

ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION: LANGUAGE PRACTICE AND STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN A BUSINESS PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DANANG - UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS, VIETNAM: A CASE STUDY

GIẢNG DẠY BẰNG TIẾNG ANH: NGHIÊN CỨU TÌNH HUỐNG VỀ THỰC HÀNH NGÔN NGỮ VÀ TRẢI NGHIỆM CỦA SINH VIÊN TRONG CHƯƠNG TRÌNH ĐÀO TẠO NGÀNH KINH DOANH TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC KINH TẾ - ĐẠI HỌC ĐÀ NẴNG

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Abstract - In the 21st century, English medium instruction (EMI) programs worldwide continue to face challenges due to their complexity and rapid implementation without sufficient planning, leading to a persistent demand for comprehensive research to enhance their quality. This article presents a case study involving one lecturer and six students from an EMI undergraduate international business program at the University of Danang - University of Economics, Vietnam (UD-DUE). Through classroom observations and in-depth interviews, the study gathered insights into the current language practices within the program and explored the difficulties faced by students, along with their learning strategies. The classroom observations highlighted the dominance of English as the primary language of instruction and interaction, accounting for 91.6%. The analysis of interviews identified common challenges experienced by EMI students, primarily related to English language proficiency. Additionally, the study revealed various learning strategies employed by participants to address their proficiency gaps in English.

Key words - English medium instruction; undergraduate international business program; language practice; students' challenges; learning strategies

1. Introduction

Under the influence of political, economic, and social forces, mankind's history has witnessed the ascendancy of the English language as a lingua franca [1]. Observing the prominence of English, some insightful scholars predicted that this language would continue its expansion in other fields including education, which proved to be prophetic in the 21st century [2]. The dominance of this language has now been reflected strongly in academic institutions, with the introduction of English medium instruction (EMI), which means "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English" [3].

In Vietnam, the concept of EMI programs quickly received a great deal of attention from all stakeholders, which motivated educational policymakers to implement EMI courses as quickly as they could. Since 2008, EMI courses have been enacted in Vietnamese higher institutions [4]. However, the rush to implement EMI has led to some undesirable outcomes [5], with inadequate quality assurance [6], lecturers' unwillingness to convey the content in English [7], and students' struggles to comprehend the lessons [8]

Tóm tắt - Trong thế kỷ 21, các chương trình giảng dạy bằng tiếng Anh đối mặt với nhiều thách thức do triển khai nhanh chóng và thiếu kế hoạch, dẫn đến sự cấp thiết cho những nghiên cứu toàn diện để nâng cao chất lượng của các chương trình này. Bài báo này trình bày một nghiên cứu tại Trường Đại học Kinh tế - Đại học Đà Nẵng, Việt Nam, với đối tượng tham gia nghiên cứu là một giảng viên và sáu sinh viên ngành Kinh doanh Quốc tế, hệ đào tạo bằng tiếng Anh. Thông qua quan sát lớp học và phỏng vấn sâu, nghiên cứu đã thu thập thông tin về thực tiễn sử dụng tiếng Anh trong chương trình, khám phá những khó khăn và chiến lược học tập của các sinh viên. Cụ thể, thông qua quan sát lớp học, nghiên cứu ghi nhận 91,6% thời gian lớp học sử dụng tiếng Anh, và từ phân tích phỏng vấn, nghiên cứu đã phát hiện các khó khăn mà sinh viên thường gặp phải, chủ yếu liên quan đến ngôn ngữ, cùng những chiến lược sinh viên áp dụng để cải thiện kết quả học tập.

Từ khóa - Giảng dạy bằng tiếng Anh; chương trình kinh doanh quốc tế bậc đại học; thực tiễn sử dụng ngôn ngữ; khó khăn của sinh viên; chiến lược học tập

Given these challenges, coupled with the fact that EMI research in Vietnam is far from being thoroughly researched [9], there is a need for thorough research [6] to increase the quality of EMI courses. This study probes into undergraduate students' voices of business EMI courses at a university in this country.

2. The context of the study

This qualitative case study was conducted in the International Business Department, UD-DUE Vietnam. The International Business Department was originally a part of the Industry and Trade Department, which was founded in 1992, before operating independently in 2012. In this year, it was called the Commercial Department. The name "The International Business Department" was officially used on 6th February 2018.

