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IMPACTS OF ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION ON DISCIPLINARY LEARNING AND ENGLISH PROFICIENCY FROM STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES IN A VIETNAMESE TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: Over the last few decades, the global expansion of English has seen an increase in the significance given to not only English language instruction, but also teaching other subject areas in English at various levels of education. By providing programs and courses that employ English as a medium of instruction across subjects, higher education institutions in non-native English speaking countries have tried to internationalize their image and boost their competitiveness in the education market. English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been regarded as a language policy with the distinct advantage of addressing two objectives: content learning as the primary goal and English proficiency as a byproduct. However, studies on EMI practices have revealed inconsistency about the effects of EMI on both students' content learning and English competence, necessitating further investigation into this contentious issue. This qualitative case study aims to explore how EMI students at a Vietnamese technical institution perceive the influence of EMI on their disciplinary learning and English proficiency. The data from in-depth interviews with thirty-five students indicated some discrepancies in how students perceived the effects of EMI on students' subject learning and English proficiency. The study findings also identified several issues that students face in EMI courses and provides implications to optimize EMI approaches in the Vietnamese higher education context.

Keywords: English medium instruction, higher education, disciplinary learning, English proficiency

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ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA VIỆC GIẢNG DẠY CHUYÊN NGÀNH BẰNG TIẾNG ANH ĐỐI VỚI VIỆC HỌC KIẾN THỨC CHUYÊN MÔN VÀ NĂNG LỰC TIẾNG ANH NHÌN TỪ QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA SINH VIÊN TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC KỸ THUẬT Ở VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt: Trong vài thập kỷ vừa qua, sự phát triển của tiếng Anh trên phạm vi toàn cầu đã chứng kiến tầm quan trọng của không chỉ việc giảng dạy ngôn ngữ tiếng Anh, mà còn là việc giảng dạy các môn học khác bằng tiếng Anh ở các cấp độ khác nhau trong hệ thống giáo dục. Tại nhiều quốc gia không sử dụng tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ bản địa, các cơ sở giáo dục đại học đã nỗ lực quốc tế hóa hình ảnh và nâng cao khả năng cạnh tranh trên thị trường giáo dục bằng cách triển khai các chương trình và khóa học chuyên ngành giảng dạy bằng tiếng Anh (English as a Medium of Instruction – EMI) trong nhiều lĩnh vực khác nhau. Giảng dạy chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh (EMI) được nhìn nhận là một chính sách ngôn ngữ với lợi thế nổi trội trong việc đồng thời đạt được hai mục tiêu: Học kiến thức môn học chuyên ngành là mục tiêu chính và năng lực tiếng Anh là mục tiêu phụ. Tuy nhiên, các nghiên cứu về việc thực hiện chính sách EMI đã cho thấy sự không nhất quán khi đánh giá về ảnh hưởng của EMI đối với việc học kiến thức chuyên môn và năng lực tiếng Anh của sinh viên, điều đó đòi hỏi cần có thêm nhiều nghiên cứu hơn nữa đối với vấn đề còn đang gây tranh cãi này. Nghiên cứu định tính này được thực hiện nhằm khám phá nhận thức của sinh viên về tác động của việc giảng dạy chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh (EMI) tại một trường đại học kỹ thuật ở Việt Nam. Số liệu phỏng vấn sâu với 35 sinh viên EMI đã chỉ ra những điểm khác biệt về cách nhìn nhận của sinh viên đối với ảnh hưởng của EMI trong việc học kiến thức chuyên môn và năng lực tiếng Anh của họ. Kết quả nghiên cứu cũng xác định nhiều vấn đề mà sinh viên gặp phải trong các khóa học EMI và đề xuất các giải pháp nhằm tối ưu hóa các phương pháp tiếp cận EMI trong bối cảnh giáo dục đại học Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: dạy chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh, giáo dục đại học, học kiến thức chuyên môn, năng lực tiếng Anh

1. Introduction

For decades, the global growth of English has resulted in an increase in the importance of not only English language instruction but also teaching other academic disciplines through the medium of English at various levels of education. English has become increasingly prevalent as a medium of instruction (EMI) in university programs in non-native English-speaking nations, owing in part to the internationalization and marketization of higher education (Lasagabaster, 2022; Saldo et al., 2025).

EMI is seen as having the particular advantage of fulfilling two objectives (disciplinary learning and English competence) in a single integrated course. Furthermore, EMI courses have helped institutions recruit more students, boost their public image, and increase their chances of competing in the education market. There are also ideological reasons, such as encouraging multilingualism, developing global citizens, and enhancing domestic internationalisation (Griffiths;

2023). Due to these advantages, EMI has become increasingly popular worldwide, beginning in Europe (Costa & Coleman, 2012; Doiz et al., 2013a). It has also made major inroads into Asian countries' higher education systems, such as China (Hu & Lei, 2013), South Korea (Piller & Cho, 2013), and Vietnam (Le, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2017; Vu, 2014).

