

Developing Self-Directed Learning and Epistemic Agency through English-Medium Instruction Programs: Experiences of Vietnamese Graduate Students in Taiwan.

Research Overview

As Taiwan pursues its Bilingual 2030 policy to enhance global competitiveness, English-Medium Instruction (EMI) has been fostered across universities. While Vietnamese students now form the largest international student group in Taiwan, little is known about their longitudinal learning experiences and academic adaptation within these challenging EMI environments.

Purpose

This study aims to deepen the understanding of how Vietnamese graduate students develop self-directed learning (SDL) strategies and enact epistemic agency (EA) while navigating the academic and cultural transition into Taiwan's EMI context. By exploring these lived experiences, the findings will provide actionable insights for universities to design supportive environments that empower international students to become active, lifelong learners and critical knowledge contributors.

Methods

The research adopts a qualitative multiple-case study methodology grounded in a constructivist-interpretivist epistemology. This design allows for in-depth, contextual engagement with the participants' lived experiences and includes both within-case and cross-case analysis to identify patterns and relationships.

The target sample includes eight to twelve Vietnamese graduate students enrolled in Master's or Doctoral programs in Taiwan where English is the primary medium of instruction.

Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling are employed to ensure informational richness and maximum variation across disciplinary fields, levels of study, and geographical locations in Taiwan.

The primary instrument is the semi-structured individual interview, which allows for the exploration of participants' feelings, behaviors, and interpretations of their world.

The study utilizes an integrated conceptual framework based on the theories of Garrison (1997) and Morris (2024) for SDL, and Damşa (2010) and Nieminen & Ketonen (2024) for EA. This framework views the academic process as a continuous interaction between the individual's micro-ecosystem and the macro-ecosystem of the EMI environment.

Results and Discussion

Initial findings from pilot interviews suggest a bidirectional interaction between linguistic proficiency and agency. Students experience significant "language shock" and anxiety during their initial transition into the EMI environment, which impacts their concentration and cognitive processing. However, those who develop effective SDL strategies, such as self-monitoring and proactive goal-setting are better positioned to overcome these obstacles.

Key preliminary observations include:

Negotiation of AI: Students are leveraging generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT or Gemini) as an academic assistant for core SDL activities like diagnosing learning needs and searching for resources. They report an ability to "Negotiate with AI" by separating AI-generated ideas from their own to maintain epistemic ownership.

Cultural Habitus: Vietnamese students often negotiate a tension between their Confucian-influenced traditions of learning and the academic norms of the Taiwanese institutional context.

Knowledge Contribution: When students experience themselves as valuable knowledge contributors through class discussions and collaborative research, their motivation to engage in demanding SDL behaviors increases.

The study concludes that SDL is not just an autonomous learning competence but a survival skill that affects students' long-term success. The final discussion will highlight theoretical and practical implications for institutional practices, emphasizing that educational settings must orient toward transformational goals where learning is about changing the world through meaningful knowledge objects.