Chapter 1
Perspectives on English Medium Instruction Practices in Vietnamese Universities: Introduction

Jenny Barnett and Min Pham

Abstract As an educational innovation, the English medium instruction (EMI) project in Vietnamese universities is dependent for its success on the quality of the instruction practices put in place. Consequently, this book takes the direction of moving forward with EMI—successfully achieving educational goals through EMI, enhancing student learning experiences and outcomes, and developing transformational EMI practices. To this end, institutional, practitioner and student perspectives are all brought into play, representative of the key stakeholders in the educational outcomes of the EMI project. This chapter begins by indicating the aims the book hopes to achieve as a contribution to the forward direction of EMI in Vietnamese universities. It then briefly reviews EMI as a pedagogical innovation internationally and in Vietnam, and outlines the types of undergraduate EMI offerings currently available in Vietnamese universities. There follows an explanation of the three part structure of the book—institutional, practitioner and student perspectives on EMI practices—and an overview of the chapters across the three parts.

Keywords English-medium instruction · EMI · Vietnam · Higher education

Much has been written about the challenges of English medium instruction (EMI) in higher education both internationally and in Vietnam, so this book looks to how such challenges have been understood and constructively addressed in particular contexts in the Vietnamese tertiary sector. Chapter 2 provides a detailed analysis of the complex picture of EMI in Vietnamese higher education generally, highlighting the range of actors and their different opportunities and capacities for enacting agency to move EMI forward educationally. Subsequently, the focus throughout the book is on how institutions, practitioners and students have engaged with the introduction of EMI, and what we can learn about moving forward educationally based on their experiences, reflections and actions within particular settings. The book thus acts on

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the call by Vu and Burns (2014) that studies of EMI 'generate evidence for good practice that can assist the development of effective EMI programs' (p. 24).

Together the chapters illustrate management, curricular and pedagogical practices in action, drawing on a range of different tertiary contexts and disciplines. All the authors have deep practical experience of EMI in their particular disciplines, not only as current EMI lecturers but often as previous graduate students studying overseas in English speaking environments.

1.1 Aims of the Book

We take seriously the importance of 'understanding the complex interactions between a pedagogical innovation and the context into which is it introduced' (Schweisfurth, 2015). EMI as a pedagogical innovation in Vietnamese universities is set within the broader context of internationalisation in South East Asia, and specifically within higher education. In Vietnamese universities, this context has exerted considerable pressure and has frequently resulted in the implementation of EMI in undergraduate programs without sufficient readiness in terms of planning and resourcing (Nguyen et al., 2017; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019). Consequently a key aim of this book is to understand how particular institutions, teachers and students have engaged with EMI and the implications for moving forward with EMI to develop transformational EMI practices and provide quality educational experiences and outcomes for students.

More broadly, the purpose of the book is to provide a resource for the successful implementation of EMI programs and courses in Vietnam and other Asian settings. To this end, the specific objectives are:

- to bring alive the realities of teaching and learning through EMI and options for moving forward educationally;
- to inform the constructive development of institutional EMI policies and practices;
- to illustrate valuable EMI practices for teachers and students; and
- to provide professional learning and support for lecturers engaging in EMI.

Macaro et al. (2018, p. 11) argue that the evolution of EMI 'should be research-led, not imposed top-down by market forces or by managerial imperatives [to] ensure that EMI would be of benefit to society at large and to the learners in particular'. Consequently, a further aim of this book is to contribute to the research-led evolution of EMI in Vietnamese higher education. We set the broad context in this chapter and the next, while subsequent chapters are grounded in the authors' lived experience. This encompasses a range of disciplines—from engineering to business—and a range of university settings—metropolitan and regional; early to late undergraduate coursework. The emphasis throughout is on finding ways of making EMI work as effectively as possible within particular local constraints, and within the particular type of program offered. The experiences and strategies represented in this volume also enable comparison and contrast with those in similar contexts across Asia or elsewhere.

