Learning expectations, challenges, and strategies of university students on English-medium instruction

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Abstract

Despite its wide application at tertiary education, English-medium instruction (EMI) poses complexities in practices. This study investigated EMI students’ expectations, challenges, and coping strategies based on prior learning and language backgrounds and explored EMI policy implementation at a university in Indonesia. The qualitative data were obtained from open-ended questionnaires, a focus group interview, with participants selected using purposive sampling for maximum variation, and EMI policy documents from a faculty of economics and business at an Indonesian university. The data were analyzed inductively by looking at the recurring themes and were used for triangulation. The students’ different backgrounds: mainstream, mainstream with English courses, and bilingual or international classes brought some differences in their EMI learning. Students had high language, career, academic, relational, and intercultural expectations. Those from mainstream classes faced considerably more challenges compared to those from the other groups with stronger English backgrounds, regarding inadequate English proficiency, unfamiliarity with academic and disciplinary terms, and struggling in following lectures. The students’ learning strategies relied on cognitive and rote learning with the assistance of digital technology. Finally, a gap was observed between meso and micro policy and practice. More institutional supports thus were recommended for better achieving the EMI program vision.
Keywords: EMI challenges; English-medium instruction; institutional supports; learning expectations; learning strategies; policy implementation

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Introduction

There is currently a growing trend among higher education institutions in applying English-medium instruction (EMI). EMI is “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden, 2014, p. 2). It is a movement from teaching English as a learned subject to using English as the delivery mode to teach content courses. By taking an EMI course, students can learn their disciplinary subject as the primary goal, and simultaneously develop their English skill (Macaro et al., 2018; Pecorari & Malmstorm, 2018). Institutionally, EMI is a language policy chosen by universities to strengthen their internationalization agenda (Byun et al., 2014; Dearden, 2014). However, to apply the EMI policy, there are complexities and dynamics (Dafouz & Smit, 2020; Fenton-Smith et al., 2017) which can be due to the position of English as a second or foreign language, students’ learning and language background, and the provision of supports for the lecturers and the students.

A growing urgency therefore should be directed toward looking at EMI students’ language and learning challenges (Tsou & Kao, 2017) and lecturers’ language and communicative competence (Dearden, 2014). Some studies have shown discrepancies between EMI policy and its implementation, such as in China due to the lecturers’ perception about focusing on content teaching and the students’ English language inadequacy. This is further echoed by Aizawa and Rose (2019) about language challenges for the lecturers and the students among Japanese EMI students. Meanwhile, there are conditions to be met to successfully apply EMI, namely lecturers’ expertise and capacity in the disciplinary content, language and pedagogy (Walkinshaw et al., 2017), students’ minimum English
threshold (Nguyen et al., 2017), and enough supports for the lecturers (Walkinshaw et al., 2017) and the students (Jiang et al., 2019).

Several EMI studies have been conducted at universities in Indonesia. Floris (2014) found that despite the acceptance of EMI among students and lecturers, the students felt a burden to speak in English due to their inadequate English. Further, Simbolon (2018) found that though English was considered important by university stakeholders, the EMI implementation still left a gap regarding the English proficiency of the students. This is further enhanced by Lamb et al. (2021) that most of the university managers and lecturers agreed on EMI as beneficial for improving students English, enhancing their content knowledge, and boosting their university prestige, but with students’ lack of English proficiency, inadequate staff’s English competence, and less enthusiasm in EMI among the local students. Simbolon (2017) also found that the lecturers varied in their teaching from using translations mostly to code switching due to differences in understanding EMI and in characteristics of the courses. Though EMI is emerging in Indonesian universities to enhance their internationalization (Simbolon, 2018), limited study has been conducted on students’ prior learning and language backgrounds related to their university EMI learning. This study is therefore worth conducting to reveal the micro-level practices when dealing with EMI complexities, along with the meso-level policy responses outlining real classroom practices for pedagogical and policy evaluation and improvement.

