

WHO IS SEEN AS LEGITIMATE TO TEACH? VIETNAMESE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC AUTHORITY IN EMI CLASSROOMS

AI ĐƯỢC XEM LÀ CÓ ĐỦ NĂNG LỰC ĐỂ GIẢNG DẠY?
NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM VỀ UY TÍN HỌC THUẬT CỦA
GIẢNG VIÊN TRONG CÁC LỚP HỌC GIẢNG DẠY BẰNG TIẾNG ANH (EMI)

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Abstract - This qualitative study examines how Vietnamese undergraduates perceive and negotiate lecturers' academic authority in English-medium instruction (EMI) classrooms. Guided by Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital and Language Ideology, semi-structured interviews with 18 students were analysed thematically. Findings reveal a three-stage process. Students initially associated authority with English proficiency, overseas qualifications, and native-speaker identity. They then reassessed lecturers through pedagogical competence and classroom interaction, ultimately understanding authority as relational and grounded in trust, accessibility, and meaningful learning support. These findings show that academic authority in EMI is negotiated rather than predetermined, with implications for teacher development and quality assurance in Vietnamese higher education.

Key words - English-medium instruction; academic authority; symbolic capital; language ideology; Vietnam

Tóm tắt - Nghiên cứu định tính này tìm hiểu cách sinh viên Việt Nam nhận thức và thương lượng uy tín học thuật của giảng viên trong các lớp học giảng dạy bằng tiếng Anh (EMI). Dựa trên lý thuyết vốn biểu tượng của Bourdieu và hệ tư tưởng ngôn ngữ, dữ liệu phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc từ 18 sinh viên. Kết quả phân tích chủ đề cho thấy sinh viên ban đầu đánh giá uy tín qua năng lực tiếng Anh, bằng cấp quốc tế và bản ngữ. Sau đó, họ đánh giá lại giảng viên dựa trên năng lực sư phạm và tương tác lớp học, trước khi xem uy tín là một cấu trúc quan hệ dựa trên sự tin cậy, khả năng tiếp cận và hỗ trợ học tập có ý nghĩa. Nghiên cứu khẳng định uy tín học thuật trong EMI được thương lượng thay vì định sẵn.

Từ khóa - Giảng dạy bằng tiếng Anh (EMI); uy tín học thuật của giảng viên; nguồn lực mang tính biểu trưng; hệ tư tưởng ngôn ngữ; Việt Nam

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, English-medium instruction (EMI) has become a prominent strategy for internationalizing higher education across many non-English-speaking countries [1]. Governments and universities have increasingly adopted EMI programs to enhance graduates' global competitiveness, strengthen institutional reputation, facilitate international collaboration, and improve access to global knowledge [2]. Vietnam has actively embraced this movement through national policies promoting EMI in selected higher education programs, particularly in science, technology, business, and economics [3-5]. As a result, EMI has become an increasingly common feature of Vietnamese higher education.

However, EMI represents far more than a change in the language of instruction. Rather, it is a sociocultural and ideological space where language, knowledge, identity, and power intersect [6]. Recent research suggests that EMI implementation is shaped by continuous interactions among educational policies, institutional practices, and classroom realities rather than by a simple transfer of English into content teaching [7, 8].

Existing EMI research has generated substantial knowledge regarding language proficiency, learning outcomes, translanguaging practices, teacher beliefs, classroom pedagogy, and policy implementation [9, 10]. Increasing attention has also been paid to teachers' agency, institutional mediation, and the ideological tensions surrounding English as the dominant language of academic communication [11, 12]. Collectively, these studies have demonstrated that successful EMI implementation depends not only on linguistic competence but also on institutional support, pedagogical flexibility, and context-sensitive practices.

Nevertheless, considerably less attention has been devoted to how students themselves construct and negotiate academic authority within EMI classrooms. Much of the existing literature implicitly assumes that authority naturally resides in lecturers' disciplinary expertise or English proficiency, while overlooking students as active interpreters of legitimacy [2, 13]. Yet students may evaluate lecturers according to multiple, and sometimes competing, forms of authority, including English proficiency, disciplinary expertise, teaching competence, overseas educational background, native-

speaker identity, or classroom language choices. These perceptions influence not only whom students trust but also whose knowledge they regard as legitimate. As recent EMI scholarship increasingly recognizes the emotional and ideological dimensions of policy enactment [2, 14], understanding how students negotiate academic authority has become essential for explaining how EMI functions in everyday educational practice rather than merely how it is officially designed.

