

Exploring Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Light of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in Higher Education in Vietnam

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Abstract: In response to the growing need for English proficiency for international communication, Vietnam has implemented English-as-medium-of-instruction (EMI) education. This educational strategy aims to enhance students' English and disciplinary knowledge that meets the high-demanding work readiness and assists their professional endeavors. However, there is limited research on how Vietnamese students perceive intercultural communicative competence (ICC) through EMI, which typically involves acquiring cultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills relevant to their future personal willingness, educational qualifications, and professional requirements. This study investigates how Vietnamese higher education students in EMI programs perceive acquiring ICC, including intercultural attitudes, knowledge, discovery, and interaction skills, interpreting and relating skills, and critical cultural awareness. Informed by Byram's (1997) ICC framework, a questionnaire was developed, validated, and administered to a sample of 315 students. The questionnaire revealed varied perceptions of ICC outcomes after completing EMI programs, influenced by their cultural backgrounds, educational experiences, and social interactions. Our quantitative findings suggest implications for improving educational policies for EMI in Vietnam while foregrounding future survey-based research that attends to ICC as part of the EMI education implementation. Furthermore, the study proposes practical and research-oriented directions to better understand how Vietnamese learners perceive ICC as they participate in EMI programs, both domestically and internationally.

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Globalization has increased the need and opportunities to connect people worldwide, which has further enhanced the role of the English language as a means of communication—a *lingua franca* (Kirkpatrick, 2017). In response to the increasing demand for the English language in socio-economic advancement, Vietnamese higher education (HE) institutions have undergone innovations in their English language education policies (Le, 2012; Tri & Moskovsky, 2023; Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2008; Vo et al., 2022). In Vietnam, besides being a required subject for all educational levels, including HE, English has become the language of instruction in many programs (Vo et al., 2022; Vu & Burns, 2014). While the English language has become an integral component of educational programs in Vietnam, initiating EMI programs is still new in many institutions, which requires guidance on implementing EMI programs. Following the increasing preference for EMI programs, numerous top-down policies have been initiated to guide EMI enactment in Vietnam (Le, 2012; L. Nguyen et al., 2016; Tri, 2021; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019). Following the issuance of these policies, attention has been paid to EMI programs' operational successes and challenges by many researchers (Duong & Chua, 2016; Tri & Moskovsky, 2023; Vo et al., 2022; Vu & Burns, 2014).

Although one of the objectives of EMI programs is to develop language proficiency for effective communication, intercultural awareness is indeed an important constituent of successful communication in this globalized world. To illustrate, Tri and Moskovsky (2019) reviewed EMI policies in Vietnam issued by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and recognized the attempt of internationalization to bring Vietnamese graduates to the world and attract international students to Vietnam through EMI programs. However, such internationalization requires intercultural sensitivity, a noteworthy problem in preparing EMI learners for intercultural communication (Rey-Paba et al., 2024). For instance, Kim et al. (2017) reported the challenges in communication between local and international students in EMI programs in Korea due to the lack of intercultural understanding and further questioned the effectiveness of these programs in improving the intercultural competence of local students. Similar questions could be raised in the Vietnamese context. There have been reports on Vietnamese students' unwillingness to communicate with international peers due to cultural differences despite their proficiency in the English language, which requires making them more aware of and responsive to cultural diversity (Chi & Vu, 2024a). As such, the role of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) should not be ignored (N. Nguyen & Tran, 2017; Vu, 2021; Vu & Dinh, 2021). Despite top-down policies, how EMI is implemented in Vietnam is very context-dependent (Tri & Moskovsky, 2023), raising further questions on how ICC has been perceived in EMI programs in different educational institutions.

To achieve a better understanding of the implementation of EMI programs in Vietnam and how ICC is developed in these programs, this study aims to explore the relationship between EMI programs and the acquisition of Vietnamese learners' ICC at the HE level, taking into consideration possible influential factors such as student gender, discipline, geographical regions, and learners' English language proficiency and learning experiences in relation to ICC

acquisition. These factors are taken into account as they have been concluded to have an impact on the teaching and learning of the English language in Vietnam (L. H. N. Tran, 2019; L. H. N. Tran & Vu., 2024). The purpose of the study is to provide pedagogical implications for EMI programs to ensure the development of Vietnamese students' ICC for successful communication in this globalization era. We seek to answer the research question: To what extent do Vietnamese undergraduate students perceive the relationship between EMI programs and ICC?

Literature Review

An Overview of English Medium of Instruction Programs

Under the influence of globalization and the increased importance of the English language, it is essential to facilitate the internationalization of higher education to produce future workforce with higher qualifications to serve the fast-changing business world. In addition, these future generations will be able to address a number of more sophisticated emerging social, economic, political, and cultural issues related to equality, equity, and justice. One possible solution is to promote EMI education to increase the learners' content knowledge in connection to English proficiency when English becomes the medium of communication (Kuteeva, 2020; Nicola et al., 2020). While research may not agree that a primary objective of EMI education is to use the English language in many forms of educational deliveries that involve many other academic disciplines, it is likely impossible to separate the English language and subject content, given that English is the communication tool for knowledge exchange (Dearden, 2015; Dearden & Macareo, 2016; Taguchi, 2014). Because English is the language of instruction, learners in these programs are required to obtain a certain level of proficiency as a prerequisite and are immersed in an English-rich environment. Therefore, English language proficiency has been largely considered an overarching benefit in EMI programs (Rose & Galloway, 2019).

