

## ***English as a Medium of Instruction at Tertiary Education System in Vietnam***

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This article critically examines a number of aspects of using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Vietnam. It draws from a wide range of literature in different contexts. In the light of document analysis, the article aims to address such issues as whether EMI at HEIs ensures students' acquisition of language skills and subject content, whether EMI benefits a majority of people in the country, and whether it marginalizes disadvantaged students from an equal chance to accredited HEIs. It is concluded that although EMI proposed at HEIs in Vietnam is considered a timely and wise response to globalization and regionalization and as a solution meeting socio-economic and political requirements in the new era, its implementation is a long way off. For this project to be successful, its feasibility and other interfering factors at macro and micro levels are to be carefully considered or else foreseeable failures will inflict long-lasting detrimental effects on the stability and development of the country politically, socio-linguistically and economically.

**Key words: English, medium of instruction, language-in-education policy, EMI)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Government of Vietnam is devoted to enhancing its human resources in the age of global integration, technological advances and internationalization. With the Prime Minister's recent approval of the Ministry of Education and

Training (MOET)'s project entitled "Teaching and learning foreign languages in the National Education System, period 2008 – 2020", political will for such a move is obviously indicated. The project outlines goals, tasks, solutions and plans for implementation of teaching and learning a foreign language within the education system at every school and training institution. This means most Vietnamese youth who graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities are proficient in a foreign language and use it fluently for work and study in an integrated and multi-cultural environment by the year 2020. Accordingly, the specific goals for the project include:

- Implementing a ten-year education program wherein foreign language is enforced as compulsory for grade school starting grade 3. From 2010 – 2011, the program implemented language teaching in accord with new curriculum for about 20% of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders and will gradually expand the scale to about 70% by the school year 2015 – 2016, aiming to reach 100% in the school year 2018 – 2019.
- Implementing a foreign language enhancement training program for vocational education which will target about 10% of students from different training centers and professional vocation training schools in the school year 2010 – 2011, increasing to 60% by the school year 2015 – 2016 and eventually achieving 100% of students in the school year 2019 -2020.
- Implementing a foreign language enhancement training program for undergraduate education (for both foreign language specialization institutions and normal institutions). This targets about 10% of students from different colleges, and universities in the school year 2010 – 2011, increasing to 60% in school year 2015 – 2016 and eventually reaching 100% in the school year 2019 – 2020.
- Renovating the tasks of teaching and learning foreign languages within regular programs with content and training curriculum that is suitable for different learning and training levels. This aims to contribute positively to the enrichment and upgrading of language capacity for human resources, such as staff, officials, etc; and to

diversify studying methods in order to meet learners' needs (MOET, 2008)

The project also constructs the six levels of the language proficiency framework. These 6 levels (i.e., 1 is ranked as the lowest and 6 as the highest) are compatible with those of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to define learners' language competency across different education levels, for example, level 1 is for primary school students, level 2 for secondary schools and vocational training students, and level 3 for high schools and undergraduates. For the implementation, the project is executed in three main phases. Phase 1, 2008–2010, prepares conditions for writing and piloting a new language program and spreading it to general school levels. Phase 2, 2011–2015, aims for widespread implementation of a ten-year language program (starting from Grade 3) for all education levels as well as intensive language training program for different training degrees. Phase 3, 2016–2020, continues the implementation of the ten-year language program nationwide and of intensive language programs to all educational institutions in the national system.

Noticeably, in phase 2 (i.e., 2011- 2015 period), the project proposes the implementation of teaching in foreign languages for some basic subjects, sectors and for intensive training in some strategic sectors in senior year. The recommended language is English, hereafter called English as a medium of instruction or EMI. This is to start with about 20% of students from national universities, provincial universities and other strategic universities (hereafter called higher education institutions or HEIs), then increase gradually every year until the year 2020 when all HEIs have intensive language training programs.

The proposal of EMI at HEIs is believed to remarkably improve students' language competence and enable them to use English as an effective means of communication in the workplace of the 21st century. However, the project also encounters a number of criticisms from concerned local educators, policy-makers, and teachers. Some are even skeptical of the feasibility of the plan.

This article critically examines the relevance of the controversial issue of

EMI at HEIs in Vietnam by drawing from a wide range of literature and from other similar contexts. In particular, the article addresses the following questions on the prospective implementation of EMI:

- (1) Whether or to what extent is the proposed EMI likely to ensure students' acquisition of language skills as well as subject content?
- (2) To what extent is the proposed EMI likely to impact the society socio-linguistically, economically, and politically?

