THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EMI IN VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITIES: CHALLENGES AND ITS POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Nguyen Thi Thu Ha

English for Specific Purposes Department, Hanoi University

Abstract. The internationalization of education through English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) is growing really fast around the world. Vietnam has not been an exception in this trend. The Vietnamese government has promoted EMI with the objective of enhancing the quality of Vietnamese higher education, overhauling the outdated curriculum, and lifting the ranking of Vietnamese universities. Besides the benefits stated, some drawbacks have hindered the process. This project analyzes the different challenges of EMI implementation that have been described by different authors and it also refers to partial EMI as a possible feasible solution for the gaps of full EMI that have arisen worldwide.

Keywords: internationalization of higher education, English Medium of Instruction (EMI), instruction, full EMI, partial EMI.

1.   Introduction

Nowadays, there is an unstoppable internationalization process of education at the tertiary level. The composition of the universities´ faculties is tending to be more international and diverse. Thus, English has evolved from being a foreign language or L2 to the language of academic disciplines in tertiary education (Wanphet & Tantawy, 2018). English-medium domination is deeply rooted in social, economic, and technological development as well as in international communication due to the results of globalization noticed in more English-medium programs in higher education institutions (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013). Using EMI in a university study program is a method to prepare an English-proficient labor force so as to help it compete in the global market (Troudi, 2009).

Adopting English as a medium of instruction is one of the major educational trends in non-English speaking countries in the past decades. This trend is prominent in higher education institutions not only in European countries but also in Asian countries including Indonesia, Korea, and China where English is traditionally taught as a standalone foreign language subject. In Vietnam, English Medium Instruction (EMI) has been introduced into a number of university courses and programs in the past decade (Manh, 2012).

The Vietnamese government has promoted English Medium Instruction (EMI) in many universities, especially across important cities such as Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh. As one of the fundamental initiatives for enhancing the quality of Vietnamese higher education, overhauling the outdated curriculum, and lifting the ranking of Vietnamese universities, internationalization is often synonymous with the use of EMI and the import of foreign curricula (Duong & Chua, 2016). EMI programs and the imported curricula embedded in these programs assist students to

some extent in the development of English competence and provide them with updated knowledge, thereby enhancing their competitiveness in globalized labor markets. However, there are some key challenges associated with the process of promoting and implementing EMI (Tran & Nguyen, 2018).

2. Content

2.1. Challenges of EMI implementation

Despite the different opportunities that EMI can provide to teachers and students, there are still a lot of criticism related to the negative effects that EMI may bring about. Some factors that can hinder the implementation of English as Medium of Instruction include the dilemma between instruction and English, an unsupportive environment in acquiring English in Vietnam, the lack of English proficiency among teachers and students, and the limitedness of classroom discourse.

2.1.1. The dilemma between instruction and English

The purpose of instruction is to impart knowledge, and its success depends on whether "a learner follows, and is able to do something s/he has been shown or told by an instructor" (Blake & Hanley, 1995, page?). Since the objective of the instruction is to make a learner understand, the teaching-learning process should be in a favorable context and under beneficial conditions. Forcing learners to use an undeveloped second language at school may lead to academic failure. Thus, EMI is inherently dilemmatic (Ibrahim, 2001).

A consequence of offering English-medium courses and programs in many non-English environments is the poor quality of the instruction. It is offered by many faculties whose command of English may be only rudimentary, or whose ability to teach in the language is limited. This low-quality instruction, often combined with limited English comprehension on the part of many local and non-Anglophone international students, creates an environment where little actual learning is taking place. Additionally, knowledge of and access to current course texts and other materials in English may be limited. In short, offering high-quality programs in English is a complex undertaking that requires a high level of fluency on the part of both faculty and students. (Philip G, 2019).

