



Translanguaging in EMI law settings through the lens of Vietnamese students

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Abstract

The current study investigated the perceptions and practices of Vietnamese law students of an advanced program in terms of translanguaging and its functions within English-medium instruction settings. Leveraging classroom observation and semi-structured interviews through the lens of translanguaging space (Wei, 2018) as the analytical framework, the findings revealed that while the institutional policies favor monolingual English use, students frequently utilized both planned and spontaneous shifts between English and Vietnamese to master complex legal concepts. Such flexible linguistic approach serves as a pedagogical scaffold, allowing learners to exercise their agency in clarifying abstract terminology, thereby reducing the cognitive burden of studying law in a foreign language. The majority of the interviewed students expressed their favor of the optimal position, i.e., the value of mother tongue resources in instructing discipline content and acknowledging socio-emotional support. Conversely, in certain situations, a small minority advocated for English-use only, reflecting the virtual position to maximize language exposure and maintain academic rigor. The study highlights the necessity of moving toward a multilingual orientation in EMI classrooms which underscores the benefits of leveraging students' full linguistic repertoires.

Keywords: EMI, law, translanguaging, Vietnamese students

Introduction

English-medium instruction (EMI), defined as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden, 2015, p. 2), is seen as a tactical reaction to the internationalisation of higher education (Kirkgoz et al., 2023). Consequently, the transition to EMI has flourished globally, leading to the expansion of EMI courses across

different disciplines for the past few decades (Dafouz & Smit, 2020). A multitude of motives for the growing popularity of EMI have been addressed (Rose et al., 2020), among which is the enhancement of university graduates' English proficiency to cater to economic development goals in the era of globalization (Sahan et al., 2022), especially in contexts where EMI is sharply connected to top-down policy.

From a language policy perspective, EMI programs are commonly characterized by a monolingual orientation (Curle et al., 2020) where English is the only language employed in instructing content knowledge, however, it is undeniable that both lecturers and students have met language-related issues due to limited exposure to English (Richards & Pun, 2022). Several concerns are noticed in EMI contexts including learners' insufficient English language proficiency, their difficulties in acquiring content knowledge resulting in psychological tension, lecturers' poor English communication capacities, and their inadequate accountability for attending to students' language requirements (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2020; Hu, 2019; Pun & Thomas, 2020). Furthermore, complex language features of each discipline, including lexical-grammar, technical or specialized terms, and unique-contextualized vocabulary meanings, are also attributed to linguistic barriers (Halliday & Martin, 1993; Lewis et al., 2012). Furthermore, earlier studies have argued that such monolingual viewpoints potentially constrain students' learning (Wilkinson, 2013), contending that the multilingual resources of EMI stakeholders should be acknowledged and leveraged rather than regarded as obstacles to the effective implementation of such programs.

Despite these perspectives, Lasagabaster (2017) states that institutional policies generally lack clear guidelines on either the use of multilingual practices or the explicit incorporation of students' and teachers' additional linguistic resources in EMI settings. Similarly, the majority of content lecturers are observed to continue to follow English-only policies, even though integrating other languages is proven to offer a wide range of educational purposes (Mazak & Herbas-Donoso, 2015). Such preference is largely influenced by either the belief that using other linguistic resources, especially students' L1, may impede the development of the target language (L2) or the dominant English-only ideology, which frames alternative approaches as inappropriate or even unacceptable (García, 2009).

With regard to Vietnamese higher education context, whose EMI programs aim to develop a highly competitive educational system by international standards by 2020 (Ngo, 2019), little is known about learners' perspectives on translanguaging and their translanguaging practice employment except a few studies (i.e., Ngo, 2021; Nguyen, 2025). In particular, in EMI law classrooms where legal knowledge and legal language are deemed to be complicated, exploring how Vietnamese students navigate between languages in terms of translanguaging practices and strategies for constructing conceptual understanding remain under-researched. Thus, this present research is expected to clarify the functions of translanguaging among law students in EMI classrooms with the focus on how students leverage their linguistic repertoires through their own practices in classroom activities. Accordingly, two distinct research questions are formulated:

1. In what ways are translanguaging practices employed in EMI law classrooms?
2. How do law students perceive the use of translanguaging in EMI classrooms?

Literature Review

Translanguaging Concept

"Translanguaging", the most widely current used concept, was first introduced in the 1980s by Cen Williams in Welsh term, which was later translated into English and understood as

“the planned and systematic use of two languages inside the same lesson” (Baker, 2011, p. 288). The concept of translanguaging is frequently compared to codeswitching. In terms of similarities, both code-switching and translanguaging involve the use of bi-/multi-languages in communication to facilitate learning, social interaction, and meaning-making in bi-/multi-lingual settings (Hornberger & Link, 2012). While translanguaging is treated as the unity of the multilingual repertoires employed to produce effective communication (García & Wei, 2014), codeswitching is viewed as a mixture or alternation of two or more distinct languages within a conversation or discourse (Poplack, 1980). From another perspective, translanguaging is often regarded as a general term encompassing diverse bi/multilingual communicative practices, including code-switching. Later on, García and Lin (2016, p. 1) affirm that translanguaging emphasizes “both the complex and fluid language practices of bilinguals, as well as the pedagogical approaches that leverage those practices.” As a pedagogy, translanguaging suggests the attention of learners’ language backgrounds, as well as their diverse resources of linguistics and semiotics to promote both subject knowledge and target language acquisition (Li & Lin, 2019). According to Cenoz and Gorter (2020), translanguaging is further categorized into pedagogical (planned) translanguaging and spontaneous translanguaging.