Pre-university academic experiences are important preparation and can affect university students’ academic attainments (Nicholson, 1990). Tinto (1985) suggested an education fitness to create an academic “integration” to strengthen students’ learning commitment, thus affecting persistence throughout their studies; otherwise, various learning problems will occur. Students’ exposure to English in their secondary schools was crucial in following their EMI courses at a university in Hong Kong (Lin & Morrison, 2010). Pun and Jin (2021) also found that EMI university students with previous EMI backgrounds were more prepared about disciplinary terms than those from Chinese-medium instruction schools. Hence, it is necessary to explore how different prior learning experiences shape EMI university students’ learning along with the high demands of EMI in different learning contexts.

EMI students should have different high expectations when taking an EMI course, ranging from daily experiences, such as receiving English advisory support, to beliefs about EMI benefits upon their graduation (James, 2002). As a dual-benefit approach, EMI is expected to help students master the disciplinary knowledge and improve English proficiency (Dearden, 2014; Macaro et al., 2018; Pecorari & Malmstorm, 2018; Rahmadani, 2016). In addition, students can obtain
professional skills to work in multinational companies, get wider job offers and acceptance, and study overseas (Kırgöz, 2014; Macaro & Akincioglu, 2018), and develop socio-cultural skills (Byun et al., 2011), such as international collaboration to develop cultural awareness and learning abilities (Macaro et al., 2018; Rahmadani, 2016).

However, due to its complexity, EMI can pose considerable challenges. First, the students can face challenges to use academic English and understand disciplinary terms in learning (Lei & Hu, 2014) due to lack of preparation or low English proficiency skills when entering (Aizawa et al., 2020), or insufficient academic or linguistic supports during EMI learning (Byun et al., 2011). Another is the lecturers’ English, either because of inadequate English proficiency or their strange pronunciation or accent influenced by their native language as experienced by Japanese students (Aizawa et al., 2020). Thus, the students’ lack of English proficiency adds more pressure on them in following an EMI class (Evans & Morrison, 2011).

In addition, applying effective strategies is crucial for EMI students. Pun and Jin (2021) suggested two learning strategies for the EMI students: (1) using L2 to search for additional information for those already above the English threshold level and (2) using L1 for those below the English threshold level. As information and communications technology is becoming more advanced, the use of such technology, such as social media can be promoted to help EMI students learn better (Citrayasa et al., 2022). In addition, taking a multilingual perspective in EMI by using L1 to cope with challenges is a possible strategy for most students (Macaro et al., 2020) through explaining, translating, and elaborating the taught L2-mediated knowledge (Lin, 2015) and translanguaging (Chen et al., 2020). Teaching methods should also be directed toward student-active learning and more flexibility in learning to foster students’ academic achievement (Nguyen et al., 2022). Therefore, it is useful to identify more learning strategies to help other EMI students learn better.

A limited number of studies, however, have been conducted to look at EMI students’ previous education, expectations, challenges, and coping strategies. We argue that these aspects, along with institutional roles, can influence students’ performance and persistence when pursuing highly demanding EMI courses (Harvey et al., 2006), and together with lecturers’ teaching styles and assessment methods, could enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Reason et al., 2006). As EMI is emerging with inconclusive research findings (Macaro et al., 2018), the current study is expected to shed more light on how EMI has been adopted as a pedagogical approach in the Indonesian higher education context. The foci of this study are directed at EMI students’ learning experiences shaped by their
previous education and English backgrounds, in conjunction with the set EMI policy realization. The research questions were therefore formulated as follows:

1. How have students’ diverse prior experiences in English language learning shaped their expectations, challenges, and strategies in EMI learning?
2. How has the EMI program vision been realized through the students’ learning experiences?

Method

Research setting and design

This study was conducted at a faculty of economics of a university in Indonesia that has implemented EMI since 2007 in three departments: Accounting; Management; and Economics, Finance, and Banking (EFB). The EMI program was aimed to enhance the faculty’s vision to be internationally recognized in the fields of economics and business. An interpretive qualitative study was employed in this research, aimed at understanding how EMI learning is constructed by making sense of EMI students’ classroom world and experiences (Merriam, 2002). This was conducted to understand how the participants made meaning of the EMI situations or phenomena, through multiple sources: questionnaire, group interview, and documents to arrive at a rich descriptive account of findings referring to literatures framing this study.

