EMI Programs in Higher Education in Vietnam: Benefits and Drawbacks From Students' Perspectives

Le Thi Tuyet Hanh[1]✉, Nguyen Thanh Bac[2]

[1] hanhfran@gmail.com,
Foreign Language Department
Vinh University

[2] nthbac1904@gmail.com,
Foreign Language Department,
Vinh University

✉ Corresponding author

ABSTRACT: *English-Medium Instruction has been considered a key strategy in internationalizing the education system in many countries. Its popularity has brought both benefits and drawbacks to the learners. This study was aimed at investigating the positive and negative effects of EMI programs at a university in North Central Vietnam from students' perspectives. The study involved 137 participants, who were studying in an English as medium instruction program in a university in Vietnam. An explanatory mixed-methods approach was used in data collection through a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. From the data analysis, it was found that EMI courses benefited their learners in terms of job opportunities, English language proficiency, and social skills. However, the results also indicated that EMI students faced many difficulties relating to teaching and learning methodology and psychological issues during their learning process. Different pedagogical implications are put forward to improve the quality of EMI programs in the Vietnamese context.*

1. Introduction

English has rapidly become a dominant language to facilitate academic exchange and partnerships, hence the distribution of English Medium Instruction (EMI) is more universal than ever (Jenkins, 2000). EMI is considered to be at a more mature stage in its development, and its growth is expected to continue (Tran & Nguyen, 2018). The main characteristic of EMI is using English—a dominant international language that is used widely and commonly among people across curriculums (Dafouz & Camacho-Miñano, 2016). EMI allows universities to attain an international image, attract international students, and move up in the world rankings. In addition, EMI is promised to create more opportunities and enable university students to earn great benefits in today's globalized higher education (Joe & Lee, 2013). With the long history of colonialism, many Asian countries, such as Hong Kong, India, and Singapore consider English a primary instructional language, and bilingual education is prevalent within language policies (Doiz et al., 2012). As a result, EMI has been applied on a large scale and has been successful in these countries (Kirkpatrick, 2014). In Vietnam, EMI has been popularized in different educational contexts, leading the country in a more innovative and market-driven direction (Tran & Nguyen, 2018). Because of such potential, EMI program is not unfamiliar to Vietnamese students and lecturers (Im & Kim, 2015). Furthermore, EMI programs have adopted the name of "advanced university program" since 2008 by a significant political move named "Educating advanced universities programs from 2008 to 2015" in the Decree number 14/2005/NQ-CP dated November the 2nd 2005 (Vietnamese Government, 2008). Many universities expect iimplementation to contribute to the progress of the educational quality, specifically for Vietnam's tertiary education and to strive for the future target that in 2020 some Vietnamese universities will rank in the top 200 universities in the world (MOET, 2008). Such EMI programs have also attracted the attention of researchers who have attempted to investigate the effects of Vietnamese EMI programs on learners from diverse perspectives (Le, 2021; Tran & Nguyen, 2018; Phuong & Nguyen, 2019; Vu & Burn, 2014). However, there have been few studies that examine the viewpoints of EMI students. This study was conducted to contribute

to the body of the literature in the field as well as suggest solutions to improve the quality of EMI programs in Vietnam. To this end, the study seeks to answer the two following research questions

- What benefits do university students perceive in learning an EMI course?

- What challenges do university students face in learning an EMI course?

2. Literature review

According to Dearden (2014), EMI involves the use of English to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the mother tongue of the majority of the population is not English. EMI has been described as "*an umbrella term for academic subjects taught through English*" (Dearden & Macaro, 2016, p. 456). In other words, English is considered to be a vehicle for teaching academic subjects effectively. Thus, EMI programs predominately aim at "*the acquisition of subject knowledge rather than being fluent in a foreign language*" (Uterberger, 2012, p. 88).