The study acknowledges ongoing debates regarding conceptual boundaries between translanguaging and code-switching (MacSwan, 2017). However, instead of viewing these perspectives as mutually exclusive, this study adopts a pedagogical translanguaging perspective, focusing on the functions of bi/multilingual resource employment in disciplinary meaning-making. In other words, translanguaging is understood as an umbrella term that includes both plurilingual repertoires (e.g., code-switching) and multimodal repertoires (e.g., cultural legal knowledge) as a resource of meaning-making and knowledge construction.

Translanguaging in EMI

In EMI educational settings, literature on translanguaging practices has revealed diverse classroom language-use scenarios. In one respect, it is viewed that several factors including monolingual policies (Fang & Liu, 2020), monolingual ideologies (Almayez, 2022) and the absence of clear guidelines (Wang, 2016) continue to hinder EMI teachers from adopting a translanguaging approach. Moreover, many EMI teachers deliberately avoid using translanguaging and advise students against utilizing their multilingual capacities in the classroom because of differences between teachers and learners’ linguistic background, and a lack of language awareness among teachers (Almayez, 2022; An & Macaro., 2022). Although many institutions adopt strict English-only policies, aiming to immerse students in the target language, research indicates a disconnect between these policies and actual classroom practices (Tri & Moskovsky, 2021). Similarly, Macaro et al. (2018) stress that strict English-only policies can create stress and inhibit understanding, while more flexible approaches offer instructors to benefit their students’ multilingual resources to reinforce EMI efficiency in various ways, thus supporting better learning outcomes. Notably, studies carried out across EMI tertiary contexts pinpoint that content instructors and learners generally appreciate L1 as a helpful tool to enhance content acquisition, promote engagement and participation, facilitate classroom management, and support metalinguistic awareness (Choi et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017; Pawapootanon et al., 2025).

In Vietnam, the EMI policy is thoroughly connected with the English proficiency goals (Tran & Nguyen, 2018; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019) to enhance the quality of the workforce. Similar to other contexts, EMI in Vietnamese higher education is shaped by top-down policy that often generates tensions between macro-level policy expectations and institutional capacity (Nguyen et al., 2017). An increasing amount of research has revealed that both lecturers’

and learners' poor English language proficiency have been pinpointed as contributing factors to obstacles in EMI lessons (Nguyen et al., 2016; Vu & Burns, 2014). Specifically, EMI lecturers have faced challenges when instructing students with varying levels of English competence (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017; Nhac et al., 2025). Additionally, lecturers' limited English proficiency leads to the lower quality of EMI lessons compared to those delivered in Vietnamese (Pham & Barnett, 2022). In such cases, Vietnamese is leveraged alongside English to overcome language barriers and to assist students' comprehension of the content knowledge (Nguyen et al., 2022; Sahan et al., 2022; Tri & Moskovsky, 2021). However, Vietnamese usage in EMI has led to questions concerning the program's objective of enhancing their English language proficiency (Sahan et al., 2022). Also, little is known about how languages are used and how stakeholders support an English-only policy approach to EMI with only a few relevant studies to date (Nguyen et al., 2022; Nguyen, 2025; Ngo, 2021, 2024). This gap, subsequently, is addressed in the current study to explore how students' view language use and what their translanguaging practices are in high-stakes EMI law classrooms where precision in disciplinary concepts and knowledge is paramount.

Wei's (2018) translanguaging space, defined as "a space for the act of translanguaging" and "a space created through translanguaging" (p. 9) with three interrelated dimensions (i.e., social, cognitive, and identity) serves as the analytical lens guiding this study. Wei (2018) further characterizes translanguaging space with two key features, including (1) "creativity" where speakers transcend linguistic boundaries and generate new meanings, and (2) "criticality" where they leverage diverse forms of evidence and knowledge to deepen their understanding. In the context of Vietnamese EMI law settings, this framework provides a valuable lens for understanding how learners construct dynamic multilingual spaces to engage with and simultaneously exercise their agency to mobilize their full linguistic repertoire to facilitate meaning-making and disciplinary knowledge construction.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design was utilized to delve into the students' translanguaging practices and their perceptions in EMI law classrooms with a view to generate a contextualized understanding of these complex and real-world phenomena (Yin, 2018). With the use of a variety of research instruments, including classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, the current study adopted Wei's translanguaging space framework (2018) to capture learners' multilingual practices.