Participants

The participants for this study were recruited using purposive sampling to cover the heterogeneous characteristics of the students and to obtain a rich and in-depth data through maximum variation (Merriam, 2002) by considering different study programs, intake years, and genders. The population was 75 in Management, 59 in Accounting, and 43 in EFB study programs, totaling 177 students. At first, 20 participants were invited to fill in the open-ended questionnaire. Then from those participants, 10 students were invited for a group interview based on their secondary English language and learning experiences: regular class with non-formal English learning, regular class, and bilingual or international class. Consent forms were obtained from all participants. To ensure their confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in this study. The interview participants were five from the Accounting Study Program (Rasyid, Peni, Ade, Mary, and Alice), three from the Management Study Program (Alex, Salim, and Barry), and two from EFB Study Program (Harry and Icha). The detailed participants are shown in Table 1.
Table 1. The information of the participants

| Participants | Semester | Gender | Learning & English Background | Study Program |
|--------------|----------|--------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| Rasyid       | 4        | Male   | RC**             | Accounting    |
| Popy         | 4        | Male   | RC**             | Accounting    |
| Peni         | 4        | Female | RCNE*            | Accounting    |
| Ade          | 4        | Male   | RCNE*            | Accounting    |
| Mary         | 6        | Female | RCNE*            | Accounting    |
| Joe          | 6        | Female | RCNE*            | Accounting    |
| Alice        | 8        | Female | BIC***           | Accounting    |
| Jean         | 8        | Female | BIC***           | Accounting    |
| Andrew       | 8        | Male   | RC*              | Accounting    |
| Nury         | 8        | Female | RC*              | Accounting    |
| Alex         | 12       | Male   | RCNE*            | Accounting    |
| Ali          | 4        | Male   | RC**             | Management    |
| Cathy        | 4        | Female | RCNE*            | Management    |
| Salim        | 8        | Female | RCNE*            | Management    |
| Jay          | 8        | Female | RCNE*            | Management    |
| Dony         | 11       | Male   | BIC***           | Management    |
| Barry        | 13       | Male   | RC**             | Management    |
| Risa         | 4        | Female | RCNE*            | EFB****       |
| Harry        | 6        | Male   | RCNE*            | EFB****       |
| Icha         | 8        | Female | BIC***           | EFB****       |

Notes:
* RCNE: regular class with non-formal English learning
**RC: regular class
***BIC: bilingual or international class
****EFB: Economics, Finance & Banking

Data collection

The data of this study were taken from multiple sources, namely an open-ended questionnaire, a group interview, and institutional documents (strategic plans and academic guidelines). First, the open-ended online questionnaire was used to gather the students’ prior education experiences and their EMI learning perspectives and experiences concerning expectations, challenges, and learning strategies. The questionnaire was developed based on the previous studies regarding prior education learning experiences by Evans and Morrison (2011), learning challenges by Aizawa et al. (2020), EMI learning strategies by Pun and Jin (2021), and EMI policy gap by Aizawa and Rose (2018). The online questionnaire contained the following questions: (1) Please describe your English learning experiences when you were at high school? (2) What are your expectations from
taking an EMI course in relation to yourself, your friends, and your institution? (3) What are the challenges you are facing in following your EMI courses regarding your language and content learning ability, your lecturers’ teaching and language ability, and the classroom interaction? (4) How has the institution supported you to achieve your learning expectations? (5) What are your learning strategies in coping with your EMI learning challenges? and (6) What do you think of your lecturers’ ability in using English when teaching EMI courses? After the university permission was obtained, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants with the assistance from the faculty administrative staff. The questionnaire responses were then downloaded and proceeded with a preliminary analysis which was continued with a group interview for further clarification.

