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Teachers' transformative agency in English-medium instruction in higher education in Vietnam: a cultural-historical theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

Higher education worldwide has witnessed a rapid growth of English-as-a-medium-of-instruction (EMI) courses. Research reported complex challenges teachers encounter in transitioning from using L1 as a medium-of-instruction to EMI and acknowledged the importance of teachers' agency and perceptions. However, little is known about *how* teachers exercise agency to act on demands of EMI teaching and the role their perceptions play in this process. Within EMI research, teacher agency is not always systematically theorised. Adopting a cultural-historical theory perspective, this study explores how Vietnamese EMI teachers exercise agency to act on perceived demands of teaching academic subjects in English. Data included in-depth individual interviews with 15 EMI teachers from ten universities in Vietnam. Findings revealed these teachers exercised their agency in response to what they perceived as *meaningful* and *important* within the broader *societal conditions* for EMI and the particular *activity settings* of their discipline with specific EMI student cohorts. They exercised agency to transform EMI practice to be learner-centred, critical thinking- and content knowledge-focused, and future/outcome-oriented, and through this process also transformed themselves as EMI teachers. Findings have implications for EMI research and practice, and for supporting institutions and teachers embarking on EMI.

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Introduction

The higher education (HE) sector worldwide has witnessed a rapid growth of courses using English-as-a-medium-of-instruction (EMI) in countries where L1 is not English (Aizawa and Rose 2019). EMI is commonly defined 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, 37). This phenomenon has been driven mainly by the internationalisation of HE institutions (HEIs), academic and student mobility, and the spread of English as a global lingua franca (ELF). For universities seeking to internationalise their curriculum, offering courses in English is an effective strategy to make academic programmes accessible to international students (Macaro 2018) while boosting the international profile of HEIs and academics

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(O'Dowd 2018). Although 'research evidence to date is insufficient to assert that EMI benefits language learning' (Macaro et al. 2018, 36), promoting EMI promises potential improvement of domestic students' English language skills and employability prospects, and providing internationalisation at home for them.

Despite the omnipresence of EMI, research has reported complex challenges teachers encounter in transitioning from using L1 as a medium-of-instruction to EMI. Teachers are 'often found unprepared and/or inadequately supported' and face multiple challenges when embarking on EMI (Dang, Bonar, and Yao 2023, 840). These include linguistic challenges in using English in the classroom (Curle et al. 2020), pedagogical challenges in supporting student learning (Sahan, Galloway, and McKinley 2023), lacking resources (Dang, Bonar, and Yao 2024) and workload issues (Macaro et al. 2018). EMI university teachers were 'caught in tensions between competing demands' including teaching, research, and publishing (Yuan 2023, 4). Misalignments between challenges EMI teachers faced and formal professional learning (PL) on offer have also been identified (Dang et al. 2023).

Emergent research reveals the important role teacher agency plays in EMI implementation in various HE contexts (Cheng and Wei 2021; Hopkyns 2023; Manan, Channa, and Haidar 2022). However, except for a few studies (e.g. Ali and Hamid 2018; Dang et al. 2024), not all systematically theorised 'EMI teacher agency' or closely engaged with the concept beyond the level of defining it. The literature also emphasises the need to understand EMI teachers' perceptions in order to support them adequately (Macaro 2018). Teachers' perceptions of EMI, i.e. what EMI means to them, lies at 'the heart of teachers' beliefs about their identity and their attitudes to what responsibility and accountability in their professional role entails' (Macaro 2018, 235). Nevertheless, little is known about *how* EMI teachers exercise agency to act on demands of EMI practice and how their perceptions play in this process.

Adopting a cultural-historical theory (CHT) perspective, this study explores how EMI teachers in HE exercise agency to act on their perceived demands of teaching academic subjects in English by situating the empirical research in Vietnam. As the adoption of EMI in the Vietnamese HE has been recent, Vietnam is a suitable empirical site to explore this topic.

Although 'the term "agency" has a long history and has been examined and theorised from a range of disciplinary perspectives' (Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech 2021, 1), the concept is little theorised within extant research on EMI teacher agency in HE. To theorise teacher agency, this study draws on the works of neo-Vygotskian theorists, particularly Edwards' (2017) work on agency, Hedegaard's (2012a, 2012b) work on motive-orientation and demands of practice, and Stetsenko's (2020) work on transformative activist stance. From this CHT perspective, teacher agency encompasses teachers' subjectivities and deliberate actions to act on new demands, both shaping and being shaped by the environment in which agency unfolds. This perspective is useful to elucidate how teachers in Vietnamese HE exercise agency to act on perceived demands of EMI. Given the focus and theoretical framework, the following questions guided the investigation:

- How do Vietnamese EMI teachers perceive EMI?
- What challenges or demands do they perceive in implementing EMI?
- How do they exercise agency to act on the perceived demands of EMI practice?

Literature review: EMI teacher agency in HE

Although teachers' agency was considered important in EMI implementation in the earlier literature (Dang, Nguyen, and Le 2013), only recently has this topic gained traction in EMI scholarship. A lack of appreciation of the complex demands on EMI teachers may have contributed to this oversight (Dang et al. 2024). The emerging empirical research on EMI teacher agency has focused mainly on school settings, such as in Nepal (Phyak et al. 2022) and Finland (Pappa et al. 2019), and few in HE settings. Research on EMI teacher agency in HE comprises studies conducted in China (Dang et al. 2024; Cheng and Wei 2021), Pakistan (Manan, Channa, and Haidar 2022),

Malaysia (Ali and Hamid 2018), and the UAE (Hopkyns 2023), without any on EMI content teacher agency in Vietnam.

