

Chapter 6

English-Medium Classroom Practices in Action: Facilitating Student Learning and Engagement in a Vietnamese University



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Abstract In Vietnam, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is widely implemented in higher education institutions as a strategic approach to internationalise institutions and improve graduates' employability in the globalised labour market. However, implementation of EMI has been beset with challenges: the incompatibility between macro-policies and institutional capacities, teachers' and students' insufficient English language competence, and pedagogical conflict with traditional education. There is currently little information about successful EMI pedagogies to support learning and student engagement in Vietnamese higher education, and this chapter therefore reports an exploratory study on classroom EMI practices carried out at one multidisciplinary university. Data derives from eight classroom observations, survey questionnaires with 275 students and one-to-one interviews with eight teachers and eight representative students. Data presentation highlights strategies facilitative to student learning and engagement, such as grouping techniques; providing detailed self-study guidance; judiciously using students' first language; employing diagrams, short video clips, and drawings; integrating practical exercises within theoretical lessons; frequently reviewing previous lessons and recapping at the end of lessons. The chapter offers a detailed explanation of the teachers' practices for moving forward educationally with EMI and a full account of students' reflections on the usefulness of the practices to their learning.

Keywords English-medium instruction · EMI · Vietnam · Higher education · Pedagogy · Student engagement

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6.1 Introduction

The growing role of English as the world lingua franca and the intense global competition for internationalisation and marketisation of higher education over the past couple of decades have resulted in English increasingly being adopted as a medium of instruction (EMI) at universities in various non-native English speaking countries worldwide. In Vietnam, EMI delivery has been promoted as one strategic approach to internationalise Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and improve graduates' employability in the globalised labour market (Vietnamese Government, 2005). The introduction of EMI in higher education can be traced back to the early 1990s, starting with cooperative programs between Vietnamese and overseas HEIs, often referred to as foreign or advanced programs, with (almost) all of the courses in the programs designed and delivered in English by staff of the foreign HEIs (Nguyen et al., 2017; Vietnamese Government, 2008a). After that come the so-called high-quality programs which are developed and delivered by staff in domestic HEIs with at least 20% of the courses delivered in English (MOET, 2014). In the meantime, the national foreign language project also requires some courses in the last years of tertiary study to be delivered in English (Vietnamese Government, 2008b). Against that backdrop, the intensifying competition among HEIs nationwide and region-wide for students, teachers, and revenue has resulted in an increasing number of EMI courses having been developed and delivered at Vietnamese HEIs over the last decades (Nguyen et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2018).

The rapid development and nationwide implementation of EMI courses in the Higher Education (HE) system does not mean that the courses have been unproblematic. Research has revealed that implementation is presented with various problems and challenges at different levels (Nguyen et al., 2017; Tran & Nguyen, 2018; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019; Vu & Burns, 2014). At the macro (national) level, a mismatch has been noted between the traditional education culture featuring teacher-centeredness and textbook-based transmission, and the EMI-focused pedagogy characterised by learner-centredness and autonomous learning. In addition, EMI is seen to pose a potential risk in creating inequity of cultures and educational opportunities—through promotion of EMI programs using nomenclature such as foreign, advanced, high-quality, through high tuition fees, and through the required level of English proficiency at entry. The lack of detailed guidelines on EMI implementation at HEIs is identified as another macro-level problem. At the meso (institutional) level, HEIs are challenged by the discrepancy between the content and aims of imported curricula in foreign or Advanced Programs and the sociocultural and economic context in Vietnam. Meanwhile the high-quality programs designed by Vietnamese HEIs often suffer from a lack of reference materials in English. Additional obstacles include absence of institutional guidelines on classroom practices, shortage of qualified eligible staff capable of delivering EMI courses, inadequate attention paid to the differences between academic disciplines, and poor infrastructure. At the micro (classroom) level, the most commonly reported problems are students' limited English competence and seemingly passive learning styles, together with teachers'

insufficient English ability and lack of training in EMI delivery. It is worth noting that many of the problems at meso and micro levels in Vietnam, including the teachers' and students' low English competence, the lack of professional development for teaching staff and the shortage of learning materials for students, are also found in studies taken in other countries in the region and over the world (Al-Bakri, 2017; Byun et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2018; King, 2014; Kym & Kym, 2014; Walkinshaw et al., 2017).