In EMI contexts, pedagogical challenges intertwined with language obstacles worsen the classroom teaching situation. Becoming a successful EMI instructor requires combinations of linguistic, academic, and pedagogical competence, which few lecturers possess. The instruction process in an EMI program may be affected by the inefficiency of the English classes provided for Vietnamese students, difficulties that students may face in comprehending disciplinary content delivered in English, and the lack of training in language and teaching necessary to enhance academics´ readiness for lecturing through EMI. Students need more discipline-focused English training (Erling & Hilgendorf, 2006) and academics need explicit instruction on pedagogy and English for teaching purposes (Freeman, Katz, Gracía Gomez, & Burns, 2015). Other problems appear when teachers have to work with students with diverse language abilities and learning styles. Lecturers tend to lack clear pedagogical guidance with the teaching methodology to compensate for language difficulties.

2.1.2. Unsupportive environment in acquiring English in Vietnam

English teaching in Vietnam has been developing at an unprecedented speed since the 1990s; it has become the number 1 foreign language to be taught both inside and outside the formal education system. At present, English is used in Vietnam as the medium of international communication and it is the language of professional advancement. Although English in Vietnam does not seem to have anything to do with social classes, it does act as a gatekeeping

tool in society, particularly with employment and educational opportunities. Almost all jobs require a certificate in English, and even work promotion now states English proficiency as a criterion (Nunan, 2003).

A further consequence is a remedial approach adopted in tertiary English education. University students have diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds, coming both from major cities where English learning is better resourced and rural areas which offer only basic language learning opportunities. In addition, not all students have to take English tests in the entrance examinations. Nevertheless, new students are enrolled in the same classes, regardless of their English level. Given this situation, it is often assumed that their English needs are elementary and therefore problematic, which is then disadvantaging and demotivating those who aim to achieve higher English levels (Dong, 2007).

Despite the importance that English has gained in Vietnam, it remains to be only a foreign language, not a second one. Professors and students are generally exposed to English only in the classrooms; and most of the time, the opportunities to communicate in this language occur just in an academic context. As a result of that, a lot of barriers towards efforts to acquire the English language may be imposed.

2.1.3. The lack of English proficiency among teachers and students

If EMI is to be institutionalized, attention needs to be paid to the language-in-education policy areas of students, teachers, resources, curriculum and materials, methods, community, and evaluation (Hamid, Jahan, & Islam, 2013). For the proper implementation of EMI programs, students and teachers should be proficient in English to function well in an English academic context. However, students and professors have reported that they find it hard to achieve their aims of teaching and learning through English. On the other hand, there has been a lack of provision of professional development or training for academics teaching EMI classes.

The lack of proficiency of students and teachers may result in an inefficient teaching-learning process. Teachers who do not speak English fluently and accurately will have problems conveying the content and they will be also limited to perform due to language barriers. As a result, the explanations can be unclear and students may have difficulties in grasping the content of instruction. On the other hand, students with low proficiency in English will have serious problems in learning. The lack of development of language skills will hinder the whole process. Those with listening skills problems will not be able to get the most important information from the lecture. The students who have reached adequate reading skills cannot get the paramount ideas from the textbooks. Similarly, having difficulties writing up what has been learned may lead to major problems in students' assessment process. Finally, students with poor oral proficiency may feel withdrawn to ask questions to clarify their doubts.

Reflecting on their EMI teaching experiences, academics agreed that the new teaching task was a real challenge and that they did not perform as satisfactorily as when teaching using their mother tongue because language difficulties had impacted the quality of the lecture and students' comprehension and motivation in EMI classes. As students did not usually understand the English medium lectures, academics almost always had to switch code between English and Vietnamese during lectures. Although this flexible employment of code-switching between English and Vietnamese was appreciated among students, they then questioned the nature of EMI programs in Vietnamese universities because one of their ultimate goals when enrolling was to improve their English language proficiency. Most students confirmed that upon graduation they did not think that their English language proficiency had improved, and even if it was improved they did not attribute such improvement to the EMI program or their lecturers (Tran & Nguyen, 2018).