To date, a sizable number of American, British, and Australian universities have formed bilateral partnerships with Asian universities in order to co-teach and moderate EMI programs across subject areas. In order to "capitalize on the hard currency of higher degrees earned in English in English institutions," several Western universities have even opened campuses in nations like Malaysia, Japan, and Vietnam (Van der Walt, 2013, p. 63). Following this trend, educational authorities in Asian nations have seized the chance to create their own independent EMI programs in an effort to increase enrollment and improve their reputations in the region.

Nevertheless, the rapid expansion of EMI in higher education institutions (HEIs) has not been successful as expected. Research has identified numerous difficulties regarding implementation of EMI courses by research. India, Indonesia, and Pakistan have shown evidence that EMI causes "language apartheid" (Coleman, 2011b), unequal resource distribution (Coleman, 2011a), and societal division (Meganathan, 2011). In institutions applying EMI, other challenges include the limited proficiency of teachers and students, a lack of resources and support, inappropriate teaching methods and learning styles, and the disparate demands of various disciplines (Aguilar & Munoz, 2013; Byun et al., 2011; Chang, 2010; Coleman, 2006; Hamid et al., 2013; Ibrahim, 2001; Le, 2012; Macaro et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2017; Sert, 2008; Vu, 2014; Williams, 2015).

Since the National Foreign Language 2020 project (NFL2020), "Teaching and learning foreign languages in the National Education System, period 2008-2020", was announced by the government in 2008 with Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTĐ (Vietnam Government, 2008), EMI programs in Vietnam have grown dramatically in the past few years. NFL2020 is divided into two phases (2008-2010 and 2011-2015, now extended to 2017-2025), with phase 2 focusing on teaching content in foreign languages, particularly English, for some fundamental disciplines. This project begins with 20% of students from national, provincial, and strategic institutions implementing EMI programs, and this percentage steadily expands every year until 2020, when all of these HEIs have intense language training programs (Le, 2014).

Furthermore, the Vietnamese government's determination to implement EMI courses was reaffirmed by the Prime Minister's Decision No. 1505/QĐ-TTĐ dated October 15, 2008, on the Project of Advanced Programs (AP) in Vietnamese HEIs, period 2008-2015 (MOET, 2008). These APs are offered in collaboration with foreign universities to train students in specialized knowledge in various content areas with English as the medium of instruction. Up to now, there have been 27 HEIs in Vietnam implementing 35 APs of various disciplines (Nguyen et al., 2017).

The technical university with the EMI program under study has partnered with Leeds University in the UK as its foreign counterpart to deliver an AP specialized in transport construction engineering through the English language. Since 2008, the university has been one of 27 HEIs in Vietnam designated by the Ministry of Education and Training to implement this AP. With nine graduate courses, the AP has been in place for 14 years, but its execution has been fraught with difficulties. Several issues have been put forward in terms of the factors motivating EMI students in registering EMI programmes and the impact of EMI on students' subject content learning and English competency.

The current qualitative study intends to improve the AP in its specific context by

attempting to find the answers to these concerns. To accomplish these goals, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. *What are the students' motives when enrolling in EMI programmes?*
2. *How do EMI students perceive the impacts of EMI on their disciplinary learning and their English proficiency?*

2. Literature Review

Up to now, a considerable amount of empirical research has been undertaken on the challenges that EMI practices confront in higher education, as well as how EMI affects students' English proficiency and content learning. To improve the caliber of EMI programs and courses at HEIs, more research should be done because these studies have yielded inconsistent and even contradictory results in various contexts. The following section examines various definitions of EMI and provides an overview of some earlier research on the effects of EMI on students' disciplinary learning and English language proficiency, which sheds light on the study methodology.

2.1. Definition of English as a Medium of Instruction

According to Dearden (2015, p. 2), English as a Medium of Instruction is defined as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English”.

This definition is crucial because it makes a distinction between EMI and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), another term for subject matter taught in a language other than the students' native language. Dearden (2015) points out,

whereas CLIL is contextually situated (with its origin in the European ideal of plurilingual competence for EU citizens), EMI has no specific contextual origin. Whereas CLIL does not mention which second, additional, or foreign language (L2) academic subjects are to be studied in, EMI makes it quite clear that the language of education is English, with all the geopolitical and sociocultural implications that this may entail. Whereas CLIL has a clear objective of furthering both content and language as declared in its title, EMI does not (necessarily) have that objective (p. 4).

Mc Kay (2014) states that EMI is the emergent language policy employed by countries where English is not the native language with the purpose of internationalising their higher education system. However, the goal of developing students' English language proficiency is seen as a secondary or by-product of the EMI program rather than an approach to improve students' English competence.

Macaro et al. (2018) choose to use the label ‘English medium instruction’ and define this as: “The use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English” (Macaro et al., 2018, p.37). In comparison to the earlier mentioned definition by Dearden (2015), Macaro et al. (2018) clarify the academic subjects as “other than English itself”, which means other disciplines apart from the education of the English language. It can be seen that apart from this clarification of the academic subjects, Macaro et al. (2018)'s definition shares common views with Dearden's (2015) in the ways they define this phenomenon.