Despite the recognition of numerous problems and challenges, EMI has continuously been implemented in various HEIs nationwide with various aspects of the implementation insufficiently researched. In particular, there is a paucity of research on implementation at the classroom level. In educational contexts outside Vietnam, only a few studies have been conducted on the issue, with diverse findings. For example, in UAE, King (2014) reported teachers' use of such strategies as simplifying teaching content, shortening reading materials, pre-teaching relevant vocabulary, selecting activity-based learning, building teacher–student relationships to facilitate student learning. Meanwhile, in Oman, Al-Bakri (2017) found that the teachers' delivery methods were mainly restricted to reading the handouts and staying close to the textbook with limited classroom interaction, discussion, or critical engagement in constructing knowledge. In China, the case study carried out by Hu et al. (2014) revealed that the EMI teachers demonstrated a tendency to reduce course content to the most basic matter, appropriate the language of the textbook, stay close to the pre-prepared teaching notes, minimise improvisation, code-switch to the students' first language, repeat explanations, and assign pre-lecture readings. Research also reveals that students' engagement in the lessons is seriously impeded by the use of EMI (Al-Bakri, 2017; Byun et al., 2011; Sultana, 2014). However, little is known as to whether the use of different teaching strategies could alleviate the problems to any extent.

In Vietnam, there is a dearth of information about teaching practices in EMI courses, especially regarding facilitative impact on students' learning and engagement. This, therefore, is the focus of the present chapter. It reports an exploratory study investigating the teaching practices carried out by teachers in EMI courses at a public university in Vietnam and highlights the strategies which are facilitative to student learning and engagement in that particular EMI context, thus offering directions for moving forward educationally with EMI.

6.2 The Study

6.2.1 *The Research Site*

Our focal university is a public and multidisciplinary university (pseudonymously named CAU) in Vietnam with an enrolment of more than 24,000 full-time students. CAU is a medium-ranked university in Vietnam, i.e. its students are not those with the

highest study results in high schools or in the national university entrance exams and many of them are from rural areas with limited opportunities to develop their English competence for communication purposes. CAU offers 36 undergraduate programs, one of them being a High Quality Program. The university plans that by 2022 about 10% of the discipline-specific courses in the 3rd or 4th years of the standard programs and 20% of the courses in the High Quality Program will be delivered in English. Faculties consider their own resources such as teaching staff, learning materials and equipment, etc., to decide which courses in their programs can be delivered in English, but only courses with more than ten students registered will eventuate.

At the time of data collection (October 2019–January 2020), there were eight newly developed EMI courses at CAU, four courses belonging to the High Quality Program and four others in standard programs. Those courses are also the first courses to be conducted in English at CAU. In preparation for the delivery of EMI courses, since 2015 CAU has organised three EMI pedagogy courses for the potential teaching staff. CAU also offers free-of-charge English courses for potential EMI teachers, focusing on developing oral skills and pronunciation. However, not all the EMI teachers are attending those professional development courses due to lack of time or the limited space in the EMI pedagogy courses since there were maximum of 20 participants in each course.

6.2.2 *The Participants*

The study involved eight teachers delivering the EMI courses and the 275 students participating in them. Of the participating students, all were Vietnamese; most were in their 3rd year, the rest being in either their 2nd or 4th year of tertiary study. Teachers 1–4 taught Business Management courses, while teachers 5–8 taught technical courses. All of them met the English requirements to teach EMI courses, i.e. having either completed undergraduate or postgraduate studies overseas using EMI or obtained English proficiency equivalent or above C1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (MOET, 2014). Except for the two teachers who had about ten years' experience working as assistants for foreign teachers in cooperative programs, none of the teachers had any experience teaching EMI courses. All participants gave their consent before taking part in the study. The participants were anonymised and numbered consecutively. Information about the participating teachers and students is provided in Table 6.1, where Courses 1 and 3 have two groups of students and Teacher #1 teaches two groups in Course 1 while Teacher #2 works with a group in each of Courses 2 and 3.

