

BRIDGING THE GAP IN EMI: A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract: English Medium Instruction (EMI) has become increasingly prevalent in higher education globally, yet a persistent gap between top-down institutional policies and bottom-up classroom realities continues to challenge its effective implementation. This paper reports on a qualitative study examining the EMI-related challenges experienced by 183 students across various academic courses through an open-ended questionnaire. Using an inductive coding approach, eight categories of challenges were identified, including vocabulary and terminology difficulties, academic writing challenges, content comprehension issues, communication barriers, difficulties with lecturers' accents, information overload, and miscellaneous institutional challenges. Approximately 23.5% of participants reported no difficulties. Drawing on Spolsky's three-dimensional framework of language policy—language practices, language beliefs, and language management—the findings reveal significant misalignments between EMI policy aspirations and lived student experiences. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations for policymakers and university administrations, advocating for a shift from a 'language-as-medium only' model towards a 'language-as-support-for-learning' approach.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction, EMI policy, language management, higher education, student challenges, language planning

Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI) refers to the use of the English language to teach academic subjects—other than English itself—in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English [2]. Over the past two decades, EMI has expanded rapidly across higher education institutions worldwide, driven by internationalisation agendas, economic imperatives, and the global dominance of English in academic publishing and professional life.

Despite this growth, a well-documented tension exists between the ambitious policy frameworks promoting EMI at macro levels and the complex, often challenging realities experienced by teachers and students at the micro level. Research consistently identifies misalignments between institutional language policies and actual classroom practices, raising urgent questions about the adequacy of current EMI policy models and the support systems in place for key stakeholders.

This paper presents findings from a workshop-based research study conducted with 183 students in an EMI higher education context. The study employed an open-ended questionnaire to elicit students' self-reported EMI challenges, which were subsequently analysed using an inductive coding approach. The findings are interpreted through the lens of Spolsky's (2004) three-dimensional language policy framework,

offering practical implications for language planning and institutional policy development.

Literature Review

The rapid internationalisation of higher education over the past two decades has positioned English Medium Instruction as a central mechanism through which universities seek to attract international students, enhance research output, and improve graduate employability in a globalised labour market [2]. However, the pace and ambition of EMI expansion has consistently outstripped the institutional infrastructure needed to support it. Macaro and Rose [3] observe that while there is now substantial evidence documenting the spread of EMI across Europe, Asia, and Central Asia, the field still lacks consensus on what constitutes effective EMI provision, leaving institutions to implement policies with limited empirical guidance. This disjuncture between policy ambition and evidence-based practice is not incidental—it is structural, reflecting the way in which EMI has typically been adopted as an institutional strategy driven by prestige and market logic rather than by principled pedagogical planning.

A foundational tension runs through the EMI literature: the assumption that proficiency in English is sufficient preparation for teaching or learning complex academic content through it. Macaro et al. [2] challenge this assumption in their systematic review, arguing that language competence and content-through-language competence are distinct capabilities, and that conflating them produces policies that set both students and teachers up to struggle. The present study takes this insight as its starting point, examining precisely the ways in which students experience the consequences of this conflation in their everyday academic lives.

Perhaps the most consistent finding across contemporary EMI research is the gap between the formal policies articulated at institutional or national level and the lived realities of those expected to implement them. This gap operates at multiple levels simultaneously. At the broadest level, national language-in-education policies may mandate or incentivise English-medium provision without accompanying resource commitments or professional development frameworks. At the institutional level, universities may adopt EMI policies that are insufficiently attentive to the specific disciplinary, linguistic, and cultural contexts in which they operate. And at the classroom level, both teachers and students may find themselves navigating expectations that their existing competencies and support structures do not equip them to meet.

Tajik et al. [8] document this dynamic with particular clarity in their study of graduate students at Kazakhstani universities undergoing a turbulent transition to EMI. Their findings reveal that students experienced acute struggles with academic English not because of personal linguistic failure but because macro-level policy aspirations were systematically disconnected from the micro-level resources and preparation available to them. This structural account of the policy–practice gap is significant: it reframes what is often constructed as an individual deficit as a systemic problem requiring systemic solutions. Similarly, Orduna-Nocito and Sánchez-García [5], drawing on data from 28 lecturers across ten European higher education institutions, demonstrate that misalignment between official EMI language policies and actual classroom practice is not an exceptional circumstance but a pervasive pattern. Their analysis suggests that lecturers frequently develop informal workarounds—code-switching, simplifying content, reducing interactional demands—that diverge from stated policy precisely because the policy does not reflect pedagogical reality.