Despite the development and benefits of EMI programs, the implementation of EMI programs may face several challenges. There have been arguments about how these programs are described in policy documents and implemented in HE institutions (Baker & Hüttner, 2018). The idealization of EMI education has been challenged when teaching and non-teaching staff involved in the delivery may not be proficient in either the English language or content knowledge. Indeed, the use of EMI may lower learning engagement due to students' inability to comprehend and communicate in English (Toh, 2020), thus leading to inequality in classrooms in which academic success is more feasible for those with higher language proficiency (Gu & Lee, 2018; Toh, 2020). Alternatively, the facilitation of EMI programs may be unsuccessful due to the limited collaboration of stakeholders, including governmental officers, policymakers, school leaders and administrators, teachers, learners, and employers (Baker & Hüttner, 2018; Tri, 2021). Furthermore, EMI greatly requires the teachers' instructional quality and the learners' language competence centered on the subject and other related content, which ultimately facilitates the learners' future prospects (Kim et al., 2017; Rey-Paba et al., 2024). Another issue in EMI programs is the need for materials that support

teaching and learning, which may not be feasible in some low-resourced contexts (Kim et al., 2017; Sahan et al., 2022; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019). Therefore, it seems that proposing and implementing such EMI courses is not always desirable in many contexts.

EMI Programs in Vietnam

In light of the National Foreign Language 2020 Project (MOET, 2008), Vietnamese universities have begun to implement EMI programs through foreign, joint, advanced, and high-quality programs to maintain internationalized higher education and enhance HE students' employability skills to work or study overseas (H. T. Nguyen et al., 2017; Tri, 2021). In Vietnam, EMI education can be implemented with MOET approval when educational institutions meet the demands of teaching staff, facilities, and resources or collaborate with qualified international institutions (T. H. T. Tran et al., 2021; Vo et al., 2022). However, the practice of EMI may also be applicable in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses only rather than being a program itself. In these ESP courses, students learn specific subject matter knowledge in English, and these programs develop the students' linguistic resources related to the subject-related terminologies and enhance students' experience of work scenarios. Sahan et al. (2022) also placed ESP courses, more specifically English-for-Academic-Purposes courses, under the umbrella EMI category. Generally, these programs share the benefits of language competence, subject knowledge, and career preparation. Similarly, T. H. T. Tran et al. (2021) found that in some educational institutions, ESP courses are seen as foundational for students to develop their discipline-based language competence before embarking on EMI programs.

Although EMI education has the potential for sociocultural and socioeconomic development, the implementation of EMI education in Vietnam has remained problematic. Policymakers have communicated unclear goals to practitioners (e.g., curriculum designers and teachers) to guide how EMI programs should be run (Le, 2012; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019, 2023) and how the national EMI policies are interpreted and implemented in accordance with the local contexts (Tri & Moskovsky, 2023). As argued by H. T. Nguyen et al. (2017), the lack of multiple voices prevents the implementing institutions from managing the program successfully. For example, Duong and Chua (2016) documented the voices of school leaders, departmental heads, and teachers in the facilitation of EMI education at Vietnam National University. The findings suggested that school leaders consider changing structures (teaching, learning, and administration), process orientations (teacher selection, teacher training, teacher monitoring, teacher motivation), and culture (that facilitates learning) to implement EMI programs effectively.

Nonetheless, the implementation of EMI education does not always align with the expectations indicated in national and institutional policy documents, which requires quality assurance practices (Phyak, 2024; Tri & Moskovsky, 2023). To illustrate, while EMI education is largely believed and regulated as English-only (Tri & Moskovsky, 2023), there are questions about the language used in EMI programs in Vietnam. It has been found that the success of EMI programs should also take into account "the use of L1 as part of students' linguistic resources for knowledge and meaning making" (Tri, 2021, p. 14) to help learners make sense of the subject content in both languages (Tri & Moskovsky, 2023; Vo et al., 2022). This is

particularly important for EMI-education degree graduates who work for Vietnamese companies and present their content knowledge in the Vietnamese language (Tri & Moskovsky, 2023). However, such integration of students' L1 requires teachers to skillfully organize tasks so L1 can become part of the learning process while English as the target language is simultaneously developed (Tri & Moskovsky, 2023; Vo et al., 2022). In a Nepali context, peer policing practices were applied with penalties for those violating English-only policies in EMI programs to ensure the production of disciplined English-speaking subjects, despite debates in this regard (Phyak, 2024). This raises the issue of the qualities of teaching staff and management approaches in EMI education. Research emphasizes effective teaching approaches in EMI programs to develop learners' necessary knowledge and skills as well as to meet the programs' goals (Rey-Paba et al., 2024; Vo et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Vu and Burns (2014) reported Vietnamese teachers' insufficient skills in organizing EMI classes successfully due to limited knowledge of the subject in authentic settings, teaching skills, and classroom management. Therefore, the quality of teaching staff needs further attention, which is also one of the demands for institutions to be able to operate EMI programs (T. H. T. Tran et al., 2021).

