



ENGLISH AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN VIETNAM HIGHER EDUCATION: A STUDY OF STUDENTS' ATTITUDINAL ASPECTS FROM A DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Although English used as a medium of instruction (EMI) has gained much research attention recently, there is still a dearth of studies that look into the similarities and contrasts as construed by learners with different academic backgrounds. This study thus aims to investigate how students from natural science and social science backgrounds verbalize their attitude towards EMI in the context of Vietnamese higher education. Two hundred and fifteen questionnaires, accompanied with ten semi-structured interviews, were used to obtain relevant research data. The results showed that the students in natural sciences (NS) and social sciences (SS) had generally accepted and embraced EMI as an essential part of their university education. However, some significant attitudinal differences were found between these two groups of students in terms of their belief (cognitive aspect), their perceived benefits (affective aspect), and their intentions and strategies (behavioral aspect) towards EMI. Finally, some implications are drawn from the findings with an aim to enhance the quality of EMI delivery at tertiary level.

Keywords: English as a medium instruction (EMI), students' attitudes, natural sciences (NS), social sciences (SS), challenges

1. Introduction

English is currently used as a medium to deliver instruction and content subjects in many non-English speaking settings. The number of English-medium instruction (EMI) courses has increased sharply around the world, and its definition also varies according to the context and angle of investigation. In this study, we posit that EMI can be best described as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English" (Dearden, 2015, p.4).

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With internationalization and marketization, EMI has become one of the most common occurrences in the field of education and vocational training. EMI programs are widely accessible (Hu & Lei, 2014) to a growing number of students across the globe. As a tactic to promote students' profiles (Altbach & Knight, 2007) and prepare local graduates for success in a new world of increasingly global competition (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013), the use of EMI has been fervently embraced by higher education institutions. Accordingly, EMI has gained considerable attention from researchers who attempt to analyze English language policies, practices, and orientations towards EMI.

In the context of Vietnam, research has been conducted concerning language, pedagogy and policy issues (e.g., Manh, 2012; Dang, Nguyen & Le, 2013; Nguyen, Walkinshaw & Pham, (2017), and content lecturers' and students' challenges in EMI classrooms (e.g., Vu & Burns, 2014; Do & Le, 2017; Le, 2017; Yen & Thong, 2019). However, little has been reported about how EMI is implemented across various disciplines and how students from different disciplinary backgrounds perceive their EMI experience. The main purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate the attitude of students from natural sciences and social sciences towards EMI courses at Vietnamese tertiary education institutions.

2. Attitude and its components

Attitude is a central psychological topic of study, and researchers have given a number of definitions for this concept. As Ajzen (2005) states, attitude can be defined as a latent propensity or tendency to respond to a psychological object with some degrees of favorability or unfavorability. It is also viewed as *"a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies toward socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols"* (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005, p. 150). According to Latchanna & Dagneu (2009), attitude is accepted as an important concept for understanding human behavior and is defined as a mental state comprising beliefs and feelings. Attitude is the reaction or evaluation of an individual to a particular situation or object, depending on his/her opinions and beliefs (Abidin et al., 2012). This study employs the way Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi and Alzwari (2012) conceptualize attitude in order to examine how students reflect, react, and evaluate what they experienced in their EMI classrooms. It is further argued that there are three aspects of attitude that need careful understanding (**Figure 1**): cognitive (including beliefs, thoughts, viewpoints), affective (including feelings, emotions), and behavioral (including actions, intentions) (Garrett, 2010;