Most studies on EMI teacher agency draw on Language Planning and Policy (LPP) framework (e.g. Cheng and Wei 2021; Hopkyns 2023; Manan, Channa, and Haidar 2022), seemingly coinciding with Macaro and Aizawa's (2022, 1) observation that the field of EMI research 'has been appropriated by academics with an applied linguistics background even though the majority of EMI programmes are taught by non-linguists'. From an LPP perspective, 'agency can be seen as taking the form of a strategy undertaken by an actor to bring about deliberate language change in a community of speakers' (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997, cited in Hopkyns 2023, 74). For example, Cheng and Wei's (2021) study investigates English teachers' agency within Chinese HE. It revealed teachers are the real implementors and micro policymakers in the classroom. Teachers play a central role as LLP agents and 'teachers' beliefs and professional abilities, how they interpret and implement or (re)create policy, and what the policy context is, can together decide the effect and effectiveness of a language education policy' (2021, 119). While LPP perspective is useful in explaining teacher agency in relation to their language-related decision making, particularly in the classroom, it may not be adequate to explain non-language related decision making in which EMI teachers are involved. Prior research with EMI teachers emphasises 'teaching is an immensely complex activity, and many factors other than English proficiency determine success or failure' (Malmström, Pecorari, and Warnby 2023, 14). For such purposes, a cultural-historical perspective on human/teacher agency, which has potential to capture multiple factors and processes beyond language-related ones, would be more relevant for this study. Despite recent developments in cultural-historical theory (CHT) to examine agency in general teacher education (Nguyen and Dang 2021; Edwards 2017), Dang et al.'s (2024) study is the only one that has adopted CHT to explore teacher agency in the Chinese EMI HE context.

Within the paucity of research on EMI teacher agency in HE, only few (Ali and Hamid 2018) either systematically theorise EMI teacher agency or closely engage with the concept. Ali and Hamid's (2018) study revealed how Malaysian EMI teachers, driven by students' learning needs, exercised agency in the form of resistance, accommodation and dedication to make sense of EMI policy. Dang et al. (2024) showed Chinese EMI teachers' agency unfolds in acts to improve their pedagogy and student learning of academic content, but not necessarily to develop students' English proficiency. It found teachers' perceptions of EMI appeared to orientate their agency as they enacted EMI policy. The study calls for further research along this line, taking into account the context of EMI practice.

Prior research has mainly investigated EMI teacher agency at the meso and micro levels of context. For example, Toth and Paulsrud's (2017) study using audio recordings of lessons revealed that language choice in classroom, i.e. translanguaging, always involves agency. It showed as 'teachers ... provide students with the means to make use of all their linguistic resources ... to facilitate both interaction and learning ... agency can also lead to affordances in the classroom' (2017, 205). Manan, Channa, and Haidar (2022) found that teachers 'can create policies of their choice, acting simultaneously as policymakers and implementers' (530) at micro and meso levels. They revealed how Pakistani teachers understand and implement official EMI policy, and address conflicting demands imposed on them. Hopkyns's (2023) study within the UAE HE is one of the few that discussed the roles of macro, meso and micro factors. It identified 'very little choice or agency surrounding MOI in UAE HE for either teachers or students' (80). Although these studies have offered insights into EMI teacher agency, the link between context and agency is not always theorised.

Theoretical framework: EMI teacher agency from a cultural-historical perspective

This study adopts a cultural-historical theory (CHT) perspective for its robust framework to theorise human/teacher agency. As this perspective takes into account subject's perceptions and

intentions, demands of practice, and context, it is relevant to the focus of this investigation. CHT is an umbrella term that encompasses diverse traditions of developmental psychology and theories of human development. These traditions include Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning and development, also referred to as sociocultural theory in the field of applied linguistics (e.g. Lantolf and Thorne 2006). CHT traditions also include Leontiev's and Engeström's iterations of activity theory (Engeström 1999; Hakkarainen 2004; Kaptelinin 2005), also known as cultural-historical activity theory, which evolved from Vygotsky's work and has various traditions within itself (Dang 2013). The integration of these CHT traditions could be flexible to address the intricacies of real-life phenomena (Engeström 1999). Although agency is not inherently a concept explicitly elaborated in Vygotsky's original work (Edwards 2017), it has been theoretically explored from a CHT perspective to guide research in the realms of education and social transformation.

The present study draws specifically on the work of neo-Vygotskian cultural-historical theorists including Edwards' (2015, 2017) work on agency, Stetsenko's (2020) transformative activist stance, and Hedegaard's (2012a, 2012b) motive-orientation and demands of practice, to conceptualise EMI teacher agency and elucidate how EMI teachers in Vietnamese HE exercise agency to act on their perceived demands of EMI. Specifically, teacher agency could be viewed as a process enabling the dialectic between person/teacher/subject and institutional practice (Edwards 2017), oriented by the person's/teacher's motives, driven by demands of practice (Hedegaard 2012a, 2012b), and capable of transforming both the person and practice (Stetsenko 2020). We elaborate on this conceptualisation in the following sections.