EMI Programs and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

EMI education has been widely practiced and put into real teaching and learning within the educational contexts of Asian countries (Piller & Cho, 2013), simultaneously to inspire, support, and facilitate higher education oriented towards *interculturalization*. It is evidenced that learners in the relevant degree programs as part of EMI education will likely develop their intercultural awareness (Liu, 2023; Rey-Paba et al., 2024) for the interconnection between language and culture. Byram (1997) held the stance that language and culture are interwoven to generate intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Regarding the relationship between language and culture in EMI educational programs, the EMI educational delivery is influenced by local culture, which impacts learners' ICC in that local context. To illustrate, EMI educational programs are influenced by the sociocultural values in the host country of HE, such as EMI programs in Korea that cannot be detached from Korean cultures to ensure politeness and harmony as prescribed cultural values (Kim et al., 2017). Such a language–culture relation is found to be influential on the EMI learners' mindset about the values of their local language and culture as well as those of the English-speaking world (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Rey-Paba et al., 2024; Sahan et al., 2022). However, such a language–culture relation in the Vietnamese HE context has not been adequately researched, which leaves a void in our understanding of how Vietnamese students perceive their ICC when taking part in EMI courses. The reason to push forward the need to research Vietnamese students' ICC is that Vietnamese HE students are usually classified as passive learners and inactive in intercultural communication, which harms their perceptions of ICC (Vu, 2021; Vu & Dinh, 2021). Such a restraint on ICC development among Vietnamese students might be attributed to cultural differences in learners' backgrounds (Markey et al., 2023) and other educational factors including academic disciplines, English language proficiency and perspectives toward the role of English (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Davidson et al., 2016). These factors are worth our investigation to

determine the extent to which they affect learners' perceptions of ICC and offer insights into how ICC is promoted in the EMI programs of Vietnamese HE settings.

ICC in this study is viewed via Byram's (1997) framework consisting of five ICC dimensions, called *savoirs*, that encompass individuals' abilities to communicate effectively and appropriately with others from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The *savoirs* include attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. According to Byram (1997), attitudes—ATTs (*savoir être*)—encompass the language learners' curiosity, willingness, openness, and readiness to remove personal disbeliefs and inappropriate judgment of other cultures. Knowledge—KNW (*savoir*)—refers to language learners' acquisition and understanding of the local, multicultural, and interactional process. Skills of discovery and interaction—SDI (*savoir apprendre/faire*)—are the language learners' abilities to acquire new cultural knowledge, in turn using attitudes, knowledge, and skills to interact in real time. Skills of interpreting and relating—SIR (*savoir comprendre*)—requires language learners to understand documents produced by those in other cultures by relating them to their own cultures and by carefully reading, analyzing, and interpreting to transform their perspectives. Lastly, critical cultural awareness—CCA (*savoir s'engager*)—involves language learners' abilities to critically evaluate cultural products, perspectives, and practices other than theirs, likely by perceiving from different viewpoints.

However, there are critiques of Byram's (1997) ICC model for its failure to explain how to develop ICC in language classrooms. First, Byram's (1997) model provides very limited clues about conflicts and cultural similarities. Including these elements in EMI educational deliveries is beneficial for language learners to know how best they can harmonize differences and deal with conflicts in more common events of interaction (Hoff, 2020). Second, Byram (1997) recommended limited tools for measuring the *savoirs* in a practical way, besides his definitions and general characterization (Hoff, 2020). Together, these critiques emphasize that developing ICC is not a linear process but a dynamically evolving and challenging one.

Despite the shortcomings, Byram's (1997) ICC model is arguably relevant to our study on two major grounds. First, it delineates the important aspects that need to be examined to uncover the perceived ICC level of Vietnamese learners in relation to EMI education in the Vietnamese HE context (Vu, 2021; Vu & Dinh, 2021). Second, Byram's (1997) ICC model foregrounds the ICC dimensions to consider when examining the reciprocal impacts of language learning and ICC. Therefore, in response to the above-mentioned limitations, this study designed a research instrument, leveraging the five ICC dimensions of Byram's (1997) to establish a more nuanced relationship between language and culture in Vietnamese HE context of EMI programs where further research on ICC is warranted to guide better EMI program implementation. By taking into account the learners' differing cultural, social and English educational backgrounds, this instrument arguably guided our study to capture Vietnamese HE learners' perceptions of ICC through examining their knowledge of and attitudes towards cultural similarities and differences, their perceived intercultural skills to respond and adapt to those phenomena, and their critical cultural awareness of this adaptation process as part of their language-culture experiences in the EMI program. Within the limited scope of this study, we primarily focused on Vietnamese students' self-rated levels of ICC as the viable benefits of EMI education, not on the extent to which they could achieve their ICC

after participating in the required EMI educational programs at the time of research. However, it is important to note that these senses of ICC were the perceived outcomes of the EMI educational programs in which the students engaged.

Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative approach was used to answer the research question (Creswell, 2009), with a particular focus on the students' self-rated levels of ICC, revealed as their perceived outcomes of the EMI programs. Quantitative data assisted in identifying the differing degrees of students' levels of ICC between age groups, academic majors, cultural backgrounds, English language proficiency levels (in accordance with the Common European Framework of References), and years of English language use (inextricably associated with length of English language learning). Relying on the growing literature on EMI in other contexts, which is otherwise limited in Vietnamese HE learners' perceptions of their ICC as participants in EMI courses, we developed a questionnaire on the grounds of the multimodal ICC framework (Byram, 1997).

Participants

Demographically, participants in this study included 63% of female students and 37% of male students in EMI programs across seven (7) institutions. Our targeted institutions were purposefully selected based on two principles: (1) the availability of EMI courses and (2) the diversity of HE institution locations across the country. Participants were recruited through a structured and multi-step process. Initially, institutional gatekeepers, such as department heads or EMI program coordinators, were contacted via formal email invitations and follow-up phone calls, where the research objectives, ethical considerations, and participation requirements were thoroughly explained. After obtaining permission from the institutions, we collaborated with the gatekeepers to disseminate study information to potential students of EMI programs through the distribution of recruitment materials (e.g., flyers and digital announcements) via institutional communication channels (e.g., official emails and learning management systems). Additionally, brief presentations were delivered as part of EMI class visits to provide potential participants with direct information about the study and encourage questions. Participation was voluntary, and interested students were directed to complete an online or paper-based consent form before joining the study. While we successfully included HE institutions in the middle and southern regions of Vietnam, gaining consented access to institutions in the northern region proved challenging and led to the exclusion of that region from the sample.