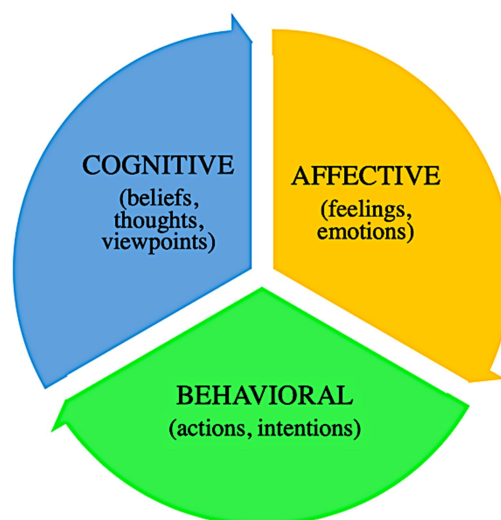


Figure 1. Three components of attitude

Abidin et al., 2012). We therefore adopt this component frame with an attempt to elucidate and deconstruct the concept of attitude and substantiate it with illustrations and examples.

3. EMI at tertiary education in Viet Nam

Viet Nam, a developing country in South East Asia, started adopting English as a subject for schooling in the 1950s (Le, 2007). By 2008, English has become the most popular foreign language in its educational system and eventually the medium of instruction in some universities (Le, 2007). As stated in this policy, educational institutions are encouraged to establish and introduce bilingual programs that aim to strengthen EMI programs in Vietnam (Vietnam Government, 2008). As a result, numerous EMI programs have been established not only in public universities but also in private ones (Vu & Burns, 2014), adapting to the changes in these days of technology and globalization and becoming competent in the job market.

The types of EMI programs delivered at Vietnamese HEIs can be broadly divided into foreign and domestic programs. Foreign programs are defined as intellectual cooperation agreements with overseas institutions in terms of academic resources, curriculum, materials, texts and assessment (Nguyen, 2009). There are two sub-types of foreign programs: offshoring and franchising.

- Offshore programs are partnerships between local and offshore institutions, known as Joint Programs (JPs). The government for Vietnamese HEIs has legalized JPs to develop transnational education programs (Nguyen & Shillabeer, 2013), aimed at attracting Vietnamese students to enroll in foreign style tertiary programs provided at domestic HEIs. Overseas qualifications are awarded upon completion and students may thereby undertake a degree program from an overseas institution without leaving Vietnam.
- Franchising programs are slightly different: modified versions of overseas educational programs are delivered under agreement with offshore institutions, known locally as Advanced Programs (APs). The programs are supported by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) project for capacity building in HEIs, which has the aim that by 2020, a Vietnamese HEI will be among the world's 200 leading universities (Marginson, Kaur, & Sawir, 2011).

Domestic programs are developed, administered, and delivered by Vietnamese HEIs. These draw on the syllabus, content, materials and assessment schemes of overseas programs as reference, but are situated within the structure and the objectives of MOET's HE curriculum framework. These programs are known as High-Quality Programs (HQPs), which appear to be more affordable in comparison with studying abroad.

4. Disciplinary divergence in EMI programs

The review by Bolton and Kuteeva (2012) of EMI in a study involving both staff and students at a Swedish university shows that attitudes towards EMI differ across disciplines. The findings among students also indicate that the use of English is a pragmatic reality for both teachers and students in the sciences, while English is usually used as an additional or supplementary language alongside Swedish in the humanities and social sciences. One should note that parallel language use was apparent in these EMI courses for both students and lecturers.

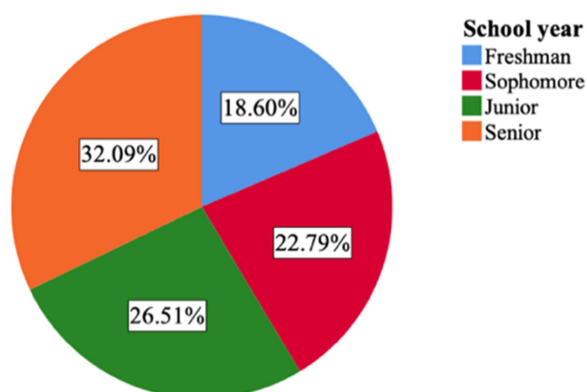


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents by year

Meanwhile, Karabay (2017) conducted a study into STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics) and Social Sciences Students’ Language-Oriented Academic Challenges in English Medium of Instruction (EMI) Programs at Kazakhstan International University. It was revealed that STEM students’ needs differed from social sciences because STEM area were content driven while social sciences were more language-oriented area. The major finding was that STEM and social sciences students equally expected their English to be improved in the program. However, it could be seen that only social sciences students succeeded in it, while in STEM areas, students were less likely to get their language improved by the end of their studies.