Given the Vietnamese technical university setting in the current study, where the majority of students and lecturers speak Vietnamese as their first language and English is used as the medium of instruction, the researcher has chosen to use Macaro et al. (2018)'s definition because it is appropriate for the context of the study.

2.2. Reasons for EMI Implementation

Macaro et al. (2018) outlined the rationale for EMI implementation in HEIs and provided a review of research on how students and lecturers view EMI practices. The majority of studies concur that EMI courses provide both economic and cultural advantages of internationalization. According to EMI lecturers and students, English is the international language or a crucial component of the internationalization process (Macaro et al, 2018; Earls, 2016; Hamid et al., 2013; Jensen & Thorgersen, 2011; Khan, 2013). Furthermore, learning English has practical benefits, such as enhancing one's English and opening up career options (Vidal & Jarvis, 2020). It also offers the opportunity to pursue higher education overseas (Dearden & Macaro, 2016). In terms of teaching and learning, EMI also assists instructors in developing intercultural awareness and "mental flexibility" (Earls, 2016).

HEIs can profit from EMI in four main ways, according to Galloway et al. (2017): a) fluency in English in addition to subject-matter knowledge; b) awareness of other cultures and global citizenship; c) improved career prospects; and d) employment of staff members. To explain these benefits in more detail, EMI is considered as killing two birds with one stone, i.e. providing students with an opportunity to improve their English proficiency as well as enhancing their content learning at the same time. In other words, it is assumed to create a favourable learning environment where students are exposed to the target language and given chances to make use of the language to negotiate the subject content, therefore resulting in a better academic performance in the target language. Secondly, EMI programmes can enroll foreign students, which can provide an interculturally mixed environment and mutual understanding. This also helps enhance students' employment opportunities. Thirdly, EMI is perceived by students as beneficial for more educational opportunities abroad and future careers. This is a powerful incentive for students to enroll in EMI programs. Finally, EMI fosters employment in several HEIs, especially for TESOL practitioners when these EMI programmes are often carried out with English support courses for students as the preparations for learning the disciplines in English.

2.3. Impacts of EMI on Students' Content Learning

The effects of EMI on students' subject-matter expertise are among the primary factors taken into account in research on EMI deployment. The majority of studies demonstrate negative impacts while a small number demonstrate favorable effects (Cho, 2012; Dafouz & Camacho-Minano, 2016; Hellekjaer, 2010; Hong et al., 2014; Hu & Lei, 2013; Ibrahim, 2001; Kim, 2011; Lee et al., 2014; Lin, T., & Lei, J., 2021; Sert, 2008; Vinke, 1995; Tamtan et al., 2012). These researchers pointed out the reasons leading to the negative effects of EMI on students' learning lie mainly in EMI lecturers and students' limited English proficiency, inappropriate pedagogy, lack of support and resources for EMI practices.

The findings of these studies have come to a conclusion that when the lecturers and students were weak in their language, their academic teaching and learning suffered seriously. Ibrahim (2001) stated that insufficient English competency on the part of both students and teachers constituted a "threat" since it might lead to a lack of rapport, subject comprehension, and student-teacher interactions. Airy and Linder (2006) revealed that students found it difficult to comprehend lectures and take notes when English was used, and they were limited in their ability to ask and answer questions.

Hellekjaer (2010) surveyed 411 Business and Engineering students from universities in Norway and Germany to compare their self-reported comprehension of EMI and first-language

lectures. The findings showed that students perceived their understanding of EMI lectures to be lower than that of lectures delivered in their native language. These findings were shared by Sert (2008) and Jensen and Thogersen (2011) when they stated that EMI in Denmark is an obstacle in transmitting content knowledge and it affected students' thinking ability. According to Kim (2011), the majority of students even demonstrated against EMI lessons, arguing that they hindered their ability to acquire subject content.

According to a thorough study by Tamtan et al. (2012) on the implementation of EMI in higher education across Europe, Asia, and Africa, students face numerous challenges related to a lack of language proficiency, which leads to ineffective content learning, and a shortage of qualified teaching staff fails to develop both linguistic and academic content. Cho (2012) carried out an EMI study in Korea and concluded that because of the low level of English proficiency among instructors and students, EMI policies applied in an EFL environment proved to be unsuccessful and inappropriate in conveying course content. Hu and Lei (2013) in a case study of an EMI Business Administration program in mainland China commented that EMI can cause ambiguity and hence misunderstanding, especially when it involves highly specialized disciplinary content. Due to such difficulty, the Chinese language was also frequently used in combination with the English language by the lecturers to impart content knowledge to students in the EMI classroom (Hu & Lei, 2013).

In contrast to the above mentioned research, a few studies presented the positive views of EMI impacts on content learning. Hong et al. (2004) and Lee et al. (2004) carried out surveys on EMI in Korea universities and concluded that students and lecturers showed their satisfaction with EMI classes and said that they improved their subject knowledge in their EMI courses.