What makes these findings particularly significant for the present study is that they draw attention to the gap from the perspective of teachers and institutional actors. The student perspective—arguably the most consequential vantage point for understanding the effects of EMI policy—remains comparatively underexplored. Students are the ultimate recipients of EMI provision, yet their experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies are rarely foregrounded in policy discussions. The present study addresses this gap directly.

The theoretical landscape of EMI is increasingly shaped by critical engagement with the assumptions embedded in language policy frameworks. A growing body of scholarship questions the monolingual orientation of mainstream EMI models, arguing that policies premised on English as the exclusive medium of instruction fail to account for the multilingual repertoires that both students and teachers bring to the classroom. Rahman and Hu [4], in a comparative study spanning China, Japan, Malaysia, and Nepal, find that policymakers' commitment to neoliberal language ideologies—wherein English is treated as a neutral, universally accessible medium—systematically obscures the complex multilingual realities of EMI classrooms. Their analysis reveals how such ideologies produce policies that are simultaneously aspirational and exclusionary, positioning students who cannot yet perform at the required level of English academic proficiency as deficient rather than as individuals navigating a demanding and often inadequately supported linguistic transition.

This critique connects to broader debates in applied linguistics about translanguaging—the pedagogical practice of drawing strategically on the full linguistic repertoire of speakers, rather than treating languages as sealed, parallel systems. For EMI contexts, the implication is significant: strict English-only policies may actively impede the very learning outcomes they are designed to promote. large-scale study of EMI policy in Chinese higher education, document how gaps between national language policy, institutional implementation, and individual stakeholder ideologies and practices compound one another, creating conditions in which neither teachers nor students can fully comply with official policy without educational cost [1]. Their framework—attending simultaneously to policy texts, institutional cultures, and individual agency—offers a model for the kind of multi-level analysis that the field urgently needs.

Despite the breadth of EMI research, student experience remains a relatively undertheorised area. Much existing scholarship focuses on institutional policy documents, teacher perspectives, or outcome measures such as academic achievement and language test scores, leaving relatively little room for the nuanced, phenomenological accounts of what it actually feels and means to study through a language that is not one's first. Where student perspectives are included, they are often collected through structured instruments that constrain the range of responses available, or are treated as supplementary data rather than as primary evidence for policy analysis.

The present study takes a different approach. By using an open-ended questionnaire and applying inductive analysis to student-generated data, it seeks to centre student experience as primary evidence for understanding both the nature of EMI challenges and the adequacy of existing policy responses. This methodological choice reflects a theoretical commitment: that effective EMI policy cannot be designed from above, but must be informed by the bottom-up realities of those it directly affects. In this sense, the study aligns with a strand of EMI scholarship that calls for more

participatory, experience-near approaches to policy research [3], and contributes empirical grounding to the theoretical frameworks outlined above.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilising an open-ended questionnaire to capture the EMI-related experiences and challenges of students enrolled in various academic courses at a higher education institution. An open-ended format was chosen to allow participants to express their views freely without being constrained by pre-determined response categories, thereby ensuring that the data reflected authentic, bottom-up perspectives.

A total of 183 students from various courses and academic programmes completed the questionnaire. Participants were students studying through the medium of English and represented a diverse range of academic disciplines.

Data were analysed using an inductive approach, following the framework proposed by McDonough and Chaikitmongkol [4]. Two independent raters coded the data separately and subsequently compared their findings to ensure analytical rigour. The first rater identified 8 codes, while the second rater identified 10 codes. Following discussion, consensus was reached on 8 codes, as the additional codes generated by the second rater were determined to overlap substantively with the agreed set. This iterative inter-rater process enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

Results

Analysis of the 183 student responses showed eight categories of EMI-related challenge. The distribution of responses across these categories reveals both the breadth of difficulties students encounter and their relative prevalence. The largest single category—vocabulary and terminology challenges—accounted for 30 responses, followed by challenges with understanding academic content (20), communication difficulties (19), and academic writing challenges (12). Accent and information overload challenges were each reported by five students, while 43 participants—approximately 23.5% of the total—reported no particular difficulties. A residual miscellaneous category captured challenges that did not map onto the other seven codes. Taken together, these categories paint a multidimensional picture of EMI experience that cuts across linguistic, cognitive, affective, and institutional domains.