Among the recruited participants, 30% came from the middle of Vietnam, with 70% from the south of Vietnam. While 23% of the respondents majored in Science studies, the remaining 77% majored in Social Sciences and Humanities subjects. A significant 89% of them perceived their English language proficiency level from A1 to B2, and 11% of them at C1 and above. In total, 58% of the respondents had less than 10 years of experience in English language

learning, which was higher than those with over 10 years of experience. These students pursued high-quality and advanced programs designed by the university and approved by MOET in accordance with the Vietnamese Law of Higher Education. The listed programs included general and major courses primarily instructed in English by Vietnamese faculty members whose qualifications were Master's and Ph.D. in the relevant areas of studies.

Data Collection Instrument

A questionnaire was employed to gather readily processed data from a large number of participants (Dörnyei, 2003; Gillham, 2008). Open-ended items, despite serving exploratory purposes (Cohen et al., 2000), are not included because asking for written responses could make respondents abandon the questionnaire due to fatigue effects (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). We did not seek to probe learners' perceptions of the impact of the EMI program on their ICC on a case-by-case basis. To ensure the quality of data generation, the questionnaire was developed, refined, piloted, and administered (Anderson, 1998) through the following stages:

Determining the Operational Domains and Generating Questionnaire Items

The initial questionnaire included five domains as informed by the five Byram's (1997) ICC savoirs, including ATT, KNW, SDI, SIR, and CCA. Drawing on the theory-led approach (Lavrakas, 2008), the researchers co-constructed the initial item pool by scrutinizing Byram's (1997) detailed description of what is characterized in each savoir and by drawing on the researched HE contexts of EMI programs in Vietnam. The initial set of items was formulated as 32 statements, with (a) eight (8) items referring to ATT domain, (b) six (6) items to KNW domain, (c) six (6) items to SDI domain, (d) seven (7) items to SIR domain, and (e) five (5) items to CCA domain.

These items were then scrutinized by a panel of five experts as PhD degree holders with research interests in cross-culture and intercultural communication to examine their face and content validity (Taherdoost, 2016). These experts were selected based on their established expertise and research interests in the areas of intercultural communication. Specifically, they had an extensive record of scholarly contributions to intercultural communication, including experience in designing and evaluating instruments related to communication across cultures. Furthermore, they were deliberately composed to represent a variety of perspectives within the domain of intercultural communication, encompassing diverse subfields such as cultural psychology and intercultural training programs.

In order to examine the face validity, the experts rated each item on the 4-point ordinal scale (1 = *not relevant*, 2 = *somewhat relevant*, 3 = *quite relevant*, and 4 = *highly relevant*). The content validity ratio (CVR) for each item was adopted to indicate the proportional level of agreement on how many experts within the panel rate an item as valid (Lynn, 1986). CVR was calculated by dividing the number of experts rating an item as valid (i.e., a rating of 3 or 4) by the total number of experts who evaluated the item. According to Lynn (1986), an item is retained if its CVR value equals at least 0.78. This process resulted in a refined scale of 27 items. All the ICC items were constructed into a questionnaire as a 5-point Likert scale, in

which 1 denoted “*very weak*” and 5 denoted “*very strong*”. A 5-point Likert scale is “the most practical for most common purposes” (Anderson, 1998, p. 174). It may reduce the respondents’ frustration to increase response rate and quality, compared with a 7-point scale (Sachdev & Verma, 2004).

Piloting

Given that the questionnaire was to be completed by Vietnamese university students, the refined scale was translated into Vietnamese to ensure comprehensibility. The authors piloted questionnaire items among a group of seven (7) stakeholders, including Vietnamese English-as-a-foreign-language teacher educators, EMI teachers, and EMI learners to represent diverse perspectives in EMI contexts. Those piloted participants were invited to the pilot to (a) evaluate the questionnaire’s comprehensibility by identifying ambiguities in linguistic and conceptual use in the questionnaire items and (b) pre-empt the problems related to item wording as caused by English-Vietnamese translation (Mackey & Gass, 2005). This was done through cognitive interviewing (Jobe & Herrmann, 1996), in which the researcher queried the piloted participants to see whether their comprehension of the questions was aligned with the researcher’s intent. The piloted participants were asked to verbalize their thought process while interpreting the questions, allowing the researchers to assess whether their comprehension aligned with the intended meaning.

Several key insights emerged from this process. The piloted participants highlighted instances where certain words or phrases in the Vietnamese translation carried unintended connotations or were less commonly used in an academic setting. In particular,

- two *ATT items* contained terminology that was too formal and potentially ambiguous. These terms were consequently revised to more commonly understood equivalents that preserved the original meaning while improving clarity.
- three *SIR items* included phrasing that, when translated directly, sounded unnatural or overly complex. The piloted participants suggested alternative expressions that were more idiomatic and intuitive for Vietnamese respondents.

