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## ENGLISH AS LINGUA FRANCA: EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ON VIETNAMESE GRADUATE STUDENT LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

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Aim/Purpose	In this study, we explored the learning experiences of graduate students enrolled at Vietnamese-German University (VGU), a transnational collaborative university that uses English as the language for instruction that is primarily conducted by German faculty.
Background	Transnational education has gained in popularity across the globe, often with English serving as the common language, or lingua franca. However, English as lingua franca contributes to learning challenges as a result of English language dominance in academia.
Methodology	Case study methodology was used to examine the learning experiences of graduate students at Vietnamese-German University, with the institution as the case and 24 participants as the unit of analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face which allowed for rich data.
Contribution	Transnational education has gained significant attention in recent years, including how language may influence operations and motivations of institutions. However, few studies exist that examine English as lingua franca at transnational universities from the student perspective. The context of Vietnam is also important as Asia is a growing region for the establishment of transnational universities.

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Findings	Participants expressed that the primary reason they chose to attend VGU was because of its use of English as lingua franca. However, they experienced several challenges, particularly with technical jargon and an overall language barrier in the classroom. Participants navigated challenges with three strategies for learning: asking the professor questions, talking with peers, and using supplemental resources to understand unfamiliar concepts.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Results from this study include implications for instructors to better meet the needs of non-native English learners in the classroom, such as supporting peer engagement, group work, and engaging in pedagogical training.
Impact on Society	The findings from this study provides additional perspectives on how English as lingua franca allows for affordances and challenges for student learning at transnational universities in Vietnam. The results of this study could inform other transnational universities in Asia.
Future Research	Recommendations for future research include examining English as lingua franca from the perspectives of instructors. Additional suggestions include longitudinal studies on the outcomes of graduates' English language learning and how English language training contributed to their employment in the global sector.
Keywords	Vietnam, Germany, transnational education, English as lingua franca, student learning

## INTRODUCTION

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As a result of internationalization, increased use of English as the common language (lingua franca) of instruction has emerged in many institutions of higher education. Beyond the institutional-level, several governments, such as in Vietnam (Harman, Hayden, & Nghi, 2010), have developed strategic plans that support the increase of English as the language of instruction (Harman et al., 2010). English “now serves unchallenged as the main international academic language” (Altbach, 2016, p. 140), much of this is due to the emergence of English-speaking countries as “academic superpowers” (p. 141). English language dominance is supported by the growth of transnational education, which is defined as “study programs where learners are located in a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is based” (Wilkins, 2016, p. 3).

English as lingua franca is typically used by transnational universities to attract tuition-paying international students, increase institutional prestige, and develop the English language skills of staff as well as students (Ferguson, 2007). In doing so, institutions are contributing to the commodification of higher education within a global market-driven economy in a way to maintain English language dominance in academia. However, linguistic imperialism may cause challenges for students because “the spread of English...sometimes marginalizes nonnative speakers” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 169). As a result, English as lingua franca has led to a form of language hegemony in global higher education.

This movement may have educational ramifications for instructors and students at institutions that prioritize English language instruction. The dominance of English in non-native English-speaking countries can compound obstacles that students face as they learn in a second language, such as difficulties in communication and comprehension in student group work (Bjorkman, 2008). Yet, few studies have examined the impact of this trend on student experiences within those institutions that utilize English in instruction. Thus, we seek to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of graduate student learning at Vietnamese-German University (VGU), one of four collaborative transnational universities in Vietnam.

In this study, we explored the learning experiences of Vietnamese graduate students enrolled at Vietnamese-German University, a collaborative transnational university that uses English as the language of instruction. VGU serves as an important case as it is the first of three established institutions in the “New Model University Project” (The World Bank, 2018) in Vietnam. The New Model University Project, which was approved by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), intended to establish international research universities that relied on inter-governmental partnerships by the year 2020. VGU was founded as the very first transnational university in Vietnam as a part of the project; thus, this site serves as an important research case as it represents the first collaborative transnational university in Vietnam.

Although scholars have focused on the proliferation of transnational education (e.g., Knight, 2016; Kosmutzky & Putty, 2016; Wilkins, 2016), few studies have examined the influence of English language dominance on student learning at transnational universities. Thus, we ask, how are the educational experiences of graduate students at VGU influenced by the use of English as lingua franca? Understanding students’ communication challenges in this study will assist in understanding how English as the lingua franca relates to student learning and engagement, particularly in current global higher education markets.

In the next sections, we first provide an overview of relevant literature related to English as the instructional foundation for internationalization. We then provide an overview of our conceptual framework, which includes perspectives on transnational education and internationalizing the curriculum. Methodological approach and methods used for this study are addressed, and then findings from the case study are highlighted. We conclude our study with a discussion and implications for practice and future research.

