Students' Voices in Translanguaging Practices in English Medium Instruction in Southeast Asian Universities

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Abstract

Much research on language use in English Medium Instruction (EMI) classes indicates that lecturers commonly use translanguaging to support students' content learning. The present comparative study aims to build momentum by focusing on students' self-reported translanguaging practices to accomplish content learning-related activities both in and outside the classroom. The data consist of nine focus group discussions involving domestic and international students enrolled at three Southeast Asian universities—in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. The grounded theory analysis examines students' voices of the situations, reasons for using translanguaging, and their perspectives on such practice across the three countries. The findings reveal that, in addition to using translanguaging in classroom interactions and group discussions, students employ it to support their reading and writing activities. Key differences in translanguaging practices and perspectives are discussed across research contexts. This study offers implications for language education policymakers and EMI practitioners in multilingual contexts.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction, translanguaging practices, higher education, multilingual users, Southeast Asian universities

Introduction

The rapid growth of English Medium Instruction (EMI hereafter) in European universities has influenced Southeast Asian institutions to develop their own EMI programs. Driven by the internationalization of higher education (HE hereafter), these initiatives aim to enhance student and staff mobility, improve rankings, and boost income from international students (Curle et al., 2020). EMI involves teaching academic subjects in English in regions where it is not the majority's first language (L1) (Dearden, 2014; Macaro, 2018).

Strong English skills are essential for success in EMI classes, as they are key to understanding academic content (Kim et al., 2017). However, many students face challenges due to limited English proficiency, affecting their learning (Sahan et al., 2022). Restricting instruction to English overlooks students' multilingual abilities, which support more effective learning. In many Southeast Asian contexts, language policies prioritize English as the sole medium of instruction, driving EMI's rapid adoption. This creates two tensions: the mismatch between EMI's English proficiency expectations and students' actual abilities, and the conflict between English-only instruction and the reality of multilingualism.

Research on students' translanguaging practices in EMI, particularly within the double layers of tension, remains limited, with most studies focusing on lecturers. As recipients of the EMI enterprise, students' perspectives deserve greater attention, given their expected reliance on English for learning-related activities. Responding to a call for more research of a 'comparative kind' (Dearden and Macaro, 2016: 455), Baker and Hüttner (2017) examined EMI in Austria, the UK, and Thailand but excluded Vietnam and Malaysia. Similarly, Sahan et al. (2022) studied EMI in Thailand and Vietnam, omitting Malaysia, while Boonsuk and Ambele (2024) focused on multilingual students in Thailand and Malaysia, leaving out Vietnam.

Our research addresses the gap by conducting a comparative study of Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand. We investigated students' translanguaging practices for in- and out-of-class learning, exploring their language choices and challenges in EMI programs. While often overlooked in applied linguistics (Galloway, 2020), we used focus group discussions (FGDs hereafter) to gather data from multiple participants simultaneously, as FGDs are effective for generating new ideas (Shabina et al., 2024). Our study examines translanguaging practices across the three countries, guided by the following research questions: 1) When and why do students use translanguaging in the EMI contexts? How do they view using translanguaging to learn content? 2) What, if any, are the differences in using translanguaging amongst EMI students from Malaysian, Thai, and Vietnamese universities? What might these differences be attributed to?

We used grounded theory as an analytical strategy, offering a structured approach to build robust evidence and clarify complex processes during analysis (Charmaz, 2014). The findings provide valuable insights for EMI stakeholders, advocating for using multiple languages in EMI programs to enhance educational outcomes.

Literature Review

EMI Policies across Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam

Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), are geographically close yet diverse in history, ethnicity, culture, and language (Hashim and Leitner, 2014). In Malaysia, English is a vital second language alongside Malay, the national language. While Malay replaced English as the medium of instruction post-independence, globalization prompted a partial policy reversal. In 2005, EMI was reinstated for STEM programs at the tertiary level to produce a skilled, English-speaking workforce and support the nation's development goals (Gill, 2006; Hashim and Leitner, 2014). EMI plays a key role in the Ministry of Higher Education's (MOHE) internationalization agenda, which has significantly increased international student enrolment in Malaysian universities—from 45,000 in 2007 to nearly 100,000 in 2014, with a target of 250,000 by 2025 (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2015). The 2011 Internationalization Policy recommends using English as the medium of instruction for managing and teaching international students (MOHE, 2011).