2.1. The undergraduate international business EMI course at the university

The partial EMI undergraduate international business program was offered in 2018. This program meets the standard of AUN-QA (Asian University Network – Quality Assurance). In the program, 80% of the course is taught in English, while the remaining 20% is taught in Vietnamese.

The full EMI undergraduate international business program was officially run in 2022, with 100% content being taught in English. The design and the purpose of the program are quoted below:

“This program is applied using the credit training system with 133 credits including general courses, fundamental courses, and specialized courses including IB major courses, IB project, and graduation thesis. The curriculum is designed according to a flexible route that allows students to make their own study plan and complete the program from 3 to 6 years. A bachelor’s Degree in International Business creates a solid foundation for students to be able to do business in an international environment and specialize in foreign trade; good quality, conscious of compliance with professional ethics; have skills in informatics, foreign languages, business communication to adapt to the rapid change of business environment and the necessary ability for lifelong learning purposes” [10].

The International Business curriculum was designed with the view to providing students with critical business skills and knowledge in the international perspective and developing an insight into the social, cultural, and political dimensions of global business. Table 1 briefly illustrates the current curriculum of the EMI international business program at UD-DUE.

Table 1. The current curriculum of the EMI International Business Program at UD-DUE

Year	Semester	Courses	Year	Semester	Courses
1	1	Macroeconomics (3)	3	5	Corporate Finance (3)
		Management (3)			Financial Markets and Institutions (3)
		Marxits-Leninist Philosophy (3)			Ho Chi Minh’s Ideology (2)
		English Composition (3)			Statistics for Business and Economics (3)
		Information and Digital Literacy for University Success (3)			International Trade Transactions (3)
		Public Speaking and Presentation Skills (3)			Research Methodology (2)
		Physical Education (3)			
	2	General Law (2)	6	Cross - Cultural Management (3)	
		Microeconomics (3)		International Business Management (3)	
		IT for Business (3)		Business Negotiation (3)	
		Introduction to Business (3)		Finance in International Trade (3)	
		Principles of Marketing (3)		Multimodal Transport (3)	
		Introduction to Data Science in Business (3)		Import-Export Business (3)	
		Physical Education (2)			
2	3	International Economics (3)	4	7	International Finance

4	Financial Markets and Institutions (3)	8	Management (3)
	Organisational Behavior (3)		Business Ethics (3)
	International Business (3)		Global Strategic Management (3)
	Business English (3)		Asian Pacific Business Management (3)
	Applied Mathematics in Economics and Business (3)		International Business Simulation (3)
	Business Law (3)		Logistics & International Trade (3)
	Management Information Systems (3)		Graduation Thesis (10)
	Political Economics of Marxism – Leninism (2)		
	Scientific Socialism (2)		
	Introduction to Accounting (3)		
Business Communication (3)			

(): credits

Research Questions:

There are three questions that this research attempted to answer:

1/ How is the use of English and Vietnamese divided in EMI business lectures at UD-DUE ?

2/ What challenges do undergraduate international business students at UD-DUE encounter in their EMI undergraduate program?

3/ What learning strategies do business students at UD-DUE employ to better their learning?

3. Literature Review

3.1. English medium instruction

EMI is the most recent and booming program being applied in higher education all over the world [10]. In Europe, for example, the 2014 data shows that around 8,000 EMI bachelor’s and master’s programs were taught in English [11], which was 9 times higher than the data in 2007. The rise in EMI was also witnessed in most countries in Asia and Africa [12].

To advocate the implementation of EMI, research has been conducted to explain its benefits to universities and students, and even some have referred to Second Language Acquisition theories to empirically support that EMI is an innovative teaching methodology. The benefits of EMI could be listed as language gains for students [13], updated teaching and research materials [14], employment prospects [6], developing students’ Intercultural Competence [11], increasing reputation [15] and international enrollment for institutions [16]. When viewed from theories of second language acquisition such as Connectionism, EMI is an effective methodology to develop students’ language skills, as frequent exposure to language items while absorbing the content can help students gradually form strong connections among the language features [17]. Other scholars (see [18];

[19]) applied the seem-to-be-old-fashioned Input Hypothesis by Krashen to argue that EMI programs provide students with chances to immerse in an environment that is full of comprehensible input while also allowing them to produce pushed writing and speaking output, all of which are important components to facilitate their English learning journey [20].