Participants

Seventeen third-year law majors in the same class of an advanced training program at L University partook in the study through a purposive sampling technique for its relevance and convenience when collecting data. Specifically, learners at advanced programs at L University achieved a certain minimum level of English proficiency as required, that is, B1 according to CEFR (normally measured by IELTS scores in this context) before attending EMI law courses. Of 17 law majors, ten students scored 6.0–6.5 IELTS (B2), six students got 7.0–8.0 IELTS (C1), while one of them achieved 8.5 IELTS (C2). All of the participants, whose mother tongue is Vietnamese and English is their additional language, completed two compulsory legal English courses prior to their exposure to EMI law lessons. Such criteria ensure that these students were reasonably homogeneous in terms of learning experiences and English proficiency.

One thing noted is that although EMI law lecturers were not the participants of the study, they were also sought for their consent to allow the researcher to observe their lessons to capture their learners' uses of languages.

Data Collection and Analysis

Formal invitations were distributed to students by the researcher, who also served as their legal English lecturer. To address the potential power imbalance associated with this dual role, participation was strictly voluntary, and students were clearly informed that non-participation or withdrawal would not affect their academic grades. Consent was obtained after the completion of course assessment, with a colleague independent of the course assisting in the distribution and collection of written consent forms. Information relating to the study aims, procedures, confidentiality protocols, as well as the participants' right to withdraw at any time were included for ensuring their consent in alignment with ethical standards, including permissions for classroom observations, and audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. Moreover, to ensure anonymity, all of the information and data were stored securely and simultaneously; instead of addressing students' names directly, they were all abbreviated as "St" when analyzing their viewpoints or practices.

Classroom Observations

The researcher acted as a non-participant observer in six sessions of the aforementioned EMI law classrooms over the course of one semester to capture their translanguaging practices. Following Wei's translanguaging space framework (2018), the researcher documented the use of languages, patterns of the participants' interaction, and pedagogical practices with the assistance of field notes. Observed lessons were also audio-recorded for later transcripts. Class observations were carried out in comparative contract law and public international law sessions, each of which spanned 90 minutes, resulting in a sum of nine hours of observational data. Such data was determined to be sufficient because by the final sessions, the observed patterns of linguistic negotiation became consistently repetitive and no significantly new pedagogical functions emerged. The observation protocol emphasized the linguistic negotiation which denotes the fluid use of English and Vietnamese in the form of either planned or spontaneous translanguaging practices with or without the use of translation/AI tools in group discussions, raising/answering questions in both lectures and seminars.

Semi-Structured Interviews

An invitation email was sent to all students, inviting them to take part in the interviews. Nine students voluntarily consented to participate in one-by-one semi-structured interviews, each of which lasted approximately 25–30 minutes and were conducted in Vietnamese to enable the participants to express themselves fully.

The data analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), managed through NVivo software to ensure systematic organization. A hybrid approach of deductive and inductive coding was employed to bridge the gap between theoretical constructs and classroom realities. Specifically, the analysis of classroom observation data began with open coding to clarify patterns and themes related to translanguaging practices. Audio-recorded interview data transcribed verbatim and translated were shared with the participants for clarification and confirmation before being grouped into themes. However, all non-lexical fillers such as *ah*, *uhm*, and other hesitation markers were omitted to enhance readability as they were not relevant to the focus of the analysis. Additionally, during data analysis, discrepant cases and negative perceptions toward translanguaging were intentionally retained and reported to avoid presenting an overly positive account of students' attitudes.

Findings

Learners' Translanguaging Practices

Classroom observation analysis indicated that a wide range of translanguaging practices, including both spontaneous and planned types were employed by students to handle the linguistic and disciplinary challenges of EMI learning.

Spontaneous Translanguaging

Spontaneous translanguaging occurred frequently, particularly during class discussions and collaborative group work when learners encountered challenging law concepts or need quick clarification. To illustrate, in a group discussion on the remedies for breach of contract, Vietnamese explanations of common remedies under English law were fluidly incorporated while key terms in English were still retained, as one student explained:

“Under English contract law, there are several main types of remedies for breach of contract such as damages, specific performance, injunctions, and rescission, some of which may not exist or be regulated as under Vietnamese law. Thus, when I explain these to my classmates, I usually keep the English legal terminology but switch to Vietnamese to clarify the underlying ideas.” – St9

Similarly, another student shared his views:

“Clearly using Vietnamese to elaborate the concepts help us comprehend the logic and purpose of each remedy, in this case, I think that keeping the English terms maintain accuracy and prepares us for legal texts and assessments conducted in English.” – St3

From class observations, students were noticed to create a translanguaging moment to break boundaries between named languages to achieve a communication goal. More specifically, the participants do not just switch to Vietnamese, but they mobilize their full linguistic repertoire to analyze the meaning of the complex legal terms and theories.

Extract 1. Context 1: a group discussion on remedies for breach of contract

St1: “Specific performance *nghĩa là tòa buộc bên vi phạm phải thực hiện đúng hợp đồng, nhất là khi tài sản là unique, như đất đai chẳng hạn. Trong trường hợp này, người ta không chấp nhận damages vì damages không đủ để bù đắp cho những thiệt hại xảy ra.*” <Specific performance means that the court compels the defaulting party to perform the contract as agreed, especially when the asset is unique, such as land. In this case, damages are not excepted because monetary compensation is insufficient for the harm done>

St4: “*Nghĩa là biện pháp này chỉ dùng khi tiền bồi thường không thể giải quyết được, đúng không?*” <It means that this kind of remedy is applied when money cannot adequately resolve the dispute, right?>

St5: “Yes, exactly. Damages won’t put the claimant in the same position, so the court orders specific performance.”