In Vietnam, EMI is crucial for developing an English-speaking workforce to aid its rapidly growing economy. English, now the country's primary foreign language (Nguyen et al., 2017), has been promoted across education levels. EMI at postgraduate levels began in the early 1990s, and recent efforts by the Ministry of Education and Training aim to internationalize HE and enhance students' English proficiency (Galloway and Sahan, 2021). Initiatives like the National Foreign Languages 2020 project recommend

offering programs in English at selected universities (Nguyen et al., 2017). Recent initiatives have promoted EMI in Vietnam and encouraged partnerships with foreign universities (Bolton and Botha, 2020). However, these efforts face challenges, particularly lecturers' and students' insufficient English proficiency, which hinders EMI implementation (Vu and Burns, 2014). Although EMI aims to produce a skilled English-speaking workforce, students' language readiness can impact learning outcomes and limit its effectiveness (Nguyen et al., 2017).

Like Vietnam, Thailand has taken measures to internationalize its HE, which includes two 15-year initiatives (i.e., 1990 to 2004 and 2008 to 2022) (Galloway and Sahan, 2021). EMI, called international programs, were introduced in the early 1990s to improve students' English skills and enhance employability (Sahan et al., 2022). While EMI in Thailand 'mainly caters to a domestic cohort' (Galloway and Sahan 2021: 14), the country is the third most sought-after destination in Southeast Asia for international students, after Malaysia and Singapore (Atherton et al., 2018). Several top Thai universities now provide EMI programs designed for Thai students. These programs aim to offer an international education and boost students' job opportunities (Bolton and Botha, 2020).

The 'E' in EMI in the Multilingual World

English-only ideologies dominate as a *de jure* language in EMI within HE across Southeast Asia. Universities in the region often emphasize exclusive English use in EMI programs. In Thailand, English-only instruction is firmly rooted in education policies (Baker and Jarunthawatchai, 2017). In Vietnam, EMI plays a significant role in the internationalization of HE (Tran and Nguyen, 2018). Similarly, in Malaysia, private universities widely use English, and the government has recently expanded EMI use in leading public universities (Bolton and Botha, 2020).

When implementing EMI, a tension often arises between the ideal of English-only instruction and the multilingual reality of students in multilingual universities. Authorities aim to enforce EMI using only English, but multilingual students can benefit from using multiple languages. The European Commission (2007: 6) defines multilingualism as "the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives." Kirkpatrick (2018) advocates for viewing EMI as a multilingual practice, encouraging lecturers and students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires. He suggests that the 'E' in EMI should represent English as a lingua franca rather than a native-speaker variety. The concept of English in EMI must go beyond native norms (Galloway and Rose, 2015).

EMI can link with the existing linguistic diversity of its context. Phillipson (2018) highlights that EMI in universities should not undermine using students' mother tongues. Similarly, Kirkpatrick (2014) advocates for EMI lecturers to incorporate other languages they are proficient in, alongside English, even when the subject is officially taught through EMI. Multilingual users possess unique personal language repertoires shaped by varying levels of proficiency and development across languages, dialects, and registers (García and Li, 2014). In EMI settings, multilingualism fosters communication and understanding by enabling the use of multiple languages in interactions (Marshall and Moore, 2018).

Going beyond the emphasis on the 'E' in EMI, the focus should move away from exclusive English use to prioritize students' comprehension and ability to demonstrate their learning. Students should be allowed to utilize all their linguistic resources to achieve their learning goals. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 highlights how students can integrate multiple resources to enhance their learning.

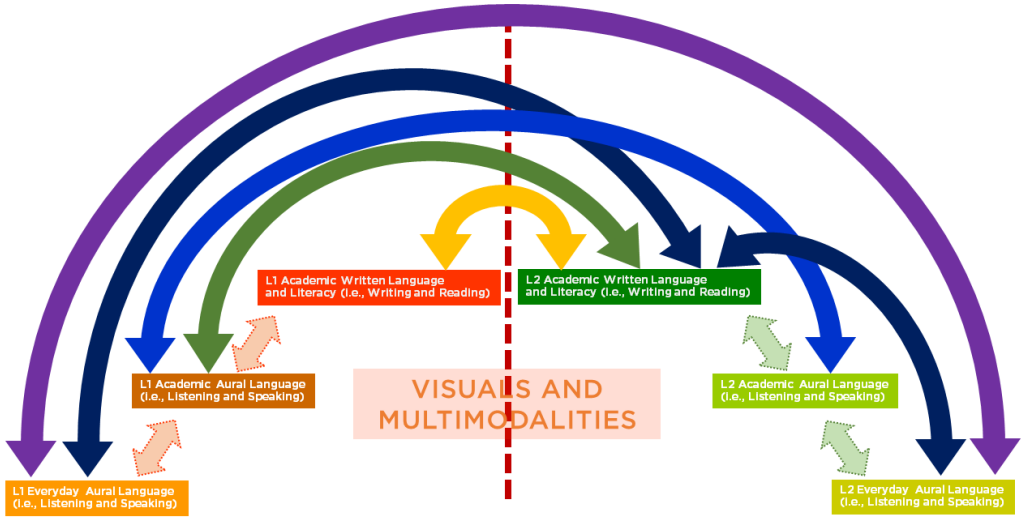


Figure 1 Rainbow Diagram
Source: Adapted from Lin (2012: 93)