To further validate these refinements, the revised translation was subsequently reviewed by three non-expert native speakers of Vietnamese who had no prior involvement in EMI research. This additional step was to ensure that the questionnaire was accessible not only to individuals familiar with the EMI context but also to a broader range of Vietnamese-speaking respondents. Each reviewer was asked to assess the questionnaire independently, focusing on whether the revised wording was natural and easily comprehensible in everyday Vietnamese language use. They were encouraged to highlight any phrases that sounded awkward, overly technical, or ambiguous. Additionally, they provided feedback on whether the revised items maintained logical coherence and conveyed the intended meaning without misinterpretation. Their feedback further reinforced the effectiveness of the prior modifications. They reported that the revised items were more naturally sounding and easier to understand, compared to the initial translation. This provided additional assurance that the questionnaire was linguistically accurate, free of unnatural phrasing, and suitable for its intended audience.

Administering the Questionnaire

There were two primary sections in the finalized questionnaire, including (a) demographic information and (b) the five ICC savoirs to measure students' existing ICC levels as a result of their EMI learning experience. The survey was distributed in both online and paper-based formats and was accompanied by consent forms. There were 350 responses out of 410 invitations (85.37% as a response rate), but 31 were removed due to incomplete responses. Therefore, 315 responses were included in further analyses.

Instrumentation

To determine the factor structure of the administered questionnaire, the EFA was conducted by principal component analysis and Varimax rotation in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 21. The result of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test was 0.854, higher than 0.600, proving that the variables were sufficiently extracted into principal components (Kaiser, 1960). Furthermore, the items exhibiting loadings less than 0.3 and/or cross-loading on two or more factors with loadings of 0.4 or greater were excluded (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). This process culminated in the exploration of four factors, as detailed in Table 1.

- Factor 1: Attitudes (5 items, variance explained: 9.353%);
- Factor 2: Knowledge (4 items, variance explained: 7.495%);
- Factor 3: Skills of discovery and interaction (4 items, variance explained: 16.75%);
- Factor 4: Skills of interpreting and relating (3 items, variance explained: 11.8%);
- Factor 5: Critical Cultural Awareness (2 items, variance explained: 6.489%).

Table 1

Factor Structure of the Byram's (1997) ICC Savoirs

Items	Factor loadings
<i>Factor 1: Attitude ($\alpha = 0.80$)</i>	
I am interested in other cultures (new experience, people, ideas, societies, and so on) in the EMI degree course;	0.34
I am open towards other cultures (new experience, people, ideas, societies, and so on) in the EMI degree course;	0.32
I am curious about new experiences and other cultures (new experience, people, ideas, societies, and so on) in the EMI degree course;	0.39
I am willing to diversify my viewpoints on existing cultural differences and related value systems in the EMI degree course;	0.38
I am willing to avoid mono-cultural attitudes to willingly accept cultural differences in the EMI degree course;	0.35
<i>Factor 2: Knowledge ($\alpha = 0.77$)</i>	
I am aware of my current knowledge, cultural understanding and personal dispositions in the EMI degree course;	0.35

I have knowledge about my local cultures in the EMI degree course;	0.30
I have essential knowledge about other cultures in the EMI degree course;	0.31
I have knowledge about how to fit in interaction between people of diverse cultural backgrounds in the EMI degree course;	0.34
<i>Factor 3: Skills of Discovery and Interaction ($\alpha = 0.81$)</i>	
I am actively engaged in establishing relationships and addressing any dysfunctions in the EMI degree course;	0.60
I can use appropriate knowledge to overcome challenges regarding interactions with those from other cultures in the EMI degree course;	0.55
I can express positive attitudes to overcome challenges regarding interactions with those from other cultures in the EMI degree course;	0.45
I can use skills to overcome challenges regarding interactions with those from other cultures in the EMI degree course;	0.40
<i>Factor 4: Skill of interpreting and relating ($\alpha = 0.76$)</i>	
I can seek to develop my competencies related to intercultural sensitivity in the EMI degree course;	0.38
I can act on various personal selves and employ suitable strategies to interact effectively with those from other cultures in the EMI degree course;	0.34
I can seek to address my perspectives on other cultures to succeed in relationships between different cultures in the EMI degree course;	0.30
<i>Factor 5: Critical cultural awareness ($\alpha = 0.67$)</i>	
I can evaluate cultural perspectives, practices and products from different angles in the EMI degree course;	0.53
I actively seek to identify criteria for critical evaluation of my and others' cultures in the EMI degree course;	0.48

To strengthen the validation of the questionnaire, the convergent and discriminant validity were also assessed. Table 2 indicates that the composite reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs were greater than the minimum threshold (CR > 0.70; AVE > 0.50), as suggested by Hair et al. (2019). These indices show strong convergent validity.

Square roots of AVE were also gauged to examine the discriminate validity of the scale. According to Table 2, the square roots of AVE in bold fonts are on diagonals; off diagonals are Pearson correlation values. It is shown that the square roots of AVE all exceeded their Pearson correlation values off the diagonal. This suggests a very good discriminant validity of the measurement instruments (Hair et al., 2019). The correlations among the constructs were also

examined (Table 2). Based on the satisfactory psychometric properties of these constructs, the study proceeded with further analyses.

- ATT positively correlated with KNW ($r = 0.379, p < 0.01$), SDI ($r = 0.624, p < 0.01$), SIR ($r = 0.645, p < 0.01$), and CCA ($r = 0.160, p < 0.01$).
- KNW showed positive correlation with SDI ($r = 0.605, p < 0.01$), SIR ($r = 0.597, p < 0.01$). KNW negatively correlated with CCA ($r = -0.003, p < 0.01$).
- SDI had positive correlation with SIR ($r = 0.633, p < 0.01$) and CCA ($r = 0.235, p < 0.01$).
- SIR positively correlated with CCA ($r = 0.416, p < 0.01$).

