# CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH-MEDIUM INSTRUCTION IN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES: A REVIEW OF STUDENT AND TEACHER EXPERIENCES

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**Abstract.** English-medium instruction (EMI), the teaching of academic subjects through English in countries where most people do not speak English as a first language, has become one of the most visible features of university internationalisation. International universities adopt it to attract foreign students, to prepare graduates for global careers, and to improve their standing in rankings. Yet the move to English brings real difficulties for the people inside the classroom. This review brings together published research on the challenges that students and teachers face in EMI programmes, with particular attention to studies from Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

**Keywords:** English-medium instruction, higher education, internationalisation, student challenges, lecturer challenges, language support

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, universities around the world have changed the language in which they teach. Subjects such as business, engineering, medicine and economics, which were once taught in the national language, are now often taught in English. This shift is driven by several forces at once. Governments want their universities to compete internationally, institutions want to recruit fee-paying international students, and students themselves see English as a key to better jobs and further study abroad. Dearden[1] (2014), in a British Council survey covering 55 countries, described this trend as a fast-moving global shift from teaching English as a foreign language to using English as the medium through which other subjects are taught.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to review and organise what published research says about the challenges of EMI at university level. The review is guided by three questions:

1. What language-related, academic and emotional challenges do students experience in EMI programmes?
2. What challenges do content lecturers face when teaching their subjects through English?
3. What institutional and pedagogical measures does the research suggest for reducing these challenges?

## English-Medium Instruction: Definition and Growth

The term "English-medium instruction" is used in different ways, and related labels such as "English-taught programmes" or "content and language integrated learning" (CLIL) sometimes overlap with it. This paper follows the widely cited definition offered by Macaro[2] et al. (2018), who describe

[1] Dearden, J. (2014). *English as a medium of instruction – a growing global phenomenon*. British Council.
[2] Macaro, E., Curle, S., Pun, J., An, J., & Dearden, J. (2018). A systematic review of English medium instruction in higher education. *Language Teaching, 51*(1), 36–76. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444817000350



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EMI as the use of English to teach academic subjects other than English itself in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of most of the population is not English. An important feature of this definition is that EMI is primarily about teaching content. Unlike CLIL, which usually has explicit goals for both language and subject learning, EMI programmes often assume that students will improve their English simply by being exposed to it, without any planned language objectives.

Central Asia has joined this trend more recently. Bezborodova[3] and Radjabzade (2021) compared the role of English in universities in the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and found that English is the most widely studied foreign language in the region and is increasingly used as a medium of instruction. In Uzbekistan, the government's Concept for the Development of Higher Education until 2030, adopted in 2019, set the goal of having internationally recognised universities, and English-medium programmes have been treated as one of the main tools for achieving this.

**Methodology**

This paper is a narrative literature review. Unlike a systematic review, which follows a fixed protocol and aims to include every relevant study, a narrative review selects key and representative works in order to build a clear, interpretive picture of a field. This approach was chosen because the aim of the paper is to organise existing knowledge about EMI challenges into a practical framework that teachers and administrators can use, rather than to calculate statistical effects.

Sources were identified through searches of academic databases and publisher platforms, including Google Scholar, ERIC, Cambridge Core, SAGE and Taylor and Francis, using combinations of terms such as "English-medium instruction", "higher education", "challenges", "students", "lecturers" and "language support". Reports published by the British Council were also included because they contain large-scale data on EMI policy and practice. Three criteria guided the selection of works: they had to focus on university-level education; they had to be published in peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books or reports from recognised research institutions; and they had to provide evidence about the experiences of students, lecturers or administrators. Priority was given to frequently cited studies and to research from a range of regions, including East Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia.

The most frequently reported problems in EMI are linguistic. One of the best-known studies in this area is the longitudinal research of Evans[4] and Morrison (2011) at a university in Hong Kong. Through interviews with undergraduates, they found that students struggled with specialist vocabulary, unfamiliar accents, the purpose and organisation of lectures, visual materials and the planning of large assignments. Importantly, the type of secondary school students had attended made a major difference: those who had studied in Chinese at school found the move to English-medium university study much harder than those from English-medium schools. This finding suggests that the difficulties of EMI begin before students enter university, and that the transition from school to university is a particularly sensitive period.

