

Original Paper

Exploring the Educational Role of English-Medium Instruction in Internationalized Higher Education

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Received: July 31, 2026

Accepted: August 27, 2026

Online Published: August 30, 2026

doi:10.22158/jecs.v10n3p159

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v10n3p159>

Abstract

With the internationalization of higher education, English-Medium Instruction has developed rapidly in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs. However, the existing research mainly understands EMI from the perspective of language teaching and teaching implementation, and pays less attention to its educational value in the cultivation of international talents. In this view, this paper attempts to explore how EMI curriculum, as an international educational practice, plays a potential role in promoting students' academic development, cross-cultural understanding and global competence. It also examines key challenges associated with EMI, including language barriers, inadequate teaching support and the risk of superficial or formal internationalization. This article tries to address a practical question that in the context of Sino-foreign cooperative education projects, how can EMI curriculum design and international talent training be more practical and closer to actual needs.

Keywords

English-Medium Instruction, Higher Education, Educational Role

1. Introduction

The process of globalization is accelerating, and universities around the world have regarded the internationalization of higher education as an important task, not just an incidental work. The meaning of internationalization is also changing. It no longer refers to traditional activities such as student exchange and cross-border mobility, but extends to how to design courses, how to carry out teaching, and what goals are set for talent training. As a result of this change, universities are expected to take on more responsibilities than merely imparting subject knowledge and professional skills. They also need to help students work effectively in a highly connected world. For example, students need to understand

global issues, communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, and engage in international dialogue and cooperation. These changes make global competence as a core goal of higher education to cultivate international talents receive more and more attention. Studies have pointed out that global competence is not just about understanding global issues, it also requires cross-cultural communication skills, understanding different perspectives from themselves, and treating cultural differences with an open and respectful attitude (Hunter, 2004; Deardorff, 2006). Therefore, an important issue in the study of internationalization of higher education is how universities can create meaningful educational experiences and truly help students develop global competence.

English-Medium Instruction (EMI) provides a specific example. In a broad sense, EMI refers to the teaching of academic content in English in an environment where English is not the first language of students. In recent years, EMI has developed rapidly in the higher education system of non-English speaking countries and is increasingly integrated into the broader internationalization agenda of universities. Initial growth in EMI provision was in Europe, where there were approximately 11 times more EMI programs in 2014 than 2001 (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). The Chinese Ministry of Education has given a national directive to increase EMI undergraduate programs from 5% to 10% at all state university programs by 2013 (Hu et al. 2014). Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has promoted the expansion of EMI through policies such as the "Global 30 Initiative" and the "Top Global University Project." (Galloway et al. 2020) As EMI has spread globally, its educational function has gradually transcended its role as a mere linguistic tool and has come to be regarded as a vital educational arena that bridges disciplinary learning, international academic exchange, and cross-cultural development. Particularly in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs, EMI have become a key teaching format for cultivating internationally-oriented talent due to their international curriculum systems, English-language academic resources, and cross-cultural learning environments. Within the context of Sino-foreign cooperative education, EMI courses not only provide English language exposure but also create an internationalized learning environment. Through exposure to internationalized course content, participation in English-mediated academic communication, and engagement with diverse cultural backgrounds, students may gradually develop a broader global perspective and cross-cultural awareness during the process of course learning. Therefore, reconsidering the educational value of EMI is of great significance for deepening research on the cultivation of international talent in higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of EMI in Higher Education

The concept of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) was first proposed by Julie Dearden and Ernesto Macaro of the EMI Oxford Research Group in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. They defined EMI as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English." (Dearden 2014;

Macaro 2018) This definition helps distinguish English-Medium Instruction (EMI) from English language teaching. In EMI, the main purpose is not to teach English itself, but to use English as a medium for delivering disciplinary knowledge. Nevertheless, as Macaro et al. (2017) point out in their systematic review of EMI in higher education, early research on EMI was largely concerned with linguistic issues. Much of the attention was placed on students' English proficiency, teachers' language competence, and the extent to which language barriers might affect students' learning outcomes.