2.1. Advantages of EMI programs

The implementation of EMI programs in tertiary contexts has been widely recognized and appreciated (Tsou, 2017). Coleman (2006) noted that EMI programs support students to receive "*double benefits of subject knowledge and improvement of target language proficiency" (p. 5)*. Using EMI in non-speaking English nations' universities is believed to promote students' motivation and inspiration in learning English (Chang, 2010). Tatzl (2011) indicated that EMI contributed to enhancing students' linguistic skills, including academic or specialized vocabulary size. Not only is EMI helpful for students, but it also serves the purposes of EMI teachers, including increasing lecturers' exposure to English comprehensible input and their use of English comprehensible output (Ibrahim, 2001; Tatzl, 2011). Some researchers have found that studying in the EMI program also helps learners improve their social skills. More specifically, EMI pupils are more outgoing, emotionally mature, active, assertive, conscientious, competitive, and independent (Ho & Nguyen, 2019; Senapati et

al., 2012; Xiao & Zou, 2020). In step with a study conducted by Byun et. al. (2011), EMI students can adapt to the demands of various academic situations.

In terms of resource availability, following the EMI course, students are not only provided resources in their L1, but are also helped to access material in English (Alhamami, 2015; Gholami & Zare-ee, 2013). Lecturers also believe that EMI enables students to access the resources in English that are relevant to their fields of study (Başıbek et al., 2014). From the faculty's point of view, EMI is likely to strengthen student recruitment for the university and the internationalization of the institution. Some scholars have indicated the close connection between EMI outcomes and potential opportunities that graduates can get jobs more competitively and have an attractive level of salary that requires both English language proficiency and professional knowledge (Dang et al., 2013; Lueg, 2015). It is also believed that EMI increases mobility opportunities and prepares students for working in international and intercultural environments (Galloway et al., 2020).

2.2. Disadvantages of EMI programs

Although EMI has brought about a number of benefits, it also presents some challenges for the students in terms of (1) understanding lecturers, (2) participating in class discussion, (3) psychological aspects, (4) learning materials, and (5) testing and assessment.

Problems associated with comprehending teachers are the most concerning for the EMI student who is a non-native speaker. According to Phuong and Nguyen (2018), failure to catch lecturers' explanations or instructions and taking notes results from limited knowledge of vocabulary and low listening competence. Moreover, when English is used as a medium of instruction, non-native speakers are dissatisfied with the knowledge and information they have gained in class (Chang, 2010; Tatsl, 2011). When it comes to participating in class discussions, students revealed that they were shy and reluctant when discussing with their peers and teachers (Doiz et al., 2012; Flowerdew & Miller,

1992; Kagwesag, 2012). Differences in academic levels and English proficiency are the greatest challenges when conducting the EMI classroom, which lead to difficulties when arranging and managing class activities (Li & Wu, 2017). In addition, students with low English competence find it uncomfortable when they want to express their ideas and thoughts in front of the class (Al-Bakri, 2013; Kagwesag, 2012). That causes an imbalance in class discussions. Female students are especially inclined to be less active than their counterparts in discussions.

In terms of EMI students' psychology, nervousness and anxiety were experienced at the beginning of the course (Huang, 2015; Yang, 2015; Yeh, 2012). Students also express their concern when it comes to speaking, answering, and discussing in English because of low confidence in L2 (Seikkula-Leino, 2007). Similar results were also shown in other studies where students with low English language competency did not find their learning experience effective (Kang & Park, 2004, 2005). The fear of negative evaluation and worrying about reactions of other students are the most concern of EMI students when they speak (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). Moreover, the psychological impacts affected the students' academic performance (Zumor & Qasem 2019).

Regarding the learning materials, a number of studies reported that English material is one of the greatest challenges that EMI students face. Zumor and Qasem (2019) indicated that students struggled to read textbooks in English because of their lack of vocabulary and low English proficiency. Similar results have been found in other research in that students spend more time in preparation because of slow reading speed and limited vocabulary (Chang 2010; Chia, Johnson, Chia, & Olive, 1999; Evans & Green, 2007). In addition, Students also faced challenges in testing and assessment. Many students reported that if they were tested in L1, they would do better than when tested in English (Chang 2010, Phuong & Nguyen, 2018; Zumor & Qasem 2019). Moreover, they faced difficulties in understanding questions and it was difficult to provide answers (Sivaramana, Al Balushib, & Rao, 2014). In addition, because of uncertain usage of English, students had to depend on translation tools and software which led to writing assignments being time consuming.

