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The Distinction of ESP and EMI

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares two approaches to English language teaching: English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). While both approaches involve using English in educational settings, their objectives, target audiences, and instructional methodologies differ. ESP focuses on teaching English tailored to learners' specific needs and goals within certain professional or academic contexts. On the other hand, EMI uses English as the primary language of instruction across various academic disciplines, aiming to facilitate content learning in addition to language development. This paper reveals the similarities and differences between ESP and EMI approaches through a comparative examination of key characteristics, pedagogical principles, and practical implications. Furthermore, it discusses the implications of these distinctions for language teaching and learning in diverse educational settings, offering insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers.

Keywords: English as a Medium of Instruction; English for Specific Purposes; English teaching approaches; Pedagogical principles; learners' needs

1. Introduction

In the globalized world of academia and professional development, English has established itself as the lingua franca. Two prominent approaches in the field of English language teaching have emerged to offer diverse educational and occupational needs: English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). While both aim to enhance English proficiency, their objectives, methodologies, and target audiences differ significantly. ESP focuses on equipping learners with the language skills required for specific professional, academic, or technical domains. It adapts instruction to the unique linguistic and communicative demands of business, engineering, medicine, and law. By emphasizing relevant vocabulary, genre-specific structures, and contextual language use, ESP courses prepare students to function effectively within their chosen specializations. EMI, on the other hand, represents a pedagogical approach where English is used as the medium of instruction in academic subjects, rather than being taught as a separate language course. This approach is increasingly prevalent in non-English-speaking countries, particularly higher education institutions aiming to attract international students and increase global competitiveness. EMI seeks to provide students with the content knowledge of their disciplines while improving their English proficiency. The distinctions between these two approaches are important to higher educational institutions in building the training program and designing appropriate courses for their students.

This paper aims to reveal the distinctions between ESP and EMI by exploring their definitions, pedagogical strategies, and outcomes. Understanding these differences is crucial for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers seeking to implement effective English language programs tailored to specific educational contexts.

2. An overview of ESP and EMI

2.1. An overview of ESP

Development and Definitions of ESP

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a subfield of English language teaching (ELT) that focuses on teaching English tailored to specific disciplines, professions, or occupational needs. ESP emerged in the 1960s in response to the increasing demand for English language skills that catered to the specialized needs of various fields such as business, science, technology, and medicine.

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The development of ESP was driven by several factors. The first was the rise of global commerce and communication, which necessitated a more specialized form of English instruction. Traditional English language teaching methods were found to be insufficient for learners who needed English for specific vocational or academic purposes. The second factor was the growth of linguistics, particularly the branch of applied linguistics, which emphasized the analysis of language use in specific contexts. This led to the creation of syllabi and teaching materials tailored to the specific linguistic needs of different professional and academic fields.

ESP is different from general English language teaching (ELT) in several ways. Hutchinson and Waters (1987:19) define ESP as "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning." This definition highlights the pragmatic, learner-centered approach of ESP, which prioritizes the specific needs and goals of the learners over a one-size-fits-all curriculum. Another key definition by Strevens (1988) describes ESP as designed to meet the "specific needs of the learner" and make use of "the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves," which underlines the tailored nature of ESP in terms of both content and pedagogical approach.

Current Situation of ESP in Higher Education in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the implementation of ESP in higher education is becoming increasingly prevalent as the country seeks to enhance the employability of its graduates and meet the demands of its growing economy. The Vietnamese government and educational institutions recognize the importance of English proficiency in specific professional and academic contexts and have thus incorporated ESP into their curricula. Several universities in Vietnam have developed and implemented ESP programs across various disciplines. Some universities offer ESP courses tailored to fields such as tourism, business, and information technology. Technical universities have implemented several ESP courses related to their typical majors. These programs are designed to provide students with the language skills necessary for their future careers, focusing on both linguistic competence and the specific vocabulary and conventions of their chosen fields.

However, the adoption of ESP in Vietnam is not without its challenges. One significant issue is the lack of adequately trained teachers who are proficient in both English and the specific subject matter of the ESP courses. Many English language teachers may not have adequate background knowledge in the fields they are teaching, which can affect the quality of instruction. To address this, some institutions have started to invest in professional development programs that provide ESP teachers with the necessary subject matter expertise and pedagogical skills.