### **Language Planning and Language in Education**

The concepts of language planning and language-in-education planning are different. According to Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), the former is defined as “a body of ideas, laws and regulations, change rules, beliefs, and practices intended to achieve a planned change in the language use in one or more communities” (p. 3). In this sense, the macro level is responsible for language planning to respond to such national goals as modernizing language to cope with advanced technology, standardizing language for underlying political incentives, or to achieve unification among other ethnic minorities within a nation. On the other hand, language –in- education planning is understood as “a subset of language planning, [and] is a part of human resource development planning, being invoked in the interests of modernization and community development” (Kaplan & Baldauf Jr, 1997, p. 126). Unlike language planning, the scope of language-in-education planning is narrower as it “substantially involves only the formal educational structure” (Kaplan & Baldauf Jr, 1997, p. 123). Some scholars name language- in-education as “acquisition planning” (Cooper, 1989).

Choosing a language as a medium of instruction, which is part of the language-in-education policy, is not a novel issue as it has been discussed and studied worldwide, especially in the countries where multilingualism exists with diverse peoples and multi-ethnic groups such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Canada, Hong Kong, etc. The selection of medium of

instruction is sensitive in these countries because it profoundly impacts on political, economic, and sociolinguistic aspects of a country and may “lead to war and bloodshed” (Tsui & Tollefson, 2004, p. 4) if ill-managed.

Unlike other countries in the region and in the world, Vietnam does not encounter tribulations of language policy. Although there are 54 distinct peoples scattered across the entire country, the Kinh people makes up to 90% of the population (with more than 86 millions). Therefore, in reality, Vietnam is generally considered a linguistically homogenous country (Vang, 2004). Since its independence in 1945, Quoc Ngu (Vietnamese) has been chosen as the national language and has been used as medium of education to promote literacy (Goh & Bang, 2004; Wright, 2002). The language policy has stabilized since then and fulfilled its roles as building the national identity, achieving the nation’s education goals, and maintaining the socio-political stability and unity of the country. A milestone of language in education in Vietnam is when the Education Law came into effect in 2005, whereby “Vietnamese is the official language to be used in schools and other educational institutions” {*Article 7.1–Education Law (MOET, 2005)*}. To elaborate on this, Vietnamese was proclaimed as the medium of instruction at all levels of the national education system, tertiary included.

### **Vietnamese Higher Education in the New Epoch**

Gill (2004) proposes that tertiary education is the “major means of meeting human resource needs” (p. 139) . In Vietnam, the ruling Communist party, the government and MOET consider education one of the national priorities in building and developing the nation, especially at the tertiary level. The responsibilities of HEIs are defined as follows:

*to provide high quality human resources in line with the socio-economic structure of the industrialization and modernization of the nation; enhance the competitiveness in fair co-operation for Vietnam in its international economic integration; to facilitate the expansion of*

*post secondary education through diversification of educational programs on the basis of a path-way system that is suitable for the structure of development, careers and employment, local and regional human resource needs and the training capacities of education institutions; to increase the appropriateness of the training to the employment needs of the society, the ability to create jobs for oneself and for others (MOET, 2006).*

In 1986, the Communist party decided to eradicate neo-Stalinist policy and stepped into the so-called “doi moi” (renovation) period (Lammert, 1999). Since then, Vietnam has comprehensively changed politically and economically. After 10 years of doi moi, Vietnam openly collaborated with “non-communist regimes on an unprecedented scale” (Wright, 2002, p. 238). As a result of this liberalization, the flow of investment capital from Western and regional countries into Vietnam increased exponentially. International relations of Vietnam had gained stunning achievements with the development and establishment of trade relations with more than 100 countries in the world. These accomplishments, nevertheless, posed two major burdens as pointed out by Dung (1998 cited in Wright, 2002): “the lack of knowledge on business practices, laws and a poor knowledge of foreign languages are the main reasons many people fail to perform in foreign companies” (p. 239).

The first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been a period of accelerating national industrialization and modernization in Vietnam (MOFA, 2006). This era has witnessed a rapid shift from the domestic economy to the regional and international economy. A number of foreign enterprises, corporations and international organizations have chosen Vietnam as a potential destination for their investment or establishment of representative offices. Also, with the attainment of full membership in such trade organizations as APTA, APEC, ASEAN or WTO, Vietnam has become internationally prominent. Suffice it to say that the external expansion of trade relations has led the country to become more deeply involved in the processes of globalization. However, in the new era, HEIs encounter two main challenges, namely, the pressures of

globalization and internationalization, and the tough competition among HEIs themselves.