Another study, conducted at a Spanish institution by Dafouz and Camacho-Minano (2016), investigated how EMI affected students' academic performance in comparison to their peers in their first language (Spanish). The results indicate that there are no statistically significant differences between the groups and that EMI students not only performed on par with their non-EMI peers but also acquired the specialized disciplinary literacy in English necessary for studying and communicating in this language.

In summary, studies on EMI in various settings and nations have mostly found detrimental effects on content learning for a number of reasons, including students' and teachers' limited English proficiency, improper instructional methods, a lack of class discussion, and pressure to use English. These findings were envisaged since EMI lessons were delivered in EFL situations, where instructors' and students' English competency was seen as a hindrance to their EMI teaching and learning.

2.4. Impacts of EMI on Students' English Language Proficiency

Concerning how EMI affects students' English ability, there have been diverse opinions among EMI stakeholders. While several researchers claim that EMI helps improve the students' English language use (Chang, 2010; Dafouz & Camacho-Minano, 2016; Jensen & Johanneson, 1995; Lasagabaster, 2022), others state that it has no positive effect on students' English proficiency (Ibrahim, 2001; Heugh, 2002; Kim, 2010; Kim & Kweon, 2016; Uys et al, 2007).

There have been quite a lot of positive comments concerning this aspect. According to Jensen and Johanneson (1995), the majority of Danish students claimed that their English ability improved over the course, and both foreign and Danish students expressed satisfaction with the linguistic competency of the lecturers. Chang (2010) and Wu (2006) discovered that EMI students' language proficiency had enhanced in Taiwan, they also reported that they had

difficulties comprehending the material and effectively expressing their viewpoints.

Having quite the same idea, Lasagabaster (2022) in his research in Spain confirmed that the implementation of EMI was successful in helping students improve their L2 competency and EMI produced favorable results in every aspect of language. Dafouz and Camacho-Minano (2016) conducted a study on EMI in a university in Spain and concluded that students improved their English proficiency and could eventually study and work in an international context.

Despite these favorable views of EMI's effects on students' English proficiency, several studies found that EMI has minimal impact on students' English language skills. In research on EMI in Indonesia, Ibrahim (2001) identified issues with teaching content in English, including teachers' inadequate English proficiency and their failure to help students improve their English. Based on these results, Ibrahim suggested a partial EMI program that permitted teachers and students to communicate in their mother tongue during certain activities, like discussions and inquiries. Heugh (2002) and Uys et al. (2007) looked into how EMI impacted English competence in Southern Africa and discovered that due to their limited language proficiency, incapacity to meet students' language-related needs, and lack of teaching strategies for skill promotion, content teachers were unable to enhance their students' English abilities. A study on EMI students' perceptions of EMI at three leading Korean engineering universities was carried out by Kim and Kweon (2016). According to the majority of students who responded to the survey, EMI was not helpful to them in improving their English.

Overall, research on how EMI affects students' content learning and English proficiency has shown a number of contradicting results that call for more investigation. In terms of the disciplinary content, the majority of research has found that EMI has a detrimental impact on students' subject-matter expertise. The studies cite a lack of resources and support, inappropriate teaching methods, and the inadequate English proficiency of both lecturers and students as the causes of this negative impact. There is a wide range of diverse viewpoints regarding how EMI affects students' English proficiency. Despite the fact that some academics have found that EMI helps students become more proficient in English, many others disagree with this. This contradiction should be further investigated to make clear the underlying reasons. The present study is an effort that aims to explore EMI students' perceptions on these issues in a Vietnamese technical university context.

3. Methodology

The study was carried out in a Vietnamese technical university. The institution has been implementing the EMI programs for nearly 20 years, which have been offered for two institutional programs, namely the Advanced Programs (AP) in coordination with a prestigious university in the UK (with all the specialized subjects taught in English) and the High-Quality Programs (with half of specialized subjects taught in English). The overarching goal is to foster the essential link between academic English competence and the subject comprehension, as specified in the EMI program guidelines. English has been explicitly assigned as the working language for classroom instruction, assignments, examinations, and instructional materials. The goal of EMI in this context is to enhance students' academic English literacy and communication skills based on their comprehension of the subject knowledge.

The study adopted a qualitative approach based on constructivism as it aims to explore the students' perspectives of the impacts of EMI on their content learning and English proficiency. According to Darlaston (2007), qualitative methodologies provide the means to seek a deeper understanding and to explore the nuances of experiences not available through

quantification. By utilizing qualitative approaches, the researcher is able to expand on the “what” questions of human existence asked by positivism to include the “why” and “how” asked by constructivism. The study employed intensive interviews with the students as the main instrument of data collection because it allows the researcher the opportunity to explore the perspectives of other individuals. Glesne and Peshkin state “the opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see is the special strength of interviewing in qualitative inquiry” (1992, p. 65).

