

The IELTS Ceiling in EMI: Washback, Instrumental Motivation, and Sustained Idle among Non-English-Majors

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Abstract - *Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) is frequently positioned to extend learner autonomy, particularly in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) contexts where students use English to access disciplinary knowledge. However, students' engagement with IDLE may be shaped by the perceived utility of English after institutional benchmarks are met. This qualitative case study examines how non-English-major students at a Vietnamese EMI university construe English learning and IDLE after achieving a proficiency threshold in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). An initial screening survey of 182 students was used to identify potential interview participants who had met the institutional English requirement, continued to regard English as important, but reported limited current investment in deliberate English learning. The primary qualitative data consisted of semi-structured interviews with nine students who met the screening criteria and two EMI lecturers. The findings reveal that while students did not cease using English, their deliberate language-learning investment shifted. Specifically, some participants interpreted IELTS certification as a point of sufficient English for their immediate purposes, after which further learning was postponed, selectively pursued, or reclassified as content study. This study conceptualises this pattern as the "IELTS Ceiling," a possible post-threshold washback process in which some learners interpret achieving the required IELTS score as the completion of English learning. The conclusion emphasises that passing a proficiency benchmark does not guarantee sustained academic literacy. The study offers implications for EMI curriculum design and assessment practices that position English as an ongoing academic and professional resource.*

Keywords - EMI, IDLE, IELTS, Instrumental Motivation, Learner Agency, Washback.

I. INTRODUCTION

English-Medium Instruction (EMI) has expanded globally to internationalise curricula and enhance graduate employability. EMI involves complex relationships among language proficiency, content learning, and stakeholder expectations (Macaro et al., 2018). In Vietnam and similar contexts where English is a foreign language (EFL), EMI readiness is frequently operationalised through benchmarks like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

Achieving a threshold score (e.g., B2 on the CEFR) is treated as evidence of linguistic preparedness. Yet, passing a benchmark does not equate to EMI academic literacy preparedness. Academic literacy encompasses discipline-specific practices that cannot be fully reduced to general language proficiency (Wingate, 2015). For non-English-major students, English may be perceived primarily as an entry requirement rather than an ongoing disciplinary resource.

This study investigates a pedagogical puzzle: many students who achieved IELTS/B2-level proficiency reported limited current investment in continued English learning or Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE)

after entering university. The question is why English remains highly valued in their future-oriented beliefs while becoming less investable in their present practices. We conceptualise this pattern as the “IELTS Ceiling,” a possible post-threshold washback process in which achieving an IELTS/B2 requirement is interpreted by some learners as evidence that their English is sufficient for immediate purposes.

Students may continue using English in EMI contexts but drastically reduce deliberate learning investment, deferring it until future high-stakes transitions. This intersects with IDLE, which is profoundly shaped by learners’ goals and ecological conditions (Guo & Lee, 2023; Soyoof et al., 2023). While existing washback research extensively covers pre-exam behaviours (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng, 2005; Green, 2013), it lacks attention to post-threshold behaviours.

The primary objective of this research is to critically examine this post-threshold washback effect. The research questions are:

- How do B2/IELTS-qualified non-English-major students explain the gap between recognising English as important and investing limited effort in continued English learning after entering EMI programmes?
- How does IELTS attainment shape students’ understanding of what counts as English learning, particularly in relation to IDLE and EMI content study?
- How do EMI lecturers perceive students’ academic English participation after students have met institutional English proficiency requirements?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Washback and IELTS as a Goal-Structuring Mechanism

Washback refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993). High-stakes tests shape classroom practices, learner motivation, and learning strategies, although washback is mediated by learners’ perceptions, preparation practices, and educational contexts (Allen, 2016; Cheng, 2005; Green, 2013). IELTS often functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, producing both positive effects (clear goals and strategic preparation) and negative washback (narrowing learning to test-taking) (Allen, 2016; Green, 2007, 2013; Nguyen, 2023).