As EMI has become increasingly common in higher education around the world, scholars have begun to view it as more than simply a choice of instructional language or an educational policy. EMI is increasingly understood as a complex educational practice involving various aspects of teaching and learning. In line with this shift, recent research has moved beyond asking what language is used for teaching and has paid more attention to what happens when students actually learn through EMI, particularly how their learning experiences may influence their academic development and broader personal growth.

2.2 The Impact of EMI on Student Development

The impact of EMI on students' academic performance is one of the central topics of research. A comparative study by Dafouz and Camacho-Miñano, based on four years of data from an accounting course at a Spanish university, found no statistically significant differences between the EMI group and the native-language group; EMI instruction did not lower students' final academic performance. However, a systematic review by Macaro et al. (2017) noted that the existing research evidence is insufficient to conclude that EMI is beneficial for language learning, nor is it sufficient to prove that it significantly impairs content learning. A study demonstrated through empirical research that EMI not only does not hinder students' acquisition of subject-specific knowledge but also improves their academic performance; however, it takes some time for the benefits of EMI courses in improving students' English proficiency to become fully apparent (Jin 2021). Wang (2025) conducted a study using diaries and interviews to survey EMI students enrolled in two courses. The results showed that participants improved their general English proficiency to varying degrees and developed English thinking and communication patterns; their academic English proficiency improved to varying degrees, particularly in listening and reading skills. However, most students explicitly expressed that EMI had a negative impact on their mastery of academic content knowledge, but this impact closely related to their insufficient English proficiency.

2.3 The Potential Factors Influencing Students' Academic Achievements in EMI

Many scholars have examined the impact of various factors on students' academic achievements in an EMI context; related research has primarily focused on students' linguistic factors like English proficiency and personal factors such as self-efficacy and motivation.

As for the linguistic factors, English proficiency is a key predictor of academic success in EMI. A study by Rose et al. (2020) of 146 students in an EMI business program at a Japanese university found that English language knowledge and academic English skills are statistically significant predictors of success in EMI context, and that students with lower proficiency levels require more targeted language support.

Soruç conducted a study on the EMI academic achievement of 459 Turkish students; the results showed that English proficiency is a significant predictor of EMI achievement. Notably, a study by Curle et al. (2020) involving 159 students in Turkey found that general English proficiency was not a significant predictor of academic success in EMI, whereas academic performance in mother-tongue instruction (TMI) significantly predicted EMI success, supporting a blended rather than a purely English-based EMI implementation model.

Some research findings suggest that self-efficacy is a key factor in students' academic achievement in EMI courses, and that the interaction between self-efficacy and other factors can more significantly promote students' academic achievement. Thompson et al. (2019) found that, in addition to language proficiency, self-efficacy is also a significant predictor of success in EMI; students with higher self-efficacy put in more effort and view course activities as opportunities for growth.

At present, most of the research on EMI is still from the perspective of language and teaching. These studies have offered valuable insights into the difficulties that EMI will encounter in the actual implementation process, and also provide a useful reference for practice. However, the existing discussions on what EMI means for the long-term development of students are still relatively limited. Strictly speaking, EMI does not just use English as a teaching language; it can also be regarded as an international form of education. From this point of view, rather than continuing to understand EMI mainly from the perspective of language teaching, it is better to link it more closely with student development and talent training.

3. Educational Value of EMI in Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education

With the increasing internationalization of higher education, how to understand English-Medium Instruction (EMI) has become an increasingly important issue. To put it simply, EMI is to regard English as a language tool to teach subject knowledge. The key difference between EMI and general English teaching is that English itself is not a learning goal, but a medium to convey subject knowledge. The research of Dearden (2014) and Macaro et al. (2018) shows that EMI has become an important phenomenon in the internationalization of higher education. The existing research mainly focuses on teachers' and students' cognition, English proficiency and content learning, which lays a foundation for subsequent research. However, if only EMI is regarded as the choice of teaching language, it may be difficult to fully explain its role in cultivating talents with international vision.