When students encounter academic content that is very challenging, multilingual students can use all the resources they have to support their learning. Lin's framework (2012) highlights the different types of resources that can help scaffold students' understanding of academic content and academic writing. These resources, as Lin (2016) explains, include L2 (a second language) academic spoken language, L2 everyday language, L1 academic written languages, L1 academic spoken languages, L1 everyday languages, and multimodal tools. Furthermore, the adapted diagram illustrates the crucial interconnection between languages and receptive competencies, specifically listening and literacy. These skills are presented as an integral part of students' overall linguistic repertoire, essential for maximizing their potential. Consequently, students can strategically leverage this entire set of abilities, drawing upon multiple languages and skills in synergy to enhance their comprehension.

Translanguaging in EMI

Translanguaging was first used to describe the practice of shifting between Welsh and English in teaching to enhance meaning-making and deepen understanding of content (Baker, 2001). Today, translanguaging is a unified linguistic system that uses fluid language practices within natural multilingual contexts, going "beyond the boundaries of named languages" (Li, 2018: 19). The prefix 'trans-' reflects the smooth movement between languages, while 'languaging' highlights activity and individual choice (Brooks, 2022). Thus, translanguaging consists of the "multiple discursive practices" those multilinguals use to make sense of their multilingual worlds (García, 2009: 45) and explains that people use these practices strategically.

In theory, language is seen as developing along a horizontal continuum. This means individuals use features from their entire linguistic and semiotic repertoire strategically, depending on the context they are in (Vogel and García, 2017). In this view, language is not a fixed 'product' but rather an ongoing process, described as "the simultaneous process of continuous becoming of ourselves and of our language practices as we interact and make meaning in the world" (García and Li, 2014: 8). Translanguaging enables speakers to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire, transcending the socially or politically imposed boundaries of named languages (Otheguy et al., 2019). Canagarajah (2011: 401) describes translanguaging

as "the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages." Typically, translanguaging refers to communication between two or more people, either in spoken or written form, with a particular focus on spoken language as it is often the most common form of usage for many multilingual individuals (Siegel, 2020). However, as Conteh (2018) emphasizes, translanguaging also extends to written texts, where multiple languages can be used.

By practice, translanguaging aims to support students' multilingual identities by viewing their full linguistic repertoires as valuable resources. It develops students' metalinguistic awareness during language and content learning (Cenoz and Gorter, 2021). Using their L1 alongside their L2 in the classroom can help students overcome language challenges in EMI settings (Kim et al., 2017). Both teachers and students have positive attitudes towards L1 use in EMI, as it promotes greater equity in the classroom (Caruso, 2018) and creates a translanguaging space (Li, 2018) where students can construct knowledge, communicate, and negotiate meaning (Rahman and Singh, 2022). Translanguaging focuses on building a collaborative learning environment where students' communicative repertoires—including multilingual, multimodal, and multisensory resources—are used in the meaning-making process (Cenoz and Gorter, 2021).

Despite English language policies in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, the voices of students—key stakeholders in EMI—remain unheard. Evidence supporting English as the sole medium of EMI is unclear. Translanguaging may either remain theoretical or become a practical tool to help students overcome English-related learning challenges. Our study addresses the gaps by examining students' voices on translanguaging practices in learning-related activities in and out of class. The comparative approach is expected to provide insights into how contextual factors may influence students' choice and use of translanguaging to accomplish learning across the three research sites.

Methodologies

Focus Group Discussions and Participants

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are designed to capture participants' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes through informal, focused discussions among small groups (Shabina et al., 2024). FGDs explore specific issues by emphasizing group interaction to generate collective perspectives (Galloway, 2020). FGDs should be large enough to capture diverse opinions yet small enough to encourage participants to share their thoughts and experiences comfortably (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Davis (2017) recommends four to twelve participants per group, focused on a specific topic. A multiple-category design enables comparisons across factors like location and participant types (Krueger and Casey, 2014), with sampling often based on convenience methods (Davis, 2017).