3.1. Participants

The participants in this qualitative study were selected using purposive sampling, which involves finding and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who possess a particular level of expertise or familiarity with a topic of interest (Creswell, 2012). The criteria set for selecting the participants were as follows. For the EMI students, they should have learnt EMI subjects for at least one year and had sufficient EMI learning experience so that they could provide precise information. The participants in the study included thirty-five third-year students of AP class majoring in civil engineering. The study was carried out after the students completed two semesters of EMI study and four semesters of English-intensive courses. They were requested to pass a B2 level test in order to make sure that they have sufficient English proficiency for their EMI study.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This case study collected data from in-depth interviews with thirty-five EMI students. Interview questions centered on students’ reasons for enrolling in EMI programs, as well as how EMI affected their English language skills and content acquisition. Each interview often lasted approximately 30 minutes and took place after students’ EMI classes based on their timetable. For data analysis, all of the interviews were recorded, verbatim transcribed, and imported into the MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. The study employed thematic analysis in qualitative studies, in which the key phrases in the interviews were grouped into codes, then developed into categories and themes (see a code sample of student interviews in Table 1).

Table 1

Code Sample of Student Interviews

Transcription of interviews	Codes	Categories	Themes
<i>Studying my major in English has a very big impact on how I absorb knowledge. Compared to studying in Vietnamese, it takes me much more time because I have to first understand the meaning of the vocabulary and then grasp the subject content. At home, I also need to study both the English and Vietnamese versions of the knowledge, so I find it quite difficult.</i>	Taking more time to understand EMI vocabulary and content. Experiencing difficulty studying the subject in two languages.	Negative impact on students’ content learning.	Impacts of EMI on students’ content learning.
<i>However, in return, the abundance and diversity of English-language resources enable me to access and explore up-to-date specialized knowledge from around the world.</i>	Accessing updated specialized knowledge thanks to the abundance of materials in English	Positive impacts on students’ content learning	Impacts of EMI on students’ content learning
<i>Studying EMI has definitely improved my</i>	Improving	Positive	Impact of EMI

English proficiency. My vocabulary and communication skills have become much better. Although I had previously studied English courses such as A1, A2, and B1, when I started learning my major in English, my English improved even more” (extracted from S1’s interview)

vocabulary and communication skills when studying EMI	impact on students’ English proficiency	on students’ English proficiency
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4. Findings

4.1. Reasons Given by EMI Students for Enrolling in EMI Programmes

Analysis of the interview data indicates multiple reasons for students’ enrollment in EMI courses, including the improvement of English proficiency, enhanced employment prospects, the quality of EMI programs and lecturers’ qualifications, opportunities for further study abroad, professional development, interest in civil engineering, and recommendations from relatives and university staff. Many students reported multiple motivations rather than a single reason for choosing EMI courses.

The most frequently cited reason, reported by twenty-five students, concerned their expectations of improving English proficiency. Participants identified the development of English skills and vocabulary through EMI as the primary motivation for enrolling in EMI courses. Several students explained that studying all subjects or technical majors in English would enhance their language abilities, “particularly as English was perceived as one of their strengths” (S10, S8). Overall, the findings indicate that English proficiency was a key factor attracting students to the program.

The second most frequently cited reason among EMI students, mentioned by twenty-two participants, related to employment opportunities. They believed that studying in an EMI program would enhance their employability, enabling them to secure positions not only in Vietnamese companies but also in international organizations. Several students highlighted that EMI could facilitate easier job access, allow them to utilize their English proficiency in professional contexts, and create opportunities to work both domestically and abroad (S1, S15, S32).

The third most frequently mentioned reason related to the perceived quality of EMI courses, as reported by eleven students. This perception was associated with the qualifications and experience of EMI lecturers, smaller class sizes, and the high quality of the imported curriculum. Among these factors, the presence of qualified and experienced lecturers was most frequently emphasized by the students. A student claimed: “*The curriculum is taught by experienced lecturers, all lecturers studied abroad with high professional skills*” (S3). In addition, some students enrolled in the AP program because they perceived its quality to be superior to that of massive programs at the institution, attributing this advantage to the smaller class sizes. “*I registered because I thought the classes in the International Faculty are not as crowded as those in other programmes, then the quality must be better*” (S1).

Students also identified the innovative curriculum delivery, compared with mainstream programs, as a key reason for choosing EMI. One participant noted that the program employs modern teaching methods, enabling students to study in English and obtain high-quality degrees (S20). Another student emphasized the program’s contribution to national development, explaining that “*EMI courses facilitate access to updated global knowledge, as the curriculum is regularly revised to reflect emerging international trends*” (S3).

The fourth most frequently cited reason among EMI students was the enhancement of

professional knowledge, as mentioned by eight participants. Students highlighted the continuous updating of content and the opportunity to study technical majors in English as key factors influencing their decision to enroll in the AP program. A student confirmed: *“Studying the technical majors in English opens up many opportunities to improve our professional knowledge”* (S14). Another reason mentioned by EMI students concerned opportunities for further study abroad after graduation. Participants explained that enrolling in the AP program would enhance their prospects of pursuing overseas education, as the combination of English proficiency and content knowledge delivered in English was perceived as advantageous for international study (S7, S25).