Investigating this issue is particularly important in Vietnam. Rooted in a Confucian Heritage Culture, Vietnamese education has traditionally positioned teachers as legitimate authorities and respected sources of knowledge [15]. Meanwhile, EMI introduces English as a symbol of globalization, academic excellence, and international legitimacy [16]. These parallel influences may create new forms of negotiation in students' perceptions of academic authority, as disciplinary expertise, linguistic competence, and institutional prestige do not always align within EMI classrooms. Examining these negotiations can therefore deepen understanding of authority construction in multilingual higher education while informing EMI policy and classroom practice.

This study is informed by two complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital [17-18] conceptualizes authority as a socially recognized form of capital rather than an inherent personal attribute. Within EMI, symbolic capital may derive from English proficiency, academic credentials, international experience, institutional affiliation, or native-speaker status, all of which shape students' judgments of lecturers' credibility and legitimacy. Second, the study draws on Language Ideology [19-21], which explains how socially shared beliefs assign symbolic value to particular languages and language varieties. From this perspective, English functions not only as a medium of instruction but also as an ideological resource associated with intelligence, professionalism, modernity, and academic excellence. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how beliefs about English interact with different forms of symbolic capital to shape students' perceptions and negotiations of academic authority in EMI classrooms.

Against this background, the present study addresses the following research question: How do Vietnamese university students perceive and negotiate academic authority in English-medium instruction classrooms?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how Vietnamese university students perceive and negotiate academic authority in EMI classrooms. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, beliefs, and meaning-making processes regarding a socially constructed phenomenon that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures [22].

2.2. Setting and participants

The study was conducted at a private university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where EMI has been widely implemented across undergraduate programs. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure rich and relevant insights into the research phenomenon. The study involved 18 undergraduate students (10 females and 8 males), aged 19 to 22 years ($M = 20.4$), from various disciplines, including Business Administration, International Business, Information Technology, Finance, Marketing, etc. All participants had completed at least four EMI courses taught by both Vietnamese and international lecturers. This criterion ensured that they had sufficient exposure to diverse EMI teaching contexts and were able to reflect meaningfully on how they perceived and negotiated academic authority across different classroom experiences. Participants represented different years of study and varied levels of EMI experience, providing diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation.

The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation rather than statistical representativeness. Data collection and preliminary analysis proceeded iteratively, allowing the researchers to assess whether additional interviews generated substantively new information relevant to the research question. As the interviews progressed, recurring patterns concerning linguistic prestige, pedagogical competence, and relational dimensions of academic authority became increasingly consistent across participants. In the final interviews, the data largely reinforced existing codes and emerging themes without generating substantively new themes. Data saturation was therefore considered to have been reached with 18 participants. The purposive inclusion of students from different disciplines, years of study, and levels of EMI experience further provided sufficient variation in perspectives within the scope of the study.

To protect participants' confidentiality, all interviewees were assigned anonymous identifiers ranging from S1 to S18 throughout the Findings section.

2.3. Instrument

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the research question and informed by Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital [17, 18] and Language Ideology [19-21].

The interview guide consisted of 10 open-ended questions exploring students' perceptions of academic authority and the factors shaping its negotiation in EMI classrooms. Sample questions included: "What makes you perceive a lecturer as academically credible or authoritative in an EMI classroom?" and "Have your perceptions of a lecturer's academic authority ever changed after attending their classes? If so, what contributed to that change?". To enhance content validity, the interview guide was reviewed by four experts in applied linguistics and EMI research, and minor revisions were made based on their feedback. Following the expert review, one pilot interview was conducted with an undergraduate student who had characteristics comparable

to those of the target participants. The pilot interview was intended to identify potential issues concerning the clarity, comprehensibility, sequencing, and flow of the interview questions prior to the main data collection, rather than to establish instrument reliability.