2.1.4. Limitedness of classroom discourse

Second language acquisition includes second (or foreign) language learning in both naturalistic (unschooled) settings as well as classroom-based learning, including both oral and written forms (Zhao, et al., 2012). Thus, professors and students who are enrolled in EMI programs have limited exposure to the English language to just classrooms activities, they are likely to be an obstacle in the teaching-learning process due to their lack of proficiency in English. They only use the foreign language in teacher-students and students-students communication in an academic context mainly with informative purposes and topics related to students´ disciplines. The fact that their use of English is reduced to speaking, writing, listening, and reading in the class means they have a narrow register. In this case, the real social functions of the language to communicate are not achieved. There is not a true second or foreign language acquisition and the worldwide EMI implementation is still a reason for great criticism.

It also has stated in different research that they had attended EMI courses in a non-English-speaking country, while others asserted that they did not have formal training in English and they had few opportunities to use the language.

Equity and access to these EMI programs are also issues. As EMI is only implemented in selected programs of the university, opportunities are limited to only a small proportion of students. Thus, while such inequity and inequality exist, impacts are fragmented and on a small scale, rather than on the entire student population of the university. Also, language support could be provided for those wishing to enhance their proficiency in an academic context. Such support could include taking English courses specifically oriented to academic teaching in a formal setting or engaging in more informal opportunities, such as study tours in English-speaking countries, scholar exchanges, and travel grants for international (Ball & Lindsay, 2012; Wilkinson, 2005).

2.2. Possible solutions

The EMI expansion is happening rapidly, not only in tertiary education but also in the previous levels. Taking into account some of the challenges, a lot of concerns may appear regarding whether EMI should be implemented, and in the case that it is the correct option, how should it be implemented to achieve the desired goals?

2.2.1. Full or partial EMI

Immersion education can be defined as "one in which school pupils are taught the normal school curriculum through the medium of a language which is not their native one." (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, page?). Therefore, students under English immersion education receive the normal school curriculum with English as a medium of instruction, although it is not their native language. Immersion education has various degrees; some methods use total/full immersion (full EMI) while others the partial immersion (partial EMI). Full EMI is unfeasible given the drawbacks mentioned previously, the dilemma between instruction and English, the unsupportive environment of using English outside the classroom, lack of proficiency among teachers and students, the limitedness of classroom discourse, among others. Thus, partial EMI may be the way to carry out the internationalization of education.

2.2.2. Concept of partial EMI

Full immersion is a form of bilingual education using no native language at all in its curriculum, while a partial immersion is a bilingual program with as little or less than 50% of the curriculum taught via a second language (Johnson & Swain, 1997). Moreover, in partial immersion programs, each class has a teacher who is proficient in the students' first Language (hereafter, L1) and a teacher who is proficient in the target language (L2) (Brondum & Stenson,

1998). The students receive, for example, instruction for one-half of their day entirely in the second language (Barik & Swain, 1974).

2.2.3. Partial EMI and implementation

Taking into account the different challenges that hinder EMI programs, it is necessary to pay attention to different aspects to properly implement a partial immersion. It would be useful to analyze the settings in which it would take place; the courses, language skills, and tasks that may be involved, as well as the requirements for teachers and students enrolled in any partial EMI program.

2.2.3.1. Settings

Many students enrolled in EMI programs have received English lessons in previous levels of education; however, most of the time they feel they have failed to learn English. Although they have passed examinations successfully, they find themselves unable to use the language in a communicative context with a fluent speaker. One reason why it may happen is that they had little exposure to real spoken interaction and they were mainly involved in only instruction-focused teacher talk.

To implement a partial EMI program, two important factors of the setting are place and time. Because most of the teaching-learning activities take place in the classroom, different academic details should be taken into consideration. Time is also really important for partial EMI. The higher students´ semester level is, the more time they have spent studying, the more exposure to knowledge in their fields of study, and the better learning skills and strategies. Students in an advanced stage of education are more likely to have better language proficiency due to the immersion program. Therefore, EMI classes should be introduced gradually taking into account the semester level and its correspondent cognitive difficulties.