In the above extract, St1 initiated the space by providing a Vietnamese bridge for the term “specific performance” while St4 immediately entered this space to verify her understanding

in Vietnamese. By the time St5 responded in English, a shared conceptual understanding had been built through the discussion in Vietnamese. Such space allowed them to logically move from Vietnamese back to English terminology with greater clarity. The aforementioned extract exemplifies that students strategically leveraged spontaneous translanguaging in the form of L1 mobilization to unpack the meaning of complex legal remedies while preserving English for essential law terminology. Such kind of translanguaging practices created quick meaning-making, peer scaffolding, and co-construction of legal reasoning as a dynamic sense-making process in multilingual learning spaces.

Extract 2. Context 2: Law instructor (Instr) explains “rescission” in an EMI contract law session

Instr: “Rescission is understood as a type of legal remedy that sets the contract aside and restores both parties to their pre-contract position. Usually, rescission is available in cases of misrepresentation.”

St12: “Em thưa cô, *restore to pre-contract position* hiểu như thế nào ạ? Có thể hiểu là trả lại như ban đầu à?” <Excuse me, teacher, what does *restore to the pre-contract position* mean? Does it mean returning everything to the original state?”>

Instr: “Đúng rồi. Cụm từ đó có thể hiểu là hai bên trở về trạng thái như trước khi ký hợp đồng < “Exactly. That phrase means that both parties return to the state they were in before signing the contract”, that is return the goods, refund the money, everything back to the original situation.”

St13: “So rescission basically cancels the contract?”

Instr: “Yes, but remember that it is not termination because termination ends the contract from now on; rescission unwinds it from the beginning, các em hiểu chứ? Giống như hợp đồng chưa từng tồn tại.” <Do you understand? It’s like the contract never existed.>

Extract 2 is an example of student-initiated spontaneous translanguaging, in which a translanguaging space emerged when St12 exercised her agency to ask about the meaning of the phrase “*restore to pre-contract position*” in Vietnamese. The lecturer subsequently capitalized on this translanguaging moment by providing pedagogical scaffolding, flexibly leveraging her linguistic repertoire to clarify the distinction between *rescission* and *termination*. Creativity was manifested through the use of concrete examples in Vietnamese to make abstract legal concepts more accessible, while criticality was reflected in both the lecturer’s and students’ prioritization of cognitive effectiveness over adherence to a monolingual policy. As a result, through interaction with this translanguaging space, the student was able to integrate specialized legal terminology into her conceptual framework in a more meaningful manner.

Planned Translanguaging

Planned translanguaging strategies were observed as intentional practices in which students systematically developed bilingual glossaries of legal English concepts or compiled the notes in both languages. Students reported that they purposefully prepared Vietnamese explanations of complex or new legal terms prior to delivering presentation in English for time saving and a higher possibility of audience comprehension, as illustrated in the following opinion:

“Key concepts in my presentation encourage us to translate and explain in Vietnamese, helping not only myself but also my peers deeply comprehend

its underlying meaning. In some situations, I also attempt to convey it in Vietnamese after delivering in English.” – St8

Extract 3. Context 3: Group presentation on Sources of European Union (EU) law

St1 (Presenter 1): Now, let's move on the next part concerning sources of EU law, in which we will explain three main sources, namely treaties, secondary legislation, and general principles. Firstly, treaties are the primary source providing the constitutional framework for the EU.

(St1 paused and used Vietnamese for conceptual clarification)

“Ở đây, treaties có thể được dịch là “hiệp ước” và được hiểu như “hiến pháp” của EU, đó là văn bản có giá trị pháp lý cao nhất, quy định toàn bộ cấu trúc và thẩm quyền của các cơ quan EU.” <Please note that in this context, treaties can be translated as “hiệp ước” in Vietnamese, and function as the “constitution” of the EU, a type of legislation having the highest legal validity and establishing the overall structure and powers of the EU institutions.>

“The second source of EU law is secondary legislation, which includes two sub-types: regulations and directives.”

“Trong tiếng Việt, regulations ở đây có thể hiểu là “quy định, quy chế” trong khi đó, directives có nghĩa là “chỉ thị.” Tuy nhiên, chúng ta cần hiểu bản chất khác biệt giữa regulations và directions, theo đó, regulations có tính áp dụng trực tiếp đối với các quốc gia thành viên, còn directives chỉ đặt ra mục tiêu và các nước tự triển khai.” < In Vietnamese, “regulations” means “quy định, quy chế” while “directives” is translated as “chỉ thị.” However, we need to understand the basic difference between two types of legal documents, that is regulations are directly applicable, while directives only set objectives and each country implements them on its own.>

“So in English terms, regulations are directly applicable, while directives require national implementation.”

St14 (Presenter 2): “Next, we discuss general principles of EU law, including fundamental rights, EU citizenship, and especially the principle of subsidiarity as another source of EU law.”