A focus group interview was conducted to help respondents recall specific events or experiences shared by the group members and to perform triangulation with the questionnaire data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). After stating their consent, the participants were invited to join the online interview. To assure the quality of data and comfort of the interviewees, Indonesian language was used. The interview lasted about one hour. Specific points of discussion were based on the thematic analysis from the questionnaire to clarify the answers and enable in-depth findings. The interview key points were: the students’ secondary English learning experiences and their contribution in EMI learning; the students’ motivations for taking the EMI program; the students’ expectations from their friends, lecturers, and institution; the students’ challenges during their EMI learning related to the teaching and learning process, English language of the students and lecturers and EMI policy implementation; and the students’ efforts or strategies to cope with EMI learning challenges. Follow up questions were asked for confirmation or elaboration of their answers. The interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and finally translated into English. The first researcher served as the moderator, the translator, and the interpreter of the findings as he was also a faculty member at the university, thus being able to understand the contextual meanings of the data.

Finally, content analysis was conducted for EMI policy documents from the university’s strategic planning and academic handbook to examine how institutional policy corresponds to the students’ perspectives and to provide data triangulation. Related and meaningful statements from the policy documents or other details, such as graphs or tables, were identified. It was conducted iteratively by reading the documents thoroughly, examining every related detail or important sentence, and interpreting the details in relation to the previous findings and research questions.
Data analysis

As part of an interpretive qualitative study, the data were analyzed inductively (Grbich, 2007; Merriam, 2002). The questionnaire data were analyzed as the preliminary analysis by identifying the recurring patterns or common themes that came across the data, employing checking and tracking the data to understand the important points stated by the participants, identifying key areas, and highlighting emerging issues to allow the relevant data to be identified and to provide directions for further analysis through the group interview.

Then using the relevant identified questionnaire findings, the interview results were analyzed using thematic analysis as suggested by Creswell (2012) by coding, employing data reduction, grouping or categorizing the repeated words or phrases, displaying data, and interpreting the findings. Thematic analysis was based on pre-set themes from the literature review and identifying emerging topics using both a block and file approach and conceptual mapping as suggested by Grbich (2007). To increase trustworthiness, member checks or participant confirmation of the preliminary results and the revision were employed.

Finally, a document analysis was conducted by reviewing the documents based on the previous findings, identifying the relevant and meaningful statements from the documents to address the questions, and finally interpreting the documents for further triangulation of the findings. The validity of the study was achieved through triangulation by employing multiple data sources; while the credibility was obtained through proofreading by a colleague who was a lecturer and researcher in English language teaching (ELT) (Merriam, 2002). To come to a valid conclusion, a rich, descriptive account of the findings was presented and discussed using references to the literatures framing this study.

Findings

EMI students’ prior English and learning backgrounds

The EMI students in this study came from three major learning and language backgrounds: regular classes with English courses, regular classes only, or bilingual or international schools. The first and biggest group of students had attended regular classes while taking English courses, four of them even since elementary school, ranging from general to special English programs, like IELTS or TOEIC preparation. In addition, they also attended cram schools, non-formal schools to prepare their school exams or university entrance tests. Their English
course experiences supported their English lessons at school and helped them to communicate in English better, as stated below:

My experience of taking the course was very helpful, actually not for getting into an international class. But my school environment required me to do so.

(Alice)

The second group only went to regular classes without attending any English courses. They just attended regular schools delivered in Indonesian, with an English subject twice a week. However, most of them showed high motivation and good attitudes toward English, such as by participating in English competitions like debating and story-telling, taking English trips, learning English from films and games, or engaging in English self-learning.

Finally, the third group came from bilingual or international schools, since junior or senior high school, supported by taking English courses, joining English clubs, or participating in English competitions. Participating in both English courses and competitions was helpful for EMI program as stated below:

I haven’t taken any courses, but since elementary school, I have attended an international school with 50% expatriate teachers and 50% local teachers. This supported me to keep using and learning English at school. Besides, I also took part in a debating team, which I believe was very helpful for me when I am studying in the international [EMI] class. (Barry)

These students’ different prior learning and English backgrounds shaped their university EMI learning experiences, as elaborated below.

