Chapter 15
Commentary: EMI in Vietnamese Universities—The Value of a Socio-ecological Perspective

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Abstract This chapter responds to research studies carried out by the authors in this section and comments on critical issues and key insights from their research at the macro, meso and micro levels. The three chapters make an important contribution to debates on English Medium Instruction (EMI) in the South-East Asian, and more specifically Vietnamese, context. First, in EMI research in general, it is much less common to hear the perspectives of students experiencing this form of instruction than those of teachers/lecturers, academics/researchers and policy makers. Second, the authors have, rightly, gone beyond local individualised views of students, to locate them within socio-ecological systems that enable explanation at the intersection of macro (policy and institutional), meso (program and classroom) and micro (individual) levels of policy, research and practice. Third, the authors have used a wide range of mainly qualitative methods, which are able to uncover not only the cognitive but also the affective experiences of the students. Together these perspectives offer powerful implications for forward movement in EMI in this context.

Keywords EMI · Student perspective · Socio-ecological system · Macro, meso, and micro levels

The three chapters in this section make an important contribution to debates on English Medium Instruction (EMI) in the South-East Asian, and more specifically Vietnamese, context. First, in EMI research in general, it is much less common to hear the perspectives of students experiencing this form of instruction than those of teachers/lecturers, academics/researchers and policy makers. As Luu and Hoang point out in their chapter, 'there is a dearth of studies on student experiences and the learning strategies they use to cope'. Second, the authors have, rightly, gone beyond local individualised views of students, to locate them within socio-ecological systems (Pham & Barnett) that enable explanation at the intersection of macro (policy and institutional), meso (program and classroom) and micro (individual) levels of policy,

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research and practice. These nested social systems facilitate deeper understanding of the issues that interact and affect student experiences. Third, the authors have used a wide range of mainly qualitative methods, which are able to uncover not only the cognitive but also the affective experiences of the students. Thus, there are important insights into the strategies students use to cope in EMI classes, which would otherwise be unobservable. Together these perspectives offer powerful implications for forward movement in EMI in this context.

In this brief commentary, I will draw out my main insights from my reading of these chapters at these different ecological levels, and comment on what forward directions could be considered by those most directly affected.

15.1   The Macro Level

One of the most striking aspects of the research is that EMI policies in the contexts concerned are still very much under transition. It is clear from all three chapters that universities, and those making the key decisions within them, have grappled, and still are grappling, with effective models whereby to initiate and maintain EMI.

Variously differentiated policies, curriculum, content and testing/assessment practices are in evidence within and across educational sites. Underpinning them are 'folk' assumptions, rather than empirical evidence, of language improvement through EMI courses and self-study (Pham & Barnett), with students being taught and tested not in relation to discipline specific language knowledge and skills, but through generalised content and tests, which are mandatory for graduation regardless of subject area.

There are also variations in models used to support student English skills, some institutions front-loading the course of study with general English but no further support (Vo) and others providing classes related to course of study only for the second of four-year courses (Luu & Hoang). In each case the question must arise of how effectively EMI can continue to be experienced by students, and to what extent their individual lecturers are left to struggle with imparting content effectively in another language. In each of the chapters there is little mention of training for lecturers. While this is understandable, since the research focused on students, one is left with an impression of a substantial gap and one to which universities need to pay more attention.

From my reading at the macro level, a number of themes for forward movement emerged. One related to course structure and content. Rather than relying on 'preformed' curricula and materials from overseas universities unfamiliar with local conditions, Vietnamese institutions could consider working with these universities to revise content to target subject-specific English more relevantly.

Having Vietnamese and overseas colleagues work together would help to contextualise curricula within familiar and local settings. Moreover, it would provide professional development opportunities for both sides. Local lecturers could benefit from exposure to increased linguistic knowledge of their subjects and new ways to scaffold students' acquisition of technical terms in English. Rather than teaching short

courses, visiting lecturers could team-teach or conduct Action Research (AR) with Vietnamese colleagues to increase their local knowledge of the EMI issues involved and to develop joint publishing opportunities. This approach would provide deeper forms of professional development for both.

15.2 The Meso Level

At the meso level, a recurring theme was the challenges experienced by students arising from lecturers' pedagogical teaching styles. Teaching with EMI requires heightened awareness and abilities on the part of lecturers not only of pedagogical content knowledge (how teachers synthesise what they know and believe about teaching and learning with their pedagogical actions), but also of language awareness regarding their own subject areas.

There was evidence of students' frustration with traditional styles of teaching, where lecturers simply held the floor using pre-prepared content, or failed to vary their pedagogical strategies (Luu & Hoang), and their need for greater knowledge from their lecturers about what learning strategies they could use for university study (Pham & Barnett). It appeared too, that few lecturers received any substantial form of feedback from their students on their teaching, whereby they could have reflected more on their practices and how they might adapt pedagogically for EMI. It seemed that where students did experience more learner-centred practices, with content and materials that effectively mediated their interactions with the teacher, learning was enhanced (Vo).

A further notable strand is the extent to which the use of English proves to be effective in mediating learning. From students' perspectives, some lecturers were clearly challenged in the way they used the language to impart new knowledge to their students. While they were generally very skilled in their own knowledge of their subject areas, and could also draw on pre-prepared materials, they did not always seem to appreciate the linguistic challenges for their students in using English. Difficulties related to a range of areas of classroom spoken discourse—the general competence of the lecturer, the structuring of information, the pace of speech and the introduction of technical terms, that may be taken for granted. In this respect, the preparatory year of English provided to some students seemed to be of limited use when it came to entering subject-specific discourses. The major strategy on the part of the lecturers to overcome student incomprehension was to resort to L1, which sometimes further disadvantaged students from non-Vietnamese backgrounds.