(Student switches deliberately to Vietnamese and pointed at the slide – Figure 1)

“Nguyên tắc phụ trợ – subsidiarity – nghĩa là EU chỉ hành động khi các quốc gia thành viên không thể tự giải quyết vấn đề thuộc thẩm quyền của mình một cách hiệu quả. Đây có thể coi là điểm rất quan trọng nhằm cân bằng quyền lực giữa EU và các nước thành viên.” <The principle of subsidiarity means that the EU only takes action when member states cannot effectively address an issue under their authority on their own. This is a very important mechanism for balancing power between the EU and its member states.>

“So the principle of subsidiarity ensures that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen and that the EU acts only when action of member states is insufficient.”

Extract 4. Context 4: Q&A section

St5: “In your group opinion, why is the principle of subsidiarity important for EU member states?”

St14: “Because it protects national autonomy, điều này có nghĩa là các nước không bị EU can thiệp vào những lĩnh vực họ hoàn toàn có thể tự xử lý

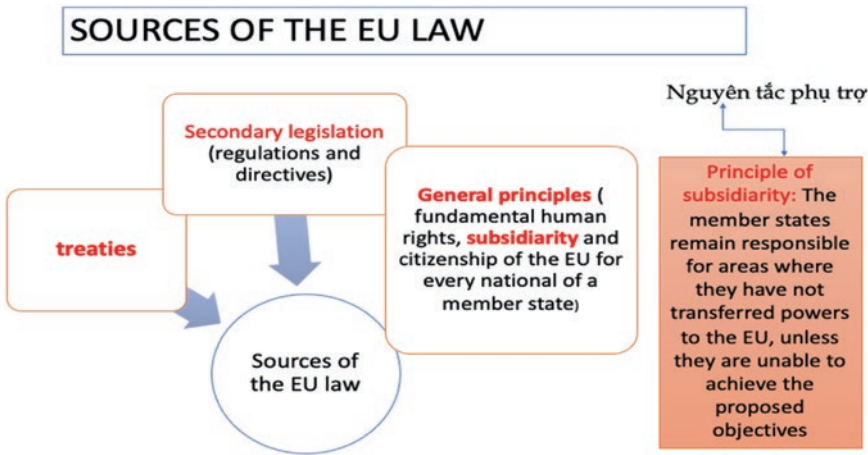


Figure 1. A microsoft powerpoint slide in Sts’ presentation on sources of EU law

<This means that countries are not subject to EU intervention in areas that they are fully capable of handling on their own.>. But at the same time, it allows EU intervention if coordinated action is needed.”

The translanguaging space in Extract 3 was further expanded into a multimodal space through the integration of spoken discourse and visual resources shown in PowerPoint slides. Such an episode represents a clear instance of planned translanguaging, in which St1 and St14 exercised their agency by intentionally designing moments of explanations in Vietnamese. Creativity was particularly evident in the students’ use of understandable concepts from the domestic legal system (i.e., “Constitution- Hiến pháp”), to unpack and interpret the hierarchy of EU law. Simultaneously, this practice demonstrated a strong sense of criticality toward monolingual policies because the students deliberately mobilized Vietnamese as a pedagogical scaffolding strategy to ensure inclusivity and support clearer knowledge communication, regardless of their diverse levels of English proficiency.

Extract 4 serves as an interactive continuation of the multimodal translanguaging space established in Extract 3. Whereas Extract 3 demonstrates planned translanguaging through the integration of visual resources, Extract 4 illustrates the student’s spontaneous mobilization of their linguistic repertoire in an authentic discussion setting. St14 continued to demonstrate her agency by strategically weaving Vietnamese into her response to clarify the abstract notion of national autonomy introduced in the earlier presentation. The connection between these two extracts confirms that translanguaging functions not only as a presentational aid but also as a flexible pedagogical scaffold that sustains the flow of meaning-making throughout in-depth discussions of EU law.

Extract 5. Context 5: Student’s presentation on Single Market of the European Union

Good morning everyone. Today, I will talk about the *Single Market* of the EU and its four fundamental Freedoms. The Single Market is basically an area with no internal borders. This means that within the EU, the free movement of goods, persons, services, and capital is guaranteed.

Firstly, free movement of persons allows EU citizens to move freely, live, and work anywhere within the EU. *Nói cách khác, tự do di chuyển về con người*