In Vietnam, Nguyen (2023) highlighted the dual washback of IELTS on learners. This study extends this trajectory by focusing on post-threshold washback, examining how IELTS shapes perceptions of necessary learning after the required score is attained. Rather than examining how an anticipated test shapes preparation, the present study investigates how an already achieved proficiency benchmark may continue to organise learners’ perceptions of whether further English development is necessary.

B. Instrumental Motivation and Motivational Closure

Instrumental motivation can generate intense effort when goals are high-stakes. However, challenges arise when it remains narrowly tethered to a single requirement. According to self-determination theory, behaviours sustained by external regulation may prove less durable once the condition is fulfilled (Deci & Ryan, 2000). IELTS preparation may involve strongly controlled or instrumental forms of motivation when learners primarily pursue the score to satisfy an institutional requirement.

In this study, motivational closure is used as an analytic description rather than as a new motivational theory. It refers to the reduced urgency of deliberate English learning after an externally defined proficiency requirement has been fulfilled. English may retain substantial future value, but further development is no longer treated as an immediate priority. Motivational closure is therefore considered one process through which the broader IELTS Ceiling may become visible.

C. IDLE, Learner Agency, and Assumed Autonomy

IDLE refers to self-directed engagement with digital English resources, widely associated with learner autonomy and language development (Lee & Dressman, 2018). However, digital access does not guarantee continuous engagement (Soyoof et al., 2023). IDLE is a purpose-dependent practice shaped by broader

environmental conditions (Guo & Lee, 2023). Post-IELTS, previously developmental IDLE activities may be reclassified merely as entertainment or disciplinary study, losing their conscious "language learning" status.

D. EMI Academic Literacy and the Proficiency-Performance Gap

EMI academic literacy requires grappling with complex disciplinary knowledge, which exceeds general test proficiency (Wingate, 2015). Consequently, an IELTS certification does not inherently guarantee effective EMI participation; proficiency is consequential, but academic ability, prior knowledge, motivation, and classroom conditions also shape EMI outcomes (Aizawa et al., 2023; Lin & Lei, 2021; Pearson, 2021; Schoepp, 2018).

EMI research illustrates that relationships between English proficiency and content learning are complex (Macaro et al., 2018; Vo, 2023). Furthermore, translanguaging practices constructively facilitate knowledge construction (Ngo, 2024). However, if students compartmentalise content study from language study, they may fail to recognise English-mediated academic work as a continuum of language development.

E. Research Gap

Existing research has rarely integrated washback, motivation, IDLE, and EMI academic literacy to explain learning investment after students achieve a required proficiency threshold. While traditional washback research primarily examines learning before or during test preparation, less attention has been paid to how an achieved benchmark may continue to shape learners' subsequent engagement with English.

This study proposes the IELTS Ceiling as a possible post-threshold washback process in which an IELTS/B2 score is interpreted as sufficient for immediate purposes, reducing the urgency of further deliberate learning. Unlike instrumental motivation, which explains effort directed towards an external goal, the IELTS Ceiling concerns learners' post-attainment perceptions and practices. Motivational closure is treated as one process within this broader phenomenon, alongside temporal deferral and the reclassification of English-mediated activities. The concept therefore extends washback analysis beyond test preparation into the post-threshold period.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

A. Research Design and Context

This qualitative case study aimed to understand why IELTS/B2-qualified students invested limited effort in continued English learning in EMI programmes (Yin, 2018). The survey constituted a participant recruitment and screening stage within the qualitative case-study design rather than a quantitative phase of the study. The study was conducted at a public technology-oriented university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Students in these EMI programmes use English for textbooks, tests, and instruction, with IELTS 6.0 (or equivalent) as an entrance requirement. Translanguaging (using Vietnamese resources for complex concepts) was present in this context.

B. Participants and Sampling

In Phase 1, a screening survey was administered to 182 Vietnamese non-English-major students who had met the institutional English entry requirement of IELTS 6.0 or an equivalent B2 qualification. Nine students rated the continuing importance of English at 3 or above on a five-point scale, self-reported limited current investment in deliberate English learning or IDLE, and agreed to participate in interviews.

