

Implementing English-medium Instruction (EMI) in Thailand: University Students' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the perceptions of higher education students concerning English as a medium of instruction for teaching international programs at one of the public universities in Thailand. A total of 128 students were selected from six programs participated in the current study using a stratified random technique. They completed a self-assessment questionnaire about their experiences on their English academic skills as the impacts of EMI courses. A survey method was employed using descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the quantitative data generated. The descriptive results indicated that students possessed the highest proficiency in reading skills (mean score = 3.30). This is followed by writing skills (mean score = 2.77) and interactional skills (mean score = 2.72). Moreover, one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference in reading and writing skills. Finally, the three English academic skills showed significant inter-correlations.

Keywords: English academic skills, English proficiency, Medium of instruction

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Introduction

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is defined as the use of English to teach academic subjects in countries where the majority of people do not speak English as their first language or mother tongue [1]. However, such definitions will be problematic in East Asia because EMI is often considered as part of an agenda to improve English proficiency. [2] mentioned that initial growth in EMI provision was in Europe where there were approximately 11 times more EMI programs in 2014 than in 2001. Moreover, China and Japan have seen significant growth where their governments are actively promoting EMI at the higher education institutions in recent years, with the aims of both attracting more international students while improving the English proficiency of their citizens and to develop an English-speaking workforce [3]. The major key driving EMI in Thailand is due to global competitiveness and the need to meet world challenges. Therefore, the educational response was to react to external pressures and attempted to find the best institutional structure for its needs. Indeed, the Thai government effort has made English as the major second language and encouraged more EMI programs in higher education institutions [4].

Although international programs in higher education have been conducted in English to increase the English-medium environment, the great majority of students in Thailand still always use the Thai language in their daily communication and educational instruction. Moreover, the Thai language is being used and remains the primary medium of instruction at higher education institutions despite the growing dominance of English [4]. It is reported that the international programs in Thailand higher education institutions had almost increased doubled the number from 2004 to 2008, a total of 465 and 884 respectively in Thai public and private higher education institutions. If classified in terms of the level of study, an international master's degree is the highest number as 350 programs, followed by a bachelor's degree as 296 programs, and a doctoral degree has 215 programs [5].

EMI is growing very fast particularly in higher education to teach university courses in English. The EMI growth varies depending on the country and the move towards teaching in English comes at the grassroots level [6]. According to [7], English which originates its status as the world's fundamental language has resulted in the prompt broadening of English use throughout worldwide nations as an international language because of the global propagation of English. Therefore, the development of EMI is of great interest to language policy researchers in an era of globalization and internationalization thus it has become an important issue and very challenging [8]. In Thailand, EMI has progressed at the higher education level from being a Thai-English bilingual teaching experience in well-developed socio-economic areas to being utilized right across the nation in the past decade [9]. Concurrently, an English curriculum prioritizing English for specific purposes (ESP) is also promoted based on the argument that it can well prepare higher education students for their academic study and professional work [10]. Consequently, many governments believe that EMI programs can improve higher education students' English proficiency and result in a workforce that is more fluent in English. This is because EMI provides a double benefit, namely knowledge of their subject and English language skills. Ultimately, government and higher education students think that this will make them more attractive in the global job market and increase the demand for EMI tremendously [6].

[11] stated that English language teaching in Thailand higher education institutions still need improvement to produce more competent graduates and labors who are fully competitive in the ASEAN Economy Community and wider international market because EMI is considered as a key mechanism to equip university graduates with professional language skills and competency [12]. Moreover, past researchers [13, 14, 15, 16, 17] found that Thai people still have less proficiency compared to other ASEAN member countries. This may be caused by Thailand's lack of direct colonial experience and the scarcity of an intra-functional role of English in the country [7]. Even though English is the main foreign language taught in Thailand's basic education for more than 10 years, [18] indicated that the current curriculum of Thailand failed to produce human capital with sufficient English competence to meet the employers' requirements in general. As a result, English has developed from being a foreign or second language to the language of academic disciplines, particularly for international programs at higher education in Thailand [19].