The aforementioned review has demonstrated that students in the EMI programs receive many merits as well as face a number of difficulties. A large number of research studies conducted to investigate both learners' and lecturers' perceptions of the impact of EMI programs so far. Little attention, however, has been paid attention to this particular topic in Vietnamese settings, especially in the universities located in the middle part of Vietnam. In fact, Vinh University has been approved to apply EMI in three majors since 2017 (MOET, 2017), however no study was carried out to evaluate the EMI programs from students' voices, which remains a gap that this study tries to address. The results of the current research contribute significantly to enhance the quality of teaching and learning process in such programs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

A mixed-methods approach was used in data collection and analysis to answer the research questions. This approach was chosen because it allowed the researchers to take advantage of the strong points of one method and compensate for deficits of the other. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018, p. 271), mixed-methods research is an approach in which the researcher uses "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

There were 137 students who participated in this study. These students (92 males and 45 females) ranged in age of from 19 to 21 and were enrolling in three different EMI courses, included 59 students majoring in business administration (11,7%), 36 students in mathematics education (36%), and 85 in information technology (62%). These participants were randomly chosen in order to maximize the objectivity of the findings.

These Vietnamese students were following EMI programs at Vinh University, in which the learning resources and examinations of these courses are administered in English, and the teachers used English and a small amount of Vietnamese language to give lectures in the classrooms.

3.3. Research instruments

Questionnaire

Because of COVID-19, an online survey was created and posted on social media to collect data from students. Five-point Likert options were provided, with choices ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Adapted from two previous studies (Phuong & Nguyen, 2019; Xiao & Zou, 2020, the questionnaire was designed based on the advantages and disadvantages encountered by the learners during their learning process in EMI courses. The questionnaire was first piloted to 30 students, the Cronbach alpha was 0.903, which is believed to be highly reliable. Some revisions were also made to make the validity of the tool before distributing to the target participants. To make it more accessible to participants, the original questionnaire was translated from English to Vietnamese.

The questionnaire contained four parts. The first part was designed to collect each participant's age, gender, major, and email address. Section 2 consisted of 11 statements related to the benefits when applying for the EMI program in terms of language proficiency and other benefits. The third section, comprising 24 statements, was used to obtain students' difficulties in language skills, learning, and psychology. One open question was added at the end of the questionnaire for students to freely share their experiences as well as their opinions about strategies to improve academic performance.

Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 15 students selected randomly from 137 students based on the email addresses they provided in the questionnaire (five students from IT, five students from business administration, and five students from mathematics education). The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese for

10–20 minutes each interviewee online meetings by Facebook, Zalo, and all responses were recorded with the students' permission. Each interview was based on the research questions. However, the interviewees were free to discuss any aspects related to EMI in Vietnamese.

3.4. Data analysis

Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software version 20.0 was used to code and analyze data from survey questionnaires. The reliability calculated using Cronbach's coefficient alpha was 0.903, which was asserted highly reliable. The recorded qualitative data from responders were analyzed based on recordings and the take-notes, after that, we transcribed the participants' answers from Vietnamese into English. Whenever we faced misunderstandings, we contacted the participants to ensure that all information was clarified and interpreted accurately. After the qualitative information had been gathered, the most used method, constant comparison analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007) was employed to analyze those data.

4. Findings

4.1. Advantages perceived by EMI students

There were 11 items in the questionnaire related to the benefits that students receive in the EMI programs. This first cluster in the questionnaire aimed at quantifying the advantages that EMI programs bring about to their learners. This part included job opportunities, language proficiency, and social skills. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of the advantages perceived by EMI students

Benefits	Mean	Standard Deviation
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

Students positively perceived EMI programs

with an overall mean of 3.7. All three aspects were moderately rated. Job opportunities had the highest score with a mean of 3.85, language proficiency received a high mean of 3.69, and the merits of social skills are reported with a mean value of 3.58.