1.2   EMI as a Pedagogical Innovation

EMI is commonly defined as 'the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English' (Dearden, 2014, p. 4). Although many have reported this definition as excluding the study of English itself, we agree with Dearden's original definition that includes such study. English in Asian universities is taught as an accredited academic subject incorporating linguistics, literature and cultural studies, with all their associated conceptual content. It is also taught as a preliminary foundation for entry into EMI programs, in which case it may or may not be taught through EMI.

The focus in an EMI program is typically on achieving content-related learning outcomes, with English viewed solely as a tool for teaching (Airey, 2016), and with no explicit English language learning outcomes set out. Consequently, as Airey points out, EMI programs must be seen as very different from programs explicitly integrating content and language in higher education (ICLHE), where language learning is an assessable goal on a par with content achievement. Nevertheless there is often an implicit expectation on the part of policy makers, students and other stakeholders that there will indeed be some improvement in students' English language proficiency over the years of an EMI program.

The rise of EMI in Asian universities is a direct reflection of the place of English within a globalising and glocalising world, reflecting 'the rise in the geopolitical status of English as a lingua franca' (Walkinshaw et al. 2017, p. 1). Internationally, English has been promoted as a pathway to 'improve national competitiveness in a rapidly changing global market place' (Wedell, 2009, p. 15), while in the ASEAN region, English also means that citizens 'are able to communicate directly with one another and participate in the broader international communities' (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009, p. 3). In Vietnam, proficiency in English is seen as 'synonymous with economic growth and prosperity' (Le, 2019, p. 8), and the aim of EMI programs has been to 'promote international exchange, increase revenue, raise the quality and prestige of educational programs, and provide a well-qualified, bilingual workforce for Vietnam's rapidly-developing economy' (Nguyen et al., 2017, p. 37). Thus, EMI has an integral responsibility to society, while also being closely tied to university competiveness, prosperity and international engagement, as well as having direct implications for the students and staff who engage with it.

Despite the importance of English language and the phenomenal, perhaps inevitable, development of EMI, concerns have been raised about educational effectiveness, social equity and English hegemony. Educational effectiveness relates to how EMI impacts learners' acquisition and application of both content knowledge and English language competence. The findings internationally have been unclear, with Macaro et al. (2018) stressing that conclusive proof is required. As elsewhere, such proof is not yet available in the context of Vietnamese universities, and there is an urgent need for national research. With regard to social equity in Vietnamese tertiary study, access to EMI is at present available to only a small number of students in a limited number of academic disciplines. Tuition fees for EMI programs are often

higher than for standard programs, which hinders those students who cannot afford to enroll in EMI programs. In addition, low and/or varied competences in English occur widely across Vietnam, with considerable inequality of access to English and limited resources in many schools (Le, 2019), making it difficult for students to meet entry requirements for EMI programs. Nevertheless, although concern has been raised about social equity in Vietnam, impacts currently remain limited as the majority of tertiary students enroll in standard programs (Tran & Nguyen, 2018). Another recently emerging EMI concern internationally is related to the hegemonic status of English at the potential expense of mother tongues (Blattes, 2018; Wilkinson, 2013). The degree of such concern varies from one country to another due to historical and cultural factors, and it appears not to be a major concern in Vietnam. This is for several reasons. English is neither institutionalised as an official language, nor is it popular across workplaces. Furthermore, the number of people who speak English fluently is very small and it is not a language used in the home (Hoang, 2021); it is mainly favoured by teachers and students due to its advantages for employment and ongoing study (Le, 2017). Consequently, we do not foresee English hegemony over Vietnamese as problematic at this time.

Students in EMI classrooms such as those at Vietnamese universities can be categorised into four types (Anderson, 2016). Foreign students are differentiated according to whether they are participating in short-term mobility or exchange programs or have enrolled to follow a full program. Both types are currently represented in small numbers across many Vietnamese EMI higher education programs and across most of the chapters in this volume. Anderson (2016) further differentiates two types of domestic or 'home' students according to whether they are majoring in English through EMI, where English is *core*, or majoring in other areas, where English is *instrumental*. This categorisation is in line with our chosen definition of EMI, covering the use of English to teach any academic subject, including English. For the majority of students referred to in this book, English is instrumental, not core, although the students referred to in Chapter 9 do fall into the 'core' category. The teacher education students represented in Chapter 13 could be said to constitute a third domestic category—perhaps 'instrumental-core'—since the students are majoring in primary school teaching, with English as just one specialist area.