## **ENGLISH AS LINGUA FRANCA: INSTRUCTIONAL FOUNDATION FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION**

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The use of English language as a mode of instruction in countries whose primary language is not English has been discussed at length (Altbach, 2016; Jenkins, 2014; Tsui, 2014; Tsuneyoshi, 2005) and under various monikers: World Englishes, English as an international language, English as a medium of instruction, English as a lingua franca, English as a foreign language, and English with a specific purpose. The various names and contexts of English instruction in countries where English as a foreign language has delayed the recognition of the significance of the topic (Jenkins, 2014). There are various definitions of English as lingua franca (ELF) (Bjorkman, 2008; Jenkins, 2014; Tsui, 2014), but for the purposes of this study, the definition provided by Jenkins (2014) is most appropriate: “ELF is defined as a contact language used only among non-mother tongue speakers” (p. 160). English as lingua franca contributes to the debate about the benefits and challenges of the use of English as a global language of instruction. Regardless which side of the debate one falls on, the trend has furthered the attempts of nations and institutions in efforts of internationalization and globalization (Altbach, 2016; Altbach, Reisburg, & Rumbley, 2010; Hu, 2004).

The use of ELF to bridge teachers and students via a common “contact” (Jenkins, 2014) or “vehicular” (Bjorkman, 2008) language is omnipresent across disciplines and nations (Bjorkman, 2008; Hu, 2004; Leibowitz, 2005; Tsuneyoshi, 2005). Altbach (2016) discussed the influence that English language instruction has had on various countries in Asia. He stated that “the influence of English language is both pervasive and subtle. It is not just a scientific language and the medium of instruction in a number of Asian nations; it also reflects a specific scientific culture” (p. 211). Many countries have implemented policies which encourage the adoption of English as the primary mode of instruction in higher education, encouraging adoption of English as lingua franca from high levels of government (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). In some nations, the change is beginning with higher education institutions as a way to entice English speakers to study abroad to their institutions, but also to

keep local students from choosing an alternate destination in order to obtain an English degree or develop their English language proficiency (Tsuneyoshi, 2005).

Other concerns that many educators, and even stakeholders, have about this trend is how to meet the needs of ELF learners when English is not the primary language for students. Some opponents of English as lingua franca argue that the use of ELF results in low academic achievement (Leibowitz, 2005). There has been some evidence in the context of Vietnamese universities that would suggest that current efforts to implement English language teaching to assist students with workforce requirements are lacking, and leave students unable to achieve the language proficiency required (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). Some of the areas that Nguyen and Pham (2016) identified as challenges for Vietnamese students are issues such as “lack of vocabulary” (p. 155) or the reliance on dictionary use, or deficiencies in “reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills” (p. 156). Leibowitz (2005) expressed hesitation to place the teaching and learning in a second language as wholly responsible for the lack of student success because there has not been a comprehensive examination of the issue. She argued, rather, that while evidence may demonstrate the deficit of learning in a second language, school conditions and location are critical factors in student writing proficiency in English as lingua franca.

The issues that are found in the literature reach beyond the classroom environment and extend to challenges related to social interactions with their peers. Often, in these environments, students find themselves surrounded by peers who also lack English language proficiency. As a result, students do not use the opportunity during social encounters or study groups to practice their English language skills, but rather revert to their primary language (Leibowitz, 2005; Tsui, 2014). The study by Tsui (2014) highlighted the implications that institutional use of English as a lingua franca can permeate student life beyond the classroom, and can also impact social and cultural interactions they have with their peers and their faculty members.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONALIZING THE CURRICULUM**

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Transnational education refers to “the mobility of an education program or higher education institution (HEI)/provider between countries” (Knight, 2016, p. 36). Transnational universities are collaborations between foreign and host countries, which in this particular case are Germany and Vietnam. These educational collaborations between countries can take multiple forms, including twinning programs, joint degree programs, and branch campuses (Knight, 2016). In addition, transnational education can be either collaborative, which is a partnership between a foreign and a local institution of higher education, or independent in its establishment (Knight, 2016). The independent category, which includes branch campuses, refers to foreign institutions establishing and delivering academic programs in a host country without a formal partnership.

In this particular case, VGU was established as a collaborative transnational institution that offers joint degree programs from German institutional partners. The joint degree program classification is a “collaboration between all partners in the design and delivery of curriculum and program” (Knight, 2016, p. 39). Commonly known hubs for transnational education include Saudi Arabia (e.g., Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2011; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012) and China (e.g., Fang, 2012; Fang & Wang, 2014); however, East and Southeast Asia are emerging as major hubs as many students who consider transnational higher education are predominantly located in growing economic areas, such as Singapore and Malaysia (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011). VGU was formed as the first of three transnational universities in the “New Model University Project” (The World Bank, 2018), in an attempt for Vietnam to establish strong academic partnerships and provide effective academic training for students.