All nine eligible and consenting students were interviewed, comprising seven first-year and two third-year students. Two experienced Vietnamese EMI lecturers were also interviewed to provide contextual perspectives. The survey was used solely to screen potential interview participants and was not designed for quantitative description or hypothesis testing. The semi-structured interviews therefore constituted the primary dataset for analysis.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews (in Vietnamese) explored participants' understandings of IELTS, IDLE, academic priorities, and EMI participation. The interview transcripts constituted the primary dataset and were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis with an abductive, theory-informed orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A Gioia-inspired data structure was applied to enhance analytic transparency, moving from first-order codes to aggregate dimensions

(Gioia et al., 2013). Trustworthiness was supported through purposeful sampling, rich first-person accounts, contextual triangulation via lecturer interviews, and researcher reflexivity.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis generated five interrelated themes. Together, these themes suggest that participants perceived IELTS certification as indicating sufficient English for their immediate academic purposes, which reduced the urgency of deliberate English learning without necessarily reducing their recognition of English as valuable. The table below presents representative extracts and illustrates the movement from participants' accounts to higher-order interpretation.

Table 1. Gioia-Inspired Data Structure

Representative data extract	First-order codes	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
Student S101: "I already have the IELTS score required for university entrance and graduation, so I do not study English much anymore."	IELTS requirement fulfilled; reduced English learning after certification	IELTS attainment as a perceived endpoint	Post-threshold motivational closure
Student S102: "I'm letting myself rest after entering university. I am starting to dislike this rest, but I haven't changed yet."	Post-university entrance exam recovery; awareness without subsequent action	Reduced urgency after a high-stakes transition	Post-threshold motivational closure
Student S104: "In high school, I studied English to take IELTS for university admission."	English learning equated primarily with IELTS preparation	IELTS as the dominant pre-university learning goal	Post-threshold motivational closure
Student S103: "Compared with high school, I feel I have fallen behind. Now I am overwhelmed by three foundation subjects. I do not plan to improve my IELTS band; enough to use is enough."	Immediate academic demands displace deliberate English learning; sufficient English threshold	English learning deferred in favour of technical coursework	Temporal deferral of English-learning investment
Student S105: "IDLE is only additional English input; it is not really studying English."	Informal exposure not recognised as deliberate learning	IDLE classified as supplement exposure	Reclassification of English-mediated activity
Student S106: "The computer field has more specialised English materials than Vietnamese materials, and the university community uses English more than Vietnamese."	English recognised as disciplinary resource	English used as a medium for content study	Reclassification of English-mediated activity
Student S107: "Speaking English is important when teachers grade presentations; it affects marks. But classroom participation is not assessed."	English used when assessed; unassessed participation less urgent	Prepared performance prioritised over spontaneous participation	Assessment-shaped English participation

Lecturer L201: "Students cannot communicate in English in class. They only speak when they have prepared a presentation weeks in advance."	Prepared English performance; limited spontaneous discussion	Gap between certified proficiency and spontaneous participation	Assessment-shaped English participation
Lecturer L202: "Students use English comfortably because the class is small and we maintain English discussion every lesson."	Regular interaction normalises English use	Interaction-rich classroom supports ongoing English participation	Classroom ecology as a moderating condition

Note: Representative extracts were translated from Vietnamese into English. The table is Gioia-inspired and is intended to make transparent the movement from participant extracts to higher-order interpretations rather than to claim full application of the Gioia methodology.

A. Post-Threshold Motivational Closure

Participants continued to recognise the academic and professional value of English after entering university. However, this recognition did not necessarily lead to sustained deliberate learning. Student S101 explained, "I already have the IELTS score required for university entrance and graduation, so I do not study English much anymore." Similarly, S104 associated English learning in high school primarily with IELTS preparation for university admission. These accounts indicate an importance-investment gap. English remained valuable, but it was no longer treated as an immediate learning priority after the institutional requirement had been met. IELTS functioned as a clear pre-university goal and, after the required score had been attained, as a perceived endpoint for deliberate English study.