Table 6.1 Participating teachers and students

EMI course No.	Group	Faculty	Teacher			Students		
			Code	Gender	Degree	No	Year	Student code
1	Group #1	Business Management	T#1	Female	MA	16	3rd	S#1
1	Group #2	Business Management				22	3rd	
2	1 group	Business Management	T#2	Female	Ph.D	30	3rd	S#2
3	Group #1	Business Management	T#2	Female	Ph.D	16	3rd	
3	Group #2	Business Management	T#3	Female	Ph.D	16	3rd	S#3
4	1 group	Business Management	T#4	Male	Ph.D	24	2nd	S#4
5	1 group	Electronics	T#5	Female	Ph.D	47	3rd	S#5
6	1 group	Mechanical Engineering	T#6	Male	Ph.D	37	4th	S#6
7	1 group	Mechanical Engineering	T#7	Male	Ph.D	14	3rd	S#7
8	1 group	Information Technology	T#8	Male	MA	53	4th	S#8
Total			8 teachers			275 students		

6.2.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection instruments employed in this study were classroom observations, individual interviews with the teachers, survey questionnaires to the students, and individual interviews with 8 representative students who indicated their willingness to take part in the follow-up interviews in their questionnaire responses. First, in the middle of the coursework, classroom observations were conducted for one 45-min period in each of the eight EMI classes. After that, near the end of the course, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the eight teachers, centering on their practices of delivering EMI courses and factors influencing their practices. The questionnaires were delivered to the students right in the last lessons, focusing on the students' EMI learning experiences including teachers' practices, student learning difficulties, learning strategies, learning achievements, and suggestions for improvement. Finally, semi-structured interviews were carried out with one representative student from each course after all the coursework had finished and the students had been informed of their end-of-course assessment results. The student interviews particularly concentrated on their learning difficulties, learning strategies, teachers' practices which are facilitative to their learning and self-assessment of their learning outcomes.

The data collected from observations, questionnaires, and interviews was analysed consecutively. First, content analysis was applied to examine data from classroom observations and interviews. After that statistical analysis was utilised to handle quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires. Results from different data sources were triangulated, compared, contrasted, and synthesised to find out what practices were carried out by the teachers in the EMI courses and how those facilitated student learning and engagement.

6.3 Findings and Discussion

6.3.1 *Overview of the Teaching and Learning in EMI Classes*

Data from classroom observations show that the EMI lessons were generally characterised by teachers' monologue for more than half of the lesson: introducing and explaining new terms and concepts, repeating main ideas, highlighting key words, and recalling related knowledge. However, two-thirds of the students indicated that they could comprehend only about 50–60% of the lessons. Although the teachers often stopped to ask questions to check comprehension and elicit contributions from students, only some students responded, and usually briefly in chorus, which reflected the cultural value of face-saving. When the teachers invited individual students to give their answers, many of them refused by shaking their heads and only a few, always the same, students responded, generally with incomplete sentences and long additional explanation to make their ideas comprehensible. In the questionnaire, 43% of the students responded that they hardly or never responded to the teachers' questions during lessons. The main reasons given included the students' low English proficiency, lack of confidence, low learning motivation, and lack of related disciplinary knowledge as demonstrated in the following extracts.

I am not good at English so I never responded to the teacher's question [during lessons]. Some friends of mine sometimes responded, they even asked questions when they did not understand but I could not express myself so I just listened. (S#7)

My English is not too bad and I could understand the teacher but I hardly responded partly because I was a bit shy and partly because I am not quite sure about the answer... my disciplinary knowledge was not good... (S#4)

Fifty-five per cent of students self-assessed that they were not competent enough to study in English, and many students indicated in their survey responses that they registered 'by mistake' or because they were 'in the high quality program'. In contrast, most of the teachers were found to be effective English speakers. Although they sometimes made mistakes in pronunciation, sentence stress, and grammar, they could express their subject matter fluently and clearly enough for comprehension. Two of the teachers were less effective English speakers and tended to use incomplete sentences and frequent self-correction, even though their reading and writing skills were highly advanced.