Students at VGU were attracted to the institution because of student-centered teaching practices and low cost for an international degree (Yao & Garcia, 2018). However, the top priority that motivated

student choice for VGU was the use of English as the language of instruction. As a result, the participants reported that they anticipated higher paying and global employment opportunities after graduation (Yao & Garcia, 2018). Thus, students expected that the curriculum and programmatic offerings at VGU would provide more employment opportunities in the global market, particularly in their development of soft skills for employability (Yao & Tuliao, 2019).

In considering student learning and curriculum at transnational universities, there is a false assumption that transnational education will automatically provide learning outcomes such as international perspectives and intercultural competence (Leask, 2015). The curriculum, as well as instruction in English, must be established in a purposeful way that is “inclusive of learning and teaching and a component of both the formal and informal curriculum” (Leask, 2015, p. 9). In an effort to address internationalization of teaching and learning, Leask (2015) created a conceptual framework for internationalization of the curriculum that is intended to assist in preparing students for “life in a globalized world” (p. 26).

The conceptual framework (Leask, 2015) includes multiple components that center on disciplinary knowledge. The bottom of the framework, which focuses on contextual factors affecting the curriculum, is most relevant to this current study as it includes factors such as institutional, local, national, and global contexts. The multiple contexts engage with each other, which results in the creation of “a complex set of conditions influencing the design of an internationalized curriculum” (Leask, 2015, p. 27). In this particular study, we reflect on the roles of institutional, national, and global contexts on English as lingua franca at a collaborative transnational university. This study is of importance because few studies have examined the influence of English language dominance on student learning at transnational universities in Vietnam, with an emphasis on institutional, national, and global factors that may contribute to student learning.

## METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

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We utilized qualitative research methods by conducting a case study (Yin, 2014) at a single site institution. VGU served as the case and unit of analysis. The findings for this paper emerged from a larger study in which we questioned: what are graduate students’ academic experiences at Vietnamese-German University? As we reviewed and analyzed findings, participants’ experiences centered on the use of English as the operating language for their coursework. These experiences led us to question how English as lingua franca influenced the learning experiences of our participants, which resulted in the findings and implications in this current study.

### *CASE DESCRIPTION: VIETNAMESE-GERMAN UNIVERSITY*

Vietnamese-German University, a public university, is the first of three collaborative transnational universities in Vietnam, with two additional institutions currently operating as partnerships with France and Japan. Located near Ho Chi Minh City in the southern region of Vietnam, VGU was founded in 2008 as a result of an agreement between the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and the Hessen State Ministry of Higher Education, Research and the Arts (HMWK). Currently, VGU includes collaboration with additional German states. The German organizational partnership, known as the VGU-Consortium, is made up by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and the Arts Baden-Wuerttemberg (MWK), and the World University Service (WUS). The goal and vision of VGU and its consortium are to become the leading technological research institution in Vietnam.

Course instruction is conducted primarily by “flying faculty” from 36 German partner universities. Flying faculty get their name from flying into Vietnam and teaching one course in two-week blocks. Some permanent faculty, who are Vietnamese nationals, do teach some courses although instruction is primarily conducted by German faculty. VGU promises students “a unique learning environment”

(Vietnamese-German University, 2018b) that is grounded in the curriculum which follows their German partner universities. Also, VGU encourages “creative learning” (Vietnamese-German University, 2018a) through collaboration, hands-on experiences, and intellectual stimulation rather than direction.

All instruction and professional communication at VGU is conducted in English, which requires language fluency from all instructors, administrators, and students. VGU’s website described its use of English as the language of instruction by asserting “VGU provides students with excellent language skills necessary for a career on the local and international job-market” (Vietnamese-German University, 2016). The values outlined by VGU state, “We are part of the global scientific community. Therefore, English is the instructional and working language” (Vietnamese-German University, 2018a). The use of English as the working language at VGU is used to exemplify the internationalized environment and to build the confidence of its students for future international careers and research. Similar to VGU, the other two collaborative transnational universities in Vietnam also utilize English as its primary language of instruction.

In 2015, which was the time of this study, VGU enrolled approximately 1,000 students in predominantly technology and engineering majors for undergraduate and graduate students. At that time, six full-time graduate programs were offered: Mechatronics and Sensor Systems Technology, Sustainable Urban Development, Business Information Systems, Computational Engineering, Traffic and Transport, and Global Production Engineering and Management. The facilities at VGU included 12 research and education laboratories for two undergraduate and two graduate programs offered at the university. Graduates receive degrees that are conferred by the German partner universities associated with their degree program. Currently, VGU issues confirmation certificates of students’ graduation, with future plans of VGU conferring joint degrees in collaboration with German universities.