It seems that there might be significant differences between students from different academic backgrounds when they experience EMI. Therefore, comparing students’ attitude from different academic fields helps students to explore how higher education language policies align with the experiences of the students, their perspectives on language and their role in teaching (Bukve, 2018). Such disciplinary divergence in attitude towards EMI are systematically linked to the type of knowledge structures that the disciplines favor (Kuteeva & Airey, 2014). It will be of great interest to find out if students from various disciplinary backgrounds vary in their attitude towards EMI.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research participants

This study was designed using a mixed-methods approach that would improve the reliability and accuracy of the data by enabling the triangulation of the methods. In so doing,

103 undergraduate students studying natural sciences: Advanced Physics (45 students), Chemistry (47 students), and Mathematics (11 students) as well as 112 students in social sciences: Business Administration (54 students) and Agriculture Economics and Finance (58 students) at a university in Vietnam participated in the questionnaire. This was able to provide rich and varied insights into the act of studying and lecturing in an EMI classroom as well as the knowledge of and/or experiences with EMI courses. The distribution of students by academic study year is reported in **Figure 2**.

Then, two male and eight female participants from different specializations and years of study were chosen for interviews. The data from the interviews were triangulated with the questionnaire data that allowed best to answer the research questions.

5.2. Research sites

The study was conducted at two campuses at Hue city. The students from one campus study natural sciences (Mathematics, Advanced Physics and Chemistry) at the University of Education - Hue University (HUEdu). The Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam (MOET) has authorized HUEdu to implement a program to train undergraduate students majoring in Physics with advanced curriculum and standard of the University of Virginia, USA since 2006. English has been used as a teaching medium in these programs. Recently, HUEdu also allows students to enroll in EMI courses for some academic subjects such as Maths and Chemistry. Meanwhile, social science students (Agriculture Economics and Finance, Business Administration) were from the University of Economics - Hue University (HUEco), which has been affiliated with overseas universities to introduce the joint training program in Agriculture Economics and Finance as well as Business Administration. These advantages create variations in the quality of the curriculum and the job advancement of the graduates.

5.3. Data collection instruments

Questionnaire

The initial instrument used to collect the necessary data was the questionnaire. As a tool to collect quantitative data, the questionnaire can gather a great deal of information in a relatively short time (Wray & Bloomer, 2013), hence could draw a broad picture of the research object at a given point of time. Also, it helps the researcher plan the next stage of data collection. In this study, the questionnaire (**Figure 3**) consisted of three sections: demographic information; closed-ended questions regarding students' attitude toward EMI; and open-ended questions with the purposes of giving them a chance to write whatever comment they have about their experience with EMI.

Interview

The interviews were conducted to generate soft data, comprised of word-of-mouth responses to directly report people’s belief, attitude and values (Berg & Lune, 2012) to elicit their views and opinions (Creswell, 2009) and expand on the findings of the questionnaire data. The selection of the interviewees was mainly based on the participants’ responses to the questionnaire to determine the relative emphasis on an issue. To increase the chance of finding out different attitude towards the issue under study, individual interviews were individually conducted with five students in NS and five SS students in Vietnamese for five minutes. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were done online via video calls on Facebook and audio-recorded.