**EMI students’ learning expectations**

*Language and disciplinary knowledge expectations from EMI learning*

The first group of students (taking regular classes with English courses) mostly expected that the EMI program can improve and make them confident in English. The program was expected to provide a conducive environment to practice English inside and outside the class, such as through English clubs. Another expectation was to experience classroom English interactions with lecturers and other students. These expectations were supported by those in the second group, who emphasized compulsory English speaking in class. They also expected their lecturers to use only English when lecturing to create a disciplined class atmosphere. Similarly, those in the third group mostly expected a good English environment to utilize their English with their friends inside or outside the class. They also expected to develop their communication skills in English without
feeling inferior or superior regarding their English. The lecturers and the students were also encouraged to use only English in class:

> Among us, there is no such commitment to speak to each other in English; we feel that when it’s OK to speak in English, we talk in English....But an English environment as small as a class should get us used to speaking in English, and so we have to create a good English-speaking environment. (Cathy)

**Intercultural, future academic, and job-related expectations**

The first group expected the EMI program to create international friendships to widen their perspectives and cultural knowledge for future overseas jobs or studies. This was also emphasized by those in the second group, who expected an intensive opportunity to use English properly and to make students converse with each other to prepare for overseas jobs or studies. In addition, EMI program was expected to widen their relationships, not only locally but also internationally.

> By taking international classes, our orientation is to continue to an international track or towards working for a multinational company. (Icha)

So, by taking an EMI program they expected to have more relations from international backgrounds which could strengthen their future career plans in working at international companies.

**Students’ challenges when following EMI programs**

**Inadequate English and unfamiliarity with disciplinary vocabulary**

Regarding challenges, most of first group students stated that the biggest challenge surrounded adequacy and equality in English ability. The next was inadequacy or unfamiliarity with disciplinary vocabulary, which could cause confusion and difficulties, thus requiring the lecturers to repeat their explanations for better comprehension, and difficulties in reading English references and taking exams. The second group also experienced difficulties in understanding disciplinary or academic terms because students’ previous education only taught them general English. Reading references in English was another challenge for them, often requiring translating unfamiliar terms using mobile apps, which could affect their course assessments conducted in English. One of them even stated that due to limited English, he was not confident speaking in English and was, moreover, burdened by the high expectation of “EMI student label,” to be proficient in English. Then, unequal levels of English
proficiency among the students also hindered them in communicating with each other, thus causing them to not speak up.

*Lecturers’ English and EMI pedagogical competences*

Another challenge was regarding the lecturers’ English, which was due to their unstandardized or different pronunciation, accents, or word choices, which affected students’ comprehension. In addition, due to their limited English, some lecturers often switched to Indonesian when lecturing. This was also experienced by the second group of students but was more serious as their English was inadequate to understand the lectures. The third group of students also stated similar comprehension difficulties due to lecturers’ unstandardized English in terms of unclear articulation and incorrect grammar. The lecturers’ limited English also prevented them from using full English in class. Furthermore, regarding course assessments, some students struggled to understand the instructions or questions due to the lecturers’ insufficient grammatical knowledge. It was even found that some assessments were written in Indonesian to avoid students’ confusion.

Regarding pedagogical challenges, three of the students in the second group felt overloaded them with assignments, using presentations to represent student-centered learning, but the lecturers did not provide enough feedback. Some lecturers even suggested the discussion session be conducted in Indonesian:

Some lecturers gave us projects to present in English. Here, they should have given us some feedback and should have been consistent in using English.
While instructing us to present in English, the lecturers asked the question-and-answer sessions to be conducted in Indonesian. (Alice)

Some stated that the presentation assignments were excessive and gave students no opportunity to participate in non-academic activities, which they perceived as important for their personality and social development.