The level of frequency with which teachers employed various teaching activities in the EMI courses was estimated by their students using a four-point Likert scale ranging from '1 = never' to '4 = often' as shown in Table 6.2. The strategies are categorised into in-class and out-of-class activities.

Classroom observations and interviews with the students and the teachers show that other strategies including organising group work, giving bonus marks, and developing rapport with students were also adopted by the teachers. These are included in the following account, which focuses on the potential support of the activities for student learning and engagement in the EMI courses.

6.3.2 *In-Class Strategies*

6.3.2.1 **Frequently Repeating and Reviewing Main Ideas**

As can be seen in Table 6.2, the teaching practices vary from one teacher to another. However, the most commonly employed strategy was frequently repeating and reviewing main ideas, with the average mean values at 3.8 out of 4 points. These results are consistent with those from classroom observations where most of the teachers spoke at length to re-explain new concepts, repeat main ideas, and recall related knowledge. In the interviews, teachers also expressed that 'it is more energy-consuming teaching in English' (T#5) and they had to 'explain more' (T#2) because 'the students' English is not good and the teaching content is heavily discipline-specific which is new and difficult to comprehend even when taught in Vietnamese' (T#5) and that they 'often repeat and re-explain if the students did not seem to understand the teaching content' (T#6). However, as indicated by the students in the interviews this practice 'sometimes made the lessons boring since the teacher keeps repeating something we could not understand' (S#6). Nonetheless, as pointed out by the students in the following extracts, the two practices of wrapping up the lessons and recalling the related knowledge when giving feedback were particularly helpful for them:

At the end of the lesson, the teacher often summarised the main ideas and linked them to those in previous lessons. That practice assisted us to systematise the learning content and if we still did not understand he would explain again, sometimes in Vietnamese if we required, so our comprehension was generally OK. (S#7)

When the teacher gave feedback on our mistakes, he often revised the related content to explain why we were wrong. It [the revising practice] helped us understand the lesson thoroughly so that we do not repeat the mistakes. (S#4)

All these comments indicate that in EMI courses where the students' limited English competence impedes their comprehension, traditional extensive lecturing delivery would be unfavourable. Instead, succinct and logical presentations of the disciplinary knowledge with well-timed review and revision would be more desirable.

Table 6.2 Mean values of students' responses on the frequency of their teachers' practices

Teaching practices	Business management courses						Technical courses				Average mean
	T#1	T#2	T#3	T#4	T#5	T#6	T#7	T#8			
In-class strategies	1. Repeating and frequently reviewing main ideas	3.7	3.8	3.9	3.6	3.8	3.9	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.8
	2. Using visual aids such as images, graphs, pictures, photos, flowcharts...	3.9	3.5	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.2	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.5
	3. Code-switching to Vietnamese	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.4	3.5	3.3	3.2	3.4	3.4	3.4
	4. Drawing demonstrative graphs, flow charts, typology, etc.	3.0	3.0	3.4	3.3	3.6	3.4	3.8	3.0	3.0	3.2
	5. Using video clips	3.7	3.2	3.4	3.3	3.0	1.9	2.9	2.9	2.9	3.0
	6. Emphasising key words	2.2	2.9	3.1	3.5	3.2	2.4	3.0	3.3	3.3	2.9
Out-of-class strategies	1. Providing detailed study guidelines	3.6	3.5	3.8	3.5	3.6	2.9	3.6	3.7	3.5	3.5
	2. Providing easier-reading materials	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.2	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.7	3.4	3.4
	3. Setting up online groups for class discussion	4.0	2.9	3.8	3.7	3.0	3.9	3.9	2.6	2.6	3.3
	4. Organising consultation sessions outside lessons	1.6	2.0	3.3	2.8	3.0	3.4	3.5	2.4	2.4	2.6
	5. Providing extra reading materials in Vietnamese	2.1	2.2	2.9	2.8	3.7	1.4	3.1	2.3	2.3	2.5