Lexical difficulty was the most frequently reported challenge, reflecting a pattern well established in the broader EMI literature. Students consistently described encountering subject-specific terminology and academic vocabulary that exceeded their existing linguistic resources, creating barriers not only to comprehension but also to productive participation. Crucially, the difficulty was not simply one of unknown words: several students distinguished between knowing the translation of a term and understanding its conceptual meaning in context, suggesting that vocabulary challenges in EMI operate at a deeper semantic and disciplinary level than word-for-word decoding. A further dimension of this category was affective: a number of students reported embarrassment related to pronunciation errors, indicating that vocabulary anxiety has social and participatory consequences that extend well beyond the individual encounter with an unfamiliar word. This finding aligns with research on foreign language anxiety in academic settings, which consistently links vocabulary uncertainty to reduced willingness to communicate and lowered self-efficacy [2].

Academic writing difficulties constituted a distinct and substantively important category, reflecting the particular demands that EMI places on students' ability to

produce disciplinary texts in a second or additional language. Students reported unfamiliarity with genre conventions including summary writing, reflection, referencing, and research proposal construction. Notably, several responses indicated that these difficulties were compounded by a perceived absence of explicit instruction: students were expected to produce academic writing in English without having received adequate guidance on the conventions governing such writing. This points to a significant gap in institutional language support, and raises questions about the extent to which academic writing development is treated as a responsibility of the institution rather than a prerequisite students are assumed to bring. The difficulties reported here are consistent with findings from the wider literature on EMI writing, which suggests that even students with strong general English proficiency may struggle with the genre-specific, disciplinary, and rhetorical demands of academic writing in their field of study [8].

Content comprehension difficulties formed the second-largest category and were characterised by a complexity that resists reduction to simple language deficiency. Students reported particular struggles with quantitative methods, complex theoretical texts, and research-oriented content. A pattern that emerged across several responses was the distinction between surface-level linguistic comprehension and deeper conceptual understanding: students could follow the English of a text without grasping its intellectual argument or disciplinary significance. This distinction is theoretically important. It suggests that content understanding in EMI is not simply a function of English proficiency but involves the intersection of language competence, disciplinary familiarity, and cognitive load management. When students are simultaneously processing unfamiliar academic English and unfamiliar disciplinary content, the cognitive demands may exceed what either capability alone would generate. This compound difficulty is frequently underestimated in policy frameworks that treat language as a transparent medium rather than as an active cognitive factor in learning.

Oral communication difficulties were the third most prevalent category and encompassed a range of interactional challenges: expressing opinions clearly, participating in group discussions, articulating complex ideas, and speaking spontaneously in class. What is particularly significant about this category is the strong affective dimension that ran through student responses. Several students described not merely difficulty in speaking but a reluctance or refusal to do so—a withdrawal from communicative participation that has direct consequences for learning engagement and academic outcomes. Some students attributed this to accumulated anxiety, while others pointed to disruptions in English fluency following periods of reduced use. Taken together, these responses suggest that communication challenges in EMI are not simply linguistic but are shaped by confidence, identity, and the social dynamics of the classroom. The implications for pedagogy are significant: creating conditions in which students feel safe to communicate imperfectly may be as important as developing their formal linguistic competence.

Although fewer in number, responses in this category draw attention to an aspect of EMI that receives limited attention in policy discussions: the intelligibility of lecturer speech. Students identified difficulties understanding specific accent features and pronunciation patterns, particularly in the context of diverse international teaching staff. This finding is significant because it locates communication difficulty not solely in student linguistic deficiency—the default assumption of many EMI policies—but also

in the interactional dynamics between lecturer and student. Intelligibility is a property of communication rather than of any individual speaker, and policies that attend only to student language preparation while neglecting the communicative accessibility of instruction represent an incomplete response to the challenge.

A smaller cluster of students reported being overwhelmed by the volume of information conveyed in lectures or required for assessment tasks. While this challenge is not unique to EMI contexts, there is reason to believe that it is amplified by language: processing dense academic content in a second or additional language requires significantly greater cognitive effort than doing so in one's first language, meaning that the effective information load experienced by EMI students may substantially exceed what the same volume of content would represent for native-English-speaking peers. Policies that do not account for this additional cognitive burden—for example, by providing pre-reading support, structured note-taking frameworks, or recorded lectures—may inadvertently create inequitable learning conditions.

The finding that approximately 23.5% of participants reported no particular difficulties is analytically significant and warrants careful interpretation. It demonstrates, first, that EMI is not uniformly experienced as problematic—a nuance that is easily lost in critical accounts of the field. Second, it raises important questions about what differentiates students who navigate EMI successfully from those who do not. Factors such as prior educational experience, exposure to English outside the classroom, subject discipline, and individual learning strategies may all play a role. Understanding these differentiating factors is potentially as important for policy as documenting the challenges themselves, since it may offer evidence about what kinds of preparation and support are most effective.