'Agency' enabling the person/practice dialectic to transform both person & practice

Our conceptualisation of teacher agency is underpinned by previous theorisations of agency from CHT, drawing on Edwards' and Stetsenko's works. Edwards (2017) conceptualises agency as 'a crucial element in the dialectic of person and practice' that 'may ... unfold when actions are taken in activities ... located in institutional practices' (273), such as EMI practice. Edwards (2017) emphasised the need to 'pay attention to the environment within which agency unfolds' (274). Thus, it is important to investigate EMI teacher agency within its context and institutional practices.

Edwards (2017) argues agency enables the dialectic of person and environment and has several dimensions. First, since without agency there would be 'no dialectic of person and the opportunities and demands of the practices they inhabit', agency is 'intertwined' with responsibility (270). Second, agency involves deliberative actions. People deliberately make choices about the particular practices they identify with, e.g. the choice to use L1 in EMI. Third, agency 'unfolds in the acts that comprise the actions taken in activities ... located within institutional practices and their demands' (271), e.g. EMI practice and its demands. Finally, engagement and commitment are essential dimensions 'to take forward what matters ... within the demands of practice' (272). Agency 'involves being able to interpret events or tasks in increasingly informed ways, as well as being able to respond to them' (272). Edwards (2015) also highlighted the need to 'attend as much to the demands in the practices as the needs of the actor in the practices' (781). Edwards' conceptualisation of agency is helpful for understanding teacher agency in the dialectic of teachers and EMI practice. It is essential to explore what they perceive matters to them in EMI, where they view their responsibilities lie, and what deliberative actions they take to act on what matters to them.

Extending on Edwards' (2015; 2017) work on agency, a transformative activist stance (TAS) helps to 'conceptualis[e] agency within a non-dichotomous, dialectical approach that gives full credit to the social roots of agency' (Stetsenko 2020, 5). To Stetsenko (2020, 5) 'the core elements of TAS ... coalesce on the nexus of social practices of self- and world-making', whereby,

Agency is the process that enacts this nexus of ongoing, ceaseless social-individual transformations whereby people simultaneously, in one process, co-create their world and themselves so that each individual person makes a difference and matters in the totality of social practices.

A TAS acknowledges the purposefulness, future-oriented, and ‘ethico-politically non-neutral’ dimensions of agency in ‘transformative pursuits’ acting on the ‘dynamic and ever-shifting world-in-the-making’ (Stetsenko 2020, 9). This view is essential to research exploring EMI teacher agency, especially given EMI is an evolving phenomenon (Macaro 2018).

Direction of agency: motive-orientation and demands of practice

While Edwards’ (2015, 2017) and Stetsenko’s (2020) work provide a theoretical and philosophical lens to examine teacher agency, Hedegaard’s (2012a, 2012b) work on motive-orientation and demands of practice provides an analytical framework, as empirically demonstrated by Dang et al. (2024). Hedegaard’s cultural-historical wholeness approach helps to illuminate the subject’s intentions and interpretations of the situation, including its demands, the purposeful and future-oriented aspects of agency, whilst acknowledging the role of context, in the sense Stetsenko (2020) refers to as the ‘world-in-the-making’. Subject’s motive-orientation reflects what Edwards (2017) views as what matters for each practitioner. It decides the direction towards which agency is enacted.

Centre to Hedegaard’s conceptualisation, which extends on Vygotsky’s and Leontiev’s works (Hedegaard 2012b), are the inter-related concepts of motive, motive orientation, activity settings, demands of practice and social situation of development. Hedegaard (2012b) remarks, ‘the concept of motive has become related to institutional values and demands, motivation in activity settings, and person’s motives and intentions’ (25). According to Hedegaard (2012a),

A child’s motives are related to what is meaningful and important for a child. In a specific situation a child’s motive can be seen as an orientation in the activity setting. A child’s motive orientation is expressed in his intentional activities and his wishes. (134)

Although Hedegaard’s framework was ‘originally designed to explain how children act intentionally at home and school ... it is also useful for designing studies of professional work’ (Edwards 2017, 7). Hedegaard (2012a) identified three categories of analysis for empirical research to understand subject’s social situation in activity settings:

- societal conditions for institutional practices;
- institutional practices and how it creates conditions for a child’s activities (which includes activity settings, demands ... and etc.); and
- the specific child (that is the child’s motives and competences) (136).

Analysing EMI teacher agency

Whilst a theoretical discussion of unit of analysis in analysing agency is beyond the scope of this paper, recognising the challenge in analysing agency when agency is the person-practice dynamic (Edwards 2017), so both individual and collective, this study adopts Hedegaard’s (2012b, 12) wholeness approach for guiding the data analysis (see also Table 2). This approach allows ‘an analytic unity which includes the perspectives of the society, the institution, and the child’ (Fleer 2014, 203). Hedegaard (2012b, 22–25) provides a detailed discussion on unit of analysis, emphasising: (1) Motive can be seen as ‘related to institutional values and demands, motivation in activity settings, and person’s motives and intentions’ (Hedegaard 2012b, 25); (2) ‘[t]o focus on the child’s motives is to take a child’s perspective and to analyse the child’s intentional actions’ (Hedegaard 2012b, 25). Drawing on Davydov et al.’s work (1983), Hedegaard (2012b, 22) argues ‘action is the basic unit to analyse motives and their activities’ and ‘[i]t is only through the analyses of the child’s intentional actions that we can catch the child’s activities and motives’. Here, ‘an action, as unit of activity ... is an act that derives from specific motives and is aimed at a specific goal; taken into account the conditions under which this goal is achieved, an action is a solution of a

problem the individual encounters' (Davydov et al. 1983, 37) to meet the demands of new practice. These situated intentional deliberate actions to resolve problems one encounters are the manifestations of one's agency.