Not as ideal as it may seem, the practical implementation of EMI has entailed some concerns in terms of content being simplified to compensate for students' limited English ability [21], slow learning process [22], and students' mother tongue being threatened [23]. Also, the benefits of EMI may not always be guaranteed, as the implementation of EMI is contextually unique and its success depends on many factors [24]. As a result, what has been believed on paper to be rosy seems to fall well short of what is expected when applied in practice. This requires involved people to propose thoughtful planning and preparation before any EMI curriculum decision is made. For countries that are currently conducting EMI programs, it is vital to reflect on the current curriculum and regularly make prompt recommendations so that they do not waste time, effort, and resources. To do these things, it should be borne in mind that one crucial part of analyzing the EMI phenomenon is looking at how students – the core stakeholder, perceive it.

3.2. The implementation of English medium instruction in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the English language has gained widespread popularity since the end of the 20th century as a response to globalisation and internationalisation [6], and has been metaphorically viewed as a fever [25]. Not surprisingly, EMI has been strongly encouraged by policymakers [26]. However, both lecturers and students stated that EMI is not satisfactorily executed [27]. Although there have been certain efforts made with the view to enhancing the quality of EMI programs in Vietnam, the current language practice and students' voices seem not to be paid attention to enough. For the case of UD-DUE, as the full EMI undergraduate international business program is new, officially implemented in 2022, it is imperative to conduct research to assess its effectiveness. This motivated the authors to examine the current language distribution, students' challenges, and their learning strategies in an international business EMI program at UD-DUE, Vietnam.

4. Methodology

Participants of this research were one lecturer specialising in International Business and six international business EMI students, at UD-DUE, Vietnam. The lecturer has 6-year experience in handling EMI courses, and therefore would develop a comprehensive understanding of the EMI program at the university. Among the six students, three were enrolled in the partial EMI program, which was taught partially (50%-80%) in English, and the other three participated in the full EMI program, which was taught entirely in English. The students from the partial EMI program have been following their courses for more than two years since their first year at university, and

therefore have developed certain strategies to overcome academic challenges and enhance their learning experience, while the three students from the full EMI program have just finished their first year because they were the first Cohort of the program. Among the six eligible participants, there were two male students and four female students. The student participants' profile is given in the table below.

Table 2. Study Participants' Profiles

Lecturer's Profile				
Degree	Gender	Types of EMI program delivering	Years of teaching	English Proficiency
Master's Degree in Business, England	Female	Both full and partial	6 years	IELTS 7.5
Students' Profile				
Participant Codes	Gender	Type of EMI program attended	Year of Study	English Proficiency (based on IELTS or Internal Tests at the University)
S1	Female	Partial	3 rd year	Intermediate
S2	Female	Partial	2 nd year	Intermediate
S3	Female	Full	1 st year	Also the first Cohort IELTS 7.0
S4	Male	Full	1 st year	
S5	Female	Full	1 st year	IELTS 6.5
S6	Male	Partial	2 nd year	Intermediate

Table 3. Classroom Observation Sheet, adapted from [28]

Domains	Constructs	Time Allocation by Language of Instruction (%)					
		L1	L2	L1-2	L2-1	NA	Total
Language Content	Social Routines (e.g., light conversation)						
	Academic Routines (e.g., assigning homework, turning in assignments)						
	Light Cognitive Content (e.g., current events, school events)						
	Dense Cognitive Content (e.g., cognitively complex communication with specialised vocabulary)						
	Total						
Communication Mode	Writing						
	Aural						
	Aural-Verbal						
	NA						
Activity Structure (Lecturer/Students)	Total						
	Lecture/Listen						
	Observe/ Performance						
	Ask/Listen						
	...						
Total							

L1: Content presented in Vietnamese; L2: Content presented in English; L1-2: Vietnamese introducing English; L2-1: English clarified by Vietnamese; NA: silent time

To achieve the aims of this case study, classroom observations were conducted, followed by open-ended interviews. The lectures that the authors observed ran for

approximately 120 minutes. The authors also had a short talk with the lecturer about her experience in this EMI program. In this study, Transitional Bilingual Observation Protocol (TBOP) [28] is used for classroom observation. This model comprises four dimensions namely (a) language content, (b) language of instruction, (c) activity structure, and (d) communication mode. In each dimension, there are different constructs as illustrated in the following table.