The miscellaneous category captured a set of challenges that, while less directly linguistic, were nonetheless experienced as part of the broader EMI environment. These included navigating unfamiliar institutional systems such as library portals and learning management platforms, managing time effectively across multiple concurrent demands, and coordinating group work among peers with varying English proficiency and academic backgrounds. These challenges are a reminder that EMI adaptation involves not only linguistic adjustment but a broader process of institutional socialisation, and that policies focused narrowly on language development may miss the fuller range of support that students need to thrive in EMI settings.

Discussion

Implications for language policy

The findings are analysed here through the lens of Spolsky's three-dimensional framework of language policy, which identifies language practices, language beliefs, and language management as interconnected dimensions of any language policy context.

Language practices refer to how language is actually used in real contexts—in this case, students' use of English in EMI classrooms and for academic tasks. The findings reveal a gap between the formal expectation of English-only academic participation and the actual linguistic competence and confidence of many students. Vocabulary challenges, communication difficulties, and comprehension barriers all point to a mismatch between expected and actual language practices at the student level.

Language beliefs encompass attitudes and perceptions about language, including confidence, perceived difficulty, and the value attributed to English. The data reveal that

affective and attitudinal factors—such as shyness when speaking, anxiety about spelling errors, and reluctance to participate orally—are significant mediators of EMI experience. These beliefs influence not only students' willingness to engage in English-medium activities but also their sense of academic identity and belonging.

Language management involves institutional decisions, policies, and support systems that shape language use, such as English-only policies, proficiency admission requirements, and the availability of academic language support. The prevalence of academic writing challenges and content comprehension difficulties suggests that institutional language management has not adequately provided the scaffolding and support students need to succeed in EMI programmes. The miscellaneous category further highlights gaps in institutional orientation and systemic support.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and their interpretation through Spolsky's framework, the following recommendations are offered to policymakers and EMI university administrations.

Rethinking English-only policies

The frequency of comprehension and communication challenges suggests that rigid English-only policies may be counterproductive in certain contexts. Policymakers should consider adopting more flexible multilingual frameworks that permit strategic use of students' first languages—particularly for clarification and concept development. Translanguaging pedagogies, which draw on students' full linguistic repertoire, offer a evidence-based alternative that supports comprehension without abandoning English-language learning goals.

Setting realistic language proficiency requirements

Many of the challenges reported—particularly those related to vocabulary, academic writing, and content comprehension—suggest that some students may enter EMI programmes with language proficiency levels below what sustained academic engagement requires. Institutions are encouraged to establish minimum language proficiency benchmarks for EMI programme entry and offer foundation or bridging courses in academic English prior to or alongside EMI programmes. Providing ongoing diagnostic language assessment to identify students who may benefit from additional support can also contribute here.

Many EMI challenges are compounded by instructors who possess deep subject expertise but have not received training in teaching effectively through English. Policy should require:

- Mandatory EMI teacher training that integrates both language awareness and pedagogical skills.
- Ongoing professional development in areas such as scaffolding, comprehensible input, vocabulary instruction, and interactive teaching methods.
- Peer observation and reflective practice communities for EMI faculty.

Institutional language support infrastructure

Institutions should invest in comprehensive academic language support services, including writing centres, academic English workshops, and accessible online resources for self-directed language development. Crucially, these resources should be integrated into the curriculum rather than positioned as remedial add-ons.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of evidence demonstrating that EMI implementation cannot be reduced to a straightforward policy directive. The challenges reported by 183 students—spanning vocabulary, academic writing, comprehension, communication, and beyond—paint a picture of learners navigating a complex and often under-supported linguistic environment. The finding that approximately one in four students reported no challenges serves as an important reminder that EMI experiences are not uniform and that individual student resources, preparation, and resilience play significant roles.

The application of Spolsky's [7] framework reveals that effective EMI policy must simultaneously address language practices, language beliefs, and language management. Narrowly conceived policies that treat language merely as a medium of instruction—rather than as an integral component of learning—are likely to perpetuate the very gaps they seek to close.

We call for a fundamental reorientation of EMI policy: from a 'language-as-medium only' model to a 'language-as-support-for-learning' model that places student experience at the centre of policy design and implementation. Only through sustained, empirically grounded attention to the bottom-up realities of EMI classrooms can the policy-practice gap be meaningfully bridged.

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