FGDs are common practices among university students, enabling us to explore their collective attitudes and values towards translanguaging practices. Three universities were selected through convenience sampling in this study. The Malaysian university has 32,052 students, including 5,208 international postgraduates. The Thai university, with 37,615 students, has 604 international students. The Vietnamese university, with 37,709 students, has 150 international undergraduates. Three FGDs per university were conducted with students enrolled in EMI programs. Groups were planned as (i) a four-member international group, (ii) a four-member domestic group, and (iii) a mixed group with two international and two domestic students. However, due to no-shows—a domestic student in Malaysia and an international student in Thailand—the total number of participants was 34: 11 from Malaysia, 11 from

Thailand, and 12 from Vietnam. Most participants were master's degree students, except for six international undergraduates in Vietnam, as no full-time international master's degree students were enrolled there. Participant details are in the Appendix. Ethics approval was obtained before data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

We followed Davis's (2017) eight-step FGD design process by defining the target population, determining group composition, selecting a representative sample, deciding on sample size, planning participant recruitment, addressing ethical considerations, organizing session logistics, and developing discussion topics and guides to structure the sessions. As facilitators, we encouraged interactive dialogue on students' language choices and views on translanguaging. Consistent with Galloway's (2020) emphasis on group dynamics, discussions averaged 90 minutes, mostly in English, with Vietnamese used for one domestic group. Sessions on Teams/Zoom were recorded for analysis. The data, comprising nine FGDs (totalling 12 hours and 49 minutes), was first transcribed verbatim; the discussion of the Vietnamese domestic group was also translated into English.

Grounded Theory or GT is defined as the discovery of theory emerging directly from data. According to Charmaz and Thornberg (2021), GT is a systematic approach to research that shapes the process of data collection and offers clear strategies for analyzing it. The grounded theory method, they explain, "not only helps researchers to synthesize data but, moreover, to move beyond description through constructing new concepts that explicate what is happening" (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021: 307). In our study we analyzed FGD data using the GT approach, employing initial, focused, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014). During initial coding, we reviewed transcripts to assign preliminary labels and organize data. In focused coding, we refined these labels through comparison, identifying key categories and relationships. Finally, in theoretical coding, we grouped categories into broader concepts, connecting them to existing theories to address research questions and provide insights. To ensure that the FGD data analysis met the standards of GT approaches, we cross-checked it using the 13 checklists and guidelines of Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) for GT analysis.

To ensure trustworthiness we focused on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Trustworthiness

Credibility relies on detailed analyses that reflect participants' diverse realities (Humphreys et al., 2021) and is enhanced by multiple data sources, prolonged engagement (Maxwell, 2013), and participant trust (Ahmed, 2024). Transferability focuses on case-specific applicability, supported by thick contextual descriptions (Tobin and Begley, 2004; Riazi et al., 2023). Dependability ensures consistent findings through rigorous documentation of methods and processes (Amin et al., 2020). Confirmability emphasizes neutrality, minimizing bias through peer feedback and alternative perspectives (Haq et al., 2023). The present study prioritized prolonged engagement to build rapport and understand participants' perspectives across diverse sites. We described the contexts, participants, and procedures to enhance transferability. We ensured methodological rigor through detailed documentation, audit trails, and recorded research processes. Confirmability was strengthened via peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journaling. Transparency and traceability were maintained through email, personal notes, and online meetings across three countries.

While we present themes as collective views from FGDs, we balance both collective and individual perspectives in the data presentation.

Results and Discussion

Translanguaging for Academic Content Clarification in EMI Classrooms

Students' voices highlight using L1 in EMI classes for clarifying academic content, particularly in Vietnam and Thailand, where lecturers relied more on L1 for instruction. A Vietnamese student shared, "When we struggle to ask questions in English, we ask in Vietnamese" (V/D/04). This language practice, from a translanguaging perspective, is a unified system with fluid practices, transcending named language boundaries (Li, 2018). FGD participants at the Vietnamese university focused more on using L1 in EMI classes.

V/I/03: Vietnamese students often ask, "Can you repeat that in Vietnamese?" …the teacher switches to Vietnamese.

V/I/05: A few teachers use only English in class. Even when Vietnamese students ask questions in Vietnamese, they say, "No, we can't use Vietnamese in this program. Please ask in English."

V/D/06: The problem is…we can't ask specific questions in English like we do in Vietnamese.

V/D/03: Still, some lecturers switch to Vietnamese for side conversations with students at the end of lessons.

These findings aligned with Sahan et al. (2022), which showed that lecturers and students at Vietnamese and Thai universities valued the L1 as a useful pedagogical tool in EMI classrooms. International students at the Thai university noted their Thai classmates used L1 for clarification. A Myanmar student said, "When they don't understand, they ask in Thai" (T/I/02). Use of English seemed to discourage classroom participation. A Thai student noted, "When it comes to English, I limit myself" (T/D/06). By contrast, Malaysian students reported minimal L1 use, with classes being "completely in English" (M/I/06) or "pure English" (M/I/01), making L1 clarification rare in Malaysian EMI classrooms. The extensive use of English in the Malaysian university contrasts with Boonsuk and Ambele's (2024) findings, which showed Malaysian students favored an optimal approach, combining L1 and English to enhance learning.