Literature review

Many countries where English is not the native language of the majority of the population are gaining popularity in their higher education institutions by using EMI. For example, it has been reported that Scandinavia and Netherlands in Europe have switched to English in teaching STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) courses. Likewise, in Asia such as China, Japan, and Malaysia are also using EMI to teach academic subjects in higher education institutions. [20] introduced five factors that must be considered while implementing EMI in non-native English countries, namely students' attitudes and motivation towards EMI, students' level of English language proficiency, instructors' level of English language proficiency, instructors' ability to teach EMI courses effectively, and institutional support for EMI.

Based on research results from the past researchers [21, 22, 23, 24, 25] have identified theories of language proficiency in a second language can theoretically be classified into proficiency in four different skills, namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This means that to be able to understand the extent to which students are proficient in a second language, they should be proficient in these four mentioned skills. The literature review has revealed that less proficient students in reading skills use fewer strategies such as speed, vocabulary, and word recognition, and use them even less effective in their reading comprehension. Likewise, students who possess better reading skills are better strategy users. They can monitor their reading comprehension, can adjust their reading rates, know their phonological and structural properties, and can consider their objectives for reading [26]. Besides, [22] conceptualized the writing skills as embrace consideration of features of language form and usage. Strong development of writing skills enables students to write research articles or business correspondence. The literature review has shown that listening is a very complex skill since it is passive and not easily observable. Therefore, listening skills require more than motivation alone to improve. It is situational and as our listening purposes change, so does the degree to which students require various listening competencies, particularly to second language students [26]. Moreover, speaking skill is not easy to identify how many oral abilities to determine students' language development and proficiency. Speaking skill is not often tested overtly by past researchers because it is time-consuming, and it is therefore neglected.

[27] studied whether EMI has an impact on Chinese undergraduates' English proficiency and affects their learning and use of the English language. A cross-sectional of 136 undergraduates involved in the survey and 10 focal undergraduates participated in interviews. Their results showed that there is no statistically significant effect of EMI on English proficiency or affect in their English learning and use. However, their results showed that undergraduates are satisfied with EMI and perceived necessity for EMI, with significant effects on their learning outcomes besides increasing their study burden. Moreover, prior English proficiency was the strongest predictor of subsequent English proficiency and English-related effect. Their results raise concerns about the quality of the focal English-medium program and prior English proficiency as a crucial factor to improve their language learning and use of the English language.

[28] aimed to explore the perceptions of higher education students and instructors regarding EMI for teaching science courses in the United Arab Emirates. A total of 100 English as a Foreign Language students completed a self-assessment questionnaire about the impact of EMI course-taking experiences on their English academic skills. Besides, 10 students and four instructors have participated in in-depth interviews. Their results revealed that the impact of EMI on the students' learning experiences is because of their varied educational and linguistic backgrounds. The majority of instructors and students supported using EMI in science courses.

[10] examined subject teachers' perceptions and practices and students' motivation and needs in English learning of the EMI program in China. They examined how EMI instruction was delivered by subject teachers and how English learning should be facilitated through the assistance of ESP courses when students' English proficiency was inadequate. They collected data from nine classroom observations, three post-observation interviews, and a questionnaire survey. Their results revealed that effective instruction was maintained by deploying pragmatic strategies. However, the goal of promoting English attainment was underachieved because language teaching was not explicitly observed. Subject teachers' perceptions of EMI undermined potential students' linguistic gains. Their results contributed to the immediate educational context as increasing access to ESP delivery that is fine-tuned to the language issues in the EMI classroom. Collaboration between subject and language specialists is beneficial to students' learning including their subject knowledge and language skills. ESP practitioners need to consider students' communication needs in their disciplines and address the limitations of the current EMI practices in higher education in China.

[3] explored language and academic skills support provision, and attitudes on EMI programs among the international students in Japan and China. Their study was supplemented with data from their previous study [29] and provided insights into how students were supported in different EMI programs, as well as staff and students' perceptions of the role of such support. Their results imply that EMI programs should be the responsibility of content instructors and language specialists, and the extent to which content instructors should be responsible for helping higher education students with academic English.