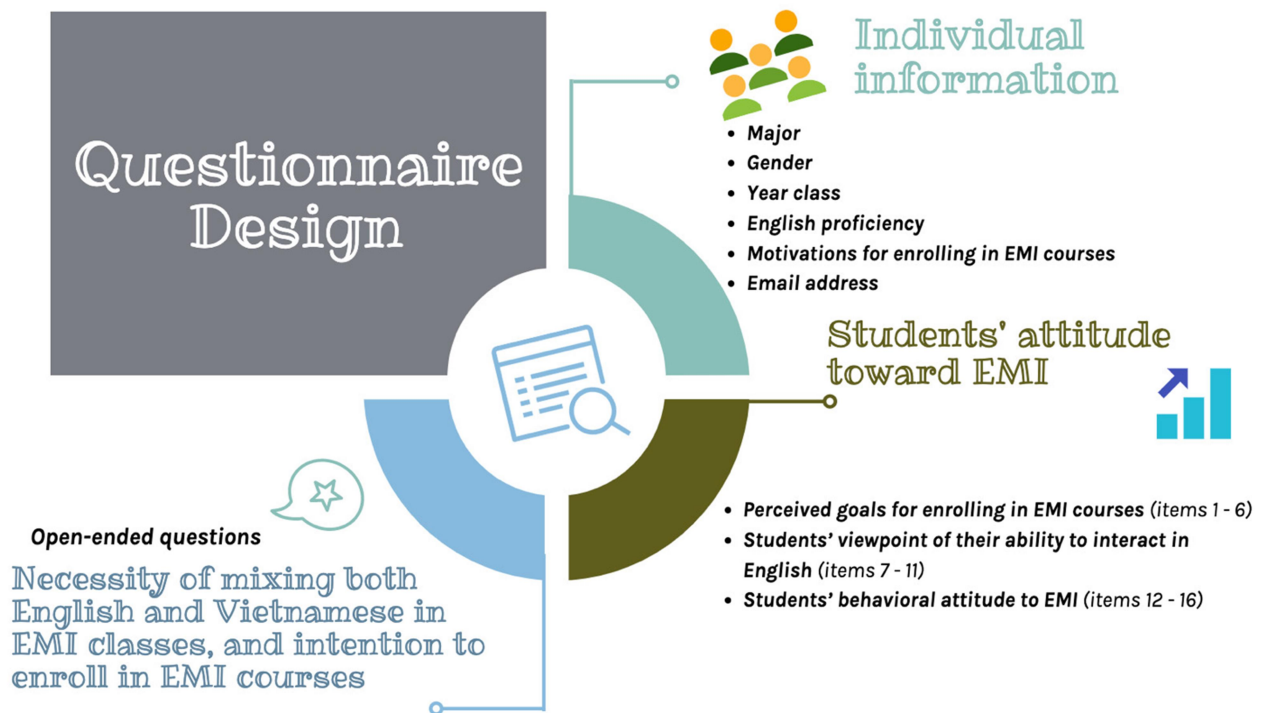


Figure 3. Design of online questionnaire with three sections

6. Data analysis

Google Forms Questionnaire was used to collect and analyze data (Figure 4). In order to perform quantitative analysis of the survey, the data from participants was computed for the calculation of reliability index by the software SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) Version 25. The Cronbach Alpha test was used to analyse the internal reliability of a set of items (Dörnyei, 2007). It is recognized in this survey that the internal consistency is homogeneous and significant for all the dimensions as the reliability of all variables ranged from 0.723 to 0.855 and exceeded the minimum of 0.70, which is considered as a reasonably high level of reliability (Dörnyei, 2007).

Qualitative data was first imported to Word, then coded into themes via thematic analysis.