6.3.2.2 Using Visual Aids

The second most commonly used strategy in the list is using visual aids such as images, graphs, pictures, photos, etc., with the average mean value at 3.5 out of 4 points. Classroom observations also indicated that some teachers (T#1,5,6,7,8) included images, pictures, diagrams, and drawings in their powerpoint slides to illustrate the teaching content. These results are in line with the teachers' and students' accounts of the practice in the interviews. Some teachers also reported using short videoclips to illustrate 'the operation of CNC machine' (T#7) or the procedures of 'career planning steps' (T#1). One teacher (T#7) was observed taking a small shaft to the class as a realia in his lesson. According to the teachers, such visual aids helped save presentation time since otherwise 'it would take so much time explaining everything in English' (T#7). The practice of using visual aids, videos, and realia was particularly acknowledged by the students in the interviews as enhancing their comprehension of the teaching content, as reflected below:

The teacher often spoke and demonstrated at the same time so we could understand [the subject matter] easily. Sometimes we could not comprehend the academic English that he used but when we looked at the diagrams or drawings we could understand [what he meant]. (S#7)

Visual aids have long been recognised as providing massive support for teachers in clarifying, establishing, and correlating precise conceptions and understandings, and making learning more actual and motivating (Shabiralyani et al., 2015). In EMI contexts, when verbal communication is hindered, the practice of utilising visual aids would be a wise choice for the teachers.

6.3.2.3 Code-Switching to Vietnamese

Code-switching to Vietnamese was another delivery strategy undertaken quite frequently by the teachers with the mean value at 3.4 out of 4 points, and interviews revealed that it was in recognition of the students' limited comprehension.

In the lessons at the beginning of the course I used English throughout the lessons. However, I found that there were only a few students who understood my teaching content, many others could not. Thus, I changed my practice, i.e. teaching in English first and then explaining in Vietnamese to make sure that the students understood the disciplinary content. (T#2)

I turned to Vietnamese whenever I found that students did not understand my instruction... they looked uncooperative or disengaged... (T#4)

The teachers also indicated that they gave priority to the disciplinary learning rather than English language development and therefore their use of the students' first language when the use of EMI endangered the students' comprehension was reasonable. However, the students found excessive use of Vietnamese undesirable. In particular, they did not want the teacher to 're-explain the lesson in Vietnamese' (T#5) and found bilingual 'devastating' since they 'would ignore the English instruction and

wait for the time when the teacher used Vietnamese' (S#3). This finding supports the results of previous studies (Lo, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2016) which underscore the judicious use of the students' first language in the EMI context to ensure that both disciplinary and language learning is facilitated.

6.3.2.4 Emphasising Keywords

The figures presented in Table 6.2 are consistent with the results from the interviews and observations that some teachers (T#3,4,5,7,8) often paid close attention to emphasising keywords during the lessons. Some teachers (T#4,7) pre-taught the key words at the beginning of the lesson and highlighted the words in the PPT slides. Others (T#3,5,8) underlined the keywords during the lessons, explaining the meanings thoroughly and providing the equivalents in Vietnamese. Teachers #5 and #7 also introduced synonyms commonly used interchangeably with the keywords and required each student to have a vocabulary notebook. Teacher #4 stressed that he tried to elucidate the keywords in both English and Vietnamese but avoided translating the words into Vietnamese since the translation 'sometimes cannot convey the full meaning of the words'. All the representative students acknowledged that the teachers' practices helped them 'remember the words more easily' and sometimes gain deeper understanding of the related concept.

When the teacher assigned the readings at home, I noted the keywords and looked them up in the dictionary and learned the Vietnamese words, but I did not understand them thoroughly until after the teacher explained. (S#5)

While 74.6% of the students indicated that they knew more discipline-specific vocabulary after the courses, only two of the eight teachers (T#7,8) were reported teaching the pronunciation and formation of the keywords while other teachers did not, due to the shortage of teaching time. As deep vocabulary learning requires instruction in both semantic and morphophonological form (Xanthou, 2010), it is believed that more attention on the morphophonological aspects of vocabulary instruction would enable students to not only recognise and understand the specific vocabulary but also use the vocabulary effectively in both oral and written discourse.