Objectives of the study

The pressing issues about EMI in higher education include instructors' English competence, varied needs of heterogeneous students, doubtful quality of learning materials, and a mismatch between what is needed in target academic conditions and what is provided by available EMI courses [30]. EMI was planned to be capable of developing an international perspective in higher education students, improving their English proficiency, and providing access to innovative knowledge available in English. Therefore, the Ministry of Education of Thailand made the number of EMI courses offered an important criterion in higher education assessment [16]. These spikey problems were led to the current research objective to investigate the extent that EMI can bring about successful language learning and how EMI teaching can better facilitate students in their academic study. Regarding achieving the study objective, the researcher planned to study the students' self-perceptions of their academic language skills with special emphasis on the course content. More specifically, the researcher sought to explore students' literacy and interactional skills problems while they were studying the EMI courses as below:

- (i) To identify the problems of students' literacy skills, namely writing and reading skills while they are studying EMI courses.
- (ii) To identify the problems of students' interactional skills in class, namely speaking and listening skills while they are studying EMI courses.
- (iii) To examine the differences between English academic skills and students' demographic backgrounds.
- (iv) To examine the inter-correlation between academic language skills.

Methodology

The researcher employed a survey questionnaire to collect quantitative data. The target population is all students from four divisions, namely Business Administration, International Affairs, Tourism Management, and Communication Arts in one of the international colleges in Thailand. The required sample size was 150 undergraduate students as respondents using a stratified random sampling technique. The stratified random sampling that was involved in the division of a population into a smaller group known as strata. The sample size of each strata was proportionate to the population size of the strata when viewed against the entire population. Final samples were selected proportionally from the different strata. This means that each strata has the same sampling fraction.

The researcher adapted a survey questionnaire from [28]'s research instrument. It consists of 19 items that were administered to 150 respondents for collecting information on their self-perception about the problems that they faced while they were studying EMI courses. This method benefits this study as it provides an excellent means of measuring attitudes and orientations in a large population which can, therefore, be generalized to a larger population [31]. Section A of the questionnaire was intended to gather information about respondents' demographic factors, namely nationality, program, and academic study year. Section B was comprised of three items to gauge the perceptions of respondents' writing skills. Section C consisted of five items to measure respondents' reading skills. Finally, Section

D had eight items to obtain information about respondents' interactional skills. To measure the respondents' self-perception, a four-point Likert scale was utilized, ranged from 'disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

Pilot testing of the instrument was conducted to five experts and 30 undergraduate students who were studying in an international program in other faculties. The five experts were asked to give suggestions and comments on the validity of the instrument while the 30 undergraduate students were asked to respond to the questionnaire to test the consistency of the instrument. It could be concluded that the instrument was reliable and good to use as the Cronbach alpha value was 0.92. Revisions were made according to the feedback from the five experts. Descriptive statistic including mean score and standard deviation while inferential statistic, namely one-way ANOVA and Pearson's correlation coefficients were employed to analyze the collected data.

Results

The results are presented according to the study objectives, which have been previously stated. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed to respondents but only 128 of them were successfully collected, giving a response rate as 85.3 percent. The results are presented according to respondents' perceptions of their productive skills of literacy and interactional skills based on EMI courses.

Descriptive results of literacy skills

Literacy skills consist of academic writing and reading skills. The results show how respondents perceived their academic writing skills while they were studying in EMI courses. If the students' perceptions are in the range of 'agree' to 'strongly agree', that means students do not have problems in their literacy skills. Table 1 shows 73.5% (55.5% + 18.0%) of respondents reported that they are not having any problems to take notes in English. Besides, 73.4% (60.9% + 12.5%) of them do not encounter any problems to do their assignment in English, and 59.4% (50.8% + 8.6%) admit being at ease writing content-based English reports. Generally, most of the respondents 68.8% (55.7% + 13.1%) have a positive tendency toward writing skills parameters compared to 31.2% (4.9% + 26.3%) who do not. The highest mean score was students' ability in taking notes ($\bar{X} = 2.89$; $SD = 0.712$). This is followed by their ability in doing assignment in English ($\bar{X} = 2.81$; $SD = 0.707$). The writing skills with the lowest mean score was writing a report in English ($\bar{X} = 2.60$; $SD = 0.756$).