Thai and Vietnamese domestic students preferred using their L1 to ask lecturers questions, helping them "understand the lesson better" (V/D/05). However, a Myanmar student at the Thai university believed lecturers "shouldn't allow Thai students to speak in Thai" (T/I/02). Similarly, a Cambodian classmate felt that "in international programs, we should only speak English" (T/I/03). It is impossible to do that because translanguaging enables speakers to use their full linguistic repertoire, ignoring the boundaries of named languages (Otheguy et al., 2019). International students' views on L1 use in EMI classes differed greatly from domestic students. In Vietnam and Thailand, L1 use often hindered international students' understanding, prompting them to seek clarification from others. Domestic students acted as interpreters, translating lecturers' L1 explanations into English. A Sri Lankan student at the Vietnamese university described this practice:

> The lecturers explain it in Vietnamese. They [domestic students] can understand it very clearly and they say, "Oh I got it. Can you understand it?" And they explain to me… (V/I/03)

This excerpt highlights multilingual use, with a Vietnamese lecturer using Vietnamese for domestic students, followed by a student translating into English for international peers. Many international students relied on local classmates, especially "a friend who is really good at English and explaining things simply" (V/I/05), to understand L1 content. This is inherently a multilingual context, as defined by the European Commission (2007: 6) as "the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage regularly with more than one language in their daily lives."

At the Malaysian university, where lecturers used minimal L1, domestic students occasionally translated English explanations into the international student's L1 if shared. A Malaysian-Chinese student noted, "We help explain to [international Chinese students] in Mandarin so they can understand quickly" (M/D/05). Such interpretation aids international students who lack local language knowledge or sufficient English proficiency, reflecting the complexity of language use in EMI classes. These translanguaging practices can be explained through the concept of trust, as described by Williams (2023). Trust, defined as confidence in the reliability of a person or system, helps explain students' reliance on L1 or English in EMI contexts. Williams concluded that fostering translanguaging competence can help students overcome these limitations and improve their learning experiences.

Translanguaging for Academic Group Discussions Outside EMI Classrooms

Students in academic group discussions need strong English skills to share and respond to ideas. However, when group members share the same language, they often use their L1. A Vietnamese student stated, "We form groups and exchange ideas entirely in Vietnamese, without any use of English" (V/D/04). A Thai student attested to the same practice: "When we get into the group of Thai students, we always use Thai" (T/D/06). In Vietnam and Thailand, with fewer international students, domestic students often formed single-nationality groups, using their L1. In multilingual Malaysia, domestic students could also use Malay, the national language. However, a Malaysian-Chinese student preferred English in group discussions, saying, "We communicate on WhatsApp, so we use English instead of Malay or Mandarin, even though English is not our first language" (M/D/01). They can use translanguaging here, as it refers to the ability of multilingual speakers to switch between languages (Canagarajah, 2011). Thai students' preference for L1 contrasts with the findings of Boonsuk and Ambele (2024), which revealed opposite attitudes towards translanguaging: most Thai students preferred a virtual English-only model, minimizing or banning L1 use in EMI classrooms.

The larger number of Chinese international students at Malaysian universities led many to form single-nationality groups. One student noted, "More than 30 of us are Chinese students, so we usually could find our partners" (M/I/05). Using the L1 in group discussions helped them express ideas clearly and engage in deeper discussions, as they felt English would hinder effective communication. This case supports the argument of Kirkpatrick (2018), which emphasizes that EMI should not be seen as an English-only approach but as a multilingual practice, encouraging lecturers and students to utilize their linguistic resources.

Language choice in mixed-nationality groups varied, based on group size and English proficiency. In Thailand and Vietnam, the L1 was often used even with international members. A Cambodian student

at the Thai university noted, "If there are many Thai students, they discuss in Thai, but in small groups, we discuss in English" (T/I/03). When the L1 was used, a group member often acted as an interpreter to assist international students, though this was not ideal. A Sri Lankan student in Vietnam noted, "My friends really struggling to explain me in English" (V/I/03). International students also faced challenges contributing, as a Cambodian student in Thailand explained, "I can't explain in Thai because I don't understand Thai. I try to explain in simple English" (T/I/05), highlighting the need for simplification.

Experiences of language use in mixed-nationality groups varied. An international student at the Vietnamese university shared a positive experience, stating, "They [domestic students] are really good at English. I can understand what they say, and they can understand what I say" (V/I/05). At the Malaysian university, where English was commonly used, Chinese international students in mixed-nationality groups often sought at least one co-national member. This topic was actively discussed by participants.

M/I/03: I think it's helpful to include a Chinese member in the group to ensure we're all on the same page. Sometimes, during meetings, we'll ask each other like, "What's that in Chinese?"

M/I/01: I prioritize working with Malaysian Chinese because they can speak Chinese, Malay, and English fluently, which helps avoid language barriers.