### *DATA COLLECTION*

Selection of participants was a result of purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009). Given the nature of VGU as a transnational university that used English as its primary language of instruction, students within VGU were selected for what they could reveal about the phenomenon. After recruitment emails were sent by administrative staff to approximately 375 graduate students at VGU, 24 graduate students agreed to participate. Nine participants identified as women and 18 were first-year master’s students. The students were from various academic programs at the institution and included first-year, second-year, and graduated students (see Table 1). Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms as a way to avoid naming and misrepresenting participants through the researchers’ Western, U.S.-based lenses which may result in defaulting to “Anglicizing a person’s ethnically identifiable name” (Hurst, 2008, p. 345). Naming participants is “an act of power” (Guenther, 2009, p. 412); thus, participant-selected pseudonyms have been used in prior research as a way to balance the power between the researcher and the participant (Dearnley, 2005; Guenther, 2009; Morrow & Smith, 1995) and to practice an ethic of care that avoids paternalistic naming (Moore, 2012).

The first author traveled to Vietnamese-German University in the spring of 2015 and conducted semi-structured interviews (Glesne, 2010) in which participants reflected on their graduate programs and future career goals. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in English. The interviews included pre-formulated questions such as, “why were you interested in being instructed in English by mostly German professors?” and “what did you anticipate as being the benefits of English instruction? Challenges?” The face-to-face setting of the interviews allowed for building rapport and for additional follow-up questions to come up as participants shared their individual stories.

Because of our participants’ broad range of interests and experiences, we were able to collect rich data. The richness from the interviews is characterized by situating the complexities of participants’

personal experiences within the contexts of place and time within their respective graduate programs (Given, 2008), which has contributed to the trustworthiness of the data collected (Glesne, 2010). In addition to participant interviews as our primary data source, we also utilized the VGU institutional website to supplement information provided by professional contacts at the institution in order to further our contextual understanding of VGU.

**Table 1. Participant demographics and program information**

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	YEAR	PROGRAM
Fat Ray	Male	2	Global Production Engineering and Management
Melissa	Female	1	Sustainable Urban Development
Tony	Male	2	Computational Engineering
Steve	Male	1	Mechatronics and Sensors Tech.
Seven	Male	1	Mechatronics and Sensors Tech.
Grace	Female	2	Computational Engineering
Simon	Male	1	Global Production Engineering and Management
Bi	Male	1	Computational Engineering
John	Male	1	Sustainable Urban Development
Mushroom	Female	2	Sustainable Urban Development
Matthew	Male	1	Global Production Engineering and Management
Danny	Female	1	Global Production Engineering and Management
Tran	Female	1	Computational Engineering
Mr. C.	Male	1	Computational Engineering
Jenny	Female	1	Global Production Engineering and Management
Alan	Male	1	Global Production Engineering and Management
Bong	Male	1	Traffic and Transport
Anna	Female	2	Traffic and Transport
Cat	Female	1	Traffic and Transport
Thanh	Female	graduate	Traffic and Transport
Nguyen	Male	1	Global Production Engineering and Management
Harry	Male	1	Mechatronics and Sensors Tech.
Kane	Male	1	Global Production Engineering and Management
Joshua	Male	1	Global Production Engineering and Management

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

Coding and analysis were conducted by a team of five researchers. We started with deductive coding, which included a “start list” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña 2013, p. 81) based on this study’s interview protocol and conceptual framework. We first searched for broad categories and then developed

themes that stemmed from the participants' experiences. Themes were coded by identifying appropriate phrases that related to our themes. Themes included "benefits of English instruction," "challenges of learning from German faculty," "interest in learning from German faculty," "effective teaching," and "professional goals," among others related to participants' learning experiences.

After concluding first cycle coding, we moved on to second cycle coding to refine themes. We organized the first cycle codes by clustering them under common themes or patterns that emerged from the interviews. This was an iterative process of reflecting and clustering codes into code categories until we felt the final codes were representative of the participants' experiences. The final codes are reflected in our findings section, and they include challenges with technical jargon, difficulties with learning in English, asking professors for help, peer engagement, and use of supplemental materials.

### ***TRUSTWORTHINESS AND VALIDITY***

Given the nature and the length of the interviews, we were able to collect rich data and use thick description, which has increased the trustworthiness of the data (Glesne, 2010). In addition, we had multiple data sources and multiple researchers, which is an effective strategy for triangulation of data (Merriam, 2009). For instance, participants referred to scholarship opportunities through industry partners with VGU, and we were able to gain further insight to these opportunities using the institutional website and professional contacts at the institution. We also conferred with international higher education scholars regarding our study topic, the nature of our study, and the process by which we collected our data. In sharing our findings with peers, we were able to confirm that our "tentative interpretations" (Merriam, 2009, p. 31) were appropriate and congruent with the themes that we identified from our findings.