A feature of EMI university students internationally has been their low and/or varied competences in English, and Vietnam is no different (Le, 2019). In response to inadequate English competence among students, universities internationally frequently put in place a sequence of overlapping language-conscious components making up what Schmidt-Unterberger (2018) refers to as a 'paradigm of EMI'. The first component of the paradigm is typically a pre-sessional course in English for Special Purposes (ESP) and/or English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This is followed by curricular (embedded) ESP/EAP and/or adjunct ESP, the former targeting discipline-specific language and the genre knowledge needed for that discipline, while the latter is tied to and runs parallel with a particular content course. All of these components are taught by English language specialists. Vietnamese universities offering EMI programs reflect this EMI paradigm to some degree, but with

important differences and with corresponding implications for moving forward, as indicated in several chapters.

1.3 Undergraduate EMI Programs and Courses in Vietnamese Universities

The presence of EMI undergraduate programs in Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs) has been directly influenced by the 2008 government policy initiative entitled 'Teaching and Learning Foreign Language Education in the National Education System in the Period 2008–2020', known as the National Foreign Language 2020 project (Doan et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2018).

For some years now there have been three types of EMI program operating in Vietnamese universities, as well as the more recent introduction of individual EMI courses within standard Vietnamese Medium Instruction (VMI) programs. The first two types of EMI programs were born of cooperation between Vietnamese HEIs and foreign universities. Of these, Joint Programs are fully designed and delivered by staff of the foreign university, and offer an overseas qualification, while Advanced Programs use overseas curricula that are modified and delivered under agreement between local and foreign institutions, offering a domestic qualification (Nguyen et al., 2017; Vietnamese Government, 2008a, 2008b). Reflecting the current situation, only Chapter 4 in this book has a Joint Program setting, while Chapters 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12 and 14 have data relating to Advanced Programs. The third type of program, known as a High Quality Program, is a more recent introduction and involves a minimum of 20 per cent of its courses being delivered in English (MOET, 2014). These latter are fully domestic programs, developed, administered and delivered by Vietnamese universities, albeit with some reference to overseas programs. In addition, a number of regular undergraduate programs across the disciplines are beginning to offer single EMI courses in the later years of VMI programs (Nguyen et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2018). Chapters 4, 6, 10 and 12 relate to High Quality Programs, while Chapters 6, 9, 10 and 13 relate to single courses within VMI programs, and Chapter 8 has data relating to both.

In regard to EMI programs imported from overseas, it must be noted that it is not just the language and the content that are imported, but also ways of thinking and understanding the world. While different academic disciplines call on different ways of thinking and viewing the world through their particular disciplinary lens, there are nonetheless some general ways of thinking and learning that come with imported EMI programs and are applicable to all disciplines. For example, '[c]ritical thinking, independent learning, lifelong and life-wide learning, and adversarial forms of argument are cited as virtues of Western education and seen as desirable goods' (Ryan & Louie, 2007, p. 413). It follows that EMI in such programs inherently requires students to develop a degree of intercultural competence if they are to be successful (Aguilar, 2018). It also follows that Joint Programs would require

a very highly developed intercultural competence given that the imported program is taught without any of the locally relevant adaptations that are possible within Advanced Programs. At the same time, the widely used practice of translanguaging in EMI classrooms creates possibilities for the co-construction of knowledge using a combination of linguistic repertoires. Li Wei (2018) emphasises translanguaging as 'a process of knowledge construction that goes beyond language(s) [taking] us beyond the linguistics of systems and speakers to a linguistics of participation' (p. 15). It is participation in the globalising world that EMI is designed to foster.

1.4   Overview of the Chapters

This book has three parts, each highlighting the perspectives and voices of key university stakeholders in English medium education: institutions, practitioners and students. Each part concludes with a commentary from an international scholar active in the field of EMI-related research and practice. These commentaries respectively highlight the importance of institutional preparation, consultation and support; the need for a glocal educational approach; and the value of a socio-ecological perspective. The three parts are flanked by this introductory chapter and by a concluding chapter of meta-analysis and reflections from the editors.