Block and Cameron (2002 cited in Coleman, 2006) assert that globalization is a complex phenomenon with both positive and negative impacts, embracing economics, culture, identity, politics and technology. In the same vein, Altack and Knight (2007) admit the effects of globalization include “the integration of research, the use of English as the lingua franca for scientific communication, the growing international labor market for scholars and scientists, the growth of communications firms and of multi-national and technology publishing, and the use of information technology” (p. 291).

With such radical changes, human resources need to be equipped with new skills to meet social demands in the modern world. Tsui and Tollefson (2007) employ the concept of “global literacy skills” to refer to two inseparable mediation tools, namely, technology and English. They also emphasize that “in order to respond to the rapid changes brought about by the globalization, all countries have been trying to ensure that they are adequately equipped with these two skills” (p. 1). Therefore, it can be concluded that English is an important language that students should be proficient in the new millennium. Fortunately, Vietnamese students are highly motivated to learn English and recognize that a good command of English is an important tool in the era of globalization to seek employment and advance their profession in the future (Thin, 1999)

Moreover, domestic HEIs have recently increased dramatically over the two recent decades. In 1987, there were only 101 universities and colleges (63 universities and 38 colleges). This number increased to 376 (150 universities and 226 colleges) in 2009. More recent statistics for 2009 – 2011 disclose the number of universities and colleges in Vietnam is more than 400. Noticeably, a number of Vietnamese institutions have recently set up an array of joint programs with foreign universities: Hanoi School of Business in partnership with University of Hawaii MBA program; National Economics University with Washington State University MBD program; Hanoi University of Technology with Clear Lake undergraduate degree; International College of I.T &

Management in collaboration with Troy State University undergraduate degree (IIE, 2004). In addition, there are a number of 100% foreign owned universities in Vietnam such as the Royal Melbourne International Technology University in Vietnam, the German University, and the British University. The programs these institutions offer are in English.

Hence, with the increase in the number of domestic HEIs and the appearance of international institutions, joint programs will create diverse opportunities for learners to access higher education. However, this also imposes strong competition between domestic HEIs which offer the course in Vietnamese and foreign universities and joint programs which offer English taught courses in the local context.

These pressures, indisputably, place domestic HEIs in a dilemma of “change” or “perish”. If domestic HEIs opt for the first alternative, it means that HEIs in Vietnam have to renovate their systems to compete with their overseas counterparts and with other members within the HEIs system themselves to attract learners. In this sense, many HEIs select EMI as one of the panaceas to improve the quality of teaching and learning and produce competent labor forces for the industrialization and modernization of the country and to compete with other HEIs.

Therefore, in the new era, the arena of language policy in education in Vietnam, which has been rather stable for a long time at HEIs, is reconsidered. The incentives for employing EMI at HEIs, as discussed previously are, after all, to produce a future labor force which is sufficiently qualified in terms of professional knowledge and foreign language competence to meet tough human resource requirements in the new epoch and also to upgrade the teaching quality in HEIs.

### **EMI at Tertiary Level in Other Contexts**

In reality, the concept of EMI is, as stated earlier, not new in the world. A review of literature indicates that EMI has been called different names such as content and language integrated teaching (CLIT), content-based teaching

(CTB), immersion or language as a medium of instruction. EMI means learners acquire both the subject content and target language in a natural setting (Sert, 2008).

Numerous empirical studies have been conducted to evaluate the feasibility of using a non-native language to instruct at HEIs in different contexts at the micro level and various and contradictory results have been found. Specifically, researchers aim to explore students' and teachers' perspectives about EMI. For example, in Europe and North America, CLIT has proved its successes as it is claimed to improve the students' target language proficiency without swaying their acquisition of the subject content (Coleman, 2006). In addition, empirical studies demonstrate students' preferences for and satisfaction with EMI (Sylvén, 2006 cited in Coleman, 2006). Learners are motivated and become interested in learning in the CTB classrooms (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). In contrast, other contexts such as South Africa, EMI is believed to negatively impact on students' academic achievement (Leibowitz, 2005). Or in Tanzania, EMI is reported to make students have difficulty communicating with their professors (Dickens, 1987 cited in Sert, 2008). Even in Europe, where EMI is deemed efficient at HEIs, few studies contradict this fact and there are reports of some concerns for reconsidering the effectiveness of EMI. For instance, a recent empirical study by Kilickaya (2006) about the instructors' attitudes towards EMI in Turkish universities shows that instructors favor using the mother tongue for instruction rather than using English. This preference is explained by the argument that giving instruction in Turkish will facilitate students to grasp the subject content better. Also, Turkish instructors are concerned about the translation of specialist terms, their students' participation in the lectures, their students' language competency and the availability of bilingual teaching resources in Turkish and in English.