M/D/03: I sometimes pair with international students, but there are moments when we don't fully understand each other. If the person is Chinese, I'll explain my point in Chinese, and they can do the same in their language.

A student noted that having a Chinese group member ensured alignment and mutual understanding, enabling clarification in Chinese during meetings. Another Chinese international student emphasized the value of a Malaysian-Chinese group member, whose fluency in English, Malay, and Chinese helped reduce language barriers. Translanguaging is not limited to students. Wang and Curdt-Christiansen (2019) found that EMI teachers in China also used translanguaging for various purposes, such as asking for Chinese translations of key terms, negotiating meaning, delivering content in English with Chinese summaries, and using local examples in Chinese to contextualize knowledge.

Translanguaging to Foster Reading Comprehension Outside EMI Classrooms

Assigned readings in EMI programs are mainly in English, but some students use translation tools to aid understanding. Malaysian and Chinese international students reported using Google Translate and DeepL to translate English articles into their L1. A Malaysian student explained using Wikipedia's translation tool: "I change Wikipedia to Chinese, read it, then back to English to understand better" (M/D/03). Similarly, participants at the Thai university agreed that reading in their L1 is beneficial. Their discussion is summarized below.

T/D/05 Sometimes I read in my first language to understand better.

T/I/04: For some concepts, I still rely on Japanese books to grasp deeper levels of theory.

T/I/05 I find it helpful to read books in two languages. When reading English financial management textbooks for the first time, I sometimes struggle with advanced terms. To deepen my understanding, I read in Thai first, then in English.

T/D/01: For difficult content, I need to study it in Thai to fully understand.

Translanguaging fosters a collaborative learning environment, utilizing students' multilingual, multimodal, and multisensory resources for meaning-making (Cenoz and Gorter, 2021). The student navigated between English and Chinese to understand English texts. Similarly, a Japanese student at the Thai university used textbooks in her L1 for complex concepts, stating, "For some concepts, I still need some Japanese books to understand" (T/I/04). However, others found L1 texts harder, as their "native language is more complicated for understanding" (T/I/01), especially for scientific terms learned in English during undergraduate studies. A domestic student at the Vietnamese university explained his preference for English reading material as follows:

> In our undergraduate studies in Vietnam, we'd read materials in English, so when we move to English in graduate programs, it's consistent use of one language, English, especially with respect to terminology use. (V/D/04)

Students' preferences for the language of reading material varied. While some relied heavily on translation tools, others noted that, "with some online translators, it [the text] just becomes quite weird" (M/I/05). Similarly, while some used L1 textbooks for better understanding, others found English texts "more convenient" (V/I/02). Using English and other languages in EMI contexts aligns with the findings of Baker and Hüttner (2017), which examined EMI programs in Thailand, Austria, and the UK. Their study revealed diverse language roles, varying recognition of multilingualism, and sophisticated language perceptions among stakeholders.

That is why translanguaging is recognized as a legitimate and effective instructional strategy (Kim et al., 2017). In EMI classes, L1 complements English, creating a translanguaging space (Li, 2018). Using English exclusively can compromise content delivery, prompting discussions where L1 and English are employed to negotiate meaning (Wang and Curdt-Christiansen, 2019). Incorporating translanguaging helps students perceive language as an integrated system, overcome linguistic challenges (Kim et al., 2017), and express themselves when struggling with English. These practices enable students to navigate and transcend L1 and English boundaries (Li, 2018).

Translanguaging to Foster Academic Writing Outside EMI Classrooms

Postgraduate students in EMI programs typically write in English but planning and drafting often involve the L1. Students at Malaysian and Thai universities described using their L1 to organize essay structures and ideas. A Chinese international student at the Malaysian university explained, "You should have your structure and ideas in Chinese first, then translate into English" (M/I/01). Translanguaging is not limited to spoken communication; it can also take place in written texts. As Siegel (2020) notes, while translanguaging frequently occurs in speech, it is also evident in writing that incorporates multiple languages (see also Conteh, 2018). It is common for multilingual students to use more than one language during the writing process in order to co-construct knowledge for their assignments. This was evident in discussions at the Thai university, which specifically focused on the use of translanguaging in students' writing.

T/I/02: I want to write more advanced, but my vocabulary is limited, so I first think in my native language and then translate.

T/D/02: I prefer to organize my ideas in Thai first, creating bullet points. I search online for more information before rewriting in English.

T/D/01: Yes, before writing, I make bullet points in Thai to organize my thoughts. Once I have the structure, I write in English.

T/I/03: Sometimes I mix languages—writing parts in Japanese and others in English—but I try to rewrite it into one language [English] later.