The first part of the book—Institutional perspectives on EMI practices in Vietnamese universities—provides a backdrop and frame of reference for the subsequent parts. It considers institutional practices in English medium instruction in higher education, addressing both the broad educational context of university EMI programs and particular curricular and extracurricular environments. The second part, on EMI classroom practices, provides perspectives from lecturers who have been actively engaging with EMI and attempting to support their students' learning. These practitioner perspectives focus on how to approach the learning needs of students in an overall and comprehensive way and some pedagogical practices teachers can usefully engage in. The third part offers student perspectives on ways of engaging with EMI and addressing its challenges, along with ideas for improving their EMI experience. These student perspectives relate to their actual experiences of learning, indicating the strategies they draw on and the outcomes they achieve in terms of both the disciplinary content and their intercultural and linguistic competences. Across the book, it is the agency of stakeholders that is in focus in terms of moving forward with EMI. This focus on the agency of institutions, teachers and students offers pathways for readers to engage in critical reflection and consider innovative action in other settings.

Of the three chapters discussing institutional practices, the first is wide-ranging across Vietnamese university settings in general, the second offers the experience of a single university that set out to enhance students' EMI experience, while the third considers the issue of sustaining practitioners as they undertake EMI within their particular disciplines. Chapter 2 puts forward an analysis of the current EMI situation in Vietnamese universities using the ROAD-MAPPING framework proposed

by Dafouz and Smit (2016, 2020). This sets a broad context for subsequent chapters by successively exploring EMI through six dimensions: Roles of English, Academic Disciplines, Management, Agents, Practices and Processes, and finally Internationalisation and Glocalisation. In this overarching chapter Pham raises critical perspectives on the degrees of agency available to and currently utilised by actors in each of these dimensions, and the extent to which there is a divergence of agency at national, institutional and individual levels. Chapter 3 then shifts the focus to agency within a single institution, and is written from the various perspectives of the collaborating team of staff: Nguyen Thi Anh Thu, Pham Van Tuan, Ho Vu Khue Ngoc, Nguyen Thi Tu Trinh, Dinh Thuy Vy and Nguyen Thi Kim Thoa. This chapter provides an account of institutional agency working through the experiences of a particular faculty to put in place curricular, non-curricular and extra-curricular practices that enhance students' EMI experience. Such institutional initiative is seen as vital to the success of EMI. Chapter 4 then provides a close look at how job satisfaction among EMI lecturers is mediated by particular factors, and what the implications are for institutional agency. Building on Hagedorn's (2000) framework of faculty job satisfaction, this study by Thi To Loan Pham, Khac Nghia Nguyen and Thu Ba Hoang locates an additional factor within job satisfaction as the ability/inability to translate pedagogical beliefs into practice within a particular context of institutional regulation and support mechanisms. Chapter 5 commentary on Part 1 is provided by Andy Kirkpatrick, whose reflections highlight the importance of institutional preparation, consultation and ongoing support for students and staff.

All of the studies reported in Parts 2 and 3 relate directly to the classroom, defined as a space where 'teachers and learners are gathered for instructional purposes' (Nunan, 2005, p. 225), including virtual spaces. These chapters (6–10 and 12–14) can also all be classified as qualitative classroom research (QCR).

> QCR is now a well-established approach to research that fulfills the important mandate of shedding light on a range of topics and issues that can best be examined with the primary data gathered in situ or, if not collected exclusively within the walls of classrooms, then from members of the class (e.g., via out-of-class interviews and journals) regarding their classroom experiences (Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2019).

The studies reported are strongly process-oriented, focusing on pedagogy and classroom interaction, and aiming to contribute to practice in related contexts. Most of them are what Ellis (2012) refers to as formal research, being carried out by an external researcher. Some are practitioner research, conducted by the authors in their own classrooms and representing 'exploratory practice' (Ellis, 2012) that aims to provide information that can improve teaching and learning in a particular setting. In both cases the research-based insights offered are opportunities to enrich practitioners' knowledge base (Ur, 2014).