EMI at HEIs also raises the question of inequality in the society because certain groups in the community are at the fringe of the socio-economic and political spectrum. Tanzania is an example. Neke (2005) argues that EMI influences the distribution of power and resources in Tanzania, restricting opportunities of a majority of the poor population who are unable to use

English for accessing professional knowledge, skills, employment opportunities and higher education which they equally deserve. As a result, these people remain poor peasants and unskilled workers. Also, EMI encourages elitism, that is, it benefits a minority of those who have the ability to use English and thus gives them the opportunity to hold power and influential positions in the society. In this sense, EMI marginalizes the poor and creates barriers to have a better life as opposed to the middle or upper classes in Tanzania.

The case of India is another example of inequality resulting from EMI. Opponents of this policy in India argue that EMI will benefit students whose families are rich and have used English as a second language for at least one preceding generation and disadvantage students that fail to have had access knowledge resources encoded in English (Annamalai, 2004). Due to the poor language proficiency, these students will receive poor education with inadequate understanding of the subjects. The former kind of students, however, are the minority when compared to the latter. Another threat is the perpetuation of “an unequal linguistic dichotomy in terms of language ideology” (Annamalai, 2004, p. 190). English is likely to be regarded as the medium for modernity, advanced technology and progressive society whereas Indian languages can be portrayed as the vehicles for “traditions and as instruments that fulfill emotional needs and maintain cultural values and practices” (Annamalai, 2004, p. 190).

Regarding Asian contexts, the adoption of EMI at HEIs is considered the “fashion policy” (Byun, et al., 2011) to attract more students. However, reports on the implementation of EMIs reflect both positive and negative outcomes. For example, in Korea, although EMI is proposed to improve students’ language proficiency, students of English-medium programs receive less support and instruction from professors (Byun, et al., 2011). These conclusions are similar to the Taiwanese context. In their studies, Chang (2010) and Wu (2006) reveal positive improvements on EMI students’ language competency though they also indicate that these students encounter difficulties understanding the subject content and expressing opinions fluently. Noticeably,

in such multi-language countries as Malaysia and Philippines, the implementation of EMI seems to be top-down with the transmission of directives from higher levels to the implementers (Gill, 2006). Take Malaysia as an example; EMI was proposed in this nation in 2005. However, the introduction of this language policy was deemed sudden (Gill, 2006; Zaaba, et al., 2011) and policy makers only “utilize the beliefs, values and interests of the individuals responsible for the policy” (Zaaba, et al., 2011, p.163). As a result, many scholars and educators in Malaysia doubt the success of the implementation of EMI because of the lack of clear direction (Gill, 2006).

It can be concluded from the above previous studies that to implement EMI successfully, the role of implementers (school managers, students, and teachers) and community attitudes are essential. Also, EMI has a vast influence on aspects of life as it determines who will participate in power and wealth (Tsui & Tollefson, 2004). Each government should, therefore, be cautious of planning and implementing language policy in general and language in education policy in particular as the policy made will profoundly impact on the development, the stability, the identity and justice of the nation.

### **EMI at HEIs in Vietnam: Questions to Be Addressed**

Regarding the Vietnamese context, although the idea of using EMI at HEIs is considered a timely and wise decision of the government and MOET as a response to the globalization and regionalization, its implementation is a long way off. It is a truism that there is always a gap between an idea and putting it into operation. However, the feasibility of this project must be considered carefully or some aspects may have long-lasting negative consequences to the stability and development of the country politically, socio-linguistically and economically. Such issues as whether EMI guarantees the students’ acquisition of both language skills and subject contents at university levels, whether EMI imposes impacts on the inequality among different regions, that is, mountainous versus plain areas, whether EMI benefits a majority or a minority of people in the country, whether EMI marginalizes the disadvantaged students

from enjoying an equal chance to a qualified HEI, whether EMI negatively influences the development of the mother tongue if the future generation rejects L1 and prefers L2 should be raised prior to the implementation of the project.