### ***RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY***

When conducting transnational research, the researchers must reflect upon their own lenses and how they are positioned with and/or against the participants and the data (Yao & Vital, 2018). As the researchers, we were aware that our positionality affected how we made meaning of participants' worldviews. The first author, who traveled to VGU to conduct the interviews, identifies as an U.S.-born first-generation Chinese-American whose primary language is English. This author had traveled to Vietnam for a previous study tour while in her doctoral program and recognizes the privileges and benefits of her U.S. citizenship when conducting this research project. Her position as a U.S.-trained researcher provided access and acceptance by her participants and the research site. She benefitted from the outsider status as a Western scholar, and at the same time, also benefitted as an insider who had prior experience in Vietnam. The second author identifies as a multiracial, Mexican and White woman whose primary language is English. Having one parent that immigrated to the U.S., she is sensitive to cultural differences and recognizes aspects of her privileged background that may shape her bias and perspective. The third author identifies as a U.S.-born Caucasian woman currently living abroad in China. Although living in China for over two years, the third author only has beginning level language skills in Mandarin Chinese. Having spent the last five-years living abroad (in Western Europe and currently China), she is cognizant of ethnic and cultural differences and recognizes that facets of her experiences and training may frame her viewpoint and bias.

As the researchers, we recognize that our own personal experiences and understandings of the world affect our engagement with participants and analysis of data. We continuously engaged in reflexive practices when we would meet to discuss the data analysis and subsequent writing of the findings. Our lenses are very much from the perspective of Western-trained academics, and as a result, our approach to the analysis could be from a structured analytical lens based on our academic training. We do not claim to have conducted interviews and/or analyzed data with no bias, which is impossible given the nature of human interactions. However, through our discussions and continuous engagement with the data, we believe we made our best efforts to present the findings in a manner that was consistent with the words and meanings of our participants.



## FINDINGS

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Participants' perceptions of the importance of English in a global economy reflected the literature on globalization. All participants expressed that the primary reason they chose to attend VGU was because of its use of English as lingua franca. Danny explained that "when you learn by English you can talk English and communicate easier in English," which was important because "English is a popular language in the world." The participants recognized the value of English as lingua franca in the increasingly global economy; thus, students viewed attending VGU as a tool for obtaining a sustainable career. Possessing strong English language skills was important in terms of simply having the ability to speak in an additional language, but was also critically important to participants in terms of their increased employability in a global economy. Alan explained that "employers now they want people who can speak English, that's a trend around the world." Yet as our participants spoke positively of their engagement in a learning environment grounded in English, they also experienced some notable challenges, which have important educational implications.

### *CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH AS LINGUA FRANCA*

Although students wanted to improve their English-speaking abilities, the actual experience of learning in an additional language was not a simple task. Many of the participants found that learning entirely in English presented some challenges in terms of lecture comprehension. Even after months of intense preparation for her OnScreen language test certificate needed to enter the program, Cat still experienced difficulties understanding her course lectures, noting that she usually understood "only 30%" of her lectures. When Bi was asked about his lecture comprehension, he laughed replying, "I just understand around 40-60% of what professor teach to us."

Notably, challenges with learning at VGU were not as salient for participants who had stronger English language skills. Kane and Matthew for instance, both began learning English in elementary school. Kane also attended VGU for his bachelor's degree while Matthew attended the VGU campus in Frankfurt for his bachelor's degree. However, for others that did not have similar levels of English language exposure, learning in an all English-speaking environment was difficult. This dynamic was compounded by two additional issues—the use of technical jargon and the reality that English was not the primary language spoken by most of their German professors.

### *TECHNICAL JARGON*

The use of technical or field related jargon was challenging because they were not terms the students typically heard while learning English. John reflected that using English in the classroom was difficult because of "all the vocabulary and specify [sic] words" that they used in the major. He added, "so this program I deal with knowledge in different major, architecture, environment, law, economics, there are a lot so sometimes I don't understand." Melissa expressed that "sustainable urban development is so quite large." Because she did not have experience in the field and with the terminology, she felt the class was "really difficult to follow."

The challenges of technical jargon in the classroom were compounded by students' uneasiness with their English language skills as well as educational cultural norms of teacher-centered instruction in Vietnam. When asked about their comfort with asking questions in class, several students, such as Mr. C, did not feel comfortable doing so. He explained, "I hesitate to ask them because I wonder is it a silly question and I find it difficult to ask [the] professor." For some participants, their aversion to asking questions stemmed from their discomfort with their English language skills. For others, at least initially when attending VGU, some were hesitant to ask questions because asking the professor a question during class was not the norm in Vietnamese education. Danny described, "I rarely ask the teacher in the class. You can ask the teacher behind the class, after the class hour, but in the class it's strange." Instead Danny "would ask my colleague, my classmates." Like Danny, Cat also explained

that she more often asked other students in her class or friends questions because “in Vietnam we are very shy...so sometime you so scared if you have to contact with a professor to ask something.”

