing EMI courses from teachers' and students' views, which can be helpful and essential for upcoming EMI program implementation. All of these suggestions can play a certain part in improving the EMI programs in the range of higher education systems in Vietnam and the world. In terms of academic research, further studies can be conducted to investigate EMI teachers' experiences, EMI teachers' challenges on teaching EMI, or EMI policies among institutions.

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