Language not only affects the vocabulary we choose, but also affects the way we think and interact. When language is used as a channel to convey subject content and carry out classroom communication, it will directly affect the resources that learners can obtain, the way they understand concepts, and the communication with teachers and peers. From this point of view, the educational effect of EMI can not be simply attributed to the use of English in the course, but needs to be examined in combination with how the teaching medium of English cooperates with the course content, teaching methods and classroom dialogue. In addition, the available evidence seems to suggest that EMI should be understood as a unique

learning environment rather than merely a language policy.

This perspective is particularly important in the context of international higher education. In traditional English courses, students usually regard English as a separate subject to learn. In the EMI course, English is part of the subject learning. Students rely on English to read professional texts, participate in discussions and exchange subject views. English has both instrumental and social functions in EMI. It can not only help students acquire subject knowledge, but also give them the opportunity to enter the academic community. The experience brought by EMI courses is not limited to the improvement of language ability, but also may promote students' academic growth, cognitive development and the expansion of international awareness.

Taking EMI as a learning environment also means that we should not only see whether the course is taught in English in form, but also examine what the students have actually experienced. It is of limited educational value to translate the course materials into English only. On the contrary, when the EMI curriculum introduces international resources and multicultural cases, English may become a door for students to access different knowledge systems. Therefore, the evidence shows that educational value is jointly constructed by language, content and learning interaction. This also explains why language proficiency or course satisfaction alone cannot fully reflect the broader effectiveness of EMI.

3.1 EMI as an International Curriculum Practice

In the EMI course, students need to deal with language and subject content at the same time. This dual task helps to explain why EMI may have an impact on subject knowledge, academic literacy and critical thinking.

First, EMI broadens the range of international academic resources available to students. However, Macaro et al. (2018) pointed out in their systematic review that the current evidence is still insufficient to assert that EMI will automatically improve English proficiency, or will definitely damage content learning. This finding means that the value of EMI should be understood primarily in the context of the opportunities it offers to participate in the international academic environment. Secondly, EMI may also have a supportive effect on academic literacy, as students need to explain subject terms, identify arguments, and evaluate information from different sources. They learn not only subject knowledge, but also how knowledge is presented and judged in the academic community. This is particularly relevant to Sino-foreign cooperative education, because graduates who plan to work in an international environment need to express their professional views on international occasions. In addition, EMI can also open up space for critical thinking and multiple perspectives. Cases and research findings often come from different countries and may challenge students' existing assumptions. When students compare theoretical perspectives or weigh alternative explanations, they will make more complex inferences. Similarly, the OECD Global Competence Framework emphasizes that understanding global issues requires students to reason based on multi-source information and make evidence-based judgments (OECD 2019). In this sense, EMI learning may transform subject learning into a process of comparison and reflection.

3.2 EMI as a Platform for Intercultural Learning

EMI also has an important value. It may serve as a space for cross-cultural learning. In the past, when discussing cross-cultural development in international education, people often linked it with student mobility and overseas exchange. However, as internationalization at home has attracted more attention, many scholars have suggested that internationalization may not necessarily be achieved by students going abroad. Through the curriculum and campus environment, international and cross-cultural elements can also enter students' daily learning. From this point of view, EMI courses can provide opportunities for students who have no long-term overseas experience to engage in international learning and develop cross-cultural awareness.

EMI courses often use cases from different countries. For the same question, students can see a variety of ways to explain. In this way, knowledge is no longer a set of fixed answers, but is formed under different historical and cultural conditions. In this process, students may also gradually understand cultural differences.

Classroom interaction also creates opportunities for cross-cultural communication in EMI courses. In cross-cultural learning, students should not only understand different communication practices, but also constantly adjust their expression in the discussion. The framework of OECD (2019) points out that effective cross-cultural interaction requires individuals to adjust their communication methods according to specific situations while maintaining openness and respect. EMI courses provide a daily practice scenario for this kind of ability.