*Strategies in coping with EMI challenges*

Some strategies were identified for coping with EMI challenges by the first group of students. Most of them translated the English words into Indonesian or memorized them to understand the vocabulary and grammatical functions. Others undertook self-study in their spare time and, if needed, asked their friends, or searched for information from online sources, media, or books. Some also adapted their language to become familiar with their disciplines. For the second group, taking English courses, such as speaking or TOEFL preparation, was a preferred strategy as their TOEFL scores were still below the requirement
for going abroad. Additionally, they encouraged themselves to “get out of the comfort zone” by seeking partners, such as native speakers, to speak in English or by using apps to improve their speaking. Finally, the third group students stated that the most common strategy was active and consistent use of English to interact in class. In addition, understanding the meanings of disciplinary terms was useful to help them read references and deepen their knowledge.

The EMI students’ prior learning background, learning expectations, learning challenges, and strategies are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The EMI students’ prior learning background, learning expectations, learning challenges, and strategies

| Prior English and learning background | Expectations | Challenges | Strategies |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|------------|------------|
| Regular classes with English courses | Improved English | International friendship | Unstandardized English (pronunciation, accents, or vocab) |
|                                       | Confident in using English | Wider perspectives and culture | Learning grammar |
|                                       | Conducive environment | Future overseas jobs or studies | Memorizing |
|                                       | Interactions in English | Unadequacy & inequality in English | Self-study |
|                                       |                         | Inadequacy & unfamiliarity with disciplinary terms | Asking friends |
| Regular classes | English-speaking zone | Communicating skills | Translating |
|                | “English Only” lectures | Difficulties in disciplinary or academic terms | Learning English courses |
|                |                         | Lecturers’ difficult language | Upgrading English proficiency |
|                |                         | Reading English references | Taking English courses |
|                |                         | Lacked presentations | To “get out of the comfort zone” for speaking English |
Meso-level policy statements, their realization, and mismatches

This section is devoted to exploring institutional policy regarding the EMI program vision and policy realization based on the students’ learning experiences.

International vision, implementation, and learning support

The EMI program is one of the university internationalization strategies, aimed at attainment of disciplinary knowledge in three competences: knowledge about economics and business, intellectual, practical, and managerial skills, and morals, attitudes, and language skills. For the language, an English exit level was required (TOEFL score: 525/IELTS score: 6.0), requiring students’ English proficiency be updated every semester to prepare for final examinations, internships, OAPs (double degree, exchange or summer/winter programs, or internship), and graduation requirements. The EMI program was applied in three international programs: Accounting, Management, and Economics, Finance and Banking, with all programs already achieving “A” accreditation from the National Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (BANPT). Internationally, Accounting study program had been accredited with Association of Certified Chartered Accountant (ACCA) and EFB with Asian University Network Quality Assurance (AUNQA).
English skills support was provided through English for specific or academic purposes (ESP/EAP): English (for Business) and Writing Skills, to prepare and develop students’ English skills (structure, listening, writing, and reading), as well as disciplinary terms, to meet the EMI demands, or English 2: Academic Reading and Communication Skills, to improve students’ English ability for academic and communication purposes using economics literature. All classes are conducted in English, enhanced by OAPs for international academic exposure. Self-access center (SAC) and language development center (LDC) were provided to enhance the students’ English language, equipped with up-to-date resources and information and communication technology (ICT) to support the students’ self-learning.

Lecturers’ and students’ linguistic issues: some mismatches

Regarding the capacities of the lecturers, they were perceived diversely by the students. Some stated that a few lecturers possessed a good to excellent English which helped the students to understand the lectures easily. Then, on average, the lecturers were already good at content delivery using English. Some lecturers, however, still demonstrated limited English proficiency, often halting and code switching to Indonesian, implying a lack of language skills, confidence, or consistency in using English. A few lecturers, unfortunately, were considered as having very low proficiency, preferring to lecture in Indonesian or to directly translate to English, which often sounded strange to the students. Their assessments were even conducted in Indonesian to avoid misunderstanding, which was disappointing for the students:

My purpose for taking international undergraduate program is its supportive environment. However, the lecturers do not perform as I expected. There are only five who are excellent and can make me understand. The rest use English with some pauses, cannot explain comprehensively, and use confusing terms.