The preference for L1 revealed in these practices is similar to the findings of Kim et al. (2017), who studied engineering students' attitudes at three Korean universities. They found that 90 percent preferred L1 use in EMI classes, with 85 percent believing it improved content understanding. Prioritizing subject content over English-only instruction is essential for effective learning in EMI courses.

In contrast to English being the sole language output in the Thai context, the focus group at the Malaysian university highlighted their freedom to choose the language for writing.

M/I/05: My classmates and I usually start by writing in Chinese and then translate it into English for assignments or presentations.

M/D/01: My program allows dissertations to be written in either English or Malay, which helps more students. If you prefer Malay, you can still graduate.

M/I/03: In most cases, I write directly in English, and I'm fine with that.

Some students used tools like DeepL to translate Chinese drafts into English. The choice of language for preparatory work often depended on the assignment. A Japanese student at the Thai university explained: "I sometimes write in Japanese, but some parts I write in English" (T/I/04). The preferences for L1 and English in writing here are associated with Siegel's (2020) study on students' translanguaging practices while note-taking. Surveying 175 EAP (English for Academic Purposes) students across Indonesia, Spain, and the United States the study found that 74 percent preferred taking notes in English, 15 percent in their L1, and just over 10 percent used both. Reasons included matching the speaker's language, avoiding translation, saving time, improving language skills, and ease.

A Cambodian student at the Thai university noted, "If it's more technical or scientific, I think and write in English" (T/I/03). Vietnamese university students preferred writing directly in English, especially for technical reports with predefined structures and vocabulary. A Sri Lankan student stated, "If I have to write some reports, I just write it directly in English" (V/I/05). Master's students with EMI undergraduate experience were also more likely to write in English, as one Vietnamese student explained: "At the postgraduate level, my English ability is good enough, so I write in English" (V/D/04). The explanation for this translanguaging practice is supported by Mazak and Herbas-Donoso (2015), who found it essential to use English for teaching technical terms, as it is the language of science, while relying on the L1 as the main communication language.

Variation in Translanguaging Practices Across Research Sites

The universities' responses to government calls for internationalizing HE influence students' language use. Malaysian universities have responded swiftly, hosting 124,133 international students in 2018 (Atherton et al., 2018: 8), compared to 12,274 in Thailand and 5,624 in Vietnam. This diversity in Malaysian classrooms encourages using English as a lingua franca. This aligns with Kirkpatrick's (2018) concept that the 'E' in EMI should be understood as such, rather than a native-speaker variety. In contrast, Thai and

Vietnamese universities, with fewer international students, domestic students, who dominate in numbers, favor the L1 in classrooms and group interactions. In Thailand, EMI in Thailand primarily serves a domestic cohort, with the majority of participants being Thai nationals, and international students constituting only a small proportion (Galloway and Sahan, 2021). Therefore, EMI should move beyond the standard English.

Students' voices of translanguaging practices in EMI content learning-related activities revealed differences across the three sites, shaped by their FGDs. L1 use is more prevalent in emerging contexts like Vietnam and Thailand (Galloway and Sahan, 2021) than in postcolonial Malaysia, where English has a stronger institutional base (Hashim and Leitner, 2014). Malaysian domestic students are more confident using English, while language-related challenges in Vietnam and Thailand affect proficiency, leading many students to rely on the L1 to manage academic demands (Vu and Burns, 2014). As a result, it is clear why Phillipson (2018) emphasizes that adopting EMI should not undermine the mother tongue, while Kirkpatrick (2014) advocates for lecturers to use other languages they are proficient in alongside English, even in EMI courses.

English proficiency significantly influences language choices for learning-related activities. Many Chinese international students at the Malaysian university reported low confidence in their English skills, relying heavily on translation apps for reading and writing. As outlined in Lin's (2012) Rainbow Diagram, students can utilize multiple resources to achieve their communication goals, with translation tools being one of these language resources. They preferred forming single-nationality groups to use the L1 for discussions. They had far less in common with the international students at the Thai and Vietnamese universities; rather, their extensive use of the L1 resembled that of many domestic students in those institutions. International students at all three sites seemed to rely on third-party interpretations to understand the content presented in local languages. Being multilingual allows students to communicate and understand by using more than one language in their interactions (Marshall and Moore, 2018).

The difference between Malaysia, on the one hand, and Vietnam and Thailand, on the other, pertained to the source and target languages of the translations. In the former, (Malaysian-Chinese) domestic students, if and when required, were apt to translate content from English into Chinese for their predominantly Chinese international classmates. In the latter, the Thai and Vietnamese students translated content from Thai and Vietnamese, respectively, into English to facilitate their international classmates' understanding of lecturers' explanations or group members' contributions. This difference reinforces the discrepancy in the extent to which the L1 is used in the Vietnamese and Thai universities compared to the Malaysian. While none of the EMI settings were English-only, the extent of L1 use varied because of the above-mentioned factors. Thus, policies should support the freedom to use one's multilingual resources when needed (Sahan and Rose, 2021).