Adopting Hedegaard's (2012b) wholeness approach means this study needed to understand the EMI educators' perspective on EMI and to analyse their intentional actions to the perceived demands they encounter as they transition to EMI practice. Here, EMI practices are viewed as institutional practices, which are 'the social and the collective' 'created and re-created by a person's activities in the activity settings of the practices' and simultaneously 'are the social conditions for a person's activities' (Hedegaard 2012b, 12). In this way, Hedegaard's framework has potential to explain how EMI practices, as institutional practices, create new demands for Vietnamese teachers, and how the teachers perceive and recognise these demands, and orientate themselves to exercise their agency to act on those demands in the EMI activity settings within the broader context of the Vietnamese HE.

Methodology

Research settings: EMI context in the Vietnamese HE

The proliferation of EMI courses in the Vietnamese HE has been recent. After many decades of war-time and economic sanctions, Vietnam has opened its economy to the world since its Doi Moi (Renovation) policy in 1986 with 'open door' policy. English has become a key to Vietnam's strategies to develop the human capital to compete in the global labour market and a mandatory subject in school curriculum. The introduction of EMI in Vietnam's HE system has been driven by Vietnam's National Foreign Languages Project 2020 (initiated in 2008, extended to 2025), Higher Education Reform Agenda, Strategy for Developing Education, the internationalisation of HE, competition among local universities, efforts to address stakeholders' needs and other societal-political-economic factors.

Participants

The participants were recruited through purposive and convenient sampling combined with a snowballing technique. Specifically, the research team approached contacts at 10 Vietnamese universities for assistance in contacting potential participants using a snowballing technique. Those meeting the following criteria were then formally invited to participate in the project:

- University educators or academics involved in teaching
- Vietnamese L1 speakers
- Experience teaching academic subjects in English in HE
- English as a Foreign Language competence

Fifteen Vietnamese academics teaching EMI programmes at 10 universities in Vietnam accepted invitations for individual interviews. They came from various disciplines including Law, Economics, Engineering, Business Administration, IT and Industrial Management (Table 1). Because of our fields of research and network, the majority of participants (ten) came from Humanities and Social Sciences, five from Science and Engineering. The average years of tertiary teaching and EMI teaching experience were 12.5 and 7.3, respectively. They taught three types of EMI programmes: advanced, joint- and high-quality programmes, to undergraduate and postgraduate students (to be elaborated in Section 'Societal conditions and activity settings of EMI practice'). Almost all participants (14 out of 15) had studied abroad, with an average length of 3 years. The host country destinations for their studies vary widely, with seven participants studying in English-speaking countries (Australia and the UK), while the rest studied in non-English speaking countries (Japan, Thailand, France, Russia, and Switzerland), mostly in EMI courses.

Table 1. Summary of Vietnamese EMI teacher participant profiles ($N = 15$).

Pseudonym	Gender	Discipline	Academic Role (Position)	Teaching experience in HE (years)	EMI teaching experience in HE (years)
VE1	Male	Economics	Lecturer	8	8
VE2	Male	Industrial Management	Associate Professor	19	12
VE3	Male	Law	Lecturer	7	4
VE4	Male	Economics	Lecturer	6	6
VE5	Male	Engineering	Lecturer	15	5
VE6	Female	Law	Lecturer	4	2
VE7	Female	Economics	Lecturer	15	2
VE8	Male	Information Technology	Senior Lecturer	20	18
VE9	Female	Law	Lecturer	10	5
VE10	Female	Law	Lecturer	5	3
VE11	Female	Economics	Lecturer	3	3
VE12	Male	Engineering	Associate Professor	20	10
VE13	Male	Engineering	Associate Professor	17	6
VE14	Female	Business Administration	Associate Professor	20	8
VE15	Male	Law	Visiting Lecturer	18	18

Data collection and analysis

This qualitative research employed in-depth individual interviews, each approximately 60–70 min long, one with each participant. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author via Zoom in 2020, all in Vietnamese as participants' preferred language. They were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Guided by the cultural-historical perspective (Section 'Theoretical framework: EMI teacher agency from a cultural-historical perspective') and the research questions, the interviews aimed to get insights into EMI teachers' experiences, backgrounds, and perceptions of EMI. Specifically, guided by Hedegaard's (2012b) cultural-historical wholeness approach, interview questions elicited what motivated participants to engage in EMI, how they perceived EMI, challenges encountered, their responsibilities as EMI teachers, and how they responded to those challenges.

The interview transcripts were analysed, using a direct content analysis procedure (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) supported by NVivo12. This approach is suitable for this study when 'existing theory or research exists about a phenomenon that is incomplete or would benefit from further description' and also enables the researchers to 'validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory' (1281). NVivo offered distinct advantages as compared to manual hand-coding in terms of flexibility and systematic management of our coding framework. NVivo12 allowed us to create and manage codes and subcodes dynamically as our analysis progressed.