Another challenge is the development of appropriate teaching materials. While there are some textbooks and resources available, many of them may not be fully relevant to the Vietnamese context or the specific needs of Vietnamese students. As a result, teachers often need to adapt or create their own materials, which can be time-consuming and require additional support.

Research on the effectiveness of ESP in Vietnam indicates mixed results. According to a study by Huong (2018), students in ESP programs generally show improved English proficiency and better preparation for their professional lives. However, the study also notes that the success of ESP programs largely depends on the quality of teaching and the relevance of the materials used (Huong, 2018, p. 45). This highlights the need for ongoing support and investment in ESP to ensure its effectiveness.

ESP represents a critical approach in English language education, focusing on the specific linguistic needs of learners in various professional and academic fields. In Vietnam, the adoption of ESP in higher education is part of a broader strategy to enhance the employability of graduates and meet the demands of a growing economy. Despite the challenges related to teacher training and material development, ESP programs in Vietnam are making strides in improving students' English proficiency and readiness for the workforce. Continued investment and support in this area are essential to maximize the benefits of ESP and contribute to the overall development of the country's education system.

2.2. An overview of EMI

Development and Definitions of EMI

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) refers to the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries where English is not the first language of most of the population. This educational approach has gained substantial traction globally due to the increasing demand for English proficiency, which is often linked to better career opportunities and access to global knowledge and networks.

The roots of EMI can be traced back to colonial and post-colonial education systems, where English was introduced as a medium of instruction by colonial powers. However, the modern wave of EMI is driven more by globalization and the perception of English as the lingua franca of international business, science, and technology. In higher education, EMI is seen as a means to internationalize universities, attract foreign students, and improve the employability of graduates.

Various definitions of EMI emphasize different aspects of its implementation. Dearden (2014) defines EMI as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries where the first language of the majority of the population is not English." This definition underscores the non-native context of EMI. Another perspective is offered by Macaro et al. (2018:19), who describe EMI as "a multilingual education policy in which English is used for the teaching of content subjects, to students who are not native speakers of English." This definition highlights EMI as a policy decision and its role in multilingual education settings.

Current Situation of EMI in Higher Education in Vietnam

In recent years, Vietnam has embraced EMI as part of its broader strategy to enhance the quality and international competitiveness of its higher education system. The Vietnamese government and educational institutions recognize the importance of English proficiency in fostering economic development and integrating into the global economy. Consequently, there has been a significant push towards implementing EMI programs in universities across the country.

Several leading universities in Vietnam have adopted EMI to varying extents. For example, the Vietnam National University, Hanoi, and the Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, have introduced numerous EMI programs in fields such as business, engineering, and information technology. These programs are designed to attract both learners, improve the quality of education, and align with international standards.

Despite these efforts, the implementation of EMI in Vietnam faces several challenges. One of the primary issues is the language proficiency of both students and faculty. Many students, particularly those from rural areas, may struggle with the English language, which can impede their understanding of complex academic content. Similarly, faculty members may lack sufficient English proficiency to effectively deliver lectures and engage in academic discourse.

Moreover, there are concerns about the adequacy of resources and support for EMI programs. Effective EMI implementation requires substantial investment in language training, teaching materials, and infrastructure. There is also a need for continuous professional development for faculty to enhance their English language skills and teaching methodologies.

Research on EMI in Vietnam suggests mixed outcomes. While some studies indicate improvements in students' English proficiency and academic performance, others highlight difficulties related to language barriers and the quality of education. Vu and Burns (2014) found that students in EMI programs exhibited higher levels of motivation and perceived benefits in terms of language skills and global awareness. However, they also noted that students faced significant challenges in comprehension and participation due to limited English proficiency.

EMI represents a strategic approach in higher education aimed at leveraging English language proficiency to enhance educational quality and global competitiveness. In Vietnam, the adoption of EMI is part of a broader effort to internationalize higher education and improve graduates' employability. While there are notable advancements in EMI implementation, challenges related to language proficiency, resource allocation, and teaching quality remain. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort from policymakers, educational institutions, and stakeholders to ensure that EMI programs can achieve their intended outcomes and contribute to the overall development of the education system in Vietnam.