2.2.3.2. Courses, language skills, and tasks

Teaching and learning a foreign language is a challenging task that requires more research to ensure the best possible outcomes. Therefore, paying attention to the courses, language skills, and tasks is paramount for the successful EMI deployment process. The gradual implementation of EMI mentioned before may be applied in the idea that in an initial phase, EMI does not have to be present in all courses. One of the reasons to adopt EMI could be the existence of English language only resources and/or lack of resources in the L1 of the country. Thus, students and teachers have highlighted the importance of matching the language of exams with the language of the resources. It can be the particular case of courses related to technology and science. On the other hand, disciplines such as history, philosophy, geography, literature, among others, are most of the time based in a region or focused on the country. In this case, they are better taught in the first language due to their nature to achieve the proper output.

Language skills are another component of great importance while implementing EMI. One way to describe language is in terms of the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the teaching and learning processes, these skills are necessary. They are usually divided into two types: receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing). It is vital to consider skills when designing the teaching materials. This helps to identify and fulfill the aims of the activity or lecture. Although communication is interactive and requires the use of the four skills most of the time; it is generally accepted that receptive skills should come before productive skills. For example, at the initial stage of EMI implementation, the attention may be focused on reading; and as the program moves forward other complex forms of the skills may be used. In an advanced stage, students should be able to write essays or papers. Ideally, learning materials have a multi-layered skills approach, where all skills are covered and combined realistically; however, for partial EMI, it would be useful for the gradual use of the language skills.

Tasks are also important to comprehend content or to acquire a skill. The role of tasks in language learning and instructional design is that they provide important learning opportunities that might improve instruction in both ESL and EFL programs internationally. A critical issue for both pedagogy and research is how teachers and course designers can expediently configure and implement communication tasks to meet learners-affective needs to generate the type of personal investment that mastering the fluent use of an L2 requires (Lambert, 2017). The success or failure of EMI can be also determined by the task difficulty. Nunan (1989) proposed a set of criteria for identifying task difficulty and task sequencing namely task input factors, learner factors, and procedural factors. Task input factors include grammatical complexity of the input (for example, a text made up of simple sentences is likely to be simpler than one consisting of non-finite verb constructions and subordination), length of a text, propositional density, the amount of low-frequency vocabulary, the speed of spoken texts and the number of speakers involved, the explicitness of the information, the discourse structure and the clarity with which this is signaled. Learner factors include factors that the learner brings to the task of processing and producing language such as background knowledge, linguistic knowledge, confidence, interest, motivation, observed ability in language skills. Procedural factors concern procedures, that is, the operations that the learners are required to perform on input data, for example, task relevance, task complexity such as the number of steps involved, the cognitive demands the task makes on the learner, and the amount of information the learner is expected to process. (Gan, 2011). To gradually implement a partial EMI is really necessary to design the tasks according to the stage the learner is involved in. In the initial stages, teachers can rely on less demanding cognitive and linguistic activities.

2.2.3.3. Teachers and students

In the implementation of EMI programs, teachers and students are basic factors that determine the success or failure of the process. Even though each of them has a specific role in the classroom that requires a greater competence in particular language skill, they are involved most of the time in cognitive and communicative tasks. Therefore, lecturers and pupils need to be proficient in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Besides the abilities in the language, teachers should receive training aimed at managing the instruction through English, including the availability of different resources for lecturing and self-preparation. Since the early stages, partial EMI should be implemented with teachers and students with English proficiency. In the case of the students, they have to read materials, listen to lectures and write essays of what they have learned in a foreign language in a course that does not give further training in the language as such. Academics should know how to teach properly in L2 to avoid the inadequate use of English that hinders the acquisition of the subject matter.