The term of EMI is vague. As a first step, it should be clarified to reach a convergent understanding in Vietnamese pedagogy. In fact, this notion can be interpreted in practice different dimensions. For example, EMI may mean teaching all subjects in the curriculum in English including physical education, military education, Communism, Marxism, Ho Chi Minh thoughts. EMI may mean only professional courses are taught in English and other courses are free to use Vietnamese for instruction. In addition, EMI may mean giving lectures in English, yet students using Vietnamese to communicate with peers or lecturers and submitting assignments in Vietnamese. These different interpretations may bring about different results.

A number of potential difficulties have arisen when implementing the proposal. The issues of EMI at HEIs have, unfortunately, been totally neglected in the literature in the local context. Almost no scientific research on this topic in Vietnam has been published so far. It is reasonable to assume that the implementation of any proposal should be based on firm theoretical foundations or conceptual models which have been proved by empirical studies rather than on subjective determination of a few top leaders. Therefore, contextual perspectives need careful consideration. Kaplan and Baldauf (1997; 2005) contend that the success of language -in -education policy depends much on bottom up efforts. They also suggest these following policy objectives to be deemed at the implementation level of language policy in education including access, personnel, curriculum, methods and materials, resourcing, community and evaluation, which can be summarized in the table:

TABLE 1

**Language-in- Education Policy Goals (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2005, p. 1014)**

<b>Language- in-education policy and planning goals</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Access Policy	<i>Who learns, what, and when?</i>
Personnel Policy	<i>Where do teachers come from and how are they trained?</i>
Curriculum Policy	<i>What is the objective in language teaching / planning?</i>
Methods and Materials Policy	<i>What methodology and what materials are employed over what durations?</i>
Resourcing Policy	<i>How is everything paid for?</i>
Community Policy	<i>Who is consulted / involved?</i>
Evaluation Policy	<i>What is the connection between assessment on the one hand and methods and materials that define the educational objectives on the other?</i>

Towards the success of meeting the aforementioned goals, Kaplan and Baldauf (2005) propose that success “largely depends on policy decisions related to the teachers, the courses of study and materials and the resources to be made available” (p.1014). However, these areas are developed differently in a particular nation “depending on how that nation’s education system operates” (Kaplan & Baldauf 1997, p. 217).

In the light of Kaplan and Baldauf (1997; 2005)’s suggestions, in the following part, the article presents the current situations and critiques the feasibility of the project in terms of teachers and students, curriculums, and possible impacts on society. Although it has been previously mentioned that the project implementation should be based on publicized empirical or scientific studies, such evidence is absent in the local setting. Therefore, most of the data for the argument is drawn from mass media sources i.e. newspapers, conferences, and government documents which are not tested empirically. The aim is to sketch a picture of how HEIs in Vietnam have been prepared for a mass implementation of EMI by the year 2020.

## **Student and Teacher Issues**

### *Situation*

Students, who will be directly influenced by this policy, will be investigated first. Vietnamese students are acknowledged to be diligent, talented, demanding, eager for knowledge, and ambitious. These good traits do not, however, guarantee their acquisition of the subject content if it is instructed in English. The success of acquisition depends on a number of factors of which a good command of English is a must.

Critical examination of the learners' language competency in country reveals that Vietnamese students are poor in English. Local mass media report that English skills among undergraduates are a problem. A great number of graduates cannot communicate in English. They stammer and stutter in speaking after nearly 10 years studying English at the secondary education level.

In a notable study to assess Vietnamese students' English skill, Anh and Hanh (2004) conducted research on 1000 students in five major universities in Ho Chi Minh City – the largest city of Vietnam. They found that Vietnamese students' language competency was insufficient to express their ideas or to communicate in everyday conversation. On average, second year students attained a level of 360 – 370 TOEFL (paper test). Upon graduating (fourth year), they only achieved a TOFEL score of 400. Therefore, with such impairment in English language competency, learners would be unable to understand materials from their lectures in English.

The topic of teachers who will instruct and deliver subject content in English will be investigated next. It is axiomatic that the teaching force in HEIs is evaluated unqualified enough in terms of professional knowledge and language competency.

