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English-as-a-medium-of-instruction students' evaluation of an English foundation program at a university in Vietnam

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Article info.	ABSTRACT
  Keywords 	*With the growing popularity of English-as-a-medium-of-instruction (EMI) all over the world, the issue of how to best prepare non-native students for their language-related problems in EMI courses also arises. While a number of studies have shed critical light on problems students encounter in EMI courses, very few have explored how students should be supported to overcome these challenges. The current study was conducted to investigate such an effort in a university in Vietnam where an English foundation program (EFP) of 390 hours have been designed and implemented for one semester before students begin their EMI courses. In particular, the study was aimed to figure out the structure of the EFP and students' evaluation of its usefulness for their EMI courses. The findings from the current study reveal that the EFP was carefully designed to tailor students' needs of English proficiency enhancement for EMI courses, but only half of the student participants found that that the program was helpful to their EMI courses. Consequently, the study provided the EFP designers with a basis to further improve their program and to help other institutions which are implementing EMI have an idea of what should be done to support their students.*

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1 INTRODUCTION

While English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has attracted various researchers in conducting studies on its impact, benefits, and challenges, few studies have been done to investigate how different institutions around the world are helping their teachers and students be prepared for language-related problems that they will deal with in their classrooms. Meanwhile, problems such as teachers' and students' inadequate English language proficiency (ELP), mixed entrance ELP, students' lack of field-specific lexis have prevented students from gaining sufficient knowledge and deep understanding of EMI courses. Several measures have been implemented in some non-native contexts such as setting a language threshold to screen out students who do not have adequate language proficiency, organizing workshops to guide students how to deal with difficulties in EMI courses, and organizing language support programs for students immediately before their EMI study. However, up to now, few findings have been revealed upon the effectiveness of such support programs. Therefore, the current study was conducted to fill that gap with two research aims, namely (1) figuring out how the English foundation program has been structured in a university in Vietnam, and (2) investigating the effectiveness of the program in supporting students in their EMI courses.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The EMI approach

EMI, with its increasing popularity, has become a worldwide educational trend. However, the educational characteristics and policies regarding EMI vary from context to context. In the same vein, the term EMI has been defined differently by various researchers, who seem not to reach a consensus up to date. According to Dearden (2014), EMI is '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' (p. 4). From this perspective, EMI can be considered synonymous to Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). However, while CLIL aims at developing both the content and language as its name suggests, EMI has its reference to the approach for which English is used to teach academic subjects in contexts where English is not the mother tongue or the second language. In this way, no explicit language learning objectives are officially set for EMI, and the focus of EMI is acquiring the content, academic or subject-related knowledge.

2.2 Students' language related problems in EMI courses

Several language-related problems arise for students in EMI courses. These include students' low entrance English proficiency level, their lack of field-specific lexis and academic reading and writing skills, and mixed English-level classes, which prevent EMI students from gaining sufficient knowledge and deep understanding of the EMI courses.

Regarding the students' entrance ELP, Williams (2015) with a systematic review of the global published research on EMI implementation in higher educational contexts reveals that the role of the English proficiency of students and instructors and the varying requirements of academic subjects towards the success of the EMI programs have been underscored. Consequently, low English level of students in EMI classroom has been reported to cause detrimental effects on students' academic and mental lives (Doiz *et al*., 2011; Tatzl, 2011; Başıbek *et al*., 2014; Dearden, 2014; Barrios *et al*., 2016). Doiz et al. (2011) and Lau and Yuen (2011) argue that it is students' poor command of English that causes negative effects on the students' academic performance and their participation in EMI classroom.

With regard to students' lack of field-specific lexis and academic reading and writing skills, Belhiah

and Elhami (2015) figured out that most Arabian students in their study did not have the appropriate reading, writing or speaking skill for understanding course materials, answering exam questions in English, or communicate effectively during classroom activities. The researchers highlighted that the English students used was not very academic and their ability to interact in English was just at basic level. Likewise, in the study of Tatzl (2011), the lecturers and students at an Austrian university of applied sciences confirmed that EMI poses linguistic challenges to them. Among the four skills of English, speaking and writing are the most challenging ones as perceived by both Austrian teachers and students. In the same vein, the Turkish lecturers (n=63) at two universities in Turkey which are currently offering partial EMI, i.e. one third of the lectures in English, the others in Turkish, perceived that teaching in Turkish would facilitate the depth and more comprehension with respect to the lesson content than teaching in English (Başıbek *et al*., 2014).