Conclusion

This article examined translanguaging practices in and outside EMI classes at Malaysian, Thai, and Vietnamese universities. In these multilingual settings, students shuttle between languages to enhance disciplinary learning. Domestic students primarily use translanguaging in class interactions, group discussions, reading, and writing to address challenges in expressing themselves and understanding content due to limited English proficiency. International students were less receptive to translanguaging practices, feeling excluded when classroom interactions or group discussions were conducted in the local language.

This created a clear tension between domestic and international students' language needs and preferences. International students often relied on domestic peers for third-party interpretations to understand content presented in the local language.

However, accurate content transmission depended on the interpreters' understanding and ability to translate effectively into English. Limited English proficiency among some domestic students could hinder comprehension for international peers. Group composition and the chosen language significantly impacted international students' ability to engage and benefit from group work, with L1 use favoring domestic students but disadvantaging their international counterparts.

In fully EMI programs in multilingual universities, it is unrealistic to enforce English-only learning. Multilingual students naturally draw on their full linguistic repertoire and resources to understand academic content, prioritizing knowledge over practicing English. Language practices in EMI should be flexible and organic, allowing translanguaging as a creative tool for learning. International students in new multilingual environments should respect domestic students' translanguaging for learning and communication. Similarly, domestic students should understand when, where, and with whom to use translanguaging effectively.

Therefore, the focus in the 'E' in EMI should shift from exclusive English use to prioritizing students' understanding and ability to demonstrate learning. Students should be free to use all of their languages to achieve their goals. Thus, in practice, translanguaging is present in EMI. If the focus shifts from a solo 'E' to include the 'T' for translanguaging, can it still be called EMI? The findings highlight the need for policymakers and university managers to reassess EMI policies and adjust approaches to optimize student learning. Prioritizing the voices and learning needs of both domestic and international students can improve learning outcomes, stakeholder satisfaction, and institutional reputation.

For methodological contributions, we recognized that focus groups are often used to capture collective views. However, our study included both individual and collective perspectives, as participants' unique experiences and backgrounds shaped their views. We valued all voices equally, both individually and collectively. Future focus group research should strive to balance these two aspects to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Further EMI research should also explore learning beyond the classroom, where significant self- and peer-learning occurs, to deepen understanding of learning through translanguaging in multilingual EMI contexts.

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Appendix

Student details

M	Malaysian university
T	Thai university
V	Vietnamese university
I	International student
D	Domestic student
01-06	Student number

Malaysian university

Student	Nationality	First Language	Program
M/I/01	Chinese	Mandarin	Public Administration
M/I/02	Indonesian	Bahasa Indonesia	Linguistics
M/I/03	Chinese	Mandarin	Management
M/I/04	Syrian	Arabic	Linguistics
M/I/05	Chinese	Mandarin	Public Administrations
M/I/06	Indian	Hindi	Media & Communication
M/D/01	Malaysian	Chinese	Media & Communication
M/D/02	Malaysian	Malay	Psychological Medicine
M/D/03	Malaysian	Chinese	Educational Psychology
M/D/04	Malaysian	Tamil	Professional Counselling
M/D/05	Malaysian	Chinese	Linguistics

Thai university

Student	Nationality	First Language	Program
T/I/01	Myanmar	Burmese	Forensic Science
T/I/02	Myanmar	Burmese	Tropical Medicine
T/I/03	Cambodian	Khmer	Tropical Medicine
T/I/04	Japanese	Japanese	Rural Development Management
T/I/05	Cambodian	Khmer	International Business
	Management		
T/D/01	Thai	Thai	L2 Curriculum & Instruction
T/D/02	Thai	Thai	L2 Curriculum & Instruction
T/D/03	Thai	Thai	L2 Curriculum & Instruction
T/D/04	Thai	Thai	L2 Curriculum & Instruction
T/D/05	Thai	Thai	L2 Curriculum & Instruction
T/D/06	Thai	Thai	L2 Curriculum & Instruction

Vietnamese university

Student	Nationality	First Language	Program
V/I/01	Moroccan	Arabic	Mechatronics
V/I/02	Palestinian	Arabic	Mechatronics

V/I/03	Sri Lankan	Sinhala	Electrical Power System
V/I/04	Palestinian	Arabic	Electrical Power System
V/I/05	Sri Lankan	Sinhala	Electronics & Telecomunications
V/I/06	Sri Lankan	Sinhala	Mechatronics
V/D/01	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Data Science
V/D/02	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Automation Control Engineering
V/D/03	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Automation Control Engineering
V/D/04	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Automation Control Engineering
V/D/05	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Automation Control Engineering
V/D/06	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Automation Control Engineering