Bain (2004) identifies characteristics of a good college teacher to include extremely good knowledge of his/her subject, possession of a long and impressive publication list, good ability to do scientific research, etc. However,

most local researchers and educators admit that the teaching staffs in HEIs in Vietnam have both a shortage and weakness of professional knowledge. For example, the ex-president of Vietnam National University, based in Hanoi, Nguyen Quang Dao claims that the teaching staff of HEIs are bookish, poor in professional knowledge and skills, lag behind the development of the modern world, are too old and suffer from inertia to keep up with the changing world (Dao, 2004).

Recent scholarship surrounding HEIs discloses the shortage of lecturers who have doctorate degrees. At HEIs now, less than 15% of lecturers achieve such academic levels. In addition, teaching staff at HEIs are currently in high demand as a consequence of the booming increase in HEI numbers from 101 institutions (in 1987) to more than 400 (in 2010). Lacking lecturers, most of the HEIs employ new graduates to fill their positions. The drawback is that these lecturers are inexperienced in teaching, developing curriculum and materials, and need years of probation to be good teachers or be able to deliver the lectures independently. It is also noted that a number of young teachers lose their commitment to teaching and conducting research because they have taken so many extra jobs for their survival as their low salary at HEIs is insufficient to support the family (Hayden & Thiep, 2007). An article in a local newspaper mentioning the case of a young lecturer in Ho Chi Minh City should be pondered. He states that his monthly salary is embarrassingly low (roughly 100 USD per month) when compared to what his friends make at foreign companies (more than 1000 USD per month); and that he is ashamed of this (VietnamnetBridge, 2007). Some young teachers admit that they are too busy with extra work and have no time for doing scientific research (VietnamnetBridge 2007).

Considering lecturers' language competency, few lecturers are proficient enough to communicate in English verbally. Due to language incompetence, a majority of academic staff are unable to read professional materials or journals in English to update their knowledge. Recent statistics show that on average, one Vietnamese professor only publishes a 0.58 article in world-recognized refereed journals during a 10 year period (1996–2005) (VietnamnetBridge,

2008). There are many reasons for this situation of which poor English ability and inadequate knowledge of the profession are the most dominant. In fact, a small number who gained their scholarship qualifications overseas are good at English. However, some concerns have arisen with these teachers if they give lectures in English, including their level of proficiency (pronunciation, grammar, structures, and language skills), their ability to deliver lectures in English comprehensively and intelligibly, their expressions of ideas or responses in English, and their interactions in English with students. As a result, students may have difficulty receiving knowledge delivered by these overseas-educated lecturers.

The shortage of teachers with proficient English competency can be filled with the so-called “stop gap measure” (Kaplan & Baldauf Jr, 1997). However, this solution is not effective. Unlike teaching at a low education level, HEIs require lecturers to have an insight of the knowledge of the field with the ability to convey specialist terms comprehensively to students. If teachers are not fluent in English, it is hard to help learners acquire the full subject content.

### *Critique*

Since both teachers and students are not proficient in English, the effectiveness of EMI will be compromised. With the impairment of language skills and insufficient professional knowledge, teachers are unable to deliver lectures in English. Likewise, students with poor language skills are unable to absorb the subject content. Regarding this concern, Vinke (1995 cited in Klaassen & Graaff, 2001) identified potential problems that arise when both teachers and students are not proficient in English. For the teachers who are familiar with delivering the lectures in their mother tongue to native speaker students, they now have to use English to instruct the subject content which will lead to a lack of clarity, problematic expressions, and a lot of redundancy. In addition, no guarantee is made for good pronunciation if lecturers are not proficient in English. Such common problems as fluency, accent, intonation, and mispronunciation are unavoidable. Added to this, didactical skills are likely

to insufficiently convey the contents of the materials and lectures. Teachers may deliver a monologue, lack rapport with students, avoid classroom interaction, and lack a sense of humor in the class. Insufficient language competency also makes teachers give shorter, less elaborative presentations, or fail to provide enough examples to define or elicit concepts. Consequently, students may feel confused and stressed due to a large amount of unclear information.

In a study about students' perceptions, problems and strategies in comprehending lectures in another language, Flowerdew and Miller (1992) conducted research with 30 Hong Kong Cantonese speaking students during a 10-week lecture course of the first semester. They found that students encounter three typical problems while accessing lectures. First, teachers' delivery speed is too fast for them to keep up with the content. Second, new vocabulary, concepts and terminologies hinder them from understanding the lectures and thus de-motivate them to learn. Finally, listening to lectures in a language in which students are less proficient makes it difficult for them to concentrate on the lesson. Therefore, they are likely to miss the main points of the lectures and fall into day-dreaming.