The interviews indicated that EMI students' listening and reading skills had improved. The students also indicated that EMI courses helped them be more confident when communicating with others because they had ideas and backgrounds to lengthen the conversation and because they participated in many extracurricular activities that made them more self-assured. Their responses are themed and shown in Figure 1.

As can be also seen in Figure 1, writing skills were not mentioned by any of the interviewees, while vocabulary in general, and concepts in particular, played an important role in students' learning process. The participants revealed that their range of vocabulary was enhanced. They also had a deep understanding of some science concepts when exploring them in English. Some students majoring in mathematics education believed they could develop self-study skills due to the huge workloads they had to cope with.

4.2. Difficulties perceived by EMI students

There are 24 items in the questionnaire related to the challenges faced by students in the EMI programs. These items were divided into five categories: (1) understanding lecturers, (2) participating in class discussion, (3) psychological aspects, (4) learning materials, (5) testing and assessment. The descriptive statistics were performed through SPSS software. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of difficulties perceived by EMI Students

Difficulties	Mean	Standard Deviation
Testing and assessment (5 items)	3.79	1.12
Learning materials (3 items)	3.7	1.13
Participating in class's discussion (5 items)	3.6	1.19
Understanding lecturers (4 items)	3.57	1.26
Psychological aspects (7 items)	3.46	1.30
Total	3.6	1.2

As summarized in Table 2, besides difficulties related to participating in class discussions,
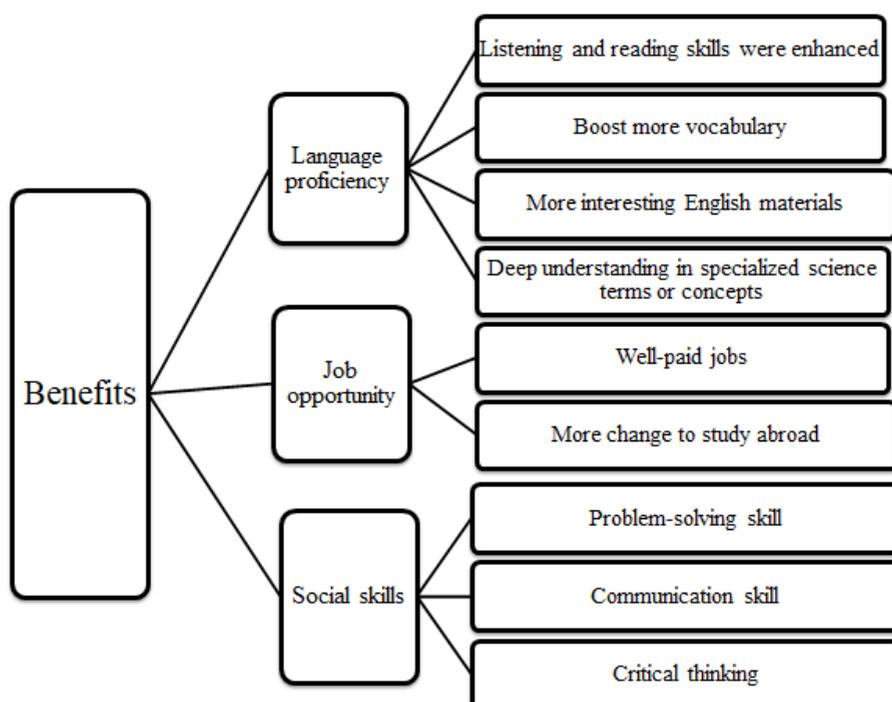

Figure 1. EMI students' responses in the interview in terms of advantages

reading study materials, difficulties in exams, difficulty in understanding teachers are among problems for those who are studying EMI, with the means of 3.6, 3.79, and 3.57, respectively. The qualitative data was in the same vein as these findings as most of the interviewers confirmed their troubles during their learning process. The excerpt below is an example:

"It is not easy to integrate with teachers and friends, regardless of the knowledge related to the lesson or additional lessons because I cannot communicate with them in English. English became an invisible fear for me. It inadvertently became the boundary separating me from everyone." (Student 2)

In addition, psychological barriers were mentioned by a majority of students as one of the difficulties they face when studying in the EMI program (M=3.46). As Student 1 stated in the interview:

"It is tough for me to speak everything in English. Somehow, I fear criticism when I mispronounce, and then, I get anxious about whether or not my peers and teachers can understand my spoken English". (Students 1)

These difficulties might come from different sources, including their English learning experience before enrolling in these EMI programs.

"I didn't have the opportunity to get in touch with English early, only to be able to know a bit later. When I went to university, just listening and understanding what the teacher said was difficult for me, I couldn't participate in interaction with the lecturer and friends." (Student 3)

Overall, the students in EMI classes faced various types of difficulties, from both subjective and objective sides. These findings are consistent with the qualitative findings from the interviews, which are summarized in Table 3.

In short, students' perceptions of EMI courses are twofold. On the one hand, they appreciated job opportunities, English language proficiency, and social skills such courses offer. On the other hand, teaching methodology and psychological issues created certain troubles during their learning process.

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 receive in learning an EMI course?

In the questionnaire, a large number of students regarded the EMI program as a foundation for building a brighter future with job and study prospects. In the interviews, they also expressed their interest that an EMI course may result in well-paid jobs and increase the prospect of studying abroad. This result is in line with Galloway et al. (2020), who stated that EMI students were well prepared for the international environment because they perceived the importance of English and considered it a requirement for their future.

In addition, EMI students reported in the questionnaire that EMI courses helped them enhance their English skills. In particular, their range of vocabulary was boosted, leading them to understand science terms or concepts more deeply and effectively because there were some key concepts that make no sense when they were translated into Vietnamese. That means EMI

is beneficial for both academic and language purposes. Coleman (2006) provided a similar insight by stating that the EMI curriculum helps students with double benefits, namely academic and language purposes. However, the interviewees emphasized the benefits in relation to receptive skills, namely reading and listening. This finding was supported by Başıbek et al. (2013).

Finally, as indicated in Table 1, EMI courses helped EMI students to enhance their social skills. In the interviews, all of the participants agreed that EMI courses improved their problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills. In addition, communicative skills were mentioned by 10 students (nine from business administration, one from mathematics education). None of the IT students discussed communication skills. The reason for these discrepancies could lie in the characteristics of each major. Although business administration students had to participate in several courses about social skills, as fixed by their curriculum, IT students spent all of their time working with computers. Thus, it is understandable why IT students are less active and less outgoing than their friends who were majoring in business administration.

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

Based on the evaluation of five important factors: participation in class discussions, learning materials, taking tests and exams, comprehending lecturers, and students' psychology, this study has produced insights into the academic situation of EMI students at the tertiary level. The difficulties the participants encountered were elicited through a semiclosed questionnaire and semistructured interviews.

More than 70% of the students mentioned the difficulty in taking tests as the major reason for failure in the assessment tasks. The interviews helped to reveal that EMI students were unable to come up with the appropriate phrases and thoughts in order to perform well on tests because of their limited receptive and productive vocabulary. The finding is in line with Phuong and Nguyen's (2019) research in which a considerable proportion of students admitted

to not understanding the questions asked in the assessment tasks, which leads to unexpected results. This is in accord with Al Balushib and Rao (2014), Chang (2010), Galloway et al. (2020), Le (2015), and Zurmo and Qasem (2019), who all stated that EMI students would do better if they were assessed in their native tongue.

About half of the students acknowledged having difficulty connecting with their instructors and classmates in the class discussions. One of the reasons for this situation might come from their anxiety. The differences in academic levels and English competence led to difficulties in arranging and managing class activities. In addition, the students with limited English proficiency found it difficult to convey their views and opinions in front of the class. This is congruent with the research of Al-Bakri (2013), Kagwesag (2012), and Li and Wu (2017), which indicated that students understand the questions but expressing them in English is challenging. Similar results can be found in several previous studies, including those of Doiz (2012), Galloway et al. (2020), Flowerdew and Miller (1992), Kagwesag (2012), and Zurmo and Qasem (2019).