(Cathy)

Regarding students’ English, it was stated that their proficiency levels were not standardized, with some already having a high level but others with a lower one. Consequently, some students were always passive in class interactions, which needed to be forced to use English consistently to be more fluent and confident. In addition, some students did not have economics background, thus making them struggle with content comprehension compared to those from economics background, thus often using Google Translate to understand concepts.

The mismatches between meso-level policy and its realization are presented in Table 3.
Table 3. Mismatches between meso-level policy and micro-level realization

| EMI goals | English as language of instruction | English proficiency | English, teaching & learning supports |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| **Meso**  | • Internationally standardized disciplinary knowledge, skills, attitudes, and language | • *English Only* classes | Exit level (TOEFL score: 525/IELTS score: 6.0) | • ESP/EAP |
|           |                                   |                     |                                      | • SAC |
|           |                                   |                     |                                      | • LDC |
|           |                                   |                     |                                      | • OAP |
| **Micro** | • Lecturers’ lack of pedagogical competence | • Code mixing by most lecturers | • No entry threshold level | • No specific EMI pedagogical and language training for students and lecturers |
|           | • Students’ lack of academic English and disciplinary terms | • Lack of interactions in English | • Lack of English proficiency score update | |

Discussion

This study aimed to reveal how students’ prior language and educational backgrounds shaped their EMI learning and the extent to which the school’s EMI vision was reflected in classroom practices at a faculty of economics and business at a university in Indonesia. The findings have shown that although coming from different learning and English background, most of the students had considerable experiences in terms of learning and using English, either through formal education, such as attending international-based schools, or through non-formal education, such as taking English courses and attending informal programs, joining English clubs or English competitions. This shows that the students were mostly prepared for using English in their EMI program. So, the EMI economics and business program could attract good students, in terms of English ability, due to promising future job orientations. In addition, there was a good fit between their prior educational experience and that of the EMI program (Tinto, 1985) as a prerequisite for EMI learning success.

There were some, however, who were less prepared, who only attended regular schools without additional English learning. Still, they possessed good motivation and attitudes toward English, demonstrated by their joining competitions and independent learning. Those taking bilingual or international class in their secondary school were considered to have stronger English and learning background as they had been used to using specific field English. The
remaining students from regular class with non-formal English learning and even from regular class only were considered as less strong as they only learned general English which would be different from specific field English required in an EMI program.

The EMI students’ different backgrounds led to similar classroom experiences to a certain extent, but in some cases indicated different learning situations. Almost all the students expected EMI to enhance their English by promoting a conducive environment to interact using English and to develop their communication skills, which would be beneficial for future academic and professional careers (Kırkgöz, 2014; Rahmadani, 2016). A clear difference in classroom experiences was noted in their familiarity with academic and disciplinary terms, with those from regular classes struggling to comprehend compared to those with bilingual and English course backgrounds. This confirms Lin and Morrison’s (2010) and Pun and Jin’s (2021) findings about the effects of secondary school backgrounds and supports Tinto’s (1985) student attrition concept, which states that prior academic institutional characteristics determine university students’ success. In addition, the less prepared students realized the disparity and insufficiency in English proficiency, which could hinder classroom interaction. Thus, the program needs to promptly respond by helping them be more proficient in English to guarantee their EMI success, as suggested by Nguyen et al. (2017), especially as an exit level of English proficiency was required.

An agreement was reached by most students with regard to the English performance of many of their lecturers, which often created confusions and difficulties to understand due to localized English accents and grammatical inaccuracies, as also found by Chen et al. (2020). Due to students’ limited English, the lecturers also often had to repeat their explanations, which is like what Sukardi et al. (2021) found among science students. This phenomenon thus places more urgency on focusing on professional development (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017), to assure adequate pedagogical, linguistic, and communicative competence of the lecturers in order not to sacrifice students’ knowledge construction (Aizawa & Rose, 2019). This needs to be highlighted especially in the field of economics and business, as the field requires more interactions and explanations of concepts using various expressions and terms rather than doing calculation and applying certain formula as in science and engineering field. The implementation of teaching methods by fostering student-active learning, such as individualized or project-based learning can be an alternative to increase students’ performance (Nguyen et al., 2021), as the economics and business
students need to develop their communication skills, such as negotiating, promoting, and persuading, related to their future jobs.