Indeed, the various English abilities and low English proficiency of EMI learners have presented obstacles to the teaching as well as the implementation of curriculum in most EMI contexts (Doiz *et al*., 2011; Tatzl, 2011; Dearden, 2014; Alhamami, 2015; Barrios *et al*., 2016). According to these authors, EMI teachers have devoted a good deal of time and effort for explaining, repeating the information, or preparing materials, which means that they cannot cover all the required topics during the semester.

However, the most striking language-related problem for EMI students is the challenges that low and medium-English level students encounter in mixed-proficiency classes. Yip and his colleagues (2003), when comparing the science achievement of Chinese students learning science through English with that of students receiving instruction in their mother tongue (Chinese), found that the EMI students had lower achievement in science learning in comparison with their Chinese-medium peers due to the inadequate English proficiency among EMI students. The authors elaborated that English-medium students had difficulties in fully comprehending abstract concepts, distinguishing between scientific terms and scientific knowledge in new or realistic situations. The researchers further argued that instruction in English or in mixed code has negative impacts on learning for low-ability students. In the same vein, Lau and Yuen (2011), who examined the impact of the medium of instruction on the learning of computer programming of secondary students (n=219) in

Hong Kong. The results indicated that the academic performance of Chinese-medium instructed students was higher than that of the English-medium instructed students, and the middle and low-ability students in English-medium schools were placed at a disadvantage. Similarly, the science lecturers in Channa's (2012) study expressed their negative attitudes towards the EMI approach in that it is not beneficial for learners coming from different types of backgrounds and mediums which imply a variety in students' English proficiency.

In short, EMI students have to encounter various language-related problems which should be addressed thoroughly to help them gain success in their EMI courses.

2.3 English foundation programs for EMI

In order to help EMI students solve language-related problems, different measures have been implemented, and probably the most common one is setting a certain level of ELP as a threshold for EMI courses (Saarinen and Nikula, 2013; Wilkinson, 2013; Hu and Lei, 2014). This threshold is expected to help screen out students who were not sufficiently prepared in term of ELP for EMI courses. However, because academic language skills basically differ from general communication skills (Cummins 2000, 2008; Jon and Kim 2011; Doiz *et al.,* 2013), it is argued that such as threshold may not properly reflect the required English skills for EMI courses. Therefore, many researchers suggest the provision of additional language support to EMI students as a solution (Shaw, 1997; Kang and Park, 2004; Hong *et al.,* 2008; Byun *et al.*, 2011; Tatzl, 2011; Joe and Lee, 2013; Knudsen and Westbrook, 2013).

Based on the experience of designing and implementing different content-based instruction (CBI) models, Shaw (1997) suggested 'the need for a twelve- to fifteen-hour training workshop for learners before the CBI course begins' (p. 282) to equip them with 'reading skills, interactive listening skills, organizing and expressing ideas in writing, organizing their own learning, identifying and deploying successful language learning strategies, and seeking out and dealing with appropriate feedback on their performance' (pp. 281–282). Similarly, Jones *et al.,* 2001 provided a series of workshops at the Learning Center at the University of Sydney to improve students' academic literacy. These workshops operated in small units to help the instructors address students' needs more flexibly and cater for various student groups, including the group of international students. Having a similar student workshop program, Knudsen and Westbrook's (2013) one was more customized to

students' language problems in an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting. Their program consisted of introductory lectures and pair or group work sessions on required English skills and strategies. Diagnostic tests for English skills were implemented to help provide more individualized support for students. However, their program took only two days and was limited in scope.

Recently, Chang *et al.* 2017 have developed a two-component language support program for Korean students. The program included two-hour workshops and a series of tutoring sessions. While one-shot workshops were designed to provide basic instructions to a larger number of students within two hours, tutoring sessions were targeted at a small group of students who needed detailed feedback and guidance on their performance. The study revealed that the language support program received positive responses and was found to contribute to increasing students' language preparedness for EMI courses. In addition, it was considered helpful to typical EFL students who usually lack English productive skills (Tsuneyoshi, 2005; Hong *et al.,* 2008), as it helps to increase their confidence and decrease their fear.

3 THE STUDY

3.1 The context

The current study was conducted in a large university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The university has begun its EMI programs since 2006 and is one of the first ten universities nationwide assigned to pilot the EMI program by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training in form of an "advanced teaching program". The term "advanced program" is referred to as the program that has collaboration with a foreign partner university in designing its curriculum, importing teaching materials, co-teaching with foreign lecturers, and using English as the major medium of instruction for all the subjects (except for Physical Education and Marxism Ideology) in the study programs. After eleven years since its piloting stage, seven cohorts of students have graduated from the program and gained considerable success in the labor market as well as in their own academic career. A hundred percent of graduates were recruited a few months after graduation, and more than fifty percent of graduates successfully have enrolled in master and doctoral programs in Vietnam and abroad. This can be considered as a remarkable success of this EMI program despite challenge of students' mixed entrance English proficiency with the higher proportion of low English level students in every cohort. The measure that the university has applied to overcome the

students' language-related challenges is building up an English foundation program (EFP) implemented in the first three executive semesters of their EMI study. This particular study will explore the way that the EFP is structured and how students evaluate its usefulness in preparing students for EMI courses.