6.3.2.5 Organising Group Work

Six teachers reported using group work regularly, either to diversify the learning activities or to enhance peer learning by intentionally assigning group members, building inter-dependence among group members and monitoring individual contributions. For example, they 'include at least one student good at English in each group' (T#2), require group members to exchange ideas with one another and each participate in preparing the group presentation so that they are all 'able to answer any questions raised about their work' (T#4), to avoid deduction of marks. T#4 and T#5

also required group members to self-assess and peer-assess and took the students' assessment results into consideration when deciding individual members' marks.

According to the students, such practices of organising group work enhanced their learning from peers, motivated them to prepare for the lessons, and to invest more effort in learning.

I prefer the teacher assigning group members since there are some good students [in the group] who can help us learn better. If we choose group members ourselves we often select our close friends who are no better than us [in learning] ... (S#2)

All of us had to prepare for the lesson since the teacher called us randomly ...if I could not answer [the teacher's question] correctly, my group would be [negatively] affected and it's very shameful. (S#7)

Groupwork is a familiar practice in Vietnam to enhance students' collaborative and active learning in tertiary education (Pham, 2014; Tran, 2015). It also reflects actual practices at the workplace where professionals do not work in isolation (Gol & Nafalski, 2007). Thus, in the context of EMI delivery at tertiary level, the use of group work with a combination of various techniques to maximise effectiveness appears to be both necessary and valuable.

6.3.2.6 Giving Bonus Marks

Five teachers (T#2,4,5,7,8) reported the practice of giving bonus marks to encourage students' learning engagement. In particular, they gave good marks to those students who gave a correct answer to questions during lessons or volunteered to perform on the stage or presented a good solution to a problem raised by the teacher. The marks were recorded, publicised, and sometimes 'converted into a bonus mark to add to the students' progress test results' (S#4). According to the teachers, practice was aimed to motivate student learning and to encourage their participation in the lessons since 'they mainly pay attention to marks' (T#2). As indicated by the representative students, the aim seemed to be achieved. The following extract is one example.

When it came to the application sessions, I was overwhelmed [but] I tried very hard because I would like to pass the subject...The teacher always created opportunities for us to gain good marks, encouraging us to try our best to do the exercises on the blackboard...I did try...going to the board to get good marks. (S#4)

The practice of giving bonus marks was also reported in Tran's (2015) study on language assessment practices at tertiary level which attributed the practice to the exam-oriented educational tradition with the ubiquitous use of marks and scores for important decision-making processes in Vietnam. However, in that study, the practice was not adopted in the public university but only in the private one where the teachers were under more pressure to engage students and ensure their learning outcomes. It seemed that the discourse in EMI lessons required teachers to put in more effort to engage students in learning. It is worth noting that although the practice had the potential to encourage students to involve themselves more in the lessons, it could

disadvantage unresponsive or introverted students and negatively affect the validity of student assessment results. Thus, the practice should be used with meticulous care to minimise its impact on the validity of the assessment data and ensure its benefits to all students.

6.3.3 *Out-of-Class Strategies*

6.3.3.1 **Providing Support for Student Self-Study**

As indicated in Table 6.2, the out-of-class practices most commonly undertaken by the teachers were providing the students with detailed guidelines and easy-reading materials for self-study. The teachers reported sending shortened materials summarising the key points of the lessons in advance, together with a table of related sources or pages of further reading. The aim was to assist students to preview and prepare for the lessons by looking up the key words and/or reading the related parts/chapters in the course books or reference materials. Some teachers (T#2,3,8) also sent powerpoint slides of the lesson in advance together with the specific questions the students needed to answer during the lessons ‘in case the students cannot catch my oral questions [during lessons], they can look at the written ones and discuss with their peers’ (T#3). Two teachers (T#4,7) recounted giving the students ‘parallel reading materials in Vietnamese’ (T#7) for reference. One teacher (T#5) reported her practice of first sending PPT slides summarising a small part of the lessons in Vietnamese and then requiring the students to work in groups to prepare similar PPT slides in English and present them in class. Two teachers (T#3,4) sent sets of test questions or chapter revision questions after a lesson and required the students to prepare to answer in the next lesson or to submit their answer in written form. Accompanying detailed guidelines, the teachers also followed and monitored the student self-study by checking individual or groups of students at random, asking questions to elicit their understanding and explain further, or marking their presentations or written submissions.

