

Title of Project:

Policy and Practice in English as a Medium of Instruction in Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Contexts

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has become a global phenomenon in higher education in non-native English-speaking countries. Vietnam is not an exception. EMI has been deployed in the country since the 1990s. Since 2005, when the Laws of Education officially emphasized the importance of foreign language education in the national education system, EMI has been considered a way to achieve its educational and non-educational goals in the global age. The Vietnamese government expects EMI courses to equip Vietnamese graduate students with English language proficiency and academic expertise to study, work and communicate efficiently in global contexts. EMI has been deployed in some selected Vietnamese universities through training programs such as The Advanced Programs and The Joint Training Programs; however, there is little research on its implementation, especially the voice from lecturers and students.

Research Questions

The present study was conducted to seek an understanding of policy and practices in EMI in Vietnam through explanatory sequential mixed methods research, including policy document analysis, surveys and interviews, specifically to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent are EMI approaches in Vietnamese tertiary EFL contexts addressed in current national policies?
2. What are students' and lecturers' perceptions of EMI in Vietnamese tertiary EFL contexts?
3. What is the perceived impact of EMI approaches on students' English language proficiency?
4. What challenges are faced by lecturers and students in EMI courses, and what learning and teaching strategies are used to overcome these challenges?
5. What are lecturers' and students' suggestions for improving EMI courses in Vietnamese tertiary EFL contexts?

Research Methodology

This study was based on pragmatism as its philosophical stance, which enables the researcher to solve practical problems in the real world (Creswell & Clark, 2007) and “interrogate a particular question, theory, or phenomenon with the most appropriate research method” (Feilzer, 2010, p. 13). The present study was conducted through (a) the combination of multiple sources of evidence from policy document analysis, which included nine national policy documents issued between in 2005-2017, and constituted Phase 1; (b) questionnaire surveys from 360 students and 30 content lecturers that constituted Phase 2; (c) interviews from 12 content lecturers; and (d) focus groups with data from 30 students in six selected Vietnamese universities located in northern Vietnam, central Vietnam, and southern Vietnam that constituted Phase 3. The voices from this wide range of the participants were reflected in their beliefs, perceptions, and their learning and teaching experiences, which have helped explore answers to the research questions from different perspectives.

A summative content analysis approach was applied for analyzing the selected policy documents, incorporating a number of steps for content and thematic analyses. The selected documents were first screened and reviewed to exclude portions unrelated to EMI. Then, data were coded and analyses were carried out with the support of NVivo version 22. Descriptive Coding, Magnitude Coding and Pattern Coding were applied to codes and the data were analyzed.

Student and lecturer questionnaires mainly used closed questions, which helped the participants answer questions more easily and quickly and did not require them to write too much in their responses. This study used five-point Likert scale for most of the closed questions. Open-ended questions were also used so that participants could express their opinions or add more information freely by writing their words. The quantitative data were analyzed thematically and statistically, including reliability analysis, descriptive analysis, comparison of means and effect sizes.

In the third stage of this study, interviews from lecturers and data from student focus groups were conducted to gain more in-depth, richer information, and detailed understandings of the quantitative results from the surveys. With the support of Nvivo 22 software, different coding methods were combined to analyze the data from interviews, including attribute coding, subcoding, magnitude coding and structural coding, which comprised the first-cycle coding methods, and pattern coding, which comprised the second-cycle coding method. Meanwhile, some additional approaches were added to coding and analyzing the focus group data due to the three different types of data that were generated: (a) individual data, (b) group data, and (c) group interaction data. The data collected from the focus groups were analyzed using content analysis as the qualitative approach, including two content analysis techniques—semantic and classical. Semantic content analysis was used to classify signs according to their meanings, and classical content analysis was used to “create small chunks of the data,” place “a code with each chunk,” and place the codes “into similar groupings” that could be “counted” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009, p. 6).