Table 2
Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Construct	Convergent validity		Discriminant validity				
	CR	AVE	ATT	KNW	SDI	SIR	CCA
ATT	0.893	0.513	0.716				
KNW	0.891	0.576	0.379*	0.759			
SDI	0.832	0.560	0.624*	0.605*	0.748		
SIR	0.806	0.534	0.645*	0.597*	0.633*	0.730	
CCA	0.775	0.511	0.160*	-0.003*	0.235*	0.417*	0.715

Note. * Statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Data Analysis

Following the demographic information, we drew on the students' self-rated perceptions of the EMI and its contribution to their levels of ICC to generate both descriptive and inferential findings. The analyses were aimed at illustrating how the questionnaire items enabled us to identify the extent to which each savoir of clustered ICC items, according to Byram (1997), was valued differently from the others. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 was used for data analysis.

Data analyses included descriptive analysis with means and standard deviations of participants' ICC levels in the five savoirs. Regarding inferential analysis, Shapiro-Wilk tests were conducted on each construct to check for normality. As the result of normal data distribution in each construct, independent sample tests were conducted to examine how learners' self-ratings of the five savoir dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, skills of discovery and interaction, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness differed across gender, cultural backgrounds, fields of study, English language proficiency level, and English language learning experience. The effect size was measured as Cohen's d and interpreted according to Plonsky and Oswald (2014).

Results

Following Byram's framework to determine the levels of ICC (Very weak: 1.0–1.8; Weak: 1.8–2.6; Moderate: 2.6–3.4; Strong: 3.4–4.2; Very strong: 4.2–5.0), the findings

suggested that Vietnamese EMI students seemed to be able to develop their perceived ICC levels as a result of their engagement with EMI courses in their programs. According to Table 3, all the savoirs were found to be strong, with values ranging from $M = 3.395$ ($SD = 0.665$) for critical cultural awareness to $M = 3.906$ ($SD = 0.500$) for their intercultural knowledge. In particular, the students indicated positive intercultural attitudes toward cultural differences of their own and other cultural backgrounds ($M = 3.841$; $SD = 0.548$), which was higher than that of their skills of interpreting and relating ($M = 3.527$; $SD = 0.644$) and that of their discovery and interaction ($M = 3.420$; $SD = 0.436$).

Table 3
Students' Perceptions of ICC

Components	Mean	SD
Attitudes	3.841	0.548
I am interested in other cultures (new experience, people, ideas, societies, and so on) in the EMI degree course;	3.395	0.665
I am open towards other cultures (new experience, people, ideas, societies, and so on) in the EMI degree course;	3.841	0.549
I am curious about new experiences and other cultures (new experience, people, ideas, societies, and so on) in the EMI degree course;	3.526	0.644
I am willing to diversify my viewpoints on existing cultural differences and related value systems in the EMI degree course;	3.420	0.536
I am willing to avoid mono-cultural attitudes to willingly accept cultural differences in the EMI degree course;	3.906	0.500
Knowledge	3.906	0.500
I am aware of my current knowledge, cultural understanding and personal dispositions in the EMI degree course;	3.718	0.715
I have knowledge about my local cultures in the EMI degree course;	4.226	0.629
I have essential knowledge about other cultures in the EMI degree course;	3.752	0.755
I have knowledge about how to fit in interaction between people of diverse cultural backgrounds in the EMI degree course;	3.928	0.755
Skills of discovery and interaction	3.420	0.536
I am actively engaged in establishing relationships and addressing any dysfunctions in the EMI degree course;	3.363	0.824

I can use appropriate knowledge to overcome challenges regarding interactions with those from other cultures in the EMI degree course;	3.567	0.805
I can express positive attitudes to overcome challenges regarding interactions with those from other cultures in the EMI degree course;	3.618	0.792
I can use skills to overcome challenges regarding interactions with those from other cultures in the EMI degree course;	3.458	0.834
Skills of interpreting and relating	3.527	0.644
I can seek to develop my competencies related to intercultural sensitivity in the EMI degree course;	4.044	0.763
I can act on various personal selves and employ suitable strategies to interact effectively with those from other cultures in the EMI degree course;	3.335	0.738
I can seek to address my perspectives on other cultures to succeed in relationships between different cultures in the EMI degree course;	3.320	0.721
Critical cultural awareness	3.395	0.665
I can evaluate cultural perspectives, practices and products from different angles in the EMI degree course;	3.411	0.815
I actively seek to identify criteria for critical evaluation of my and others' cultures in the EMI degree course;	3.380	0.771

Irrespective of the categories used to determine the students' group (e.g., gender, hometown, and academic disciplines), our findings suggested that the students tended to acquire their intercultural attitudes and knowledge when compared with intercultural skills and awareness. Statistically, independent sample t-tests conducted to compare students' perceived levels of ICC between groups revealed the following findings:

- There were no differences between male and female students regarding the self-rated levels of ICC, meaning that they could equally yield their acquisition of ICC based on opportunities available in their EMI courses.
- Students' self-rated levels of ICC were significantly different between hometown backgrounds, especially regarding skills of discovery and interaction ($t(193) = 2.044, p < 0.05$) with small effect size ($d = 0.06$). Thus, the students in Southern Vietnam were better at discovering and interacting with others who had different cultural backgrounds.
- The observation regarding the students' skills of discovery and interaction was also different based on academic majors ($t(119) = 2.374, p < 0.05$) with small effect size ($d = 0.11$). This finding implies that Social Sciences and Humanity students were

more interculturally competent than their Science counterparts in interacting with others from different cultural groups.