2.4. Data collection and analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's [23] six-phase approach. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, two researchers first coded the interview transcripts independently. The researchers then compared their initial codes and discussed differences in interpretation until agreement was reached. Codes were subsequently grouped into potential themes, which were iteratively reviewed and refined against the original interview transcripts to ensure that they adequately represented participants' accounts. Particular attention was paid to whether each theme was internally coherent and sufficiently distinct from the others. The final themes were collaboratively agreed upon by both researchers and supported by representative excerpts from the interview data. This iterative and collaborative analytical process was employed to reduce reliance on a single researcher's interpretation and enhance the credibility and consistency of the findings.

3. Findings

3.1. Academic authority is initially granted through symbolic markers rather than teaching itself.

Participants consistently described that their initial perceptions of lecturers' academic authority were formed before substantial classroom interaction had taken place. Rather than evaluating teaching effectiveness, they relied on symbolic markers that were widely associated with academic credibility. English proficiency emerged as the most frequently mentioned indicator, with several participants explaining that lecturers who spoke fluent, confident, and natural English were immediately perceived as more knowledgeable and academically competent (S2, S7, S13). Others similarly admitted that they tended to associate fluent English with higher professional standards, even before experiencing the lecturers' actual teaching practices (S4, S10, S16).

Another prominent source of perceived authority was lecturers' educational and professional backgrounds. Participants regarded overseas qualifications and extensive international experience as strong indicators of academic legitimacy because such credentials were believed to reflect advanced disciplinary expertise and broader global exposure (S1, S8, S15). Likewise, several students noted that lecturers who had studied or worked abroad appeared more credible and were expected to deliver higher-quality instruction than those without international experience (S5, S11).

For several participants, native-speaker identity further reinforced these initial judgments. International lecturers were often regarded as more authoritative than their Vietnamese counterparts, even before demonstrating their teaching ability, because English was implicitly associated

with authenticity and academic excellence (S3, S6, S9, S12). Some participants also acknowledged that these assumptions were influenced by long-held beliefs that English-speaking lecturers represented higher educational standards (S4, S10, S17). Interestingly, although participants recognized that these evaluations were largely based on outward characteristics rather than actual classroom performance, they admitted that such symbolic cues strongly shaped their first impressions and expectations of lecturers (S5, S8, S14, S18). These findings suggest that academic authority in EMI classrooms is initially constructed through socially valued forms of symbolic capital before being confirmed, or challenged, through subsequent teaching practice.

3.2. Authority is continuously tested through classroom interaction.

Although symbolic markers strongly influenced first impressions, participants emphasized that academic authority was not automatically sustained throughout the learning process. Instead, it was continuously evaluated through lecturers' classroom performance and interactions with students. Several participants reported that lecturers who initially appeared highly authoritative because of their English proficiency or international background gradually lost credibility when they struggled to explain complex concepts or respond effectively to students' questions (S2, S9, S16). Others similarly noted that fluent English alone became insufficient if lecturers were unable to facilitate meaningful learning or demonstrate strong subject knowledge during classroom instruction (S5, S12).

In contrast, participants increasingly respected some Vietnamese lecturers whose English was less fluent but who demonstrated solid disciplinary expertise and effective pedagogical practices. Several students explained that clear explanations, well-structured lessons, and the ability to simplify difficult concepts significantly enhanced lecturers' credibility (S1, S7, S15). Others further remarked that lecturers who patiently guided students through challenging content and adapted their teaching to learners' needs were ultimately regarded as more authoritative than those who relied primarily on linguistic proficiency or international backgrounds (S4, S11). These findings suggest that while symbolic markers may shape initial expectations, academic authority is continually negotiated and ultimately sustained through demonstrated teaching competence and meaningful classroom interaction.

Participants also highlighted the importance of pedagogical competence in shaping academic authority. Several participants explained that lecturers who encouraged discussion, welcomed questions, acknowledged uncertainty, and adapted their explanations to students' needs were perceived as more trustworthy and academically competent than those who relied primarily on fluent English or formal credentials (S3, S8, S14). Others similarly emphasized that lecturers' openness to dialogue and willingness to support students' learning fostered greater confidence in their expertise and strengthened their classroom credibility (S6, S10).