3. Conclusions

English is nowadays the dominant language of science, scholarship, and communication both formal and informal, among students and academics globally. The internationalization of education is considered a tool to place Vietnam in the international labor market. The promotion of EMI programs is aimed at enhancing the quality of Vietnamese higher education, overhauling the outdated curriculum, lifting the ranking of Vietnamese universities, and developing English language competence.

Despite the benefits expected from the EMI programs, some drawbacks have appeared on the way. Even though there is a significant advantage in the labor market for the graduates from these programs, there are still some proof of the lack of efficacy of the English lectures in Vietnam. Pedagogical challenges together with language obstacles bring about a dilemma between English and instruction. Despite the strong will to internationalize education, English is

still a second language in Vietnam and the possibility to use it occurs only in an academic context. Thus, teachers and students do not have a rich input source available to them outside the class. This limitation restrains the development of proficiency in English. As a consequence of that, pupils have problems comprehending the content, while academics are concerned about the lack of the necessary professional training to enhance their skills and knowledge to give a lecture in these EMI courses.

Because total immersion has been problematic, partial EMI may be a feasible solution for the persistent gaps. This strategy should be carried out gradually and pay special attention to participants, courses, language skills, tasks, and settings. The use of the language should take place at different levels both inside and outside the classroom to achieve a true second or foreign language acquisition.

REFERENCES

[1] Wanphet, P., & Tantawy, N., 2018. Effectiveness of English as a medium of instruction in the UAE: Perspectives and outcomes from the instructors and students of University Science Courses. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, vol. 17 (pp.145-147).

[2] Doiz, A., Lasagabaster, D., & Sierra, J. M., 2013. *English-medium instruction at universities: Global challenges*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

[3] Troudi, S., 2009. The effects of English as a medium of instruction on Arabic as a language of science and academia. In book: *Power in the EFL classroom: Critical pedagogy in the Middle East* (pp.199-216). Publisher: Cambridge Scholars

[4] Manh, L., 2012. English as a medium of instruction in the tertiary education system in Vietnam. *The journal of Asia TEFL. The journal of Asia TEFL*.

[5] Duong, V. A., & Chua, C. S., 2016. *English as a symbol of internationalization in higher education: A case study of Vietnam*. Higher Education Research & Development. Higher Education Research & Development.

[6] Tran, L. T., & Nguyen, H. T., 2018. *Internationalization of Higher Education in Vietnam through English Medium Instruction (EMI): Practices, Tensions, and Implications for Local Language Policies*. Queensland: University of Queensland.

[7] Blake, D., & Hanley, V., 1995. In B. D, & H. V, *The dictionary of educational terms* (p. 80). Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company.

[8] Ibrahim, J., 2001. *The Implementation of EMI (English Medium Instruction) in Indonesian Universities: Its Opportunities, its Threats, its Problems, and its Possible Solutions*.

[9] Philip G, A., 2019. The dilemma of English-Medium Instruction in International Higher Education. Altbach.

[10] Erling, E. J., & Hilgendorf, S. K., 2006. *Language policies in the context of German higher education*. Language Policy.

[11] Freeman, D., Katz, A., Gracía Gomez, P., & Burns, A., 2015. *English-for-teaching: Rethinking teacher proficiency in the classroom. ELT Journal*.

[12] Nunan, D., 2003. The impact of English as a Global Language on Educational Policies in the Asia-Pacific Region.

[13] Dong, L. Q., 2007. Teaching foreign languages at CSSH-VNU. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*.

[14] Hamid, O., Jahan, I., & Islam, M., 2013. *Medium of instruction policies and language practices, ideologies, and institutional divides: Voices of teachers and students in a private university in Bangladesh*. Current Issues in Language Planning.

[15] Zhao, J., Shin, J.-Y., Zhao, J., Shin, J.-Y., Wu, S., Unal Gezer, M., . . . Dixon, Q., 2012. *What We Know About Second Language Acquisition: A Synthesis From Four Perspectives*. Cambridge: Harvard University.