3. The Distinction between ESP and EMI in educational system

3.1. Definitions

ESP is an approach to language teaching designed to meet the specific needs of learners in particular professional or academic fields. As aforementioned, Hutchinson and Waters (1987:19) stated that ESP is "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning". This definition emphasizes the pragmatic and goal-oriented nature of ESP, where the curriculum is tailored to the specific linguistic and communicative needs of learners in fields such as business, engineering, medicine, and tourism.

EMI, on the other hand, EMI refers to using English to teach academic subjects in countries where it is not the predominant language spoken by the majority of the population. Dearden (2014) defines EMI as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries where the first language of the majority of the population is not English." This definition highlights EMI's role in content delivery, where English is used as the medium for teaching subjects like mathematics, science, and humanities, rather than focusing on language acquisition itself.

3.2. Pedagogical Strategies

The pedagogical strategies in ESP are highly specialized and context-specific. They include:

- Needs Analysis: Conducting detailed needs analysis to identify the specific language requirements of learners in their respective fields.
- Tailored Curriculum: Designing a curriculum that addresses the specific vocabulary, genres, and communicative practices of the target field.
- Task-Based Learning: Using tasks and activities that simulate real-world professional scenarios to enhance practical language use.
- Contextualized Materials: Developing or selecting teaching materials that are relevant to the learners' field of study or work.

EMI, in contrast, focuses on integrating language and content instruction. Key strategies include:

- Content-Based Instruction: Emphasizing the teaching of subject matter content through English, with language learning occurring incidentally.
- Scaffolding: Providing linguistic support to help students understand complex academic content in English, such as using visual aids, glossaries, and simplified texts.
- Interactive Lectures: Encouraging active student participation through discussions, group work, and problem-solving activities in English.
- Professional Development: Training subject teachers in effective EMI methodologies and enhancing their English language proficiency.

3.3. The outcomes

The outcomes of ESP are primarily focused on language proficiency within specific professional or academic contexts. These include:

- Enhanced Job Performance: Improved ability to use English in specific job-related tasks and professional communication.
- Field-Specific Language Proficiency: Mastery of terminology, genres, and communicative practices relevant to the learners' fields.
- Increased Employability: Greater competitiveness in the job market due to specialized language skills.

EMI outcomes are broader, encompassing both language and content mastery. They include:

- Bilingual Competence: Improved English proficiency alongside mastery of academic content in various subjects.
- Academic Achievement: Enhanced understanding and performance in academic subjects taught through English.
- Global Competitiveness: Better preparation for participation in global academic and professional environments.

3.4. Practical Implications

- Curriculum Development: Teachers and curriculum developers can use the findings from the comparative analysis to design ESP and EMI courses that fit the specific needs of learners in various contexts. By taking into account the goals, target learners, and teaching methods of each approach, they can create courses that effectively address both the language and academic requirements of students.
- Teacher Training: Teacher training programs can include instruction in ESP and EMI methodologies to prepare educators for teaching in specialized settings. By providing teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to successfully apply ESP and EMI strategies, these programs help ensure that educators are ready to address the needs of diverse learners.
- Policy Development: Policymakers can use the findings of the comparative analysis to inform policy decisions related to language education and language policy. By recognizing the importance of both ESP and EMI in promoting language proficiency and academic achievement, policymakers can support the implementation of programs and initiatives that prioritize the development of communicative competence and language fluency in specialized contexts.