giúp công dân EU không cần xin phép để cư trú hay làm việc ở nước thành viên khác <In other words, “free movement of persons” allows EU citizens to reside and work in another member state without requiring any special permission and procedures>. The second fundamental of freedom is *free movement of goods*, meaning that goods can circulate in EU member states without customs checks, tariffs, or quotas. Third, in terms of service, similar to freedom of goods, service providers from one EU member state can offer services in another member state without having to relocate. Ở đây, mình dùng tiếng Việt để giải thích rõ hơn: tự do dịch chuyển về hàng hoá nghĩa là hàng hoá sản xuất tại một quốc gia thành viên được lưu thông tự do, không thuế quan, không rào cản phí thuế quan qua biên giới các nước EU khác, tạo thành một thị trường chung đơn nhất. Tương tự, tự do dịch chuyển về dịch vụ nghĩa là hàng hoá được doanh nghiệp cung cấp dịch vụ - ví dụ ngân hàng, luật sư, kỹ sư - có thể phục vụ khách hàng ở mọi nơi trong EU mà không cần mở văn phòng tại đó.” <I use Vietnamese for further explanation. Free movement of goods means that products manufactured in any Member State can circulate freely across the borders of other EU member states without customs duties or non-tariff barriers, thereby forming a single common market. Similarly, free movement of services refers to the situation that service providers such as banks, lawyers, and engineers, offer their services to clients anywhere in the EU without establishing representative office in that location>. And finally, free movement of capital eliminates restrictions on capital transfers between member states. You can see more clearly on the slide.”

Extract 5 reaffirms the pattern observed in Extract 3 by illustrating a notable case of planned translanguaging, in which the student strategically alternated between English and Vietnamese with the assistance of PowerPoint slides during an EMI law presentation. It can be noted that the student’s translanguaging practices served several pedagogical functions, among which was to scaffold disciplinary comprehension, in this case, the legal-economic concepts including “single market, free movement of goods, free movement of services.” As observed, the student resorted to Vietnamese explanations immediately after providing English definitions, enabling peers to anchor unfamiliar legal terminology onto existing conceptual knowledge. The consistent pattern—definition in English followed by elaboration in Vietnamese—makes evident that translanguaging was not spontaneous but carefully integrated into presentation planning. Moreover, the co-deployment of English and Vietnamese reflected a multimodal translanguaging space, created through the bilingual key terms on PowerPoint slides (Figure 2), signalling that the presenter had deliberately constructed a shared linguistic resource to support the audience’s comprehension. Interestingly, the case of fluid language use also substantiated the students’ broader optimal orientation toward translanguaging, in which multiple languages were viewed as complementary rather than interfering. In EMI law contexts, English was normally used for disciplinary legitimacy of providing definitions, quoting legal provisions to ensure the accuracy while Vietnamese was deployed for reasoning, example-giving, and contextualizing for clarity. The aforementioned functional differentiation suggested an awareness of the communicative affordances of each language, which supported the idea of students’ intentional exploitation of linguistic resources to achieve specific pedagogical purposes.

Furthermore, evidence from classroom observation which has portrayed that the positive reactions from peers, who nodded, took notes, and verbally confirmed understanding (e.g., *giống như dịch vụ xuyên biên giới* <like trans-national service, right?>), proves the fact that

Single market and four fundamental freedoms

Single market: area with no internal borders, in which the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital is ensured according to the provisions of the treaties (art. 26 TFEU)

- 1. Free movement of persons:** all EU citizens can move freely, reside and take up work within the EU area.
- 2. Free movement of goods:** goods are not subject to border controls, tariffs or quotas within the EU. This simplifies and promotes trade between member states.
- 3. Free movement of services:** service providers from a EU state are free to offer their services in any state of the EU single market even without settling there.
- 4. Free movement of capital:** restrictions on capital and payment transactions between states of the EU single market are prohibited.

- Single market: Thị trường đơn nhất
- Free movement of persons: Tự do dịch chuyển về con người
- Free movement of goods: Tự do dịch chuyển về hàng hoá
- Free movement of services: Tự do dịch chuyển về dịch vụ
- Free movements of capital: Tự do dịch chuyển về nguồn vốn

Figure 2. A powerpoint slide in Sts’ presentation on single market in EU

translanguaging could facilitate inclusive participation in multilingual groups with a variety of English proficiency.

Learners’ Perceptions on Translanguaging

Follow-up interviews with the participants revealed that they engaged in translanguaging to facilitate their comprehension of complex disciplinary terms and content through fluid use of two languages. Such translanguaging practice enabled them to connect unfamiliar terms, for example EU legal terms with prior knowledge from domestic law, which helped to enhance both conceptual clarity and retention.

“A huge number of legal terms in English is highly complex which makes me find it hard to understand if we only rely on English because legal systems vary from one country to another. Therefore, I often switch to Vietnamese to explain the term clearly or to check whether there is an equivalent term in Vietnamese law or not.” – St17

“Many legal terms are quite strange to me. Admittedly, when I translate or explain them into Vietnamese, I can check whether the meaning really fits the legal context or I misunderstand the concept.” – St12

“Using Vietnamese during group presentation not only strengthens my understanding of EU legal sources but also enhances my friends’ participation.” – St3

The interview exhibited notable reasons for students’ translanguaging practices depending on EMI lecturers’ in-class language policy.

“Some lecturers have the tendency to use or allow us to Vietnamese, especially when they realize that we met difficulty in comprehending the law content in English. Normally, Vietnamese is leveraged more in seminars than in lectures.” – St7

The above account of the translanguaging practices illustrated that teachers were generally willing to use L1 or encourage students to resort to L1 to help bridge the gaps between their English linguistic competence and their disciplinary literacy. In another dimension, students tended to seek their lecturers' consent before using L1, as the below demonstrates:

"In some situations, when we want to make questions or provide answers in Vietnamese, we often raise voices to ask our lecturer first. In most cases, we are allowed although some are a bit tolerant." – St10

The majority of the participants reported the support of L1 usage beside English as a way to value bilingual practices or translanguaging pedagogy in EMI classes. They claimed that in EMI, English is supposed to have a mediating role rather than a barrier to the main aim of disciplinary knowledge acquisition.