3.2 Research questions

The current study is aimed at answering the two following research questions:

1.How is the English foundation program structured in the university of the current study?

2.What is students' evaluation of the program in terms of its usefulness for EMI courses?

3.3 Participants

Participants of the study included 115 students (51 males, 64 females) from the three most recent cohorts who finished their EFP from one to three years ago and are still learning at the university. Among them, 40% was at their second year, 27.8% at their third year and 32.2% at their final year of the study program. All these participants have experienced the EFP, and their memory of the program is still fresh enough for reliable program evaluation.

3.4 Research instruments

The main instrument employed in the study is a 13-item questionnaire with 5-point Likert Scale (i.e., 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree). Each item focuses on the extent that a specific aspect of the EFP helps the students prepared for the EMI courses. A reliability test was run and Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was .85, which revealed that the data gained from the participant responses are reliable.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 The structure of the English Bridging Program

This section presents the background information about the English Bridging Program designed for EMI programs in Can Tho University. It centres on three main aspects: (1) general objectives and structure of the program; (2) subjects/ skills included in the program and objectives for each subject; and (3) pedagogical indications that guide teaching implementation. This background information provides an important basis for the analysis of information obtained from the research participants and the interpretation of the study findings.

The English foundation program sets out with a two-fold purpose. The overarching objective of the program is to prepare learners with sufficient English knowledge and skills to be able to function effectively in learning context where English is the medium for instruction. This general aim, however, is interpreted into two specific directions. On the one hand, upon the completion of the first semester, students need to achieve English proficiency at least level B1 of the European Common Framework of Reference (CEFR) or IELTS 4.5. As an entry requirement, all students must take the English proficiency test, either in the TOEIC format or the in-house test developed by the university English teachers and the minimum entry scores differ for each year. On the other hand, this overall goal encompasses multiple academic skills and knowledge components. It first entails learners' ability to understand English lectures, comprehend reading material in their disciplines, and develop good academic essays. It also includes critical academic skills such as presentations and the ability to participate in classroom interactions confidently and effectively. In this sense, the program tends to be designed to facilitate learners' development of English competence for both general and academic interactions.

To achieve these objectives, the foundation program was designed for three executive first semesters of the curriculum. As can be seen in Table 1, the program includes a total of eight subjects which add up 24 credits (15 classroom hours per credit). Among these, students are required to complete six subjects (20 credits) in the first semester, which is an extensive program lasting 10 weeks for their first semester. The two other subjects Advanced English 1 and 2 are taken in the second and third semesters, respectively. In this design, it can be seen that the most critical component of this foundation program is allocated for semester one whereas the two advanced subjects in the second and third semesters are viewed as a continuation.

As mentioned earlier, students are required to take six subjects simultaneously in this first semester. Each subject is offered by a different teacher, focusing on a specific skill. Except for the listening/speaking and pronunciation, which are taught by native teachers of English, the other four subjects are offered by experienced Vietnamese teachers of English who are working at the university. As required, all adjustments to the content and materials need to be discussed and agreed by three parties: the teacher, the institution and the English teaching program provider. However, in reality, the teachers are awarded with

substantial freedom in selecting the teaching material for the subject that they are responsible for. Information from Table 1 shows that these teachers tend to select different textbooks available to tailor for their course, which result in a total of at least 8 different textbooks used for the program. In this sense, while the teaching contents provided at the beginning of the semester functions as a general guidance for teaching, teachers are allowed to make suggestions and changes to ensure the program better meets the students' levels, interests and learning styles each year. Since most of these teachers have been working with students from this same program for at least some years, they constantly make adjustments to the teaching material based on their experience with the former groups of students. Specific objectives for each

subject are also stated in the subject outlines provided to the students at the beginning of the semester. Accordingly, the listening/speaking subject, accompanied by two textbooks - *Person to Person* and *Q: Skills for success,* aims to develop students' ability to perform speaking interactions in both daily life and academic contexts. Both books are topic-based and integrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening and speaking skills. The pronunciation subject mainly aims to improve students' pronunciation at both segmental and supra-segmental levels, which can be transferred to their speaking performance. The course content, therefore, begins with vowels, consonants and clusters and gradually builds up to stress and rhythm, intonation, connected speech.