Table 1 Academic writing skills

Writing skills	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score	S.D.
I find no difficulty taking notes in English.	3 (2.3)	31 (24.2)	71 (55.5)	23 (18.0)	2.89	0.712
I find no difficulty doing an assignment in English	6 (4.7)	28 (21.9)	78 (60.9)	16 (12.5)	2.81	0.707
I find no difficulty writing reports in English	10 (7.8)	42 (32.8)	65 (50.8)	11 (8.6)	2.60	0.756
Collective 'Writing' construct	19 (4.93)	101 (26.3)	214 (55.73)	50 (13.03)	2.77	0.598

The descriptive analysis revealed that 66.4% (50.8% + 15.6%) of respondents perceive themselves as they do not have difficulty in reading English textbooks and course materials. Nevertheless, a majority of respondents that are 71.1% (58.6% + 12.5%) who make an effort to do extra academic reading in English. Reading English books is claimed not to be time-consuming by 55.5% (43.8% + 11.7%) of respondents, compared to 44.5% (11.7% + 32.8%) of respondents who believe that reading in their mother tongue is more rapidly. Moreover, most of the respondents that are 92.2% (51.6% + 40.6%) have confidence in reading academic materials that can improve their English vocabulary. A total of 57.1% (39.1% + 18.0%) of respondents do extra readings that are unrelated to their studies. Taken as a whole, 68.46% (48.78% + 19.68%) of respondents express a positive attitude toward their English reading skills. Descriptive results also indicated that the highest mean score in reading which can help them to expand their English vocabulary ($\bar{X} = 3.31$; SD = 0.661). This is followed by doing extra reading through textbooks and course materials ($\bar{X} = 2.81$; SD = 0.673), no problem in reading textbooks and course materials ($\bar{X} = 2.79$; SD = 0.739), and reading English books which are unrelated to their studies ($\bar{X} = 2.66$; SD = 0.872). The least capacity of reading skills is respondents can read in English faster than in their mother tongue ($\bar{X} = 2.55$; SD = 0.849).

Table 2 Academic reading skills

Reading skills	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score	S.D.
I find no difficulty reading textbooks and course materials.	4 (3.1)	39 (30.5)	65 (50.8)	20 (15.6)	2.79	0.739
I do the extra reading through textbooks and course materials.	3 (2.3)	34 (26.6)	75 (58.6)	16 (12.5)	2.81	0.673
I do not feel reading in English is time consuming compared to reading in the mother tongue.	15 (11.7)	42 (32.8)	56 (43.8)	15 (11.7)	2.55	0.849
Reading textbooks and course materials expands my English vocabulary.	2 (1.6)	8 (6.3)	66 (51.6)	52 (40.6)	3.31	0.661
I read English books that are unrelated to my studies.	11 (8.6)	44 (34.4)	50 (39.1)	23 (18.0)	2.66	0.872
Collective 'Reading' construct	35 (5.46)	167 (26.12)	312 (48.78)	126 (19.68)	3.30	0.842

Descriptive results of interactional skills

Interactional skills are comprised of speaking and listening skills by looking at respondents' English-speaking practices as another productive skill in EMI classrooms. If the students' perceptions are in the range of 'agree' to 'strongly agree', that means students do not have problems in their interactional skills. Table 3 shows that 70.4% (51.6% + 18.8%) of respondents prefer to deliver English oral presentations. However, 52.4% (17.2% + 35.2%) of them agree that English is not their first choice when they come to have peer interaction in group work. The majority of respondents (84.4% = 50.8% + 33.6%) agree with using English as the sole language of communication with instructors. Additionally, most of the respondents perceive themselves at the range slightly disagree to agree (77.3% = 27.3% + 50.0%) in asking and answering questions in English during class time. Although a total of 76.6 percent (25.0% + 51.6%) of respondents claim that they cannot express themselves better in English than in their mother tongue, but they do not ask questions in their mother tongue (80.4% = 53.1% + 27.3%). There is 75 percent (60.2% + 14.8%) of them disagree English is an obstacle to delivering proper answers to assigned questions. More than half of them (55.5% = 33.6% + 21.9%) support using English while 44.5 percent (10.9% + 33.6%) of them prefer to use their mother tongue if it is allowed. The majority of respondents (63% = 44.35% + 18.65%) agree as a total to the constructs of interactional skills. It can be concluded that using English in EMI courses is compulsory as one of the key academic achievements in the teaching and learning process.