### ***LANGUAGE BARRIER***

English was not the primary language spoken by our participants, which was difficult enough, but it was also not the primary language of most of the professors, who were predominantly German natives. Bong highlighted the intricacies of English as lingua franca by explaining that the professors had to “translate their minds into English to teach us and then we have to convert from English to Vietnamese to understand.” Furthermore, Bong noted, “sometimes the lecturers, they only know the word in German, but they don’t know the word in English.” Simon noted that the fact that the professors came “from many countries in the world, not England,” presented challenges because “sometimes I cannot hear anything.” Simon’s difficulty deciphering what his professors were saying was also something that Mushroom experienced. She noted that because the professors were “not English professor or American professor, they are German so they also have the mistake in English.” She further asserted that if there was something she could improve in the program it would be that, “some professor is not good at language, English.” She added that the professors recognized this and were apologetic about it to the class.

Though most of the professors at VGU were German, there were also some visiting professors from other countries, which also resulted in some difficulties for students. Alan explained that in studying the English language, students became accustomed “to the British, American accents, sometimes Australian, but all of them are standard.” However, the instructors “come from Egypt, from Italy, from very remote countries, and their accents are really really difficult for us to catch.” Alan further described that no one in the class said anything to the professors about their accents, but “just asked him to speak a little bit more slowly.” Alan reflected that guessing what professors said was common and that, “we can guess about up to a half of what he was saying.” Alan noted, “that’s a problem” and if this issue did not exist, it would be easier “to absorb the lesson.”

Although the challenge of learning in an additional language was compounded by the need to decipher what the professors were trying to communicate, Nguyen found benefit in this dynamic. He thought it was advantageous to hear many accents because when working with international companies in the future, “you will meet many people from many different nations.” In this regard, being exposed to different accents could actually serve as a resource for the students in future careers. There were other benefits from learning in English that made the work worth it. Primarily these included the opportunity to learn the English language and increase their confidence speaking in English as well as becoming stronger candidates for employment in a global market. As a result, participants shared their processes for navigating the challenges of English as lingua franca at VGU.

### ***NAVIGATING CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH AS LINGUA FRANCA***

Students navigated the obstacles of English as lingua franca in three essential ways: asking the professor questions, talking with peers, and using supplemental resources to understand unfamiliar concepts. Although the previous section included students’ hesitancy to ask professor questions, several participants stated that they did choose to ask questions and as a result, the communication with professors assisted in participants’ navigation of the language challenges.

#### **Asking the professor questions**

Several of the participants asked professors questions or to repeat or rephrase content when they did not understand. Bong said that when there were things he did not understand, he felt comfortable raising his hand and asking, “can you explain more about” or “can you repeat?” Harry also asked for repetition, and this helped him to “mostly understand, but I still have to looking [sic] at another material to fully understand what they are trying to explain.” Joshua understood a significant portion of the lecture—about 95% in fact—however, for the remainder he noted, “I raise my hand and ask why,

what's this and what's that. Or sometime the professor explains not clearly, after the class I will come to ask him or her about the problem.” Joshua always sat in the front of the class, which he believed made it “easier to interpret communication with [the] professor.” Similar to Joshua's preference to sit in the front of the classroom for ease in addressing the professor, Simon thought that having a smaller class size also helped. He explained, “in my class, 30 students, I think it's good...I remember in November 2014 in the class we have nearly 60 students so too many. I couldn't ask anything about what I didn't understand so I think this is a bad thing.”

An important dimension of this strategy for students, particularly considering the cultural norms of not asking questions in Vietnamese education, was being encouraged by professors to ask questions. John said that the majority of his professors were “welcome to answer our questions and they care much about us. They want to know how I feel with the lecture, at what point I didn't understand.” He further noted that they often sent the lecture material to the students, which was also helpful. Jenny noted that they were usually encouraged by professors to raise their hands. She reflected, “the lecturer and the teacher let me directly ask immediately when we don't understand so we can raise hands and ask, ‘excuse me professor can you explain again?’” This helpfulness was also highlighted in Fat Ray's response, who explained that at the beginning of his program, “I was shy...But after that I fail so much, so my mentor and my coordinator he gave me the advice said you should ask until you understand.”