A factor influencing students' decisions to enroll in EMI courses was their interest in civil engineering. Many participants reported choosing the program because they were attracted to the idea of designing and constructing transportation infrastructure. *“The reason for registering this class is that I love building transport works”*, said student 21. An additional reason for enrolling in EMI civil engineering courses was recommendations from relatives. This reflects a common practice in Vietnam, where parents or family members often guide students toward similar career paths. One student explained that having close family members working in the transport sector influenced the decision to pursue the same profession *“Most of my relatives work in the transport sector so they guide me to follow a transport career”* (S27).

Finally, four of the thirty-five students reported enrolling in the AP program based on recommendations from university admissions staff. Participants explained that advice received during enrollment consultations regarding the quality of training influenced their decision, and that staff recommendations highlighted the perceived advantages of the program. However, three students reported registering for the EMI program without being aware that technical subjects would be taught in English. This indicates that some participants had limited information about EMI courses prior to enrollment. One student acknowledged registering for the program unintentionally, explaining that the English-medium nature of the course was unknown at the time of registration.

4.2. Students' Perceptions of EMI Impacts on Their Content Learning

Students' responses to questions about the impact of EMI on subject content learning were grouped into two main categories: positive effects, reported by fifteen students, and negative effects, reported by twenty students. Overall, the findings reveal divergent perceptions regarding the influence of EMI on students' understanding of subject content.

Positive impacts

Several factors contributing to these impacts were identified by the first group of students (15 participants), including the use of coursebooks, the acquisition of subject content knowledge, the development of EMI-related vocabulary, and perceived employment opportunities.

The first factor discussed concerned EMI coursebooks, which were positively evaluated by thirteen students as clear, accessible, and up to date. Participants noted that English-language coursebooks were more comprehensible than their Vietnamese counterparts and provided access to comprehensive, specialized materials from developed countries. Additionally, students emphasized that the use of updated resources enabled them to study emerging disciplinary knowledge from around the world (S3, S11, S15).

The second factor concerned the acquisition of general content knowledge, as reported by eleven students. Participants indicated that EMI had a positive influence on their understanding of subject content, noting that EMI courses provided sufficient and comprehensive knowledge required for university study. They believed that the general content

knowledge presented in EMI coursebooks enabled them to develop a deeper mastery of the subject matter: *"I think that studying at university needs general content knowledge. Studying EMI brings us sufficient content knowledge"* (S14).

The next factor mentioned by EMI students was the EMI vocabulary improvement (9 students). A student affirmed: *"I can learn a lot of EMI terms from the coursebooks and in the lecturer's lessons"* (S8). They believed that the terminology in the EMI coursebook that they studied could help them understand technical documents in English, which was very beneficial for them in their future jobs.

Job opportunity was the final issue discussed (8 students). They thought that EMI could help them have more job opportunities when the labor market was getting more competitive. Students with good knowledge of the specialized subject as well as English proficiency would find jobs more easily than those who had limited English abilities: *"Studying EMI can bring a lot of job opportunities to us"* (S18); *"I think we can find jobs more easily with a good content knowledge in English. We can work in foreign invested companies"* (S16). This was considered an important motivational factor for EMI students.

Negative impacts

However, twenty students stated that EMI had a detrimental effect on their subject learning for a number of reasons, including insufficient English abilities, limited comprehension of content knowledge, more time for study, reduction of content knowledge.

The main reason mentioned was the insufficient English proficiency that hindered the reception of content knowledge. One student admitted: *"EMI affects my content knowledge reception. Due to my limited English proficiency, I don't understand the lessons when the lecturers teach us, I feel bored and unmotivated"*. The students expressed a lot of concern about their limited English abilities, which could be considered as the main barrier for their EMI study. They reported difficulties in following EMI lectures due to limited English competence, which ultimately reduced their motivation to engage in EMI courses. As one student noted, *"It has both positive and negative effects, but it causes a lot of difficulties for me to comprehend the content knowledge in the lectures delivered in English"* (S6).

Many students (twelve students) compared studying the content knowledge in English and Vietnamese and claimed that it was much harder for them to study in English and it took them more time to translate the EMI terms and understand the lessons. A student complained: *"Studying the subject in English makes students comprehend the lessons more slowly compared to studying in Vietnamese as students have to translate the materials from English into Vietnamese, and sometimes translating incorrectly can make the content knowledge more abstract"* (S27). Another student expressed a similar view: *"Studying specialized subjects has negative effects and takes more time than studying in Vietnamese. I need additional time to understand the terminology and the lesson content. At home, I have to study the subject matter in both English and Vietnamese, which I find very difficult"* (S32). The findings suggest that a key difficulty for students lay in understanding and translating EMI terminology.