Table 3 Interactional skills

Speaking and listening skills	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score	S.D.
I prefer giving oral presentations in English.	10 (7.8)	28 (21.9)	66 (51.6)	24 (18.8)	2.81	0.830
In group work, I interact with peers in English only.	22 (17.2)	45 (35.2)	47 (36.7)	14 (10.9)	2.41	0.901
In class, I interact with instructors in English only.	0 (0.0)	20 (15.6)	65 (50.8)	43 (33.6)	3.18	0.681
In class, I find no difficulty answering and asking questions in English.	7 (5.5)	35 (27.3)	64 (50.0)	22 (17.2)	2.79	0.790
I express myself better in English than in my mother tongue.	32 (25.0)	66 (51.6)	24 (18.8)	6 (4.7)	2.03	0.793
In class, I do not ask questions in my mother tongue.	5 (3.9)	20 (15.6)	68 (53.1)	35 (27.3)	3.04	0.767
I do not feel that English is an obstacle to delivering proper answers to assigned questions.	4 (3.1)	28 (21.9)	77 (60.2)	19 (14.8)	2.87	0.692
If the use of the mother tongue was allowed, I would not use it in classroom daily interaction.	14 (10.9)	43 (33.6)	43 (33.6)	28 (21.9)	2.66	0.941
Collective 'Speaking and listening' construct	94 (9.18)	285 (27.84)	454 (44.35)	191 (18.65)	2.72	0.370

Inferential results of differences between English academic skills and demographic backgrounds

Respondents' demographic backgrounds, namely nationality, study program, and academic year of study were taken into account. As indicated in Table 4, there was a significant effect of respondents' demographic backgrounds on their writing and reading skills at the $p < .01$ level for three conditions [$F(17, 110) = 6.871, p = 0.00$] and [$F(17, 110) = 13.754, p = 0.00$] respectively. However, there was not a significant effect of respondents' demographic backgrounds on their interactional skills.

Table 4 One-way ANOVA results between English academic skills and respondents' demographic background

		Sum of Square	df	Mean square	F	p
Writing skills	Between Group	44.457	110	.404	6.871	.000
	Within Groups	1.000	17	.059		
	Total	45.457	127			
Reading skills	Between Group	88.997	110	.809	13.754	.000
	Within Groups	1.000	17	.059		
	Total	89.997	127			
Interactional skills	Between Group	17.417	110	.158		
	Within Groups	.000	17	.000		
	Total	17.417	127			

** $p < .01$

Inter-correlations between academic language skills

Table 5 shows [32]'s interpretation of the correlation coefficient which was used by the researcher to assess the inter-correlations between academic language skills, namely writing, reading, and interactional skills. Table 6 shows that significant inter-correlations ($p < .01$), with a strength of 'moderate to substantial' to 'substantial to very strong' association and positive.

Table 5 Designation of the strength of association based on the size of correlation coefficients

Strength of association	Negative	Positive
Low to moderate	-0.29 till -0.10	0.10 till 0.29
Moderate to substantial	-0.49 till -0.30	0.30 till 0.49
Substantial to very strong	-0.69 till -0.50	0.50 till 0.69
Very strong	-0.89 till -0.70	0.70 till 0.89
Near perfect	-0.99 till -0.90	0.90 till 0.99
Perfect relationship	-1.00	1.00

Pearson correlation results showed that writing skills are significant, positive, and substantial to very strongly correlated with reading skills ($r = .564, p < .01$). The second strongest strength of correlation between reading skills and interactional skills ($r = .490; p < .01$) showed a moderate to a substantial association. Moreover, the result indicated that writing skills had the weakest association strength with interactional skills ($r = .454; p < .01$). Therefore, to a substantial

to a strong extent, an increase in writing skills is associated with an increase in respondents' reading skills. However, results also indicated that writing as well as, reading skills of respondents, is moderate to substantial correlated with interactional skills.