Table 1: The EFP structure

No.	Subjects	Credits	Classroom hours	Semester	Material
1	Listening and speaking	5	75	1	Person to person – Level 1 Q: Skills for Success L/S Level 1
2	Writing	4	60	1	Academic writing IELT Complete Guide to Task 1
3	Pronunciation	3	45	1	English pronunciation in use
4	Reading	3	45	1	Interactions 2 – Reading Book
5	Grammar	3	45	1	Focus on Grammar / Grammar for IELTS
6	Presentation Skills	2	30	1	English for presentations
7	Advanced English 1	3	45	2	Self-developed/ compiled
8	Advanced English 2	3	45	3	Self-developed/ compiled
Total			390 hours		

Similarly, the writing subject employs two course books, each targets a separate objective. The *Academic Writing Book* mainly focuses on developing students' academic writing from the sentence level to paragraphs and essays. The other book – *IELTS Writing Task 1*, aims to equip learners with effective skills for writing academic reports where presentations of visual aids such as graphs, charts or diagrams are commonly required. The grammar and reading subjects also emphasize language skills and knowledge that students need for academic contexts. Textbooks for both of the subjects are also topic-based and students focus on one or two specific topics for each week. Learning content in the presentation skills subject, however, was organized on the basis of skills and sequenced in a way that helps students gradually develop understanding and skills for designing and presenting an effective academic presentation. Learning, practicing and evaluating, therefore, seemed to be integrated on an on-going basis in this course.

One of the most important indications for teaching in the program is the integration of content within and between different subjects. While the program allows teachers with sufficient freedom to make changes or adjustments to the teaching content, they are required to stay aligned with overall objective of the program. The expected proficiency levels for students' outcomes also need to be referred to in changes making. Additionally, although each subject seems to be separately taught and its content appeared to be clearly bounded, it is strongly emphasized that sufficient attention should be paid to the integration among different teaching content.

4.2 Students' evaluation of the usefulness of the EFP for their EMI courses

Table 2 below shows student participants' evaluation of the EFP at the university being studied. In general, most of the items received approximately 50% of agreement and 10% of disagreement.

The item that received the highest proportion of agreement is Item 13, "*Presentation skills gained from EFP are very useful for me to follow EMI courses*". In other words, among the eight courses in the EFP, presentation skills course is the one that the students appreciated the most. This could result from the fact that making presentations is a common classroom activity in EMI courses. Since both foreign and Vietnamese lecturers are encouraged to implement learner-centered teaching approaches in the EMI courses, students are usually required to search for information, read books and make a presentation on the topic that their lecturers assign. Therefore, students may find that the knowledge and skills of public speaking that they gained from the EFP is the most helpful because of its practicality and applicability.

For the overall evaluation of the EFP, 50.4% of student respondents agreed that the EFP helps them study their EMI courses with ease, 13.9% disagreed and 35.7% chose the neutral option. In other words, only half of the students in the current study believed that the whole EFP could prepare them well for the EMI courses. This finding may come from the fact that students' entrance EPL varies from one student to another and thus, students with lower EPL may have found the 390 hours in the EFP not enough for them to gain sufficient language knowledge and skills to attend EMI courses.

Table 2: Students' evaluation of the EFP

Item (n = 115)	Agree %	Disagree %	Neutral %
1. The EFP helps me to study my EMI courses with ease.	50.4	13.9	35.7
2. Reading skills gained from the EFP help me to read my EMI materials easily.	46.1	17.4	36.5
3. Speaking skills in the EFP help me to communicate with teachers and friends in EMI classrooms.	58.3	11.3	30.4
4. Speaking skills in the EFP help me to discuss issues in EMI courses easily.	33.9	16.5	49.6
5. Listening skills in the EFP help me understand the EMI lectures.	50.5	6.1	43.5
6. Listening skills in the EFP helps me to understand the EMI lectures easily.	45.6	11.4	43
7. Writing skills in the EFP helps me complete the writing assignments in EMI courses.	37.7	23.7	38.6
8. Grammatical knowledge in the EFP helps me to properly write my EMI assignments.	50.5	17.4	32.2
9. Grammatical knowledge in EFP helps me to speak English correctly when discussing issues in EMI courses.	45.2	14.8	40
10. English vocabulary gained from EFP makes it easy for me to understand, write, and exchange ideas in EMI courses.	39.1	20.9	40
11. Pronunciation lessons in EFP make it easy for me to understand teachers and classmates in EMI courses.	53.9	9.6	36.5
12. Pronunciation lessons in EFP help me communicate and discuss successfully in EMI courses.	36.8	8.8	54.4
13. Presentation skills gained from EFP are very useful for me to follow EMI courses.	78.3	2.9	18.8