In dealing with EMI learning challenges, the EMI students applied various strategies, such as translating, memorizing, using online applications to improve their vocabulary. This was in line with Pun and Jin (2021) that the students applied L1 to find meanings of words, such as through translation. They also tried to develop their speaking skills by socializing, such as finding speaking partners or asking friends and joining English courses. Using technology was also popular among the EMI students in their learning, as found by Citrayasa et al. (2022). From the finding, however, the students seemed to lack strategies as they were mostly memory and cognitive ones. Thus, metacognitive and perhaps compensatory strategies or specific skills, like skimming and scanning in reading, should be enhanced as they need to more autonomous in learning. It is therefore important to incorporate language learning strategies during EMI learning (Fernandez-Malpartida, 2021). In addition, only one ESP course was provided to support students’ English during their study, which leads to questions about how students cope with the high EMI demands for English proficiency.

Related to the realization of the university’s vision in terms of EMI learning practices, it was shown how the school had provided some lecturers with adequate command of English for delivering their courses in English, though it seems that the lecturers’ ability was an assumed condition as they had graduated from overseas universities. However, some students complained that many lecturers had English skills that were not adequate and opted to use Indonesian in most of or even all classes. This was sometimes considered as discouraging for the students as they felt that the lecturers did not support the English Only policy in the EMI program. However, if L1 is integrated in an EMI learning, it needs to be carefully and purposefully used, either as a form of code switching of translanguaging (Chen et al., 2020).

Limited language and pedagogical supports were provided, only by ESP teaching and the provision of SAC for the students’ self-learning for the students to access resources to improve their language skills in reading and speaking and to deepen their content understanding. Finally, the EMI program policy only states some requirements that the students must fulfill to complete the undergraduate program, such as a minimum English proficiency score, an overseas program, but with no threshold entry level of English (Nguyen et al., 2017). No clear guideline was provided to help support students with inadequate English proficiency, only score updating, and no clear programs were offered to the lecturers for developing their linguistic, communication, and pedagogical competences (Walkinshaw et al., 2017).
It is therefore recommended that the institution provide more academic and non-academic support for both students and lecturers through systemic programs, such as intensive English for academic preparation and test preparation for the students to be proficient to actively participate in classes. In addition, lecturers need to be provided with opportunities for EMI professional development, as suggested by Walkinshaw et al. (2017), such as through training or workshops to develop their EMI teaching skills.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed at exploring EMI students’ expectations, challenges, and coping strategies based on prior learning and language backgrounds and investigating EMI policy implementation at a university in Indonesia. It has revealed how students’ prior language and learning experiences have shaped EMI practices in different circumstances. A good fit between secondary and university EMI education was shown as being necessary to create a conducive EMI learning atmosphere that can eventually enhance the attainment of EMI learning objectives. As occurring in most EMI contexts, the findings of this study can serve as a confirmation that the inadequate linguistic and pedagogical competences of the lecturers and the students still dominate the common EMI implementation, unfortunately, due to a lack of clear guidelines and limited support from policy makers, leaving in a gap between meso and micro level policy and practices. Therefore, linguistic and pedagogical competences of both students and lecturers are determining factors for EMI implementation. EMI policy makers are expected to provide more institutional supports linguistically and pedagogically for the actors in classroom to enhance the disciplinary knowledge construction of the students. The findings from multiple data sources have provided comprehensive pictures of an EMI practice from the diverse EMI students learning experiences. Since the data were limited from the students and the documents, more data need to incorporate management, lecturers, and stakeholders to reveal more about policy making, program implementation, and outcome of an EMI program. Further studies should be directed towards looking at lecturers’ and policy makers’ perspectives in developing linguistic, communicative, and pedagogical competences of the EMI actors and focusing on EMI teaching methods and students’ language by involving more participants from different institutional contexts to give more balanced and comprehensive findings.
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