Table 6 Inter-correlation coefficient between English academic skills

English academic skills	Writing skills	Reading skills	Interactional skills
Writing skills	1.00	0.564**	0.454**
Reading skills	0.564**	1.00	0.490**
Interactional skills	0.454**	0.490**	1.00

**p<.01

Discussion and Conclusions

The results showed that most of the higher education students recognize the value of EMI while they are studying in EMI courses. Even though they are encountering some problems in their learning process and sometimes they want to use their mother tongues in certain circumstances. According to [28], the focus of the EMI program in higher education institutions is content, thus language learning objectives are secondary matters. However, results indicated that students in this study expect that, through participating in the EMI program, their English language skills will develop tremendously. Moreover, students perceived positively toward EMI can reduce problems for them to comprehend in their learning. This is reflected in the results as students gave the high mean scores in these three learning activities such as they read textbooks and course materials to expand their English vocabulary (mean score = 3.31), they interact with instructors only in English language (mean score = 3.18), and they do not ask questions in their mother tongue. The results are corresponding to the previous studies [3, 4, 12]. The results imply that students believe that EMI can provide the specific outcomes associated with their specific learning behavior [6].

On the other hand, results revealed that there is a high percentage of students who are still relying on their mother tongues throughout their learning. For example, students found themselves better in their mother tongues than in English (76.6%) and they will use their mother tongues in classroom daily interaction if they are allowed to do so (44.5%). Besides, results showed that interactional skills are the most challenging skill which contradicting [33]'s result. [33] found that writing skill was the most challenging skill. Moreover, ANOVA analysis showed that there are significant differences between writing and reading skills, except interactional skills to students' demographic backgrounds. This means that students' demographic backgrounds such as nationality, program, the academic year of their study have no positive impact on interactional skills. As higher education institutions in Thailand context strive to become globally competitive, internationalization and EMI seem to go concurrently. However, true internalization should take into consideration of the English academic skills of higher education students to make sure that they are provided with the necessary support to study through the medium of English [34].

Pearson correlation analysis was used to ascertain the correlation between the three English academic skills, namely writing, reading, and interactional skills. Although results showed that all English academic skills are correlated significantly between themselves but writing skills are the most important skills as its impacts on reading skills ($r = .564$) and interactional skills ($r = .454$) at a significant level as 0.01. In this line of reasoning, results imply that the more instructors focus on improving students' writing skills, the greater there is likely to be an impact on their reading and speaking.

In conclusion, current EMI courses, specifically its impacts on students' progress in English academic skills, classroom activities, and practices have to take into account. This is because students cannot learn complicated English-medium content without an appropriate level of English language proficiency. EMI courses expect a higher language level from students so that they can acquire content completely with no difficulties. Therefore, the researcher would like to suggest to Thailand higher education institutions to well-designed language placement tests that can evaluate students capable of being taught in an EMI course setting. Hence, students will be linguistically prepared for the EMI courses and also may lead to a comparative homogeneous classroom. Furthermore, some preparatory English language courses, for example, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or ESP, provide to students who are at low proficient English language before EMI courses commerce. These courses not only psychologically prepare students to attend EMI courses but also assist them to achieve an appropriate level of English proficiency [28].

The ultimate contribution of this paper is to investigate closely students' perceptions of EMI implementation so that future instructors can modify the realistic way to implement EMI courses. Hence, this will help students to become more successful learners in the short term, and make them relevant in the global job market in the long term. Finally, the results allow important implications for implementing EMI courses in Thailand contexts where a low level of English proficiency may be a barrier. Subsequently, it is suggested that EMI courses have to be tailored to students' needs based on the collaboration of subject and language instructors or specialists.

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