Another reported reason was the reduction of content knowledge in EMI subjects (nine students). One student explained: *"For me, EMI subjects have a negative impact on the acquisition of content knowledge. In particular, the amount of knowledge delivered in English is reduced compared to Vietnamese-medium subjects. Moreover, conveying content knowledge in English and comprehending EMI subjects pose considerable difficulties for both lecturers and students"* (S8). This view was shared by several other students, who similarly confirmed that EMI courses provided less content knowledge than Vietnamese-medium courses.

Overall, the findings indicated diverse perceptions of the impact of EMI on students' content learning. While several students reported positive effects on their disciplinary learning, many others claimed that EMI negatively affected their subject comprehension and imposed a heavier workload on their studies. This contradiction mainly lied in their mixed English proficiency which hindered their comprehension of subject knowledge via the medium of English.

4.3. Students' Perceptions of EMI Impacts on English Proficiency

In response to the question on how EMI affected their English skills, all students reported improvements in their ability to communicate in English, including overall English proficiency, communication skills, and EMI-related vocabulary.

Students frequently reported an overall improvement in their English ability. One student stated: "*Studying content knowledge in English had a strong impact on my English and marked a significant turning point in improving my English competence. In an English learning environment, I have to make considerable effort to understand EMI lessons, and my English has improved through this process*" (S1). Another student echoed this view, saying: "There has been clear improvement in my English competence; studying subjects in English helps enhance my English skills" (S5).

Most students emphasized improvements across all four English skills, particularly in communication. As one student explained, "*Studying EMI helps me develop both content knowledge and English skills. I study not only in class but also at home, and my four English skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—have improved significantly*" (S10). Another student shared the similar view, noting substantial improvement in English skills, particularly listening, reading, and writing, and increased confidence in communicating with foreigners (S15). Some students highlighted greater improvement in listening and reading skills compared to other language skills.

EMI-related vocabulary was cited by ten students as a contributing factor to the improvement of their English skills. These students reported that studying EMI subjects helped expand their knowledge of English terminology. For example, one student noted that "*studying specialized subjects in English helps expand my knowledge of English terminology*" (S8), while another similarly stated that EMI courses "*provide more new English words*" (S32).

Although nearly all students agreed on the positive impact of EMI on overall English proficiency, communication skills, and EMI-related vocabulary, one student expressed a differing view regarding the development of individual language skills. The student noted that while EMI improved listening and reading skills, speaking and writing showed limited progress: "*Studying EMI can improve listening and reading skills, but speaking and writing skills have not improved much. There is no clear progress in speaking, except when students are required to give oral presentations. As for writing, we mainly copy from English coursebooks, so our writing skills have not been significantly enhanced.*"

Overall, the data analysis indicates that EMI has a favorable effect on students' English proficiency, particularly in terms of EMI-related vocabulary, English communication skills, and overall English competence. Through sustained exposure to English in academic contexts, students reported increased familiarity with subject-specific terminology and greater confidence in using English for academic communication. Regular interaction with lecturers, course materials, and peers in English appeared to create an immersive learning environment that supported language development. As a result, many students perceived noticeable improvement in their ability to understand lectures, engage in classroom discussions, and

communicate more effectively in English. These findings suggest that EMI not only facilitates language acquisition incidentally but also serves as a meaningful context for developing practical English skills relevant to academic and professional settings.

5. Discussion

This study provides insight into EMI practices at a Vietnamese university by examining students' motivations for enrolling in EMI programmes and their perceptions of EMI's impact on content learning and English proficiency.

Regarding the reasons for enrolling in EMI courses, the data analysis indicates that students were motivated by a range of factors, including the desire to improve English proficiency, enhance employment prospects, benefit from the high professional standards of EMI instructors and courses, pursue further study overseas, and advance their future careers. Additional factors included students' interest in civil engineering and recommendations from family members and university staff. These findings are largely consistent with previous studies identifying key motivational factors for EMI participation. Prior research has confirmed that EMI can enhance students' English competence and expand career opportunities, as well as increase the likelihood of pursuing higher education abroad (Bozdoğan & Karlıdağ, 2013; Dearden & Macaro, 2016; Galloway et al., 2017). However, other factors related to the local context of this study—such as students' preferences for civil engineering and recommendations from relatives and institutional staff—appear to play an important role in students' decisions to enroll in EMI programmes, yet remain underexplored in the existing literature.

Students' perceptions of the impact of EMI on content learning were highly varied. Approximately half of the participants reported unfavorable effects, whereas the remaining students perceived EMI as having a positive influence on their disciplinary learning. These findings are consistent with those of numerous previous studies. As discussed in the literature review, while some studies have identified positive effects of EMI, the majority have highlighted its negative consequences for content learning (Cho, 2012; Dafouz & Camacho-Minano, 2016; Hong et al., 2014; Hu & Lei, 2013; Ibrahim, 2001; Kim, 2011; Lee et al., 2014; Sert, 2008; Vinke, 1995; Tamtan et al., 2012). Prior research has attributed the detrimental effects of EMI primarily to limited English proficiency among both lecturers and students, inappropriate pedagogical practices, and insufficient institutional resources and support for EMI implementation. These findings suggest that when instructors' and students' English competence is inadequate, the quality of academic teaching and learning is substantially compromised.