### **Engaging with peers**

Some students expressed their preference to ask their peers for help before asking their instructors to clarify. Sometimes as Alan described, this started as simple as commiserating in a lack of understanding with peers. These discussions often resulted in asking particular questions about content or sharing class notes. Bi explained that he had a challenging time balancing between copying down notes from the board and trying to listen and understand what the professor was trying to say. When he first began at VGU, Bi tried to study alone and found that his “result is not good, guess around 60% of this exam.” Bi learned that when he studied with his classmates “I get higher result.” He reasoned that this was because in a given lecture there may be ten topics and while Bi may “understand three and my friend—my classmate understand another three and we get together and we understand six.” Being able to bring together their understanding was critical to Bi's success. Similarly, Seven noted that working together helped to fill in the gaps because “maybe I get a little bit and this guy get a little bit, and this guy get a little bit and we can exchange something.” Being able to bring together individual prior knowledge increased their ability to understand the lecture.

While many participants found working in groups both in and outside of class to be an asset in understanding course content, this presented a problem when the students used their native language as opposed to English. Since most of the students at VGU were Vietnamese, using their primary language meant they spoke Vietnamese. This was difficult for international students such as Fat Ray and Steve, who did not speak Vietnamese. Fat Ray, for example, said that when working in groups in class, the students often felt pressure to speak quickly, so they often used Vietnamese. Fat Ray reflected that they will begin the group saying “ok let's discuss in English, but after two or three minutes they give up. But you know at that moment I cannot participate with them together. I feel like I have no contribution.” Steve noted this was an issue as well. While he understood that speaking in Vietnamese was helpful to the other students, he added “I think it's an opportunity for them to be open to this culture, English culture and to the language...I think it's an opportunity they are missing.”

### **Supplemental resources**

One resource that students found useful to better understand course lectures was recording the lecture and listening to it later. Melissa explained that this helped to combat challenges in language comprehension and the need to ask professors to repeat and explain things. She explained that stu-

dents often adopted this strategy by having one person record the session and then “share with everybody.”

Another approach the students used to understand course content was by looking things up or conducting web searches for concepts they were unfamiliar with. For example, Bi explained that he did not understand the professors, he would “write down a key word and search this on Google.” Matthew echoed the importance of this resource noting, “if we do not understand when they are speaking, we will consider about the material and we will ask Google or Wikipedia.” In this light, it was helpful when professors provided lecture notes ahead of time and students were able to review any unfamiliar terms before class. Harry thought that having the material ahead of time gave the students the opportunity to do more “digging...into the subject or problem they provid[e] us during our lecture.” He also thought this was beneficial because it gave students time to “prepare some questions” to ask in class.

## DISCUSSION

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As indicated by the findings from this study, graduate students in Vietnam desire English as the language of instruction because it provides additional opportunities for them in future employment. However, the actual reality of challenges with learning technical content in a non-native language proved to be difficult for most students. Specifically, many students indicated that they understood only a small percentage of the lectures given by their instructors with different dialects. For example, Cat and Nguyen shared that they both understood only about 30% of the communication from their instructors, which is alarming given the technicality and specificity of their academic disciplines. The lack of content comprehension mirror Nguyen and Pham’s (2016) study that found students were unable to achieve the language proficiency required in the workforce. Thus, the issue of participants’ preparation for entering the global STEM workforce becomes an important consideration for institutional and governmental leaders when planning curriculum and training instructors. Specifically, the interconnectedness of institutional priorities and global contexts must be strategically considered when internationalization the curriculum (Leask, 2015) at a transnational university.

Several of the learning challenges experienced by participants were connected to the fact that most of their instructors were also non-native English language speakers. For example, Mushroom and Alan shared that some instructors may know some technical words in German but not in English. Thus, this sometimes made it difficult for the students to follow. In addition, the German faculty spoke English with a German accent which was unfamiliar to many participants who were used to U.S. or British English accents. Yet despite these challenges, many students felt empowered by their instructors to ask clarifying questions.

Many participants shared that they would ask professors questions while in class to fill in some of the gaps. For example, Joshua shared that he often sat in the front of the classroom and felt comfortable raising his hand and asking questions. However, several participants stated that they felt some discomfort asking questions because it is not the cultural norm in Vietnamese classrooms. Learning in Vietnam typically followed a Confucian model of teacher-centered approaches (Harman & Bich, 2010; Thanh, 2010; Tran, 2012), in which teachers bank knowledge in passive learners. Thus, active participation was not necessarily encouraged in prior educational settings in Vietnam.