It is worth noting that those practices were not normally carried out in VMI courses. As demonstrated in the following extracts, teachers undertook such practices in their EMI courses to tackle the problem of lacking suitable learning materials and to assist students to change their learning methods to be more effective.

The [course] books are 500-600 pages long and do not fit our 60-period syllabus... Moreover, our students do not know how to [self-]study... the teachers need to show them how to study effectively. (T#4)

As reflected by the students, the practices encouraged their self-study and enhanced their engagement in and comprehension of the EMI lessons.

It is quite useful, if the teacher did not require, few of us would prepare for the lesson... During the lesson, if we cannot understand the teacher, we look at the slides in Vietnamese. (S#5)

The teacher asked us to study the materials in advance so it was easier to understand and catch up when she taught the next day. (S#3)

The teachers' practice of providing easy-reading or shortened materials raises concerns about the quality of student learning outcomes, which have also been raised in previous studies (Galloway et al., 2017; King, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2017). Their strategies of imposing specific requirements on students' self-study with frequent checking of their progress also sound heavily teacher-centred which might not be appropriate to adult learners at tertiary level. However, given the unavailability of appropriate learning materials and the students' lack of prior experience with self-directed learning, such practices of deconstructing instruction guiding students towards specific task completion, also reported in King's (2014) study, can be considered necessary and helpful.

6.3.3.2 Setting up Online Groups for Further Interaction

As presented in Table 6.2, another activity carried out by the teachers was setting up online groups for class discussion. Five teachers (T#1,3,4,6,7) emphasised their intentional use of social networks such as Zalo and Facebook to create additional virtual discourse for students to interact with them and with other peers. The following extract is an example.

I created a Zalo group for the whole class, if students had any questions or concerns, they posted on the group, if their peers knew the answers they would respond, if none of them could, I would reply. I also commented on the students' responses showing them if they were right or wrong. (T#1)

The students themselves reported sending questions and draft versions of their assignments via Zalo for the teachers' further explanation or feedback for improvement. They consistently agreed that the teachers were very 'enthusiastic' and 'responsive' and provided 'loads of timely feedback'. The virtual discourse enabled the teachers to extend their lesson time to accommodate the students' diversified needs.

Interactions among students and between students and teachers play a crucial role in activating cognitive mechanisms and generating learning opportunities for students (Vygotsky, 1978). In EMI contexts where student learning needs are too great or diverse to be met in-class by traditional methods, utilising the virtual environment for further class discussion with teachers' timely feedback could enhance meaningful interactions and provide tailored support to student learning; such practices should therefore be highly recommended and promoted.

6.3.3.3 Developing Rapport with Students

Five teachers (T#2,4,5,6,7) and their students referred spontaneously to the practice of teachers building rapport with students. The aims of these rapport practices

were several: to elicit feedback on teaching, reassure students, investigate learning difficulties, and encourage more interaction between students and teacher.

In lessons at the beginning of the course, the students looked quite anxious. They were worried and wondering if they could complete the course. Thus, I had to talk with them, told them not to be too stressed and if they do not understand they could ask questions even in Vietnamese... (T#2)

After the first lesson, I talked with the whole class, asking how many of the students understood my lesson. Only around 20 [out of 47] raised their hands. Some of them shared that they did not understand the [English] words I used... (T#5)

Some teachers had short conversations with the students either during the session breaks or after lessons, while Teacher #7 organised ‘one consultation session every Sunday morning’ to discuss with students in Vietnamese and provide them with additional support to understand the lessons. As a result of these interactions, all the teachers reported adjusting their teaching practices, for example: slowing down the speaking pace, using more common words, sending reference materials in Vietnamese, emphasising key words and sometimes code-switching to Vietnamese. It was also recounted that after such conversations more students asked questions of the teachers inside and outside class time. One student proposed that ‘the teacher needs to establish a close relationship with students to help them get over the shyness barrier and actively seek teacher support in learning. Otherwise, they would be too shy to ask questions’ (S#8).