Part of the value of EMI is that it allows students to contact with difference. Through daily learning, students may be exposed to different knowledge systems, cultural perspectives and communication methods, thus gradually enhancing cultural sensitivity and making it easier to see problems from the standpoint of others. Of course, these effects do not appear automatically as long as they are taught in English. How to design the course and how to interact between teachers and students in the classroom also play an important role. If teachers can bring an international perspective into the classroom, design attractive learning activities, and create an atmosphere that respects different voices, EMI may become a truly meaningful cross-cultural learning space.

3.3 EMI as a Context for Global Competence Development

Global competence is not an isolated ability, nor can it be simply summed up as a single skill. It actually encompasses a set of interconnected capabilities that help individuals understand global issues and cross-cultural issues, and respond appropriately in an increasingly connected world. The OECD PISA 2018 Global Competence Framework regards global competence as a lifelong ability to develop, with particular emphasis on understanding cross-cultural issues, identifying different perspectives, and interacting effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. It should also be noted that the formation of global competence does not depend on a certain ability, but on the joint action and gradual development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (OECD, 2019).

From this perspective, there is a natural link between EMI and global competency development. EMI

can expose students to a wide range of global issues. At the same time, EMI-based courses also encourage students to understand and participate in discussions from multiple perspectives, which is highly consistent with the emphasis on perspective taking in the framework. In addition, EMI can also provide specific scenarios for cross-cultural communication, and curriculum activities may also promote students to change from passive recipients of information to active participants in dealing with global issues. However, it must be noted that EMI itself is not automatically equivalent to global competency education. Only when curriculum content, classroom activities and evaluation methods consciously bring students into global issues and cross-cultural interactions can EMI truly become an effective context for promoting the development of global competence.

Accordingly, the potential contribution of EMI to the development of global competence can be understood as a process of gradual expansion. Students may first come into contact with international knowledge and global issues through EMI, and then encounter different perspectives and cultural perspectives. In classroom interaction, they gradually learn to explain differences and negotiate. In the end, a broader global consciousness may be formed and more willing to participate in the interconnected world. This process is not a simple linear cause and effect, but is shaped by course content, learning interaction and student participation. Therefore, EMI can provide a context for global competency development. At the same time, the mode of action of EMI seems to be different from the general teaching technology. Based on these discussions, EMI should not be understood as a method that can guarantee specific learning results.

4. Challenges and Future Directions

4.1 Ensuring Equal Learning Opportunities in EMI

EMI courses do expose students to international knowledge and cross-cultural learning, but these benefits are not automatically distributed equally. For students with a good English foundation, it is usually easier to read academic texts, follow lectures, and participate in classroom discussions. In contrast, learners with weaker English often need to deal with the teaching language and subject content at the same time, and the difficulty will be greater. It may take more time and energy to complete the same task. Therefore, when discussing what EMI can bring, students' existing language foundation and learning experience cannot be ignored. This does not mean EMI itself is unfair. Rather, it suggests that EMI courses need to be tailored to the actual way students learn. If students are only expected to adapt to the English teaching environment, but do not provide enough support, it is difficult for students with weak English to fully participate in the learning process. The international learning opportunities brought by EMI may be more easily available to those students who are already good at English. Therefore, EMI courses should not only maintain reasonable academic requirements, but also provide appropriate language and academic support. For example, teachers can explain key subject terms, provide background reading or supplementary materials, give students enough time to learn, and give feedback in a timely manner. These practices will not reduce academic standards, but will enable more students to truly participate in the

study of the subject.

This is particularly noteworthy in Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools. The purpose of this kind of project is not to leave international education to students who are already good at English, but to benefit a wider group of students with the help of international courses and educational resources. For this reason, EMI courses must find a viable balance between the use of English and the actual learning needs of students. Effective EMI is not to force students to adapt to English teaching, but to help them gradually form the ability to learn and communicate in the international academic environment.