Regarding the interviews with the six students, they were conducted in Vietnamese. They were transcribed and translated into English, which was later analysed by thematic analysis, which looks for patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The interviews followed three themes comprising the students' learning experiences, challenges in their international business program, and strategies to deal with such challenges. The length of each interview ranged between 40 and 60 minutes. The participants voluntarily participated in the study by signing a consent form before the interviews.

5. Findings

Research Question 1: How is the use of English and Vietnamese divided in EMI business lectures at UD-DUE?

The observation shows that English is the main language of instruction and communication, occupying around 91.6% of the time allocation. English was used to ask and answer questions, give presentations, and discuss in groups. Assignments including doing oral presentations, writing essays, reports, and in-class examinations were also required to be submitted in English. The Vietnamese language was used only when the lecturer wanted to give further explanations to help the students comprehend the disciplinary knowledge better or when she wanted to make jokes to create a more comfortable learning environment.

The analysis of classroom observations and interviews also reveals that the structure of a lecture typically constitutes 80% of class time, focusing on information delivery. The remaining 20% emphasises student presentations and discussions. The classroom observation and the interviews also show that the lecturer and the students only focused on the meaning of the content, not on the language. Therefore, the lecturer did not correct the students' grammar and pronunciation.

Research Question 2: What challenges do undergraduate international business students at UD-DUE encounter in their EMI undergraduate program?

Generally, all of the students encountered language challenges to some extent. However, it is worth mentioning that the students from the partial EMI program struggled more with language-related issues than their counterparts from the full EMI program. There are two main common obstacles that all the participants mentioned, as clearly stated below.

The high density of new vocabulary items and terminologies

All participants expressed feeling overwhelmed by the vast number of new words and terms encountered when

reading English materials, which significantly impeded their reading speed. Comprehending the meaning and context of these unfamiliar words necessitates a solid background knowledge of international business. This challenge was exacerbated when they were required to read multiple lengthy passages daily. Despite this difficulty, participants, particularly S3 and S5, highlighted the superiority of learning content with English terminologies over Vietnamese translations. They found that certain English terms were overly abstract and challenging to grasp when translated into Vietnamese, suggesting that retaining these terms in their original English form was preferable.

Understanding the lecturers' local accents

Another challenge commonly experienced by the students is difficulty in fully understanding their lecturers due to strong local accents and incorrect pronunciation. Student S2 mentioned that she often had to guess the words spoken by her lecturers or politely request them to write on the board. Despite these difficulties, the students refrain from judging their lecturers' accents, as they prioritise understanding the content. However, they express hope for greater English proficiency among the lecturers.

Giving arguments in English

S2 and S4 highlighted a significant challenge in participating in their EMI programs. They noted that some subjects require active discussion and presentation in English. However, they struggled to effectively present their ideas and arguments due to a combination of limited English language proficiency and underdeveloped argumentation skills. This difficulty not only hindered their ability to contribute meaningfully but also impacted their confidence.

Seeking good resources of references for their assignments

As part of their written English assignments, students were required to provide references for their evidence. Initially, S4 and S6 struggled to locate credible resources and were unsure how to effectively find relevant information. They admitted that they lacked the skills and knowledge needed to identify and use high-quality sources.

Research Question 3: What learning strategies do business students at UD-DUE, employ to better their learning?

There are three similar strategies that all of the students adopted to enhance their learning experience.

Borrowing books from students attending the Vietnamese medium instruction program

All participants mentioned that they borrowed textbooks and learning materials written in Vietnamese from their friends enrolled in the Vietnamese medium instruction program. This practice allowed them to first understand the content in Vietnamese, which they found more approachable. They considered this method very helpful as it enabled them to initially grasp new knowledge in their mother tongue before engaging with the English version. This approach not only boosted their confidence but also ensured the accuracy of their understanding of the English content.

Reading materials in advance

All of the students also commonly employed the strategy of reading the materials beforehand to better prepare for the lessons. These materials typically included textbooks and PowerPoint slides provided at the start of the course. Prior to class, students would highlight new vocabulary and make notes on any concepts they found difficult, allowing them to seek clarification from their lecturers during the lesson.