The results of the present study align with these conclusions. Half of the students perceived EMI as negatively affecting their ability to learn subject content, while the remaining students did not share this view. Students who reported negative perceptions explained that their limited English proficiency hindered their comprehension of disciplinary knowledge, thereby constraining effective content learning. These findings carry important implications for EMI implementation. Specifically, they highlight the need for adequate English language support for both students and lecturers prior to and during EMI delivery, as well as the adoption of pedagogical approaches that are sensitive to learners' linguistic challenges. In addition, institutions should ensure the provision of sufficient teaching resources and ongoing professional development for EMI instructors. Without such support mechanisms, EMI may risk undermining content learning rather than enhancing educational outcomes.

With regard to the impact of EMI on students' English proficiency, all participants agreed that EMI contributed to the enhancement of their English skills, particularly listening and reading

abilities as well as knowledge of English terminology. These findings, however, appear to diverge from those of some previous studies. The literature presents mixed evidence concerning the extent to which EMI influences students' English language proficiency. While several studies have reported positive effects of EMI on learners' English development (Chang, 2010; Dafouz & Camacho-Minano, 2016; Jensen & Johannesson, 1995; Lasagabaster, 2008), other researchers have argued that EMI does not lead to significant improvements in students' English proficiency (Ibrahim, 2001; Heugh, 2002; Kim, 2010; Kim & Kweon, 2016; Uys et al., 2007).

These contrasting findings suggest that the effects of EMI on students' English proficiency, as well as on content knowledge acquisition, are context-dependent. Variations in institutional settings, instructional practices, students' initial English proficiency levels, and the availability of linguistic and pedagogical support may account for the differing outcomes reported across studies. Consequently, EMI should not be viewed as a universally effective approach to language development, but rather as a pedagogical practice whose success depends on how it is implemented and supported within specific educational contexts.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This qualitative study was conducted to explore the students' motivations for enrolling in EMI courses and examined their perspectives on the impact of EMI on their content learning and English proficiency.

Overall, students registered EMI programmes for a variety of perceived benefits, including the improvement of English proficiency, enhanced employment prospects, the quality of EMI courses, the high qualifications of EMI instructors, opportunities for further study, as well as personal interest in civil engineering and recommendations from relatives and university staff. With regard to the effects of EMI on students' content learning and English competence, the present study reveals both consistencies and divergences in comparison with previous research. These findings reinforce the view that the outcomes of EMI are highly context-dependent and may vary across educational settings. By focusing on a Vietnamese technical university, this study contributes to the existing body of EMI literature by providing empirical evidence from an under-researched context. In particular, it offers insight into how EMI is perceived and practiced by students within a technical discipline, thereby enriching current understanding of EMI implementation in non-English-speaking higher education environments.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to a single university, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other EMI contexts in Vietnam or beyond. Second, the study primarily relied on students' self-reported perceptions, which may not fully capture actual learning outcomes or instructional effectiveness. Given these limitations, further research is needed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of EMI in Vietnamese higher education. Future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions and academic disciplines to enhance the representativeness of the findings. In addition, incorporating multiple data sources—such as classroom observations, instructors' perspectives, and objective measures of language and content learning—would provide a more robust evaluation of EMI effectiveness. Further investigation into pedagogical practices, assessment methods, and learner variables is also essential for identifying sustainable and context-appropriate solutions to the challenges associated with EMI implementation.

The study bears some important implications for EMI policy makers, educational managers as well as EMI lecturers and students. These include English improvement courses

for both EMI lecturers and students, ESP preparation courses prior to EMI programs, a consideration of adopting a flexible EMI programme combining both English and Vietnamese in delivering the content knowledge to EMI students, particularly in the early stages of EMI programmes. Obviously, the major challenge facing EMI teachers and learners is their English proficiency, which needs more support from the institutions to solve in a comprehensive manner. Furthermore, it is recommended that ESP courses be modified to meet the needs of EMI with the cooperation of language and subject experts. The knowledge of English terminologies can be provided for EMI students in these ESP courses, which would enable them to comprehend the subject matter better. Furthermore, flexible EMI programmes based on translanguaging approach can be considered, in which EMI lecturers can employ both English and Vietnamese language to convey the content language to students, especially in the first EMI classes when students' English proficiency as well as their knowledge of EMI terminology is still limited. However, EMI lecturers' translanguaging between two languages while teaching content knowledge should be carefully taken into consideration to maximize the students' comprehension of the subject while avoiding the overuse of the mother tongue that can badly affect the improvement of students' English proficiency.

Finally, as the issues about disciplinary learning and language acquisition in EMI courses require further investigation, EMI will continue to attract attention in the Vietnamese higher education context. This language policy also calls for changes to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as the improvement of staff and student support. According to Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), implementing each stage of a language policy will require a comprehensive evaluation from the bottom up, considering the needs, viewpoints, and experiences of all parties involved.

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