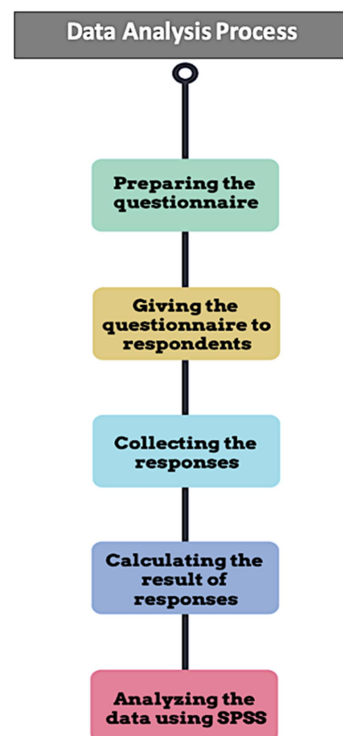


Figure 4. Five steps in the data analysis process

7. Results and Discussion

7.1. Affective attitude: Students’ perceived benefits of EMI courses

Table 2. Perceived goals for enrolling in EMI courses (n=215)

Statements	Frequency		Total (Percent)
	Natural Sciences	Social Sciences	
1. Have more job opportunities in the future	88	97	185 (86.0%)
2. Improve my English proficiency	80	102	182 (84.7%)
3. Raise confidence and motivation in studying	71	75	146 (67.9%)
4. Have higher opportunities of studying abroad	43	57	100 (46.5%)
5. Participate in international forums and programs	35	31	66 (30.7%)
6. Others	01	00	1 (0.5%)

It is noticeable that students are motivated by not only chances to find a good job after graduating (86%) but also by their expectation to improve their English skills (84%). Also, it is worth considering the fact that one of the factors which could change the student’s decision to take further EMI programs in the future was partly lecturers’ contributions. The results indicate that the majority of the participants see the benefits and are supportive of EMI classes. With high levels of motivation shown in the questionnaire, the students would put more effort into achieving the goal of EMI and have favorable attitude during their courses. This favorable attitude is important as those with favorable affective attitude towards EMI would do better than those without any recognizable indication of affection or positive emotion (Ahmed, 2015)

7.2. Cognitive attitude: Students’ viewpoint of their ability to interact in the EMI classroom

As we can see from the descriptive statistics in every single item from the **Table 3**, one-third of the respondents (NS 27.5%, SS 33.7%) in item 7 agreed that they could communicate well in English with means of 3.10 and 3.28. Therefore, items 8, 9 and 10 exploring the students’ ability to maintain a conversation and their confidence in giving a lecture or answering questions revealed a common feature regardless of their relatively low levels of English proficiency, which was relevant with the finding in **Figure 5**). The majority of respondents (51.16%) judged their English ability at the level of B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The second most common English level was A2, with 31.16% of respondents passing their pre-intermediate tests. By comparison, 10.23% reported having a B2, whereas a small number of participants stated they had an A1 (3.72%) belonging to a low level. Only 1.86% of 215 respondents estimated their English level ability to be around C1 level, which actually belonged in the Advanced level. Although students’ ability to interact in English was not high, more than half of students (NS 53.9%, SS 54.8%) reported that they were not shy or hesitant to make mistakes (item 11). Additionally, students in SS expressed their agreement slightly higher than NS students, this might be true that students studying SS were more confident when self-assessing their interaction in English.

Table 3. Students’ viewpoint of their ability to interact in English

Questionnaire items		Strongly disagree/	Neutral	Strongly	M	SD
		Disagree (%)	(%)	agree/Agree (%)		
7. I can communicate well in English.	NS	21.6	50.9	27.5	3.10	0.85
	SS	15.9	50.4	33.7	3.28	0.89

8. I can maintain a conversation with my lecturers and friends over a long period of time.	NS	23.5	47.1	29.4	3.10	0.80
	SS	14.2	51.3	34.5	3.27	0.87
9. I think I am proficient enough to lecture in English.	NS	35.3	38.2	26.5	2.94	0.94
	SS	23.9	43.4	32.7	3.13	0.92
10. I feel confident if asked to answer questions in English.	NS	31.3	47.1	21.6	2.85	0.84
	SS	21.3	44.2	34.5	3.19	0.93
11. I don't feel shy and hesitant to make mistakes.	NS	16.7	29.4	53.9	3.51	0.99
	SS	10.7	34.5	54.8	3.59	0.90