"Admittedly, in EMI lessons, I prefer being instructed by Vietnamese lecturers as when I find the content knowledge vague, my lecturers might use Vietnamese to help me understand. I do notice that the aim of acquiring law content prevails English in EMI course." – St17.

In this above excerpt, St17 emphasized the role of Vietnamese as a pedagogical scaffolding tool that significantly enhanced students' ability to comprehend disciplinary content, and at the same time underscored a crucial issue concerning lecturer preference. More specifically, students tended to favor Vietnamese instructors as they were more likely to leverage learners' L1 resources, thus resulting in more efficient comprehension of law content learning materials.

Learners also reported that the flexible shift between languages contributed to their greater confidence in the sense that they strengthened their capacity to articulate disciplinary knowledge. Such linguistic adaptability emerged as a valuable professional resource, which was reaffirmed in the follow-up students' response:

"I do think that leveraging multilingual abilities is a necessary skill in building professional relationships which helps me to bridge communication gaps between international and local clients, and even with international legal specialists especially in the globalized world." – St10

Despite the majority of learners' positive views on translanguaging, three of them held virtual position towards translanguaging, which means that they were opposed to using Vietnamese in their lessons or discussions in EMI classes. They believed that the exclusive use of English provided maximum exposure to disciplinary content, while simultaneously helping them develop their English proficiency. Those students were also concerned that allowing Vietnamese might lead to overreliance on L1 and undermined the purpose of EMI because in their view, maintaining an English-only environment ensured linguistic discipline, promoted fairness among students, and aligned with their expectations of an EMI course.

"I think that in EMI law courses, English is the only language used for lecturing, discussing. Using Vietnamese in EMI law courses ruins the purpose and the meaning of EMI." – St9

"I prefer English-only lecture because it pushes me to practice English. Moreover, full exposure to English helps me build competence in my legal

English field, thus preparing me better for future work in globalized labor market.” – St15

“Allowing Vietnamese usage sometimes interrupts the flow of the lectures, making the lessons become slower, and accordingly it creates unfairness for those who worked hard to reach a high level of English proficiency in comprehending the content.” – St11

In other cases, their adherence to English-only instruction in EMI law courses was partly due to their teachers’ exclusion of L1 in their classes as one participant reported:

“For lecturers who do not prefer to speak Vietnamese in classes, we do not make demands of asking them to explain the content or provide explanation in Vietnamese. We try to use English-only although sometimes we are naturally inclined to activate our L1 in searching information or generating knowledge.” – St16.

Undeniably, students’ use of other languages was limited in EMI classes, especially in case of their teachers’ strict rules of English-only presentations, discussions, and hand-outs. Yet, as St16 mentioned, EMI did not mean banning learners from using their L1 in the process of acquiring knowledge.

Discussion

Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Scaffold for Legal Content

The study’s findings reveal that translanguaging in EMI law classrooms is not a sign of linguistic deficiency, rather a sophisticated pedagogical scaffold. The participants engaged in both spontaneous and planned translanguaging to navigate the linguistic negotiation of complex legal content. This aligns with Wei’s (2018) translanguaging space framework, which posits that learners use their full linguistic repertoire to create a social space for meaning-making.

Specifically, Vietnamese usage for conceptual mediation during group discussions on remedies and contract law illustrates how students anchor abstract English legal terms such as “specific performance” or “rescission” into their existing conceptual frameworks. This fact mirrors the assertions of Dafouz and Smit (2020), who argue that the cultural and linguistic resources of EMI stakeholders should be leveraged rather than viewed as obstacles. While institutional policies often favor a monolingual orientation, the actual classroom practice shows a strategic disconnect, similar to Tri and Moskovsky’s (2021) study, where flexible language use is essential for reinforcing EMI efficiency.

Furthermore, the planned translanguaging observed in students’ presentations where PowerPoint slides featured bilingual terminology highlights a multimodal translanguaging space. By providing English terms followed by Vietnamese equivalents, students intentionally facilitated inclusive participation for peers with varying levels of English proficiency. Such practice contradicts the “English-only” ideology described by García (2009), which often frames such shifts as inappropriate. Instead, it supports Macaro et al.’s (2018) finding that strict monolingualism can inhibit understanding, whereas flexible approaches empower students to master specialized disciplinary language.