EMI Students also experienced difficulty while reading textbooks or course materials written in English. When the students were engaged in the EMI courses, specialized vocabulary emerged as a primary cause. They frequently had to rely on dictionaries or devices to translate words into their native language. In fact, many students had never read such specialized documents in English before, which resulted in their limited vocabulary size. This finding is consistent with findings from previous studies conducted by Chang (2010), Chia et al. (1999), Galloway et al. (2020), Phuong & Nguyen (2019), and Zurmo and Qasem (2019),

Furthermore, the findings from the survey showed that almost two-thirds of the students believed that they had trouble comprehending their instructors' English language. The interviews revealed that the lecturers usually presented the lectures on slides and there are even instructional videos available online. However, their limited English language competency prevented them

from absorbing the lesson effectively. The same results were found in other studies (Chan, 2010; Galloway et al., 2020; Kagwesag, 2012; Tatsl, 2011).

Finally, most students were affected by psychological issues such as anxiety, embarrassment, and insecurity. As a result, unpleasant and unexpected outcomes occurred. This result is similar to that of Zurmo and Qasem (2019). According to the interview data, the majority of students agreed that they were self-deprecating about their English proficiency, which led to the impediment in demonstrating their understanding of topics. Even if they did not comprehend the material, the students were hesitant to raise questions. The studies conducted by Aydin (2008), Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014), and Seikkula-Leino (2007) yielded similar results. In the interviews, EMI students confessed that if they prepared the lesson well, they had no mental issues while studying. However, because of their parents' high expectations, they were sometimes stressed about the need to obtain high scores. The findings of numerous previous research by Zurmo and Qasem (2019), Galloway et al. (2020), Huang (2015), Yeh (2012), and Yang (2015) reinforce the premise that students commonly experienced negative sentiments when asked to accomplish something connected to English. Furthermore, students with low English proficiency do not find their learning experience effective, as found in studies by Kang and Park (2005) and Kang et al. (2007).

In general, the students in this research encountered several challenges. Whatever obstacles pupils experienced, English language proficiency remained the primary factor. In other words, English competence is likely to be a significant factor in determining the comfortable learning level in EMI courses.

6. Conclusion and implications.

This study was carried out to investigate the perceived benefits and difficulties of EMI students in studying specialized subjects in English. The findings show that many positive features gained from the courses were reported by EMI students, including job opportunities, language proficiency, and social skills. As a result, it is recommended that universities in Vietnam should implement EMI programs in higher education to improve students' English skills and social skills, which are generally limited, and to improve their motivation for their careers. In addition, EMI students should be chosen more carefully by English entry requirements or a well-designed English placement test, and Vietnamese universities should design an appropriate curriculum procedure, such as English courses being provided for students at different levels.

In terms of problems, the findings of this study are similar to previous studies in several respects. The students faced significant difficulties relating to testing and assessment, learning materials, participating in class discussions, understanding lecturers, and psychological aspects—mainly resulting from their limited command of English, including vocabulary. English proficiency is clearly considered a prerequisite for success in EMI classes. It is suggested that the teachers of EMI courses need to provide an environment in which students can construct linguistic knowledge and skills as well as become active participants in the learning process so that they can fully capture the content of the lessons. They should be flexible in using their mother tongue and the second language to impart knowledge to students.

Last but not least, the students who enroll in EMI classes must be conscious of their roles in the EMI program as global citizens. They ought to make use of technology and attend extracurricular activities to improve output skills (speaking and writing). Furthermore, EMI teachers should design a variety of teaching activities that can scaffold EMI students' knowledge before moving on to the main course.

The study cannot avoid some limitations in terms of the sample size, data collection time, and research tools. For further studies, more participants, longer data collection, and other tools such as observation should be taken into account to have more reliable findings.

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