Participants further challenged the assumption that effective EMI teaching requires the exclusive use of English. Some noted that the strategic use of Vietnamese to clarify difficult concepts did not diminish lecturers' authority but instead demonstrated pedagogical flexibility and sensitivity to students' learning needs (S5, S13, S18). Others viewed occasional translanguaging practices as evidence that lecturers were sufficiently confident in their expertise to prioritize meaningful learning over strict adherence to an English-only approach (S9). These experiences suggest that academic authority in EMI classrooms is not a fixed attribute derived solely from symbolic capital but a dynamic status that is continually negotiated through pedagogical competence, instructional responsiveness, and everyday classroom interactions.

3.3. Students ultimately redefine academic authority as relational rather than linguistic.

As participants accumulated more EMI learning experiences, many described a gradual shift in how they understood academic authority. While English proficiency initially shaped their expectations, authority eventually became grounded in the quality of the lecturer-student relationship rather than linguistic performance alone. Several participants explained that lecturers who demonstrated respect, patience, and a genuine commitment to students' learning gradually earned their trust and admiration, regardless of their linguistic background (S1, S7, S15). Others emphasized that feeling comfortable asking questions, expressing uncertainty, and participating in classroom discussions was a defining characteristic of an authoritative lecturer (S4, S10, S18). Rather than maintaining authority through distance or formality, these lecturers fostered supportive learning environments that encouraged active engagement and mutual respect. As a result, participants increasingly viewed academic authority as emerging from sustained educational interactions rather than from English proficiency alone.

Participants further explained that academic authority was closely associated with trust rather than distance. Several participants emphasized that lecturers who listened to students' perspectives, provided constructive feedback, and showed empathy toward learning difficulties were perceived as more credible and worthy of respect than those who relied primarily on fluent English or formal status (S2, S8, S13). Others similarly noted that feeling heard and supported throughout the learning process strengthened their confidence in lecturers' expertise and reinforced their willingness to engage in classroom activities (S5, S11).

Participants also challenged the assumption that English should always be used exclusively in EMI classrooms. Some explained that lecturers who occasionally used Vietnamese or simplified their English to clarify difficult concepts were not regarded as less professional (S3, S9, S14). Instead, these instructional choices were interpreted as evidence of confidence in their disciplinary expertise and a genuine commitment to

students' learning (S6, S12, S17). Rather than diminishing lecturers' credibility, such practices often enhanced students' trust because they demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness to learners' needs. Collectively, these findings indicate that participants ultimately redefined academic authority as a relational construct built on trust, accessibility, and meaningful learning support rather than on linguistic prestige alone.

4. Discussion

4.1. Academic authority in EMI is a negotiated form of symbolic capital

The findings suggest that academic authority in EMI classrooms is best understood as a negotiated rather than predetermined form of symbolic capital. Participants initially associated lecturers' authority with English proficiency, overseas qualifications, international experience, and native-speaker identity, consistent with previous EMI research showing that linguistic and international credentials can function as markers of academic legitimacy [2, 6, 16]. However, the present study extends this literature by showing that such symbolic capital does not guarantee sustained academic authority. Students continuously reassessed lecturers through their disciplinary expertise, pedagogical competence, and responsiveness to learners' needs. Symbolic advantages established before instruction could therefore be reinforced, weakened, or replaced through classroom interaction. Academic authority emerges not as a fixed attribute possessed by lecturers but as an evolving social relationship that requires continual validation through teaching practice. This dynamic perspective resonates with the view that authority is enacted and renegotiated through interaction rather than merely inherited from institutional status [24].

The findings further highlight students' evaluative agency in constructing academic legitimacy. Rather than passively accepting institutional or linguistic markers of expertise, participants actively evaluated whether lecturers' initial symbolic advantages were supported by their actual classroom practices. This extends previous EMI research on teacher agency and institutional conditions [2, 7, 13] by positioning students as active participants in determining whose knowledge and expertise are regarded as legitimate. It also complements Vietnamese research emphasizing learner agency in English learning [13, 25] by showing that students exercise such agency not only in their learning behaviors but also in their evaluations of academic authority.