Data analysis followed several steps Hsieh and Shannon (2005) recommended. First, adopting Hedegaard's (2012a, 2012b) cultural-historical wholeness approach as the analytical framework for this study (see also Section 'Analysing EMI teacher agency'), an initial pre-determined coding scheme was constructed based on the theoretical concepts, e.g. activity settings, motive orientation, and perceptions (Table 2). Second, transcripts were analysed line by line, and relevant segments of data were coded into preliminary categories. Third, these preliminary categories were grouped into abstract categories and meaningful themes in an iterative process. During this stage, 'text that does not fit into the initial coding scheme' was also identified and determined if these 'represent a new category or a subcategory of an existing code' (Hsieh and Hannon 2005, 1282). This analysis process was both inductive and deductive. Existing theory was used to guide the initial coding scheme, but new categories and themes were also allowed to emerge.

Ethical approval was obtained from the human research ethics committee of the university where the first author works before commencing the study. Strict adherence to ethical guidelines, including informed consent acquisition and a commitment to confidentiality, was maintained. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of our research, we employed several measures. First, we used a multi-step process to enhance the precision of interview translations. The initial translation

Table 2. Codes scheme.

Codes	Categories	Sub-Categories
Societal conditions	Demographics of teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Education background – EMI exposure – Discipline – Professional experience
Activity settings	Type of EMI courses/programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Advanced – Joint – High-quality
	Student cohorts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Undergraduate Vietnamese – Postgraduate Vietnamese
Motive orientation	Fulfilling work assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Appointed/invited to teach EMI due to a lack of qualified teachers
	Professional learning (PL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Develop disciplinary knowledge and skills – Maintain or improve English – Prepare for further study
	Financial incentive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Higher salary compared to teaching in Vietnamese
Perceptions of EMI	EMI affordances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Knowledge and skills – Students' career prospect – PL opportunities for teachers
	EMI demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Student-related: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Motivation + Language barrier + Background knowledge and academic skills – Teacher-related: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + English competence + Pedagogical content knowledge + Teaching technical contents in English – Others: Technical difficulties
Exercising agency	Pedagogical adjustment or innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Employ a learner-centred approach with interactive and critical thinking tasks – Use Vietnamese purposefully to explain difficult concepts
	Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Seek quality teaching materials – Spend own money purchasing English materials
	Self-initiated PL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Practise English & EMI and take IELTS – Observe experienced colleagues' EMI lessons – Update specialised knowledge in English

was carried out by the third author, and it underwent a comprehensive review by the first author, both of whom are fluent in Vietnamese, the participants' native language, and hold PhDs in language education with prior expertise in translation and linguistics. Second, prior to our data analysis, all the authors met to establish the analysis procedure. The data analysis was conducted by the third author using NVivo Mac OS version 1.7.1 before being comprehensively checked with the other two authors. We also independently interpreted the data before meeting to discuss insights and resolve potential differences in interpretation. The second author, from a different language background, provided additional insight and reflection into the data and interpretations, further enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Notably, our shared research interests and expertise resulted in a high level of consensus for coding.

Findings

Societal conditions and activity settings of EMI practice

Almost all the teachers had studied abroad in English and/or worked overseas. They taught EMI courses in various disciplines (Table 1). They had had exposure to EMI, either from studying overseas or observing other EMI teachers' lessons. As tenured academics, they had gained master's degree, some completed PhD degree, and two completed post-doctoral studies overseas.

Their EMI students were predominantly fee-paying domestic Vietnamese undergraduate students.

Their EMI programmes fall into three categories: advanced, joint or high-quality programme (Tran and Nguyen 2018). *Advanced* programmes (APs) enrol domestic high achieving students selected based on their academic and English language merit. *Joint* programmes (JPs) between one Vietnamese HEI and one foreign HEI enrol fee-paying domestic and (few) international students. *High-quality* programmes (HPs) enrol domestic fee-paying students. Except within APs, fee-paying domestic EMI students varied in academic and English levels. Joint and high-quality programmes offer overseas qualifications if students transfer to study their final year in the partner HEI overseas (Tran and Nguyen 2018). Whilst all EMI students pay tuition fees, students enrolled in JPs and HPs pay significantly higher fees than those in APs, which receive some government funding. Given each EMI lecturer taught in more than one types of EMI programmes, the differences in the types of EMI courses in relation to EMI lecturers' perceptions could not be established within the scope of this study.

Motive-orientation: perceptions of EMI

Understanding how teachers perceive EMI helps to determine what *matters* and what's viewed as *important and meaningful* to them in EMI. It helps to identify their *intentions* and *motive-orientation* to EMI, which could influence their choice of activities and how they relate to other actors (Hedegaard 2012a), especially their students.

Affordances of EMI

All the teachers perceived affordances of engaging in EMI. First, they saw the opportunity to engage in EMI as prestigious. They spoke about being either officially appointed or invited by HEIs to teach EMI courses. In their disciplines, few academics were trained overseas, had good teaching reputation, and could teach in English like them. VE5 recalled 'I was appointed by the university partly because few lecturers can teach this subject in English'. Second, they viewed EMI courses as a favourable environment for their English and PL. VE4 explained 'I need an international working environment that uses a foreign language and aligns with my PL needs'. Early-career academics maintained that EMI teaching helped them 'enhance knowledge and skills through English, ... benefit future prospects including pursuing a PhD or participating in international conferences in English' (V3). To them, career progression and PL associated with English and enabled by EMI mattered. Third, for some disciplines including international trade and investment law, 'teaching in English is advantageous because teaching materials and original legal documents are mostly in English ... it's easier to access and update knowledge using English sources than Vietnamese' (VE3). EMI enables access to readily available English materials, keeping them updated. Finally, given teaching is generally not a well-paid job in Vietnam, EMI provides financial incentive, another affordance, that motivated teachers to engage in EMI.