The question of how much English is "enough" for EMI has received growing attention. In Japan, Aizawa[5], Rose, Thompson and Curle (2020) surveyed 264 business students and interviewed 13 of them. They found that English proficiency, measured by TOEIC scores, significantly predicted the level of

[3] Bezborodova, A., & Radjabzade, S. (2021). English in higher education in the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. *World Englishes, 41*(1), 72–91. https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12556

[4] Evans, S., & Morrison, B. (2011). Meeting the challenges of English-medium higher education: The first-year experience in Hong Kong. *English for Specific Purposes, 30*(3), 198–208.

[5] Aizawa, I., Rose, H., Thompson, G., & Curle, S. (2020). Beyond the threshold: Exploring English language proficiency, linguistic challenges, and academic language skills of Japanese students in an English medium instruction programme. *Language Teaching Research*.



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difficulty students reported. However, they could not identify a single clear threshold score above which EMI became easy. The interviews showed that prior subject knowledge, motivation and the classroom environment also influenced how difficult students found their courses. This is a useful reminder that a minimum test

Students are not passive in the face of these difficulties. Soruç and Griffiths (2018), working with International Relations and Psychology students at a Turkish university, used video recordings, questionnaires and stimulated-recall interviews. While the students identified many difficulties, they also described a wide range of strategies for dealing with them. This finding is valuable for teachers, because it suggests that coping strategies can be identified, shared and taught, rather than left to chance.

The second group of people affected by EMI is content lecturers. Most of them are experts in their discipline, not trained language teachers, and many have never been taught how to teach through a second language. Doiz[6], Lasagabaster and Sierra (2011) gathered the views of teaching staff at a Spanish university through group discussions and found that lecturers had mixed feelings about EMI, recognising its value for internationalisation while also experiencing tension in an environment where several languages compete. In Sweden, Airey[7] (2012) studied physics lecturers and found that they generally did not see language teaching as part of their job, even though their students needed to learn the language of their discipline. This attitude, captured in the title of his paper, "I don't teach language", reflects a common gap in EMI: the assumption that someone else will take responsibility for students' language development.

Evidence from Uzbekistan reflects these global findings while also showing some local features. Rahmanova[8] and Eksi (2023) surveyed and interviewed 34 administrators, instructors and students at Uzbek universities. Participants felt that EMI improved English proficiency, supported lecturers' professional development and careers, and increased contact with international students, but they also stressed that English proficiency was essential for learning subject content successfully and recommended making classes more motivating and comfortable. At the national level, the British Council and the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education launched a project to train a team of EMI professionals who would support programmes at 16 state universities and pass on EMI teaching methods to colleagues across the sector (Linn[9] & Bezborodova, 2022). Such initiatives show growing awareness of the need for lecturer training, but they also confirm that, in many institutions, the necessary support is still being developed.

The second implication concerns lecturer development. Airey's (2012) finding that content lecturers often do not see language as their responsibility suggests that training should not try to turn lecturers into language teachers. Instead, it should help them recognise the language demands of their own discipline and use simple, effective techniques: speaking clearly, writing key terms on slides, providing glossaries, summarising main points, checking understanding through questions, and giving students time to process information. Training programmes, such as the cascade model used in Uzbekistan (Linn[10] &

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[6] Doiz, A., Lasagabaster, D., & Sierra, J. M. (2011). Internationalisation, multilingualism and English-medium instruction. *World Englishes, 30*(3), 345–359.

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[9] Linn, A., & Bezborodova, A. (2022). *British Council (Uzbekistan) English Medium Instruction project impact evaluation*. British Council.

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Bezborodova, 2022), can be strengthened by ongoing peer observation and communities of practice rather than one-off workshops.

Conclusion

English-medium instruction is now a permanent feature of many international universities, and it is likely to continue growing. This review has shown that, while EMI offers real benefits, including access to international knowledge, better career prospects and contact with students from other countries, it also creates serious challenges. Students face linguistic difficulties with lectures, vocabulary and academic writing; these difficulties affect their academic results; and both are connected to confidence and self-belief.

The main lesson from the research is that EMI works best when it is treated as a shared responsibility. English language teachers, content lecturers and university administrators each have a role to play, and their efforts are most effective when they are coordinated.

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