4.2 Moving beyond English-Medium Delivery

With the continuous development of EMI in the field of higher education, many colleges and universities are increasingly inclined to treat the use of English textbooks and the proportion of English teaching courses as a core indicator when evaluating their own degree of internationalization. However, English is only one of the many tools to support international education. The educational value of a course also depends on a wider range of factors, including what content the course chooses, how teaching is actually carried out, and what kind of learning experience students can gain. If a course only translates the original Chinese teaching materials into English, and the content, teaching methods and classroom activities remain basically unchanged, then the use of English does not necessarily bring a truly richer international learning experience. On the contrary, if the curriculum introduces research findings from different countries, international cases and global issues, and if teachers consciously encourage students to compare their views in different social contexts and discuss possible solutions, then English will begin to move beyond the mere language of instruction. In this case, English can create opportunities for students to really get in touch with different knowledge forms and cultural perspectives. Therefore, the educational value of EMI should not only be judged by whether English is used in the classroom, but also by what English actually enables students to do. Well-designed EMI courses can help students master disciplinary knowledge but also allow them to access international academic resources, different views and opportunities for cross-cultural communication. This is particularly important for Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools. Internationalization should not be simplified as a superficial sign such as course name, textbook language or teacher's nationality. More importantly, it should be reflected in the actual experience and learning content of students through EMI courses. In other words, EMI should aim to do more than simply enable students to learn subject content in English. It should also help them understand diverse knowledge and cultural contexts, and gradually develop the ability to learn and communicate effectively in an international environment.

4.3 Strengthening Curriculum, Teaching, and Institutional Support

Whether EMI has educational value depends on how the curriculum is designed, how teaching is carried out, and what support can be provided at the school level. The use of English as a teaching medium does not guarantee that learning is effective. If the teacher is not familiar with the EMI teaching method, or the classroom is mainly one-way taught by the teacher, it is difficult for students to have the opportunity to discuss ideas, cooperate with peers, or hear different views. As a result, EMI may simply change the

language of instruction and not really drive significant changes in students' academic or international development. Therefore, EMI teachers not only need to have a qualified English level, but also be able to respond to students' needs in both language learning and subject learning. The curriculum design should also be linked to the broader objectives of international talent training. Institutional support can not be ignored. The implementation effect of EMI can be improved through teacher development, academic English support and appropriate evaluation methods.

In general, the educational value of EMI will not be automatically generated because of the use of English in the classroom. It is formed under the joint action of curriculum content, teaching practice, student participation and institutional support. Therefore, it is necessary for future EMI research and practice to pay more attention to the real experience of students in the course. In the context of Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools, EMI is more likely to promote the cultivation of international talents only when English teaching is combined with meaningful international content, effective teaching methods and adequate support for students.

5. Conclusion

As higher education becomes more and more international, EMI should not be simply reduced to lecturing in English. On the basis of combing the relevant research, this paper puts forward that EMI can be regarded as an important international education practice in Sino-foreign cooperative education. Through EMI, students have access to international academic resources and expertise; at the same time, diverse course content, classroom interactions and discussions around global issues also create opportunities for students to develop academic literacy, cross-cultural understanding and global competence. In this sense, the value of EMI lies not in English itself, but in how English, as a medium, can be effectively combined with curriculum content, teaching activities and learning interaction. EMI can play a more meaningful role in international education only when students have access to different knowledge and cultural perspectives and link their professional learning to broader international and global issues.

This paper also points out that the educational value of EMI is not achieved automatically. What students really gain from EMI courses depends on their English proficiency, course design, teaching methods and institutional support. Therefore, when promoting EMI, the Sino-foreign cooperative education programs should not only focus on the number of courses taught in English or the use of English, but also pay more attention to the actual learning experience of students. EMI courses can provide richer international content, more opportunities for cross-cultural learning and student engagement, and provide appropriate support for students of different English levels. Future EMI research should also go beyond language proficiency and academic performance to further explore students' learning experience and long-term development. In this way, EMI can gradually change from a simple choice of teaching language to an important educational practice of cultivating international talents.

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