Perceptions of what EMI involves

They emphasised the importance of English in the globalised world and benefits of EMI to students' knowledge, critical thinking, professional skills, and employability. They remarked, as English becomes unavoidable in today's 'global economic integration, it is vital for students to master English' (VE14). This view reflects the discourse of economic development and global integration in Vietnam (Sahan, Galloway, and McKinley 2023). They associated English and EMI with benefits for student learning and career prospects, indicating a future-oriented thinking:

learning and accessing knowledge from open sources of information [in English] broadens our thinking, benefitting both lecturers and students. Companies also highly value students from my faculty for their Western thinking styles and ability to adapt to new environments. (VE1)

Regarding EMI as important to students' employability, they expressed their ethico-political non-neutral stance (Stetsenko 2020), noting 'we have to treat students like customers and their graduate attributes are important' (VE1). Here, EMI outcomes, i.e. students' employment and graduate attributes, matter to them. This reveals teachers' motive-orientation to EMI, i.e. what matters to their students and how they see themselves as EMI teachers in relation to students. Believing English makes students competitive in the labour market, the teachers highlighted the need for students to develop disciplinary knowledge and 'capacity to use English for professional purposes ... to demonstrate that they can use English effectively for future work' (VE4).

They believed, for EMI students to succeed, specialised knowledge and critical thinking skills are as important as language proficiency. For EMI teachers themselves, similarly, it is teacher's specialised disciplinary knowledge that matters. VE7 explained:

Achieving a certain IELTS band score is required for studying/teaching EMI, but in reality IELTS ... does not reflect ... *discipline-specific English competence* ... Even a teacher with band 8.0 IELTS score may not be able to teach Marketing ... To do that, *specialised knowledge* is needed.

Most participants thus viewed themselves as content teachers rather than English teachers, few seeing the demands in developing students' English.

Motive-orientation: perceptions of demands of EMI

Understanding challenges teachers identified is key to understanding the demands they recognised in EMI, which also reflects 'institutional values and demands' (Hedegaard 2012b).

Perceptions of student-related demands

Challenges reported included students' lack of adequate English competence, learning motivation, critical thinking skills and background knowledge. First, the teachers perceived students' sufficient English language and background knowledge as key to effective EMI. However, 'a main obstacle is the language barrier ... even when all the slides are written in English, students still need translation to understand' (VE2). Having good general English is not enough. Students with high scores in English language tests still found it difficult to understand technical contents:

Many legal terminologies are unfamiliar to students. Even with IELTS Band 7.0 or 7.5, when listening to a lecture or reading material about a specific law, they still have difficulty understanding new concepts or terms. (VE3)

Second, insufficient background knowledge was perceived as hindering students' understanding of subject content. VE1 explained, 'understanding [the subject materials] often requires background knowledge', but students usually did not have that basic knowledge of the world. Third, some teachers found students lacking learning motivation, especially 'when studying subjects that don't match their passion or strengths' (VE1). Finally, another commonly reported challenge was students' lacking relevant academic skills, including self-regulation, critical thinking, and active learning, essential for EMI success:

Students tend to wait for their lecturer to ask questions rather than asking their own. Reading in English is more difficult than reading in Vietnamese, and students' passivity further reduces the effectiveness of their learning. (VE3)

Perceptions of teachers-related demands

For effective EMI, the teachers recognised the needs to maintain or improve their own English competence, develop pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in English, gain an in-depth understanding of the subject contents in English, and prepare English materials. First, EMI requires them to maintain adequate English. VE4 explained:

I have to maintain a high level of professionalism and competence in my teaching. However, since I mostly use English in class and Vietnamese at home, my English skills may deteriorate over time if I do not keep improving them.

Secondly, language-related demands closely link to their disciplines. EMI requires them to both understand and teach subject contents in English. To many, the challenge was that they thought in Vietnamese first, then translated into English, rather than thinking in English. VE9 said:

usually when I read some material, I would translate it into Vietnamese to understand it, but now [in EMI] I'll try to understand it thoroughly in English [without the translation] ... Instead of lecturing in Vietnamese, I now have to lecture in English. It was not good at first ... Even if I have good communication skills, but when my [English] language is not good, I still need practice to be able to communicate well [in English].

Consequently, EMI demands extensive time and efforts to prepare lessons, subject content, technical terms and materials in English. This means to 'prepare the specialist knowledge and accompanied technical language in English and be able to explain it to students' (VE1). This includes 'preparing materials for classroom discussion, all in English', plus 'exercises and extra readings' (VE6). These demands compounded with a lack of relevant localised materials in English.

Exercising agency

The teachers exercised agency to act on the student-related demands to transform EMI practices and for that to happen, they simultaneously acted on the teacher-related demands to transform themselves. Their agency unfolded in actions that manifested their commitment and responsibilities to students and themselves as EMI teachers, and that were outcome and future-oriented, both pro-active and responsive to their specific EMI activity settings.

Acting on perceived student-related demands to transform EMI practices

In acting on student-related demands, the teachers exercised agency to work on what they perceived as important and meaningful (Edwards 2017): students' understanding of subject knowledge, learning motivation, critical thinking and graduate attributes. Their agency was demonstrated in their deliberate choice of language(s) used in class, adoption of interactive pedagogical approaches, and design of formative assessment.