Note: NS = natural sciences, SS = social sciences, M = mean score, SD = standard deviation

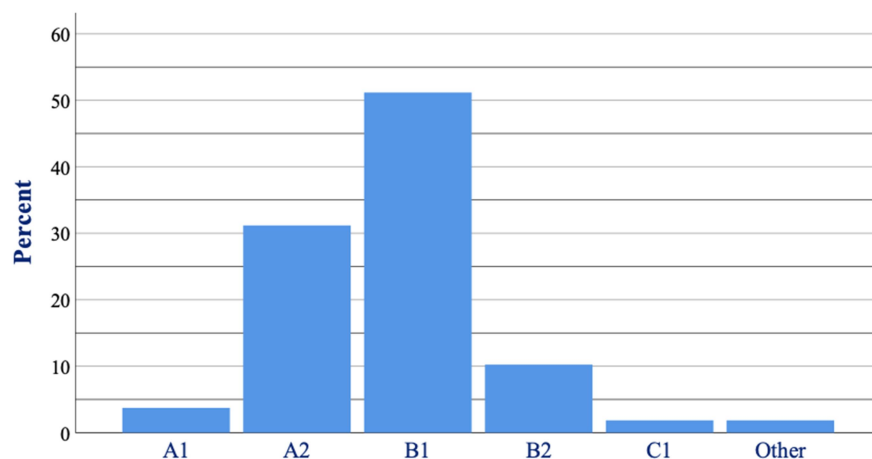


Figure 5. Students' self-evaluations of English ability (n= 215)

7.3. Behavioral attitude: Students' intention regarding the use of EMI

Table 4. Students' behavioral attitude to EMI

Questionnaire items		Strongly disagree/ Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Strongly agree/ Agree (%)	M	SD
12. I plan to take further English classes to contribute to successful EMI learning outcomes.	NS	3.0	16.7	80.3	3.99	0.75
	SS	2.7	17.7	79.6	4.10	0.81

13. I plan to read more materials written in English to improve my English proficiency and subject content.	NS	2.9	16.7	80.4	3.97	0.69
	SS	0.9	22.1	77.0	4.05	0.74
14. I plan to look for scholarships to study abroad after EMI courses.	NS	15.7	42.2	42.1	3.45	1.08
	SS	16.8	31	52.2	3.51	1.15
15. I plan to join EMI courses in postgraduate level studies	NS	15.7	35.3	49.0	3.47	1.06
	SS	15.0	31.9	53.1	3.5	1.05
16. I would recommend my friends to enroll in EMI courses.	NS	3.0	22.5	74.5	3.98	0.82
	SS	7.1	33.6	59.3	3.62	0.89

Note: NS = natural sciences, SS = social sciences, M = mean score, SD = standard deviation

As seen in Item 12 and 13, participants were inclined to enrich their English skills relevant to a particular study field by taking extra English classes to support their learning outcomes of EMI (NS 80.3%, SS 79.6%) with highest mean scores (NS 3.99, SS 4.10) and spending more time reading materials in English to improve both their mastery of English and specific subject knowledge (NS 80.4%, SS 77.0%). As for item 14 and 15, approximately half of the students showed their intention to look for scholarships and opportunities to continue learning after graduating. However, the attitude between students might vary in these two findings based on the relatively high standard deviation (NS 1.08, SS 1.15 & NS 1.06, SS 1.05) and therefore, there needs some reservation and careful consideration of this discrepancy. In response to item 16, a majority of students intended to recommend EMI courses for their friends in the future (NS 74.5%, SS 59.3%), showing how convinced they were about their EMI participation.