Being active in class

All of the students highlighted the significance of active class participation. They stressed the importance of raising hands, asking questions, and providing answers. According to them, the more engaged they were in the lesson, the better they understood the content and the more likely they were to retain the knowledge. Additionally, the lecturers incentivized active participation by awarding extra marks to students who demonstrated enthusiasm during class, which further encouraged student engagement.

Reading recommended books in the reading list

S4 and S6 mentioned that they regularly read the recommended books from the reading lists provided by their lecturers to broaden and deepen their knowledge in their major. Additionally, they actively participated in several academic forums on Facebook and sought advice from senior students for extra reading materials to help them with their knowledge.

Learning by heart the content when doing presentations

S1 utilized a traditional rote-learning approach when preparing for presentations, committing the content to memory. She noted that this method significantly boosted her confidence during her presentations, as she felt more secure in her ability to recall and articulate the information effectively.

It is worth mentioning that the students from the full EMI program are offered a team of teaching assistants who are alumni of the university to support them outside of class hours, while this support is not available to students from the partial EMI program.

6. Discussion

The findings indicated that the current language practice of the EMI undergraduate international business program at UD-DUE, aligns with the implementation of EMI programs in many contexts worldwide [3]. English is predominantly used in class, with codeswitching employed only when necessary. Moreover, both lecturers and students primarily focus on content meaning rather than language aspects [29]. This approach mirrors common teaching and learning strategies in EMI contexts.

With regard to students' challenges when participating in the EMI undergraduate international business program at UD-DUE, the high frequency of new vocabulary and understanding lecturers' local accents are students' biggest concerns. The difficulty of vocabulary could be explained by the fact that Vietnamese students were not exposed much to academic English vocabulary during their high

school years [30]. The problem of understanding lecturers' accents could be explained by the fact that EMI content lecturers were not sufficiently trained to achieve satisfactory English [29]. These findings highlight the importance of implementing language support programs or workshops for students to improve their academic English vocabulary and providing training or professional development opportunities for lecturers to enhance their English language skills and communication clarity. Additionally, introducing strategies for promoting understanding and appreciation of World Englishes among students could be beneficial in preparing them for diverse linguistic environments in international business contexts.

It is noteworthy that students in the full EMI program at this university encountered fewer linguistic challenges compared to those in the partial EMI program. This discrepancy could stem from the stricter English proficiency requirements for admission to the full EMI program. Applicants are mandated to attain a minimum score of 5.5 in the IELTS exam to qualify for this program. Remarkably, many students in the initial cohort of the full EMI program featured in this study had achieved IELTS band scores of 6.5, 7, or even 7.5 prior to enrolling in the program. In contrast, admission criteria for the partial EMI program may not necessarily include English proficiency as a prerequisite. It could be said that students should reach a certain English language level before enrolling in EMI courses [31]. This once again underscores the significance of language preparation for students prior to commencing the course.

The findings unveiled various learning strategies employed by the participants, with borrowing books from the Vietnamese medium program emerging as the most prevalent strategy. Additionally, students frequently engaged in reading materials ahead of time and actively participated in class discussions. This suggests that students were cognizant of their shortcomings and implemented these strategies to equip themselves in both language and content aspects. However, it is crucial to note that the effectiveness of these strategies has yet to be assessed. Until this evaluation is meticulously conducted, support from both lecturers and the university remains paramount.

7. Limitations

This qualitative case study is a response to the increasing empirical need to enhance the quality of EMI programs in Vietnam, by examining students' voices at UD-DUE. There are two limitations of this study. Firstly, as the nature of qualitative research, the result of this study may not be representative of all students who are pursuing international business EMI courses at this university. Secondly, as learning strategies are far more psychologically and theoretically complex than merely documenting students' activities to facilitate their learning, the analysis applied in this study may not fully capture the intricacies of the concept.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, EMI programs have been run in higher education worldwide, and unsurprisingly warmly

welcomed in the Vietnam context. However, students' voices need to be more carefully heard to ensure the quality of these programs. This motivated the authors to do this case study. Through conducting classroom observations and interviews, the current language practice of the international business EMI program at UD-DUE, its students' challenges and learning strategies have been cast light on. While this study has successfully achieved its aims and objectives, its flaws would open more chances for future scholars to better contribute to the development of EMI programs in Vietnam.

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