Optimal vs. Virtual Positions: Navigating Linguistic Ideologies

The second research question explored student perspectives, revealing a tension between the optimal position and the virtual position. The majority of participants exhibited positive

attitudes towards bi/multilingual practices, viewing Vietnamese as a necessary tool for cognitive load reduction and metalinguistic awareness. Such a sentiment echoes previous research in tertiary contexts indicating that L1 usage promotes engagement and facilitates the acquisition of content knowledge. For many students, translanguaging was seen as a way to bridge the gap between their linguistic competence and the complicated nature of legal language and content. The favor expressed for Vietnamese lecturers who provide L1 explanations suggests that students prioritize disciplinary knowledge acquisition over pure language immersion. This finding aligns with Li and Lin (2019), who emphasize that translanguaging promotes both subject knowledge and target language acquisition by acknowledging learners' diverse resources. Interestingly, students also viewed their bilingual ability as a professional asset for future employment in a globalized legal market, implying that translanguaging fosters a sense of readiness for navigating both local and international contexts. Conversely, a small minority of students held a virtual position, advocating for an English-only environment. Their concerns that L1 usage might lead to overreliance, or undermine the academic rigor of an EMI course reflect the dominant monolingual ideologies identified by Almayez (2022) and Fang and Liu (2020). These students acknowledged the exclusive use of English as a way to maintain linguistic discipline and maximize exposure to academic English. This perspective highlights the "top-down" pressure of English-only policies noted by Sahan et al. (2022), where the global dominance of English is often presumed to be an inevitable necessity.

Pedagogical Implications

The discussion of these findings underscores a critical need to move toward a multilingual orientation in EMI law settings. The research demonstrates that while "English-only" may be the stated institutional goal, translanguaging functions as a bridge that allows students to navigate the high cognitive demands of law. Moreover, the influence of the lecturer's stance on student language choice was evident. Students were more likely to activate their full linguistic repertoires when they perceived their instructors to be "tolerant" or in favor of optimal L1 usage. The results support Jenkins and Mauranen's (2019) call for flexible policies that legitimize the use of additional languages. Therefore, it is essential to provide professional development that enhances lecturers' understanding of translanguaging in EMI classrooms. Such training should be integrated into both pre-service and in-service teacher education, offering concrete examples drawn from empirical research on how diverse linguistic repertoires can be productively mobilized to support student learning. Developing a taxonomy of translanguaging functions and strategies may also help teachers recognise the pedagogical value of bi/multilingual practices and feel confident that these are legitimate features of EMI programs. Importantly, following Ferguson's (2003) view, the goal of these initiatives is not to enforce strict prescriptions, but to expand teachers' awareness so they can make informed pedagogical decisions regarding language use.

Furthermore, standing on the point of policy makers and course designers, it is crucial for them to acknowledge the gap between official EMI language policies and actual classroom practices, and to move toward more flexible policies that legitimize the use of languages beyond English (Jenkins & Mauranen, 2019). In other words, institutional language policies require reconsideration to explicitly acknowledge the pedagogical value of translanguaging in EMI programs, especially in law settings where numerous abstract legal terms and complex regulations exist. Drawing on Tsou's (2021) EMI policy framework, it is essential that higher education institutions develop formal guidelines that legitimize strategic translanguaging while safeguarding overall program quality. To maximise learning effectiveness, course structures should include explicit guidance on how translanguaging can be used to enhance legal

knowledge construction. Furthermore, EMI law curricula should be intentionally designed to embed translanguaging as a pedagogical resource rather than treating it as incidental practice. Such EMI curricula involve incorporating course materials to facilitate bilingual conceptual development as well as designing assessment tasks that allow students to use their linguistic resources strategically. Along with this, it is of great necessity that programs create structured activities for students to develop and apply their multilingual skills in professional law contexts.

For content lecturers, providing opportunities for “bilingual supportive scaffolding practices” (Doiz et al., 2013, p. 218) where the language versatility functions as a bridge to construct, acquire, and produce knowledge themselves is of crucial importance. In particular, in case of students’ limited English proficiency, enforcing a strict “English-only” approach grounded in linguistic purism (Lin, 2006) is likely to either result in oversimplified academic content or hinder students’ ability to acquire essential disciplinary knowledge. Therefore, translanguaging should not be viewed as an obstacle to academic achievement, rather as a supportive practice enabling a full access to learning. Such approaches may involve intentional incorporation of translanguaging practices in academic activities, including discussion of complex disciplinary concepts, integrating multilingual perspectives into case-study work, or drawing on students’ L1 resources to support conceptual clarity.

Conclusion

This study explores how a small group of law students practice translanguaging in their EMI law classes, the findings of which revealed that it was not common for students to use Vietnamese, yet when L1 was utilized, it served different pedagogical purposes, resulting in students’ deeper understanding. Contrastingly, the majority of the participants favored the optimal position, which underscores L1 linguistic resources in researching, acquiring, and delivering law content knowledge. Though this study was not carried out in a large scale, such results not only highlighted the necessity of raising lecturers’ awareness but also provided EMI staff with training and reflective exercises that promote translanguaging within critical multilingualism (Fang & Hu, 2022; Kirkgoz et al., 2023).

Although this research contributes meaningful insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small and confined to a small group of students from one higher education institution. The results, to some extent, were impossible to generalize or apply in other contexts. Future research engaging a larger group of participants pool from public and private institutions and multiple disciplinary areas would yield a more representative portrayal of translanguaging practices in EMI settings. Moreover, further investigations are needed to determine how translanguaging influences students’ academic achievement and language development within EMI programs.

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