7.4. Behavioral attitude: Students' preference of translanguaging

In an open-ended question of the questionnaire, students also shared their opinion on whether the combination of English and Vietnamese languages in EMI is necessary for the condition of students in their classes, as listed:

Lecturers and students can interact more effectively, which greatly improves students' lecture comprehension;

There is less homogeneity amongst students in terms of their English abilities;

A mixture of two languages will help students come to understand and develop the disciplinary knowledge in English, especially those who have limited English proficiency;

Students can be supported in both language and subject content.

This may result from the fact that using English only is sometimes not sufficient for success in the classroom. This leads us to consider that the expectation of the students should be met in relation to using both languages for teaching and learning the subject knowledge. In other words, a translanguaging approach in which Vietnamese and English are used pedagogically can promote more teacher-student interactions (Lin, 2006), increase a positive and significant relationship, and help students overcome language barriers (Probyn, 2006).

Only a few respondents expressed that they preferred using English only in EMI courses with such explanations in individual interviews as:

I am a fourth-year student now, my English has improved a lot after taking EMI classes. I find it unnecessary to combine two languages in EMI classes;

I am required to master specialized materials delivered in English and participate in classroom activities in English;

I am afraid I will forget English terminology in my field and my English listening skills will go down if I don't practice it very often. ... Moreover, some academic subjects are actually taught completely in English by foreign lecturers and I don't think they can speak Vietnamese.

Naturally, it is recognized that students' preferences for the use of Vietnamese and English depends on their language proficiency. If they have low English proficiency, they would prefer both English and Vietnamese in EMI classes; however, when students were accustomed to using English and did not struggle to follow the content taught and discussed in English, they were in favor of using English only.

7.5. Behavioral attitude: Students' commitment to EMI courses

In open-ended questions of the questionnaire, when being asked about whether students would continue to register in the next EMI courses, a majority of respondents of both disciplines expressed their strong commitment and engagement to EMI programs or courses. Only 7% of 215 respondents said that they had no intention of following EMI courses in the future because they found it hard to understand lectures and achieve good grades in EMI courses. It could be concluded that most of the participants would continue to enroll in EMI courses and they believed that the use of EMI had a number of advantages. EMI courses could boost their content knowledge in both groups: natural sciences and social sciences. This is in line with previous research (Lei, 2014; Lueg, 2015) showing EMI would improve students' career opportunities and their English competence. However, the findings is not consistent with the results obtained by Belhiah and Elhami (2015), who reported that EMI students struggled in class due to the exclusive use of English and many of them were not ready to continue EMI programs. It is

likely that these linguistic difficulties were inherent in their language learning history. Students came from different educational backgrounds and therefore most of them could not expect to reach the B1 level before the official start of the EMI (see **Figure 5**).

8. Conclusion and implications

This study uses quantitative and qualitative approach to discover students' attitudinal aspects when implementing EMI in different academic disciplines. Most of the students had general favorable attitude towards using EMI to improve the content knowledge while simultaneously enhancing their English language proficiency, which is in line with the findings in previous studies (Aguilar & Muñoz, 2014; Muthanna & Miao, 2015; Rahmadani, 2016; Yen & Thong, 2019). It is worth noticing that the quality of EMI programs could be detrimentally affected due to poor language skills (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015) and that self-confidence has been described as a significant factor affecting the academic success of the students (Stankov, Morony & Lee, 2014).

It is recommended that for the benefit of EMI programmes, general English should be taught in the first year to consolidate the language grounding of students in English, particularly those with very low levels of English language skills, and later English for Specific Purpose (ESP) should be promoted. The emphasis of English courses should, therefore, be focused more on speaking and listening skills instead of grammatical constructs and ESP courses should be developed with the intended goal of improving the mastery of disciplinary English and promoting the introduction of the EMI curriculum. Teachers along with their students can, for example, develop a communication channel such as Facebook page forum, to establish an exchange of information at the beginning of ESP classes. This would be helpful for students before and while taking EMI classes. The online connection will help students learn to share responsibility and support one another during their learning process.

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