Most participants sometimes deliberately used Vietnamese to ensure students' understanding of difficult contents when language presents a barrier. VE2 explained:

The curriculum guideline requires 100% use of English. Sometimes I still need to use Vietnamese to explain some technical terms they don't understand ... partly because we are all Vietnamese. Sometimes I use Vietnamese rather than rigidly following curriculum regulations.

In using L1, VE2 took his ethico-political non-neutral stance (Stetsenko 2020), by not 'rigidly following curriculum regulations', but acting on student learning instead. This translanguaging practice reflects 'the inherently multilingual nature of EMI classrooms, including classrooms in which the majority of learners are local students who share the same L1 as the teacher' (Rose, Sahan, and Zhou 2022, 164).

Other teachers incorporated various learner-centred and project-based tasks to motivate and assess student learning whilst developing their critical thinking:

At my institution, final exams are mandatory. However, I tried to be flexible by using various methods to assess students during the semester. I may ask them to give presentations and complete critical thinking tasks. For the mid-term, they may be required to write a report, work in groups or carry out a project. (V1)

VE1's agency unfolded in his pro-active and deliberate actions to transform assessment regime during the semester when he had authority and autonomy to do so.

Teachers' commitment and responsibility to students were also demonstrated in their responsiveness to students' specific needs by agentively adapting pedagogies while focusing on students' understanding of subject content. VE7 recalled:

For classes with good English, I'd teach them in one way. For classes with not so good English, I'd teach differently. Teachers need to be responsive and flexible, not to apply the same approach to different classes. For students good at self-study, I just show them once, they do more research and give perfect presentations, I wouldn't need to explain further. For students who don't demonstrate a clear understanding in their presentation, I'd explain again. I listen to their presentations and adapt my teaching methods accordingly.

In acting on student-related demands, VE7 transformed her EMI practice to be responsive, learner-centred, contrasting a teacher-centred approach commonly reported about Vietnamese HE.

Acting on perceived teacher-related demands to transform themselves

Edwards (2015) emphasised the need to 'attend as much to the demands in the practices as the needs of the actor in the practices' (781). Here, in response to student-related demands, the teachers, as actors with agency, had to address their own needs in EMI. Their agency was manifested in them pro-actively developing their own EMI professional competencies, linguistically, pedagogically and academically.

Recognising the needs to develop their English language, especially English for their specific discipline (ESP), they acted on this accordingly. Most focused on developing ESP and PCK to teach subjects in English. For example, VE9 practised skills to teach subject contents in English by rehearsing like 'a singer who needs to rehearse their song before performing it on stage'. As previously mentioned, VE1 responsibly updated his specialist knowledge and prepared the English jargon prior to class so he could explain it in English to students. Similarly, VE6 explained:

Preparing legal lessons for the EMI programs takes significantly more effort than in the mainstream program. In the mainstream, materials are in Vietnamese, I can read and understand the contents easily. For EMI, I spend a lot more time reading to grasp the content better in English.

They all critically reflected on their practice to identify areas for PL and acted on it. For example, VE10 pro-actively observed experienced EMI colleagues: 'At first, my teaching didn't go very smoothly. Then I got better at it because I spent time observing and learning from experienced colleagues. After a while, it improved a lot'. This suggests changes in both VE10's EMI practice and his development as an EMI teacher.

To address challenges with English materials, they proactively sought alternatives. V1 explained:

The institution doesn't have enough funding for all the books we need, so we proactively looked for them ourselves, including searching for older versions ... Sometimes when travelling overseas, I purchase them from my own pocket.

Given limited EMI resources in Vietnam, they took stance by being pro-active in finding alternatives to support student learning, revealing a strong sense of commitment.

Discussion

Holding a positive view of English and EMI, the Vietnamese EMI teachers exercised agency to act on what they recognised as demands of EMI practice and transform it. Their agency unfolded in their *commitment and deliberate actions* (Edwards 2017) to support students' understanding of subject content and development of critical thinking, *purposeful* and *intentional* use of translanguaging in EMI, their *proactively* seeking English materials, and adapting pedagogy and assessment to respond to students' learning needs. Their interpretations of EMI, its affordances and demands, appeared to influence and orientate how their agency unfolded. Using Hedegaard's (2012a; 2012b) work on motive-orientation, the analysis revealed these teachers exercised agency in response to what they recognised as *meaningful* and *important* within the broader *societal*

conditions for EMI in Vietnam and particular *activity settings* concerning their discipline and EMI students. This supports Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech's (2021, 5) observation of agency as 'not unitary and decontextualized, but rather situated in time and space'. Here, their agency is socially, societally and disciplinarily situated, in particular time and space, and cannot be understood without understanding their perceptions of EMI and its demands.