Student S102 described "letting myself rest" after entering university while recognising dissatisfaction with this inactivity. This suggests that reduced investment did not necessarily result from a negative attitude towards English. Rather, the urgency created by the previous high-stakes transition had diminished. Participants' accounts therefore suggest that interpreting IELTS attainment as the fulfilment of an institutional requirement contributed to a sense of motivational closure, in which English shifted from an urgent requirement to a perceived completed obligation. This pattern is consistent with the view that externally regulated motivation may become less sustainable once the external requirement has been fulfilled (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, IELTS attainment should not be treated as the sole cause of reduced effort because participants' investment was also shaped by workload and changing academic priorities.

B. Temporal Deferral of English-Learning Investment

Participants also explained their reduced English learning investment in relation to immediate academic demands. Student S103 reported being overwhelmed by foundation subjects and stated, "I do not plan to improve my IELTS band; enough to use is enough." This account linked perceived English sufficiency with the need to prioritise technical coursework. English learning was therefore postponed rather than necessarily abandoned. Some participants expected to invest in English again when internships or other future academic and professional transitions made it more immediately necessary. English retained instrumental value, but further development was relocated to a later stage.

This pattern may be described as temporal deferral. Participants did not claim that English would never be needed again. Instead, they considered their current proficiency adequate and directed their limited time towards more immediate academic requirements. Their instrumental orientation towards English thus remained present but was redirected towards future situations in which English would again produce a visible academic or professional benefit. The finding qualifies motivational closure as conditional rather than permanent. The perceived need to learn English could be reactivated by another high-stakes transition. The IELTS Ceiling therefore reflects an interaction between certification, perceived sufficiency, academic workload, and the timing of students' goals.

C. Reclassification of English-Mediated Activities

Participants continued to encounter English through EMI textbooks, technical materials, online resources, and disciplinary activities. However, such engagement was not always recognised as English learning. Student S106 noted that computer-related fields offered more specialised materials in English than in Vietnamese and that English was widely used in the university community. Nevertheless, accessing these materials was generally understood as studying disciplinary content.

This finding indicates a distinction between English-as-medium and English-as-skill. English-as-medium enabled students to access disciplinary knowledge, whereas English-as-skill referred to the deliberate improvement of language proficiency. The former was incorporated into content study, while the latter was postponed. A similar reclassification occurred in relation to IDLE. Student S105 stated, "IDLE is only additional English input; it is not really studying English." In this account, informal digital exposure was regarded as supplementary input rather than purposeful language learning. Thus, students could continue using English without considering themselves to be actively developing it.

Previous studies have shown that IDLE is affected by learners' goals and ecological conditions rather than by digital access alone (Guo & Lee, 2023; Lee & Dressman, 2018; Soyoof et al., 2023). The present finding adds that learners' classification of an activity may influence whether they regard it as continued language learning. After the IELTS requirement had been met, English-mediated activities could be interpreted as content study or informal exposure rather than as part of an ongoing developmental process. This reclassification helps explain why continued English use coexisted with limited reported investment. The issue was not the complete absence of English-related activity, but the loss of its recognised status as deliberate English learning.

D. Assessment-Shaped English Participation

The student and lecturer accounts also showed that English participation was influenced by assessment. Student S107 observed that speaking English was important when presentations were graded, whereas regular classroom participation was not assessed. English use therefore became more urgent when it had an identifiable effect on academic marks. Lecturer L201 similarly reported that students could deliver presentations after preparing for several weeks but experienced difficulty communicating spontaneously in class. The finding suggests a gap between certified proficiency, prepared performance, and spontaneous academic participation.

