Lecturer Perspectives on EMI Assessment Practices at Nguyen Tat Thanh University: Explaining GPA Improvement

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Abstract

English-Medium Instruction (EMI) is expanding rapidly in Vietnamese higher education, yet the reasons behind recent grade improvements remain unclear. Drawing on literature relating assessment reliability and language scaffolding to student performance-but rarely centering teacher perspectives-we interviewed six purposively selected lecturers using semi-structured interviews (three STEM, three non-STEM). A five-prompt guide solicited narratives on rubric use, marking consistency, language-content balance, feedback practices, and perceived grade validity. A five-prompt guide elicited narratives on rubric use, marking consistency, language-content balance, feedback practices, and perceived grade validity. Transcripts were analyzed inductively using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) with double-coding; intercoder agreement on an overlap sample reached κ = .85. Two intersecting themes are identified: (1) informal peer moderation circles that foster shared interpretation of rubric criteria and rein in leniency drift and (2) wider use of bilingual feedback scaffolds (parallel Vietnamese-English annotations, discipline-specific glossaries) which can reduce language-related content loss and enable students to revise more effectively. The contribution of this article to the EMI quality assurance debates is based on process-level evidence of these lecturer-driven practices, combined with archived cohort GPA shifts and offering a scalable, low-cost model for strengthening assessment literacy and feedback uptake in comparable contexts.

Keywords: English-Medium Instruction; assessment literacy; peer moderation; bilingual feedback; Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past couple of decades, EMI has been increasingly embedded within Asian higher education systems, not least with a view to enhancing global visibility and raising standards of teaching. Rapid implementation in the region has been accompanied by an overall lack of evidence regarding student learning outcomes, including under-examined grading practices. The Vietnamese context heightens this, with additional concerns regarding lecturer proficiency, pedagogical supports, and assessment integrity. Internal data at Nguyen Tat Thanh University (NTTU) indicates that from intake 2022-23 to intake 2023-24, there has been a minor upward shift in credit-weighted GPAs of first-year EMI courses. This paper recognizes that any apparent rise in grades may reflect grade inflation, pedagogical adjustment, or evolving marking conventions. The question therefore is: *How might EMI lecturers at NTTU explain the increase in one-year GPA that was found between 2022-23 and 2023-24 first-year cohorts?*

This focus on the lecturer perspective represents a call for more process-level insight into the assessment of EMI, beyond policy analysis and student proficiency outcomes, so as to explore in detail the complex issues underpinning these processes. It is located at the intersection of two key literatures, namely: first, the literature on assessment reliability which views rubrics as necessary but in themselves not sufficient, independent of moderation and shared interpretation (Bloxham et al., 2016; Sadler, 2013); and second, the translanguaging/bilingual feedback literature which suggests strategic use of both L1 and L2 serves student comprehension and learning (Mazak & Carroll, 2017; Carless & Boud, 2018; Yang & Gao, 2023).

This study collects lecturers' accounts of shifting assessment practices, namely peer moderation, exemplar sharing, and bilingual feedback, which explain a concrete GPA shift without grade inflation assumptions. Thus, the expected results will provide actionable strategies for EMI quality assurance discussions and reiterate the pedagogic value assessment literacy initiatives bring into multilingual EME contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 EMI Expansion and Evidence Deficits

EMI has seen an exponential rise in the world over, especially in the use of English in its standard or local variety for the delivery of disciplinary content, as recorded by Dearden (2014) and Macaro (2018). However, in systematic reviews of such studies, most of the studies were merely descriptive or small-scale studies, and there has always been a continuous gap in understanding how EMI affects assessment and grading as documented by Macaro et al. (2018). One of the notable gaps within the literature is a lack of process tracing-that is, describing how the assessment is enacted or moderated within EMI settings.

2.2 Vietnamese Context: Policy vs. Practice

This move towards EMI in Vietnam in general is linked with wider socio-economic aspirations (Nguyen et al., 2017; Tri, 2019). In such case studies, institutional capacity to support such EMI policies in terms of staff training and assessment design has been placed as highly variable. Normally, assessment practices are left to the school level, so it falls to lecturers at the departmental level to negotiate consistency of form and clarity of task. While these do point to systemic issues, they fall short of examining linkages between lecturer practices and outcome metrics such as GPA.

2.3 Rubrics, Moderation and Calibration

In principle, near-universal adoption of rubrics in higher education should render assessment criteria explicit, but the research evidence suggests that in practice for equity and validity, reliability depends upon social moderation and calibration processes. For Bloxham et al. (2016), for example, moderation is "crucial yet problematic," and trust in marking requires communal negotiation. Sadler (2013) frames this as a shift from moderation towards calibration-building common understanding by jointly interpreting student work over time. More recent reviews confirm that moderation cycles, rather than isolated rubric rollouts, are associated with consistent marking behaviors.

2.4 Translanguaging and Bilingual Feedback in EMI

Translanguaging is an increasingly common pedagogical strategy. The term describes the strategic deployment of more than one language within EMI; it enables comprehension in multilingual classrooms (Mazak & Carroll, 2017). Tsou & Baker (2021) provide evidence of Asian lecturers' scaffolding content and feedback through L1. Carless and Boud (2018) link feedback effectiveness to students' ability to interpret and then act on it-so, apparently, bilingual feedback really can enhance learning uptake. Engineering EMI contexts in China are finding that translanguaging practices are associated with clearer feedback understanding and product improvement (Yang & Gao, 2023).

2.5 Gaps in the Existing Literature

Both bodies of work point to two key conclusions on the need for processes of assessment co-construction as a means to establish reliability and linguistic scaffolding in feedback, yet leave one