The teachers’ practices of having consultation sessions and informal talks with students enabled them to gain more understanding of student learning (Murphy, 2008), and to adjust their teaching accordingly. Teacher–student rapport also helps reduce tension and anxiety and encourage classroom interactions (Frisby & Martin, 2010), which is important in EMI classrooms, where teacher–student reciprocal interactions are hindered by their limited English competence.

6.3.4 Summary of Findings

To summarise, data from classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews consistently show that the teaching and learning in EMI courses at the university were seriously challenged by the students’ insufficient English proficiency and unavailability of appropriate learning materials, as reported in previous studies (Al-Bakri, 2017; Walkinshaw et al., 2017). The cultural value of face-saving and the exam-oriented educational tradition also profoundly impacted on the students’ involvement and participation in lessons. Against that backdrop, the EMI teachers employed a range of strategies to facilitate students’ learning both inside and outside classroom contexts. In particular, when delivering subject knowledge, they utilised visual aids, emphasised keywords, code-switched to Vietnamese, and repeated and reviewed frequently to enhance students’ comprehension. They also organised students to work in groups and gave bonus marks to encourage students’ involvement in the

lessons. Out of class, they provided detailed learning guidelines for students' self-study, set up online groups for class discussion, and established rapport with students to gain more understanding of their learning needs for further support. As reflected by the representative students, the adoption of such practices could help improve students' comprehension and encourage their active involvement in learning. It is worth noting that these strategies are not necessarily ideal for ongoing EMI education but are coping strategies to mitigate problems arising in the implementation of EMI in this particular context. Use of the teaching strategies depicted in this study confirms the findings of previous studies (Nguyen et al., 2017; Tran & Nguyen, 2018; Vu & Burns, 2014) on the challenges facing EMI implementation at HEIs in Vietnam.

The results of the current study share considerable similarities with the findings of King (2014) in the UAE, which reported teachers' practices of regularly checking for concept understanding, using visual aids, PPT slides and group work activities, deconstructing instruction, using easier materials, pre-teaching key words, and building relationship with students. This study also corroborates some findings of other international studies (Galloway et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2014; Vu & Burns, 2014; Yildiz et al., 2017) documenting EMI teachers' practices, especially with regard to the teachers' use of learners' first language. It is worth noting that despite the use of various practices to facilitate learning, student comprehension was limited to about 50–60% of the lessons. Consequently, this study is in agreement with previous studies (Al-Bakri, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2017; Tran & Nguyen, 2018) which expressed deep concerns about EMI education quality.

6.4 Conclusion and Implications for Moving Forward with EMI

Several implications for enhancing EMI education can be drawn from the research findings. First, the most important factor that needs to take into consideration when implementing EMI is the students' English proficiency. It is crucial to establish a threshold level and ensure that all the participating students have obtained adequate English competence to study in English. Second, more careful attention needs to be paid to the teachers' English ability, especially speaking skills. Together with the requirements stipulated by MOET, HEIs need to reassess the EMI teaching staff to guarantee that they possess sufficient language competence to effectively deliver lessons in English. Third, meticulous attention needs to be placed on the design and development of teaching and learning for EMI courses and programs to make sure that the subject content delivered meets the standard of the tertiary degree. Fourth, with regards to teacher professional development, included in EMI pedagogy courses should be topics such as effective presentation and feedback to enhance comprehension and engagement, teaching of keywords, employing visual aids and group work in lesson design, code-switching, utilising virtual discourse for

further interactions and individualised instruction, establishing rapport with students, and supporting students' self-study. Finally, given the entrenched influence of the exam-oriented education culture on the students' learning attitude and behaviours, it is necessary to develop appropriate regulations on assessing students' participation in online and offline classroom interactions to legitimise and control the use of bonus marks for learning encouragement.

Since EMI implementation is context-dependent and its success is multifactorially determined, the research results of this small-scale and context-specific study on classroom practices cannot be generalised to other educational contexts. However, its detailed insights and significant implications for successful EMI implementation could serve as a useful source of reference for EMI practitioners and institutional policy makers in similar educational contexts.

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