A valuable approach to enhance students' experiences would be for lecturers to be offered professional development courses where they could be introduced to a greater variety of pedagogical approaches, and also be sensitised to the linguistic demands of their own disciplines. Where institutions are adopting EMI, subject specialists could be introduced to learning theories such as socio-constructivist concepts which could help them to scaffold new knowledge students are encountering and mediate their learning.

In relation to pedagogical language use, professional development workshops or courses could take an 'English-for-teaching' (Freeman et al., 2015) perspective on language awareness, whereby a form of English for specific purposes is adopted and teachers are introduced to the kind of classroom language that will scaffold and support new learning. In contrast, to the currently reported ad hoc use of L1, the courses could include awareness-raising of when and how translanguaging might be most valuably deployed pedagogically (Vo).

Variations of such courses could also assist native-speaking lecturers who may well be the least aware of the linguistic areas where students are experiencing major challenges. In particular, these lecturers could be made aware that their style of using English, with too rapid speech and over-use of idiomatic expressions or abbreviations, may cause students to struggle.

Finally, teams of lecturers working together could be supported institutionally to conduct AR. An obvious source for topics to research could come from student feedback. Lecturers interested in AR could identify some of the major areas that challenge students and conduct research on their own practices (preferably in collaboration with their students) to find ways to enhance them. These kinds of studies would also provide resources from which lecturers could do conference presentations or publish research to contribute to their own scholarly output.

15.3   The Micro Level

A noticeable strand in all of these chapters was the agency of the students who find themselves having to operate in an EMI context. It was impressive to read about the lengths students go to in finding ways to cope with any difficulties. Despite their sometimes previously high scores on testing systems, such as IELTS or TOEFL, on entering their courses students could be surprised, or even shocked, to realise the extent to which the EMI classroom challenged them.

As a result, they used innovative strategies to overcome their problems—from more obvious ones like using a dictionary, carefully studying their textbooks or taking notes, to others like recording and replaying the lesson, using Wikipedia, Facebook or the Internet for pre-preparation and self-study, expressing ideas in both languages in class, using discussion to understand technical terms, and practising the language out of class with friends or international students. Students proved themselves to be strategic and agentive in working out different techniques that suited them personally. The strategies also contributed towards the development of their identity as university students as they became more familiar with the demands of the EMI context.

Students were self-aware and self-reflective about their own language competence, identifying the particular English skills where they felt they were most challenged. Of these, the demands of listening were noticeably pronounced and underestimation of this skill on the part of their teachers seemed also to affect their ability to engage in

the spoken discourses required of them in their various subject areas. Students typically blamed what they saw as their own shortcomings in meeting English language challenges, rather than the macro or meso level factors interacting with their learning.

From the three studies, it seemed that students would benefit from improved orientation to their EMI courses. Some of the students indicated they did not feel ready for such courses (Pham & Barnett), suggesting that suddenly finding themselves 'forced' to be in EMI contexts was an institutional culture shock. While in the early stages of learning, institutions could consider generic orientations for students, initiating them into the structures, expectations and content of their courses, ongoing yearly orientations could be discipline-specific, introducing them to the curriculum and staff concerned, and potentially, students who have completed the previous years.

A further strategy that institutions or subject area lecturers could consider to support students would be to introduce a 'buddy system'. One student respondent in Luu and Hoang's study mentioned that talking to senior students was valuable. This model proved very effective at one of my own former university workplaces. Beginning students could be paired in the early semesters with those in more senior years. Not only would this assist new students to get to know what to expect of their EMI classes and teachers, and the possible challenges they might face, but more senior students would have an opportunity to review and consolidate subject-specific content and gain skills as mentors, which could prepare them for future workplace collaboration.

15.4   Final Thoughts

Reading these three chapters proved to be thought-provoking and I thank the editors for the opportunity. While some of the evidence from EMI research is becoming increasingly well-established across different contexts, these studies add further light and shade to what is known about the experiences of Vietnamese students. It is clear that present evidence of the effectiveness of EMI in Vietnam is mixed—and in this commentary I have so far mainly highlighted challenges. But there is also a strong sense in these chapters of what can be celebrated through the adoption of EMI. It is evident that many students value the opportunity to study in English, pointing to the way it feeds into their personal language development, knowledge and competency. They see the skills they have gained as carrying them beyond the immediacy of their course of study and opening up opportunities for future careers, both in Vietnam and overseas. Their accounts also show a level of excitement that they are being initiated into a more internationalised world in their chosen areas of study.

Macaro has referred to EMI as 'an unstoppable train' (e.g. Macaro, 2018) and Vietnamese universities are now noticeable among the passengers. While the journey is still very much in progress, as these chapters show, much more must continue to be learned about what EMI students experience. My own overarching conclusion is that if students, like those portrayed here, are to truly thrive in the EMI classroom, a major priority must be for Vietnamese universities to offer substantial and targeted

professional development to their teachers. Simply requiring generalised English proficiency, usually measured through existing testing systems, will not suffice. New forms of professional development are urgently required, focusing on the kind of issues raised in this commentary, which will equip EMI teachers pedagogically and linguistically to enhance their students' learning experiences.

References

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