Statistical findings showed that self-ratings of EMI undergraduate students' levels of ICC were significantly different between student groups of distinctive language proficiencies (according to Common European Framework of References), specifically for critical cultural awareness ($t(47) = 4.654, p < 0.05$) with small effect size ($d = 0.04$). This suggests that students not proficient in English can better inform themselves than their advanced colleagues, which will be explained in detail in the following section.

Self-ratings of ICC were significantly different by the length of students' English language learning experience, specifically with regards to attitudes ($t(292) = 2.355, p < 0.05$) with small effect size ($d = 0.20$). The findings suggest that students with more English learning experiences and exposure may show more positive attitudes toward intercultural interactions and situations. This may be because language learning can enable learners to gradually transform their own perspectives and perceptions regarding different cultures.

Discussion

This study concludes that Vietnamese undergraduate students positively perceived their intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills learned from EMI programs. The levels of ICC were reflected based on Byram's (1997) model. This study also points out that considerable variations in engagement exist regarding students' gender, geographic and cultural locations, academic majors, language proficiency, and learning experience.

Generally, the study confirms the interrelation between language and culture through the development of cultural knowledge in EMI programs. The association between language and students' attitudes and knowledge toward ICC is seen in this study through their interest in exploring cultures in EMI courses and their willingness to acknowledge cultural diversity as positive (Byram, 1997). This may be a result of the tight relationship between language and culture, the integration of cultural knowledge in language education, and frequent contact between students of different cultural backgrounds (Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Liddicoat et al., 2003; Rey-Paba et al., 2024). The more experiences the learners had, the better their attitudes toward cultural diversity. Being immersed in EMI programs as intensive English-language environments longer possibly offers students extensive experiences in multicultural-multilingual settings, which has positive effects on their awareness of cultural differences and creates positive attitudes toward learning languages and cultures. Previous studies have found that when the English language is developed, students have further opportunities to learn about other cultures through a variety of channels (e.g., books, videos, online programs) (Vu & Chi, 2022).

Despite the positive attitudes and knowledge of ICC, the likelihood of utilizing cultural knowledge and skills from EMI courses in interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds, discovering additional cultures, interpreting, and critically reflecting on different cultural values (Byram, 1997) was relatively low. This contradicts some previous research (e.g., Chi & Vu, 2024a, 2024b) where Vietnamese students were found with the agency in

transferring knowledge and skills gained from English-intensive programs to real-life interactions with international peers. This difference could be due to four reasons.

First, not only were the participants in Chi and Vu's (2024a, 2024b) either graduates of English language studies or graduates of the undergraduate programs where English was the medium of instruction, their formal English learning experiences were also complemented by professional engagement with English-rich workplace settings. This leverage might imply greater self-regulation in applying their English language and culture knowledge than the EMI learners whose acquisition of English language and culture knowledge was only restrained to the study program itself, although more comparative research on both groups of participants is warranted to substantiate this claim.

Second, the majority of participants in our study perceived their English proficiency level as standing at only from A1 to B2, while the majority of participants in Chi and Vu (2024a, 2024b) reported their English language proficiency as advanced. It might be due to the limited English language proficiency that might hinder the students of our study from effectively interacting with their peers (Kim et al., 2017; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019; Vo et al., 2022).

Third, this finding is explained by the commonly claimed gap in knowing and doing (Kim et al., 2017; L. Nguyen et al., 2016), where learners fail to apply the learned knowledge in practical situations. This shortcoming could again be attributed to the majority of EMI students' limited English language proficiency at the time of the study. Language courses before joining EMI programs may improve learners' language proficiency to successfully acquire the English language, disciplinary knowledge, and cultural values presented in EMI programs (Tri & Moskovsky, 2019). As suggested by T. H. T. Tran et al. (2021), ESP courses can be foundational courses for students to develop disciplinary language and content knowledge before enrolling in EMI programs.

Fourth and equally important are teachers' qualities in adjusting their teaching approaches in EMI programs. It has been shown that the lack of opportunities created by the teachers for the students to apply the EMI-related learned knowledge (e.g., language and content knowledge) into practice has been a concern in implementing EMI programs in Vietnam and other contexts (Rey-Paba et al., 2024; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019; Vu & Burns, 2014). In fact, students' development of language and cultural knowledge in EMI or other English language programs also largely depends on the teachers' teaching strategies (Chi & Vu, 2024a, 2024b; Rey-Paba et al., 2024; Vo et al., 2022). Therefore, teachers' teaching approaches and possibly institutional support and management play an important role in providing students with opportunities to make use of the learned knowledge (Phyak, 2024; Rey-Paba et al., 2024; Vu & Chi, 2022) such as the use of problem-solving tasks for student engagement (Vo et al., 2022), intercultural materials for students' intercultural awareness (Rey-Paba et al., 2024), and (extracurricular) activities for intercultural interactions (Chi & Vu, 2024a).

Interestingly, attitudes, knowledge, and skills toward ICC as the outcomes of engagement in the EMI courses were found not to vary by gender, which is an innovative finding of this study because existing research tends to emphasize cultural factors in a general sense and neglect gender issues when exploring student engagement in EMI programs (Kim et al., 2017). In this study, male students seemed to be as sensitive to cultural diversity as female learners and to effectively respond to different cultural values, which has not yet been deeply

explored in previous studies in EMI educational programs in Asian contexts. It can be assumed that Confucian values to date, under which women, to some extent, are seen as, or expected to be, passive, less engaged, and submissive, are a primary contributing factor (L. H. N. Tran, 2019; Tsai, 2006). Women and men have different perspectives on the goal of education where men tend to strike interest in the job market, and education appears as a token of respect and non-dependence for women (Ho, 2017). With different goals in education, the skills that these two genders strive to develop and how they engage with learning could be different accordingly (L. H. N. Tran, 2019; Tsai, 2006).