These findings have practical implications for EMI in Vietnam. Universities should avoid equating lecturers' suitability for EMI solely with English proficiency, overseas qualifications, or native-speaker status. Although these attributes may facilitate initial credibility, sustained academic authority also depends on disciplinary expertise, pedagogical competence, and meaningful engagement with students. EMI professional development should therefore combine language support with pedagogical capacity building, interactive teaching

strategies, and reflective classroom practice, enabling lecturers to develop academic authority grounded in demonstrated educational effectiveness rather than symbolic prestige alone.

4.2. Challenging the ideology of English as academic authority

The findings challenge the ideological association between English proficiency and academic authority in EMI. Participants initially treated fluent English, native-speaker identity, and international backgrounds as indicators of lecturers' credibility, reflecting the privileged symbolic status of English in global higher education [6, 16]. However, these perceptions were not stable. As students accumulated classroom experience, pedagogical competence, disciplinary expertise, and relational trust increasingly outweighed linguistic prestige in their evaluations of lecturers' authority. This extends existing EMI research, which has predominantly examined how English shapes institutional policies and classroom language practices [2, 8, 10], by showing that students actively reinterpret its ideological value through their learning experiences. It also supports the view that language ideologies are contextually negotiated and reconstructed through social interaction [26].

This negotiation is particularly significant in the Vietnamese context, where Confucian educational traditions and the prestige of English may jointly reinforce lecturers' authority [6, 15, 16]. The present findings only partially support this assumption. Although participants initially valued lecturers' linguistic and international credentials, sustained authority was more strongly associated with pedagogical care, accessibility, and meaningful academic support. Students therefore did not simply replace traditional teacher authority with linguistic prestige; rather, they reassessed both through their classroom experiences and ultimately prioritized educational effectiveness over language performance.

These findings suggest that EMI policy and quality assurance should avoid equating English proficiency with teaching quality. Lecturer evaluation and professional development should recognize disciplinary expertise, relational competence, multilingual flexibility, and student engagement alongside linguistic competence. English should therefore be treated as a pedagogical resource rather than the defining basis of academic authority, supporting more inclusive and context-responsive EMI practices in Vietnamese higher education.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how Vietnamese university students perceive and negotiate academic authority in EMI classrooms. The findings revealed a dynamic process in which students initially granted authority based on symbolic markers, particularly English proficiency, international credentials, and native-speaker identity, but subsequently reassessed it through lecturers' disciplinary expertise, pedagogical competence, and classroom interactions. Over time, academic authority was increasingly understood as relational, grounded in trust,

accessibility, and meaningful learning support rather than linguistic prestige alone. Academically, the study extends existing EMI scholarship by conceptualizing academic authority as a negotiated and continually reassessed form of symbolic capital and by highlighting students' active role in constructing lecturers' legitimacy. Practically, the findings suggest that EMI quality assurance and teacher development should move beyond an emphasis on English proficiency and international credentials to give greater attention to disciplinary expertise, pedagogical competence, relational practices, and context-responsive language use. These insights may support more pedagogically grounded and inclusive approaches to EMI implementation in Vietnamese higher education.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted at a single private university with a relatively small sample, limiting the transferability of the findings to other institutional contexts. Second, the study focused exclusively on students' perspectives and did not include lecturers' or administrators' views, which may provide a more comprehensive understanding of authority negotiation in EMI classrooms. Finally, as the data were collected through interviews, the findings reflect participants' self-reported perceptions rather than observed classroom practices. Future research could examine academic authority across different types of higher education institutions, compare students' and lecturers' perspectives, or employ classroom observations to explore how authority is enacted during actual EMI interactions. Longitudinal studies may also provide valuable insights into how students' perceptions of academic authority evolve throughout their EMI learning experiences.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Declaration of AI Use: The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language editing, improving clarity, and refining the academic writing of the manuscript. All ideas, research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final decisions regarding the content remain the sole responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure their accuracy and appropriateness.

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