An IELTS score can indicate general English proficiency and may predict aspects of academic success, but predictive-validity findings are context-dependent and the score cannot fully represent the discipline-specific and interactional practices required in EMI classrooms (Pearson, 2021; Schoepp, 2018). Academic literacy develops through disciplinary reading, writing, discussion, and participation rather than through general proficiency alone (Wingate, 2015). Meeting an IELTS requirement should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that students no longer need support in academic English.

The findings also indicate that assessment may direct students' investment towards prepared performance. When presentations affect grades but ordinary discussion does not, students have a clear reason to prepare assessed speaking tasks but less immediate incentive to participate spontaneously. Assessment practices may consequently reinforce selective English use even among students who have met institutional proficiency requirements.

E. Classroom Ecology as a Moderating Condition

Lecturer accounts showed that limited spontaneous participation was not uniform across EMI classes. While L201 observed dependence on prepared presentations, L202 reported that students used English comfortably in a small class where discussion was maintained during every lesson. The contrast suggests that classroom ecology may moderate the IELTS Ceiling, consistent with evidence that EMI challenges are shaped not only by proficiency but also by motivation, prior knowledge, and the classroom learning environment (Aizawa et al., 2023). Class size, assessment practices, interactional routines, and regular opportunities to speak can influence whether students use English as an everyday academic resource or mainly as a language for prepared performance.

In interaction-rich classrooms, regular discussion may normalise English use and create meaningful reasons for students to participate. In contrast, when English is used primarily for assessed presentations, students may have fewer opportunities to develop spontaneous academic communication. Certified proficiency therefore does not produce the same participation pattern in every EMI setting. The IELTS Ceiling should consequently not be understood as an individual deficit or an inevitable result of IELTS certification. It is contextually mediated. Students' continued investment depends partly on whether the EMI environment makes English development visible, routine, and consequential.

F. The IELTS Ceiling as a Post-Threshold Process

Taken together, the findings support the IELTS Ceiling as a possible post-threshold washback process rather than an inevitable consequence of IELTS attainment. Unlike traditional washback research, which has primarily examined learning before or during test preparation (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng, 2005; Green, 2013), this concept draws attention to learners' perceptions and practices after achieving a required benchmark.

In this study, the IELTS Ceiling was reflected in motivational closure, the deferral of further learning until future transitions, and the reclassification of English-mediated activities as content study or informal exposure. These processes help explain how participants continued to value and use English while reporting limited deliberate investment in its further development. However, the contrasting lecturer accounts suggest that assessment practices and opportunities for classroom interaction may moderate this process (Aizawa et al., 2023; Macaro et al., 2018).

G. Practical Implications

The findings suggest that EMI programmes should treat IELTS as an entry benchmark rather than as evidence of completed English development. EMI teachers should integrate discipline-specific reading, writing, discussion, and low-stakes interaction into content classes, while assessment should encourage regular rather than only prepared English use (Wingate, 2015). Curriculum developers and institutions should embed academic communication and continuing language support across EMI programmes, particularly during key transitions such as internships and graduation. These measures may help students recognise English as an ongoing academic and professional resource.

H. Limitations and Future Research

This single-site qualitative study involved nine students and two lecturers and relied primarily on self-reported interviews; its findings therefore offer contextual rather than statistically generalisable insights. The greater representation of first-year students may also have foregrounded experiences associated with the transition to university. Future research could examine the IELTS Ceiling across institutions, disciplines, and year levels and use longitudinal or classroom-based designs to investigate how post-threshold investment changes over time and is shaped by assessment and interaction.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined why IELTS/B2-qualified Vietnamese non-English-major students reported limited current investment in English learning and IDLE after entering EMI programmes. The findings suggest that some participants interpreted certification as sufficient for their immediate academic purposes, postponing or reclassifying further development despite continuing to value and use English. The proposed IELTS Ceiling describes a possible post-threshold washback process that extends washback analysis beyond test preparation, although its expression may vary across classroom contexts. EMI institutions should therefore treat IELTS as an entry benchmark rather than as evidence of completed language development.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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