Students that did raise their hands, such as Cat and Jenny, stated that they were encouraged by their faculty to ask questions. Also, John shared that his instructors would send lecture materials to the students prior to class or immediately following a class session. Thus, participants indicated that their instructors played a significant role in their classroom engagement while learning in a non-native language.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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The experiences shared by participants indicate that instructors were critical to student learning and success. As a result, some implications for practice include providing training for faculty employed at transnational universities. Training should include tips on navigating language barriers, which would perhaps include more written text on presentation materials or utilizing technology in the classroom to bridge the language gap, especially related to technical jargon. In addition, faculty must take in consideration how they can better communicate difficult STEM concepts in innovative ways, particularly because disciplinary knowledge is at the heart of the curriculum (Leask, 2015). Perhaps the flipped classroom model could be effective, as illustrated by Harry and Matthew's experiences. For example, faculty could share presentation slides and other resources prior to the actual class session and then utilize the class time for question and answer as well as problem-based work. In this flipped setting, instructors would facilitate added engagement from students and apply disciplinary concepts and theories into practical classroom work.

In addition to the role of their instructor, many participants discussed the importance of group work and increased peer engagement. For example, Bi specifically stated that his grades improved after engaging in peer study groups because he and the other students were able to fill in any blank spots from their inability to understand the professor during the class lecture. However, the challenges of peer learning included how some students would revert to their native language when in a larger group of peers. This finding supports other studies, including Leibowitz (2005) and Tsui (2014), that found students tended to utilize their main language during social encounters or study groups. This caused some issues for some non-Vietnamese students, as indicated by Fat Ray and Steve, who could not participate in group discussions in Vietnamese.

Recommendations to promote peer learning include facilitating group work in transnational classrooms. In doing so, the instructors can encourage collaborative learning to understand and apply complex topics. In addition, providing instructions on expectations of how to work in a collaborative group would benefit students and has the potential to emphasize the use of English in group communication. Collaborative learning and group work could be powerful opportunities for navigating English as lingua franca and provide real world experience as a model for future employment in global work settings (Yao & Collins, 2018).

Despite the challenges of English as lingua franca, students continually espoused the importance of engaging and learning in English as a way to contribute to the global economy. As Danny and Alan stated, many participants felt that English language skills are a necessary component for employability in the work force. Participants' perspectives on the importance of English is supported by the priorities outlined by the Vietnamese government (Harman et al., 2010) to increase English as the language of instruction. Also, many participants shared that their decision to attend VGU was to be able to get an internationally-focused degree without having to leave Vietnam. Students' justifications for attending VGU fit within Tsuneyoshi's (2005) statement that countries implement English language instruction policies as a way to keep local students from choosing alternate destinations to improve their English language proficiency. Thus, the experiences of student learners, as indicated by this current study, is a critical component of understanding and implementing English as lingua franca.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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As with all research studies, limitations to this study do exist. One limitation of this study is that we were unable to address the nuance of non-native English-speaking teachers who taught non-native English-speaking students in English. The dynamics of English instruction could be further explored in future research by examining the perspective of the instructors. For example, how do the instructors navigate teaching a highly technical curriculum in a learned additional language to students whose primary language is not English? Also, how do international instructors design their courses

for teaching Vietnamese students, who also may not identify as native English speakers? Deeper exploration from the instructors' perspectives could provide valuable insights on the use of English at transnational universities.

Another limitation is the small scale of this study, which was located at one single site and included 24 participants. As a result of this single case study, findings are not easily generalizable, yet generalizability is never the goal of qualitative research. Rather, we believe the findings may be relevant to other transnational campuses in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, but only after taking cultural, political, and societal contexts into consideration. In addition, although 24 participants appear to be a small percentage of the overall student population, we did reach saturation of information, which is the point at which the interviewer hears the same or similar information from participants (Seidman, 2013).

Additional future directions could include expanding the study further by developing student-focused research in the form of a longitudinal study that examines graduate's experiences in the global workforce. Specifically, future research could evaluate whether the employability students seek to gain through honing their English skills is in fact achieved. Research questions regarding their perceptions as current working professionals could bring insight to how effectively curricula using English as lingua franca are in helping VGU students prepare for the global workforce.

The use of VGU as a case study also provides additional opportunities for taking this study to other collaborative transnational universities within and outside of Vietnam. Examining the influence of English language on student learning at other institutions and countries may further develop the understanding of the use of English as a lingua franca. The cultivation of this topic has implications across disciplines and can serve as a basis for future study of other transnational higher education campuses.

## CONCLUSION

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As transnational institutions continue to respond to the commodification of higher education and adopt English as lingua franca as a way to recruit students, they must also continue to consider ways this decision affects students' learning and overall experience. Participants in this study emphasized the usefulness of English language skills while also discussing the inherent challenges associated with learning in a language outside of their primary one, particularly in STEM fields where the technical jargon is not commonly part of English language learning. Our findings show that attention to language dynamics must be attended to by instructors as well as institutions. While there are a number of instructional practices instructors can implement to better support students' learning, institutions must also be more intentional in providing these opportunities and rewarding instructors that use these in their instruction.

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