Regarding the items related to the four skills of reading, speaking, listening and writing, the two items that received the most agreement from the student participants are Item 3, "*Speaking skills in the EFP make it easy for me to communicate with teachers and friends in EMI classrooms.*" and Item 5, "*Listening skills in the EFP help me understand the EMI lectures*", with 58.3% and 50.5% of agreement respectively. Meanwhile, their two related items, namely Item 4, "*Speaking skills in the EFP help me to discuss issues in EMI courses easily.*" and Item 6, "*Listening skills in the EFP helps me to understand the EMI lectures easily.*" received lower percentages of agreement, with 33.9% and 45.6%, respectively. These results reveal that about half of student participants agree that the EFP could help them speak and listen in EMI courses, but smaller proportions found that they could do these activities easily.

With regard to the two skills of reading and writing, more student participants agreed that the EFP was helpful to them in the former than the latter, with 46.1% agreed that "*Reading skills gained from the EFP help me to read my EMI materials easily.*" and

37.7% agreed that *"Writing skills in the EFP helps me complete the writing assignments in EMI courses."* This is logical since writing is a productive skill and thus usually more difficult than receptive skill as reading. For example, Mourssi (2013) states that writing is considered as a complex cognitive activity requiring learners to pay more attention to context, word choice, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, and organization of ideas. In addition, it has long been acknowledged that for Vietnamese students, especially at high school, writing tends to be regarded as a burden (Tran, 2001, cited in Tran 2007). Huy (2015) also mentioned that many Vietnamese students at high school are not aware of the significance of writing skill and the number of high school students that is successful in learning writing is too small. To make the matter worse, writing is likely to be neglected not only by many Vietnamese high schoolers but also some Vietnamese teachers because writing skills are not included in the high school graduation exam. With such an EFL context in Vietnam, it is understandable why the writing skills provided during the 60 hours of the EFP cannot provide enough linguistic support for students in their EMI courses.

With respect to the language knowledge (namely grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary) gained from the EFP, the two items that received the most agreement from the respondents are Item 11, *"Pronunciation lessons in EFP make it easy for me to understand teachers and classmates in EMI courses."* and Item 8, *"Grammatical knowledge in the EFP helps me to properly write my EMI assignments."* with 53.9% and 50.5% of agreement. In other words, students found the knowledge they gained from the forty-five-hour grammar course helpful to fulfill their writing assignments. In addition, the same grammar course was agreed by 45.2% of student respondents that it was useful for them to speak proper English when discussing issues in EMI courses (Item 9). However, a much lower proportion of responses agreed that the pronunciation lessons help students communicate and discuss successfully in EMI courses (Item 12), with only 36.8% of agreement and 54.4% of neutral answer. These findings reveal that students perceived pronunciation more helpful to their listening skills than their speaking skills. This could be inferred that when students learn to pronounce the words and phrases more accurately, they will improve their ability to understand English utterances at the same time. Nevertheless, the pronunciation knowledge itself is not enough in deciding the success of an oral conversation since there are many other factors involved such as

vocabulary, content knowledge, communicative strategies and so on.

Among the 13 items of the questionnaire, Item 10, *"English vocabulary gained from EFP makes it easy for me to understand, write, and exchange ideas in EMI courses."* received the lowest level of agreement. This is in line with the claim of Cummins (2000, 2008), Doiz *et al.* (2013), and Jon and Kim (2011) that general English language knowledge is different from academic language knowledge. Therefore, vocabulary gained from the EFP may support students for only communicating their daily and common messages rather than those that required terminology of their field. This, however, could be overcome when students accumulate more field-specific lexis in their EMI courses.

5 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Although the EFP in the current study has been planned and designed carefully with the aim of supporting the students in the advanced program, the findings revealed that only half of students found it helpful for them to follow their EMI courses. Therefore, different measures should be considered to enhance the current EFP's effectiveness. First and foremost, students should be classified according to their ELP levels so that weaker students will be given a tailor-made teaching curriculum with more support and care from English teachers in the EFP. This will help reduce the gap between good and weak students when they start their EMI courses in terms of ELP. Second, tutoring sections like the ones in the study of Chang, *et al.*, 2017) should be created to help students during the first two years of their EMI study. Experienced teachers will be made available during their office hours to help EMI students deal with the language-related difficulties that they encounter in their EMI courses. Last but not least, teaching materials should be incorporated with field-specialized lexis so that students find their EFP lessons helpful not only in improving their language skills but also in enlarging their field-specific lexis knowledge.

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