Aligned with the CHT perspective, this study contributes empirical evidence illustrating how qualitative change or transformation occurs within a society or social setting, impacting not only individuality but also collectivity simultaneously. Here, the findings demonstrate that as EMI was introduced to high education in Vietnam, the Vietnamese EMI teachers exercised agency to respond to the demands of EMI practice. As they acted on the demands, they transformed their EMI practice and at the same time transformed themselves. The teachers, by responding to perceived demands, engaged in a transformative process, reshaping institutionalised EMI practices to be more learner-centered, emphasising critical thinking and content knowledge, and adopting a future/outcome-oriented approach. However, to be able to respond to EMI demands, they recognised and acted on their own needs to enhance disciplinary knowledge in English, maintain and develop English competence, especially ESP, and PCK in teaching their subjects in English. Their self-transformation is demonstrated in their *responsibility towards themselves* and *commitment to act on their own needs* as the actors (Edwards 2017) of EMI practice. This dynamic between the individual self-transformation and the collective transformation of EMI practice in responding to perceived demands of EMI practice reflects Stetsenko's (2020, 5) assertion of human's transformative agency 'whereby people simultaneously, in one process, co-create their world and themselves so that each individual person makes a difference and matters in the totality of social practices'. Participants, like V1, V3, and V4, as previously discussed, showed commitment to developing professionally to achieve their future vision as academics in internationalised universities, while working to support students' future career prospects in a globalised world. Their commitments to these 'particular sought-after futures' were 'at the core of [their] *transformative pursuits*' (2020, p. 9).

Findings confirm emerging EMI research by revealing the role of EMI teachers as micro policy-makers and implementers in the classroom (Cheng and Wei 2021; Manan, Channa, and Haidar 2022), especially regarding their language choice. Toth and Paulsrud (2017) maintain language choice always involves agency. Like their study, the Vietnamese teachers here exercised agency to employ their students' L1, the linguistic resources they shared with their students, to facilitate student learning, leading to 'affordances in the classroom' (205). In line with findings by Ali and Hamid (2018), Dang et al. (2024), and Phyak et al. (2022), the EMI teachers in Vietnam intentionally switched to L1 to facilitate students' understanding of subject content, resisting monolingual ideologies in EMI policy.

Furthermore, this study extends our understanding of EMI teacher agency by highlighting the role of teachers' perceptions of EMI, its affordances and demands, i.e. their motive (Hedegaard 2012b), in orientating how agency unfolds in actions. Together with growing research on teacher agency from a cultural-historical perspective in teacher education, this is one of the first studies that provide empirical evidence to reveal relationship between teachers' perceptions of EMI and its demands and their agency. Findings echo Macaro's (2018) affirmation of the importance to understand teachers' perceptions of EMI. The Vietnamese EMI teachers acted on what they perceived as important and meaningful in EMI practice. Findings also highlight the role of macro context, here Vietnam's sociolinguistic economic discourse, meso-institutional and disciplinary context, and micro-context of EMI classrooms, in shaping teachers' perceptions of EMI, which in turns influence the orientation of their agency.

This study demonstrates value of a cultural-historical perspective (Edwards 2017; Hedegaard, 2012a, 2012b; Stetsenko 2020), in elucidating how EMI teachers exercise agency in Vietnam's HE. This perspective takes teachers' perceptions of EMI and the societal conditions and activity settings, i.e. context, into account to reveal teachers' agentic actions to transform EMI practice and

themselves in many respects as previously discussed. This goes beyond the ‘*language change*’ focus within an LPP framework (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997, cited in Hopkyns 2023, 74) commonly adopted in prior EMI research on teacher agency. Findings challenge the view of agency as ‘an autonomous, solipsistic achievement of isolated individuals understood either as “free-will” subjects or ... as puppets of extraneous influences at the whim of powerful forces outside of one’s control’ (Stetsenko 2020, 5). This helps to shed more light on EMI research with potential to open new lines of inquiry following a cultural-historical perspective.

Edwards (2017, 278) maintains ‘while practices offer distinct affordances and demands; what is learnt will depend on what is recognised as the demands’. Understanding what EMI teachers recognised as demands of EMI practice would help identify their PL needs, which can consequently inform institutional support. To enable EMI teachers to exercise transformative agency, as findings suggest, it is important to empower them by providing the space and time they need as change agents, disciplinary-specific resources and fit-for-purpose PL support, especially regarding ESP and PCK. Communities of practice could also provide opportunities for EMI teachers to connect, support and learn from each other. As EMI is inevitable, continuing support for EMI teachers needs to be institutionalised for them to agentively support their EMI students and develop themselves.

Conclusion

This study adds to the corpus of EMI research by providing insights into EMI teacher agency in Vietnam’s higher education, a country that has not been considered much by this field of research. It indicates several important findings that enrich the EMI scholarship but need further investigation in other national contexts. Firstly, the findings suggest that in successful EMI implementation in HE, it is important to understand EMI teachers’ perceptions of EMI, what is considered as *important and meaningful* to them in EMI, and the demands EMI creates for their students and the teachers themselves within certain *societal conditions* for EMI and *activity settings* of their discipline with specific EMI student cohorts, to better support the teachers. This contributes to a better understanding of the ‘conditions for ... teaching and learning academic content through English’ currently ‘poorly understood’ (Malmström, Pecorari, and Warnby 2023, 1). Nevertheless, further empirical research in other disciplinary and national EMI contexts is needed. Secondly, engaging in EMI was mostly perceived by the EMI teachers in this study as a prestigious advantage. This respect needs further investigation in other countries and/or academic disciplines. Thirdly, here, the degree to which EMI teachers could rely on English material and/or provide EMI varies depending on their academic discipline. Disciplines deeply rooted in national/regional structures and language, (e.g. civil law) tended to present more challenges to EMI than the science disciplines where the difference between EMI and instruction in L1 is mainly a linguistic matter (e.g. engineering, IT) and those disciplines more closely linked to globalisation (e.g. international business law). This calls for future research to address those issues and to focus on other national and disciplinary contexts to support these initial findings.

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