Summary of Findings

The findings of the policy analysis indicated that EMI in Vietnamese tertiary EFL contexts is considered to be a way to achieve both its educational and non-educational goals in the global age. In Vietnam, EMI is encouraged, but not compulsory, in some selected Higher Education

Institutions who meet the government requirements for EMI programs. However, explicit discussions of issues regarding the implementation of EMI in the context of Vietnamese higher education are notably absent from policy documents.

This study revealed that most of the students and lecturers had positive attitudes towards EMI programs. The findings suggested that EMI would bring students great opportunities for both accessing current scientific knowledge and future employment, with a potentially positive impact on students' language proficiency, especially students' reading skills, listening skills, and knowledge of technical terms.

Lecturers and students reported they faced varied challenges in EMI programs. Lecturers were apparently most challenged by students' lack of English language proficiency, whereas students indicated that they felt most pressured by final exams in which they had to demonstrate their content-area knowledge in English. Students acknowledged their own lack of English language ability, recognizing difficulties arising from the unavailability of textbooks, dense curriculum, time allocation, and lecturers' teaching methods. Lecturers identified the extra workload created by EMI as a chief obstacle in EMI courses. Also, this study provided insights into the range of learning and teaching strategies that lecturers, and students applied within their EMI courses and practical suggestions for improving EMI instruction.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest a number of implications for policy, practice, and further research in Vietnamese tertiary EFL contexts. Students and their parents should be well informed about EMI programs, which helps them be aware of how they need to prepare for EMI courses and what they expect to happen in EMI courses in which students enroll.

The transition from English as a subject to English as a medium of instruction needs to be well supported through preparatory English courses such as ESP and EAP.

Students should be more active and independent in looking for other learning sources, attending extra English classes and engaging in activities in EMI classes. Students' academic knowledge and linguistic skills (not only receptive skills but also productive skills) should be encouraged. For example, there should be a balance between oral presentations, reading tasks and vocabulary development in EMI courses. Extracurricular activities, such as English clubs in which students can share and practice their English skills.

EMI lecturers should have formal language certificates as evidence for their language proficiency. They should be assessed not only by content experts but also by language experts when being recruited. Lecturers should participate in short-term courses, exchange programs and international conferences in English-speaking countries to enhance opportunities for using English academically. Pedagogical skills should receive equal attention as lecturers' lecturing skills influence students' understanding and their interests in class, and consequently, the effectiveness of EMI courses. Further, there should be a collaboration between content lecturers and language lecturers in EMI programs as language lecturers can support content lecturers' language ability.

Universities should have more specific guidelines for the linguistic and academic requirements for teaching staff and students, management and evaluations required for the implementation of EMI in individual departments. They should consider greater financial support for students, especially tuition fees for talented students whose families are under financial constraints. Vietnamese universities should also take the 'indigenization' and adaptation stages of policy borrowing into consideration. The locally appropriate curriculum can

help reduce the content difficulty, language difficulty and increased workload for students and lecturers. Further, appropriate curriculum development can help reduce the imbalance of time allocation and subject contribution. Western-style textbooks should be adapted, compiled and modified so that the language and the content are suitable for Vietnamese students. Universities may encourage lecturers' professional development through financial support, recognition, and rewards. They can make favorable conditions for EMI lecturers to participate in national and international conferences and do research on the implementation of EMI in the Vietnamese contexts in comparison to different contexts.

Specific guidelines and clear instructions should be included in policy documents, such as guidelines for preparation and readiness for EMI in Vietnamese universities regarding teaching staff, students, facilities, organization and management and curriculum. In addition, guidelines for evaluating the implementation of EMI after a specific period should be consistent within universities and between universities. Necessary adjustments may be taken from feedback, assessment, and practices in EMI in institutional contexts. The findings of the present study also suggest that policymakers could consider strict regulations of the use of mother tongue in EMI programs to enhance opportunities for student exposure to English.

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