## **Curriculum Issues**

### *Situation*

Besides, teaching methodology, learning materials and curriculum are substantive issues that need addressing when applying EMI. There is a consensus that teaching methodology in HEIs in Vietnam is conventional, inappropriate, and passive or monologue (Hayden & Thiep, 2007). In an article reported in the local newspaper, Dao (2004) criticizes teaching methodology at HEIs since it follows the passive style without developing learners' creative and critical thinking. In the classroom, teachers are preachers and students are followers. Oanh and Hien (2006) propose that memorization is the dominant learning strategy of Vietnamese students when they learn English. Curriculum

at HEIs is widely acknowledged to be outdated and theory-based, rigid and impractical (Dao, 2004). However, the process of curriculum innovation is slow and bureaucratic (Hayden & Thiep, 2007). Materials for teaching and learning and for reference at HEIs are limited in quantity and most of them are in Vietnamese. What is concerning about this is that when EMI is used, will these materials be translated into English or remain in Vietnamese or be rewritten in English?. If they are translated into English, how would they be translated to guarantee the originality of the versions? Also, the cost of reprinting and translation needs to be considered.

### *Critique*

Proponents of EMI can argue that students' poor language competency can be improved by attending additional English courses before gaining admission to HEIs as overseas universities often do this with their international students. If teachers are insufficiently qualified to give lectures in English and curriculum, materials or teaching methods are sub-standard, then these resources could be completely imported from advanced countries. However, others argue that these solutions are not feasible. First, the importation of these resources is proportional to the tuition fees as the government cannot subsidize HEIs in importing these resources. Tuition fees that are too high will cause students to decide not to enroll in these English-taught programs. The reputation of domestic HEIs is not strong enough to attract students. If prospective students face the dilemma between an international standard university (e.g. RMIT) and a domestic university with almost the same amount of tuition fees, they will opt for the former.

Added to this, importing teaching methodology from Western countries is not a wise solution. In his book, Holliday (2005) identifies typical traits of East Asian students which are in contrast with Western students such as dependent, collectivist, passive, undemocratic, reluctant to challenge authority, static, uncritical and so forth (p. 20). Such perceived traits lead those with a universalist stance to claim that Asian students are deficient in critical thinking

skills (Stapleton, 2001). Other scholars who support this view believe that under the influence of Confucian Heritage Culture (Chiu, 2009; Shaw, 1999; Song, 1995), Asian students in general and Vietnamese students in particular, tend to maintain harmony and avoid conflicts or debates with others. These traits negatively impact on Asian students' verbalizing critical thinking (Chiu, 2009) as they are passive receivers in reading the literature. Books are a symbol of standard, knowledge, wisdom and truth. Hence, learners have to accept everything stated in the book and are not allowed to question or judge the teachers or the book authors of the information (Song, 1995). In other words, questioning authority is, in any manner, regarded as disrespectful, un-Asian, un-Confucian (Shaw, 1999). Therefore, western teaching methodology may not work as effectively as expected in a Vietnamese teaching context because of different norms and cultures. If western teaching methodology were to be effectively applied in Vietnam, a systematic process of material adaptation, and teacher training in both language and profession would be required. Finally, this would not be easily achievable in a short time.

Also, imported materials which are written for English native speaking students with a certain level of language complexity will cause difficulties for local students. The question of whether the language in materials should be simplified and how it is simplified is hard to answer. If the language is kept authentic without simplification, learners will have trouble digesting the material and it will de-motivate them to learn. However, if the simplified language is too easy for learners, it may also de-motivate them for not being challenging enough.

Another aspect to be considered is the importation of curriculum. In 2008, MOET had admitted the failure of the so-called "advanced" syllabus - the syllabus which was imported from prestigious universities, including curricula, training, and educational management, especially giving lectures to students in English and considered these HEIs the good models in the national education system – after only three years being implemented in 13 top universities throughout the country (Huong, 2008). However, the exponential decrease in the number of students enrolled in the program confirms its collapse. However,

the reasons for this failure are related to teachers, materials, methodology and facilities. The former Minister of MOET, Nguyen Thien Nhan lamented the lack of qualified lecturers and textbooks. Students complained that the advanced syllabus contrasted with teaching in the Vietnamese traditional way (Huong, 2008) in which reading and note-taking are prevalent. Also, although the lectures were given in English, teachers' poor language competence imposed major limitations on teaching delivery. Oddly enough, some lecturers even gave lectures in Vietnamese for ease when they encountered difficult specialist terms. The problems were not just for the teachers themselves but for the students as well. Due to their limited language skills, students do not dare to share ideas with other classmates or with lecturers. What they do is to sit in a place and listen to the lectures in a passive way (Huong, 2008).