Methodologically, the studies draw on robust data sets, triangulating different data sources and data generation methods and often extending over a full semester. Student and teacher interviews are the most frequent data generation methods, often accompanied by classroom observations, focus groups, student products and quantitative assessment data, the latter indicating authors' respect for mixed methods within

an overall qualitative study. Interviews are seen as particularly valuable in that they facilitate access to participants' sense of agency in EMI, by eliciting insights into how practitioners and students see their own actions and the reasons for them.

Part 2 presents practitioner perspectives on EMI practices in Vietnamese universities, particularly in terms of designing and teaching EMI courses that support students to achieve the required content goals. The opening chapter by Tue Hoang and Duyen Tran offers many examples of EMI classroom practices in action across several disciplines, all with the aim of facilitating student learning and engagement. It provides a detailed explanation of the teachers' practices as well as a full account of students' reflections on the usefulness of the practices to their learning. Chapter 7 moves from this broad brush view to provide a detailed account of the pedagogy in a single EMI electrical engineering course, in which the lecturer adopted key principles of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach. The authors, Ngo Dinh Thanh and Jenny Barnett, offer a range of insights into how a non-language specialist can creatively engage students in language learning opportunities within a fully focused content course. Taking the focus off English language development, Chapter 8 by Min Pham is a discussion of lecturers' views on the role of the first language, Vietnamese, in achieving the content goals of coursework when the English language is encountered as a stumbling block. It addresses the unease of EMI lecturers in using Vietnamese when policy stipulates otherwise or provides no explicit guidance, and the need for professional development on the pedagogical uses of translanguaging. This notion of translanguaging is taken up in the next chapter by Ha Anh Thi Nguyen, Alice Chik and Stuart Woodcock in regard to its various functions when teaching English as an academic subject to diverse non-English majors, specifically in order to support their EMI learning. In this case study, strategic use of translanguaging was found to be pedagogically valuable for content transmission, classroom management and affective purposes, clearly suggesting a need for EMI educators in such settings to be confident in the flexible use of Vietnamese. The final study reported in Part 2 addresses university assessment practices in those EMI programs where students may be uncertain about enrolling for fear of not being able to demonstrate a high enough level of content knowledge. Written by Duyen Tran and Tue Hoang, the chapter raises issues for both teachers and students in this regard, suggesting assessment *for* learning as a useful practice in place of a sole focus on assessment *of* learning. Part 2 concludes with a commentary by Marta Aguilar-Pérez, which offers a deep meta-analysis of features across the preceding five chapters, affirming the need for a glocal educational approach among practitioners.

Supplementing the student reflections integrated into Part 2 of the book, Part 3 focuses directly on student perspectives, highlighting the importance of students' experiences and insights as a source of input to policies and practices for moving forward with EMI. Chapter 12, written by Toan Pham and Jenny Barnett, draws on students' accounts of their experiences of institutional and practitioner decisions regarding EMI, and their suggestions for variations to those decisions. These EMI students are located at the intersection of policy, curriculum and pedagogy, harnessing their own agency and that of their teachers in co-constructing policy implementation on the ground. Chapter 13 is an example of practitioner research by Vo Thi Khanh

Linh, who reports on students' learning experiences in her EMI teacher education course with students from rural and remote areas where English is little used. Through observation, student learning diaries, videos of micro-teaching, as well as interviews and pre- and post-tests, we see the workings of both student and teacher agency, and its value for English language development alongside the primary objective of knowledge construction. The last study reported in Part 3, written by Luu Thi Quynh Huong and Hoang Thi Ngoc Diep, focuses specifically on student strategies for learning through EMI in an International Business and Logistics program. Students' struggles with EMI are shown to lead directly to related strategies across pre-class, in-class and post-class stages, which in turn have implications for improving students' EMI experiences. The commentary for Part 3 is written by Anne Burns, who particularly endorses the value of a socio-ecological perspective on EMI at all levels—from policy and curriculum to pedagogy and student support.

All the chapters across the three parts of the book have clear pedagogical significance and suggest particular directions for moving forward with EMI. These are brought together in the editors' review and meta-analysis in Chapter 16, which highlights the potential for agency across all dimensions of the EMI enterprise in Vietnamese universities.

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