The distinction between ESP and EMI can be synthesized in Table 1 below:

Table 1. The Distinction of ESP & EMI
(Adapted from Unterberger & Wihelmer, 2011; and Howard Brown, 2016)

Criteria	ESP	EMI
Definition	An approach to teaching English that focuses on teaching language skills that are specific to a particular field or profession.	An approach to teaching that involves using English as the language of instruction in academic subjects that are not traditionally taught in English.
Language focus	Terminologies and grammar structures related to a specific field or profession.	English as the language of instruction.
Target Groups	Nonnative English learners	Nonnative English speakers, native English speakers
Teaching staff	Language teacher who has specialized training and expertise in the particular field or discipline for which they are providing language instruction	Subject teachers; sometimes subject teacher and language one in collaboration
Goal	Developing students' ability to communicate effectively in English in the context of their field.	Developing students' ability to understand and communicate academic subjects in English.
Pedagogical approaches and teaching formats	Focus on the development of learners' language skills in the context of their professional or academic fields.	Focus on developing subject knowledge, with teaching methods determined by the preferences of the discipline and instructor; an expert-led lecture is often the primary approach.
The role of language	Language as a subject (The language instruction is highly contextualized and tailored to the specific needs of learners in their fields.	Language as a tool (vehicular function)
Expected learning outcomes	Language used in specific context (professional field)	Subject knowledge acquisition
Assessment	Assess learners' ability to use the language (skills) in professional/academic contexts	Students assessed on subject content knowledge
Context	Academic, professional, or vocational settings.	Academic subjects that are not traditionally taught in English.
Challenges	Balancing language instruction with technical instruction.	Students may struggle to understand complex academic concepts in a foreign language.
Examples of application	English for engineering, English for medicine.	Teaching university courses in English in non-English speaking countries.

4. Conclusion

In tertiary education settings, ESP and EMI serve distinct roles that cater to different educational objectives and student needs. ESP is tailored to equip students with specialized language skills appropriate to their academic or professional fields, emphasizing the practical application of English within specific contexts. This approach ensures that learners are proficient in the terminology and communication practices necessary for their careers. On the other hand, EMI focuses on delivering subject matter content through English, aiming to enhance students' overall language proficiency while ensuring they acquire comprehensive knowledge in their academic disciplines. The pedagogical strategies employed in ESP and EMI reflect these divergent goals, with ESP prioritizing needs analysis and contextualized materials, and EMI emphasizing content-based instruction and scaffolding. The target audience for EMI is broader, encompassing all students enrolled in English-taught courses, regardless of their field of study. Consequently, the outcomes of these approaches differ, with ESP leading to field-specific language competence and EMI fostering content mastery. Recognizing these distinctions is vital for educators and policymakers to effectively design and implement curricula that meet the varied linguistic and academic needs of university students.

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TÓM TẮT

Sự khác biệt giữa Tiếng Anh chuyên ngành và Dạy chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh

Dương Thuý Hường

Trường Đại học Mở - Địa chất

Bài viết so sánh hai phương pháp tiếp cận khác nhau trong việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh: Tiếng Anh chuyên ngành (ESP) và Dạy chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh (EMI). Mặc dù cả hai phương pháp đều liên quan đến việc sử dụng tiếng Anh trong môi trường giáo dục nhưng chúng khác nhau về mục tiêu, đối tượng và phương pháp giảng dạy. Tiếng Anh chuyên ngành tập trung vào việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh phù hợp với nhu cầu và mục tiêu cụ thể của người học trong bối cảnh nghề nghiệp hoặc học thuật nhất định. Ngược lại, Dạy chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh sử dụng tiếng Anh làm ngôn ngữ giảng dạy chính trong nhiều ngành học khác nhau, nhằm mục đích truyền tải nội dung bên cạnh việc phát triển ngôn ngữ cho người học. Bài viết này chỉ ra những điểm tương đồng và khác biệt giữa hai phương pháp tiếp cận là Tiếng Anh chuyên ngành và Dạy chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh thông qua việc xem xét so sánh các đặc điểm chính, nguyên tắc sư phạm và ý nghĩa thực tiễn. Đồng thời, bài viết cũng thảo luận về ý nghĩa của những khác biệt này đối với việc dạy và học ngôn ngữ trong các môi trường giáo dục đa dạng, cung cấp cho các nhà giáo dục, người thiết kế chương trình giảng dạy và các nhà hoạch định chính sách có cái nhìn sâu hơn và thực tế hơn đối với hai hướng tiếp cận này.

Từ khoá: Dạy chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh; Tiếng Anh chuyên ngành; các hướng tiếp cận giảng dạy tiếng Anh; các nguyên tắc sư phạm; nhu cầu người học.

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