The failure of an advanced program with English as a medium of instruction demonstrates the lack of the feasibility of the project. This failure can be blamed on students and teachers' poor language competence, conventional teaching methodology, and materials. It is better not to repeat a failure of this kind as students are not guinea pigs for educators to test their programs or their policy. Everything needs to be well prepared for such a project before implementing it.

Other concerns to be considered are the use of English after class. With limited contact hours in class, students' language is less likely to improve significantly. Therefore, whether students have opportunities to practice English outside the class should be considered. Unfortunately, such opportunities (i.e. English speaking environment) are limited in Vietnam. Thus, conventional teaching methods and infrequent practice may drive students to memorize the target language rather than to know how to produce it.

### **Socio-economic and Political Impacts**

Inequality is likely to be caused by EMI at HEIs in Vietnam. Like Tanzania and India and other countries in the world, EMI in Vietnam appears to be beneficial to a minority of students, who are financially well-off and have

access to English. A majority of students coming from rural areas (80% of the population of more than 86 million) are marginalized by this policy because of their poor English language competence. These students do not have an equal chance to learn English in private language centers. They acquire English at the pre-tertiary education level. However, their accumulation of English language skills is not sufficient for academic purposes. These disadvantaged students will automatically lose their opportunities to access technology, professional knowledge taught in English, equal employment recruitment, professional development, and the advancement of their careers because of their language deficiencies. Consequently, those who are fluent in English consider themselves to be superior to those who are not. The threat of class discrimination will promote the instability of the country in terms of socio-economic and political perspectives.

Moreover, the question of national identity should also be considered. With EMI at HEIs, and with the preferences of employing those who are fluent in English, it can be wondered whether or not this new trend of favoring English language will make the Vietnamese language a step-child language, or second-class language as opposed to English. This threat is imminent as it is unpredictable what will happen if English is a medium of instruction in the educational system for generations.

### **Other Concerns**

The incentives for teaching subject content in English at HEIs are, in essence, reasonable as they stem from the requirements of the new era, that is, a qualified labor force with a good command of English. However, the time for its implementation should be extended. The time from now to the year 2020 is short. Yet, many issues have to be solved: teacher training, curriculum design, facilities, materials, sociolinguistic surveys, to name a few of them. It is recommended that the government, MOET, and HEIs should sit together, thoughtfully discuss, and evaluate the potential difficulties that may be encountered in the implementation. An ambiguous plan without careful

preparation is likely to result in failure.

Moreover, the dearth of empirical research creates the need to conduct scientific studies on the issue in the local context. Language in education does not occur in a vacuum (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997); rather it is significantly influenced by attitudes of the community towards language teaching, teachers, target language, curriculum and materials. These issues are important to consider prior to the implementation of any policy. Therefore, Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) propose the need to conduct sociolinguistic surveys to explore community attitudes. Presently, a number of foreign universities or joint programs offer English taught courses in Vietnam. It is, therefore, essential to carry out studies to identify students' and teachers' perception of EMI in their program, potential difficulties as opposed to mother tongue instruction; and their own language improvement prior to setting off the adventures. The results of these studies will help policy makers, educational managers, and curriculum developers have insightful perspectives in suggesting solutions for the issues.

## CONCLUSION

In the new era, the Vietnamese education system is in the middle of a crisis. HEIs are studying possible solutions to overcome the situation. However, because of the whole inertia and mazed mechanism which has existed for ages in the education system, it is not easy to get out of the quagmire overnight. Therefore, the experience in Vietnam shows that although choosing EMI is deemed a positive move by MOET and the government to produce qualified human resources for the developmental objectives of the nation as well as to enhance the capacity of competitiveness among other education providers regionally and internationally, sadly enough, this proposal is not likely to become reality in the current context of Vietnam. The fact is, without considering interfering factors while implementing at micro levels, lacking specific and sound strategies in practice, having no detailed preparation, and neglecting contextual issues may result in the collapse of the project.

Consequently, students will not acquire both university subject content and language proficiency as expected. Negative impacts on socio-economy are likely to happen.

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