Besides gender, students of different geographical regions also expressed variations in their ICC skills, which is a novel discovery of this study, as previous research tends to discuss EMI programs in Vietnam in a general sense (Duong & Chua, 2016; Le, 2012; Sahan et al., 2022; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019; Vu & Burns, 2014). Considering the two regions included in the study, students in southern Vietnam indicated a higher level of cultural acquisition and interaction with people of other cultural backgrounds. It is possible that students in different regions and their EMI programs are influenced by the socio-cultural features of their homeland, which consequently guides their beliefs and responses to different cultural values and the operation of EMI education (Kim et al., 2017).

Despite a shared perspective on the necessity and contribution of ICC to meet the more complex issues in communication in different contexts, there are differences in the abilities to acquire and use ICC skills across disciplines (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019). The prominence of ICC research in the social sciences aligns with the nature of these disciplines, which inherently cultivate ICC through their focus on subjective perspectives, empathic reasoning, and reflective thinking (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). These disciplines often incorporate theoretical debates, case studies, and experiential learning, which necessitate an active engagement with multiple cultural viewpoints and nuanced communication strategies. In contrast, hard sciences, particularly pure sciences such as chemistry, prioritize objective knowledge transmission, universal facts, and decontextualized information. Students in hard science disciplines are primarily trained for technical problem-solving in a standardized manner, which may limit opportunities for ICC development unless explicitly integrated into curricula. This fundamental epistemological distinction suggests that educational disciplines may lead to observed differences in the engagement of social science and science students with ICC (Chi & Vu, 2024a; Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019). These findings extend beyond disciplinary boundaries and into pedagogical practices in EMI contexts. If social science students exhibit stronger ICC, it raises questions about how hard science curricula might adapt to foster similar competencies. Future research could investigate the role of interdisciplinary approaches, experiential learning models, and explicit ICC training in bridging this gap. Additionally, comparative studies across different educational settings, including within Vietnam, could provide further insights into how institutional structures, teaching methodologies, and student engagement shape ICC development across disciplines. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for enhancing EMI applications and ensuring that students, regardless of their disciplinary background, acquire ICC for global communication and collaboration.

The findings also indicate a significant difference in self-ratings of critical cultural awareness (CCA) between students of varying English proficiency levels. Notably, students with lower English proficiency reported higher levels of CCA than those with higher English proficiency level, albeit with a small effect size. The findings are in contrast with other studies (e.g., Kim et al., 2017; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019), which suggest that those with higher language proficiency levels have a better critical reflection of cultural diversity because language proficiency is perceived to be supportive of exploring culture and facilitating students' success in EMI programs. The findings may be explained by several cognitive and experiential factors. First, students with lower English proficiency may engage more consciously with cultural differences due to their heightened awareness of linguistic barriers, fostering deeper reflection on intercultural interactions. Research on ICC suggests that individuals facing communication challenges often develop adaptive strategies, such as heightened cultural sensitivity, to navigate social and academic environments effectively (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Additionally, these students may rely more on non-verbal cues, contextual knowledge, and cultural empathy, reinforcing their critical awareness of cultural nuances. Conversely, students with higher English proficiency may experience cultural immersion more effortlessly, potentially reducing the necessity for explicit critical reflection. Their familiarity with EMI may lead to a perceived cultural fluency, resulting in lower self-reported CCA. Furthermore, metacognitive differences could play a role in that "cultural contrasts often stimulate learners' minds and provoke new thoughts and discovery" (Truong & Tran, 2014, p. 217). For this reason, less proficient students might actively analyze cultural interactions due to a sense of linguistic disadvantage, whereas more proficient students might assume a position of cultural ease, minimizing critical engagement. While these explanations offer initial insights, further research is warranted to verify whether this pattern is consistent across different EMI settings and student populations. Future studies should also consider qualitative investigations to explore students' cognitive strategies and intercultural learning processes in greater depth.

Conclusion

This study tackled the under-researched relationship between Vietnam-based EMI programs and Vietnamese students' ICC, which serves as a theoretical and empirical contribution to the developing literature on EMI in Vietnam and broader Asian educational settings. Significantly, the study has contributed efforts to revise and implement EMI courses in which the particular levels of ICC play a role and are considered an educational outcome for Vietnamese students to develop linguistic and intercultural communication skills.

It was found that the Vietnamese students in the EMI programs in the study seem to have positively perceived different aspects of ICC as guided by Byram's (1997) ICC model. However, the likelihood of applying the cultural knowledge and skills gained from EMI programs was relatively low due to a number of potential factors. This study has also shed light on the differences in ICC levels among students of different backgrounds related to region, academic discipline, English language proficiency, and English language learning experience. These different student populations could be potential topics for further research to explore in

terms of how EMI programs can be designed, developed, implemented, and sustained in the pursuit of HE students' intercultural communication.

Future research may employ qualitative data on language teachers', students', school leaders', and relevant stakeholders' suggestions for EMI programs in diverse HE contexts. In addition, students' disciplinary and contextual characteristics could be further explored to better understand how EMI programs and relevant policies are revised, regulated, and implemented at national, institutional, and classroom levels in Vietnamese higher education.

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