

# The Analysis of EMI Policy in Undergraduate Universities in Mainland China

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## Abstract

In this paper, the researcher analyses the extent to which the goals of the English as a medium of instruction (EMI) policy have been achieved in mainland China. At the national level, the implementation of the EMI policy responds to the international trend of English language education and helps to improve China's core competitiveness in science and technology; however, the EMI policy faces some challenges, such as the obstacles to its implementation due to the educational conditions and environment, the ambiguity of whether 'E' in 'EMI' refers to 'standard English' or 'English as the lingua franca', the increase in the inequality of educational resources, and the threat posed to the traditional culture of China. From the students' point of view, the implementation of the EMI policy improves their academic performance, but this depends to a certain extent on the students' own English proficiency; whether or not they are able to engage in in-depth cognitive thinking in the EMI classroom varies in different teaching and learning environments; and the teacher's level of spoken English has a non-negligible impact on the students' academic learning. In some EMI classrooms, there is an improvement in students' English proficiency; however, in other EMI classrooms, due to the lack of teacher-student interaction and the explanation of easier points in English, students' English proficiency does not improve significantly. From the teachers' perspective, teaching in English is a challenge for some, and the motivation to drive them to teach English needs to be strengthened. The researcher concludes that some practical problems in the implementation of EMI policy have hindered the realisation of its desired goals, and that the strengthening of students' English proficiency and the assurance of teachers' qualifications in oral English teaching may be the driving force for the effective implementation of EMI.

**Keywords:** EMI, English language education, Chinese undergraduate students

## 1. Introduction

With the globalisation of English, a growing number of countries are recognising the importance of English in participating in global affairs and have enacted policies to promote English language education, among which the English as a medium of instruction (EMI) policy has been implemented in many countries. The paper focuses on the EMI policy for university students at undergraduate level in mainland China, aiming to explore the implementation of the policy from the perspectives of the nation, the students and the teachers. This paper starts with a brief introduction to China's EMI policy; then explores the benefits and challenges of the EMI policy from the perspectives of the nation, the students and the teachers; and finally gives suggestions to address the challenges from each of the three perspectives respectively.

## 2. EMI Policy and Its Purpose

The EMI policy at undergraduate level in mainland China began in 2001 and was promulgated by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2001) (see Appendix A). It aims to strengthen the position of China in the world and to enhance its international influence in science, technology, education and the economy. It also aims to improve the professional knowledge and English language skills of students (Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2021). Since then, EMI courses have gradually been developed and become popular in Chinese higher education institutions (Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2021). In 2006, 132 of the 135 normal undergraduate universities surveyed by Wu et al. (2010) had bilingual programmes. In 2007, the Ministry of Education (2007) issued a policy emphasising the use of English language instruction to improve the professional English language skills and abilities of university students (see Appendix B).

### 3. Evaluation of EMI

#### 3.1 *From a National Perspective*

##### 3.1.1 Benefits at the National Level

In light of the trend towards the globalisation of English, the execution of the EMI policy supports China's international competitiveness in the domains of science and technology. There is a great deal of cutting-edge scientific and technological knowledge offered in English, so mastery of English is required (Crystal, 2003). Ignorance of English is a barrier to accessing advanced material, and even though students can overcome this by using translation tools, having the capacity to process information directly in English makes learning more effective and prevents information from being lost during the translation process. Further, publishing academic studies in English will facilitate academic communication at an international level. As stated by Hu, Li and Lei (2014), the EMI policy provides Chinese students with a global perspective on issues and a platform for exposure to advanced Western expertise. In other words, students will not only be able to apply sophisticated ideas to the local context, but also be able to think globally as world citizens, being inspired to participate in the internationalisation of China. Making the areas of new and high technology, finance and law the focus of the EMI program implementation also reflects the important role of EMI in promoting China's scientific, technological and economic development internationally.

In terms of the educational field, EMI can help to promote the internationalisation of universities (Dearden, 2014): EMI courses may attract a number of international students because the use of English instruction can help some international students overcome the language barrier, and their enrolment can also contribute to the economic benefits of local universities; EMI programmes can also attract international teachers who will introduce students to different cultures; and EMI can prepare local students to integrate into the international world, such as helping them to build a linguistic and intellectual foundation for studying abroad. Participants in the research by Hu et al. (2014) also noted that the EMI policy contributed to the internationalisation of higher education and provided students with international perspectives. EMI has become a growing trend worldwide (Dearden, 2014), with many countries in the expanding circle with China (Kachru, 1992) recognising the importance of English in education and implementing EMI policies. For example, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has taken steps to increase the number of EMI courses (Rose & McKinley, 2018) due to the trend towards English as an international lingua franca (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020); in Vietnam, EMI is seen as an innovation and is being applied to universities (Phuong & Nguyen, 2019); Turkey as a country in the expanding circle (Arik, 2020) has introduced EMI in higher education (Ekoç, 2020) not only as a result of its EU membership, but also because EMI will improve the international reputation of its universities and encourage student employment (Cosgun & Hasirc, 2017). Therefore, China's EMI policy follows the international trend of English language education development, promoting universities to gain greater prominence locally and internationally, and it helps to improve the international competitiveness of China's education.

##### 3.1.2 Challenges at the National Level

###### 1) Lack of Specificity in EMI Policy

This top-down policy only covers the types and proportion of courses to be taught in EMI, but does not specify the number of EMI lessons to be allocated to each student, how to ensure that students' English language ability will enable them to attend EMI lessons, the way to determine whether the teachers' qualifications meet the requirements, the appropriateness of the choice of teaching materials, and the overall feasibility of EMI courses (Kirkpatrick, 2017). The number of universities in China is large, and the quality of students and teachers varies widely. The implementation of EMI policy differs from one university to another, with some schools being able to teach in full English, while others have to teach in a mixture of Chinese and English (Feng et al., 2017). Although the policy states that the EMI could begin with English materials instead of English instructions for universities that do not meet the requirements to offer EMI courses, there are no specific criteria to define what is considered to be meeting or not meeting the standards. The problem that may arise is that EMI is being applied without schools adequately assessing whether it is suitable for teaching in English, resulting in a lack of desired outcomes.

Also, the policy does not specify whether the 'E' in EMI refers to standard English or English as lingua franca (ELF). Students and teachers often subconsciously assume that 'E' refers to English that conforms to the native English standard, so they are greatly concerned about English pronunciation, grammar and so on, which will lead to unnecessary additional stress for students in EMI courses (Murata & Iino, 2017). Further, EMI courses in China are mostly taught by local teachers (Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2021), for whom reaching a standard

level of academic English is difficult, so the excessive focus on the standardisation of English can also be stressful for teachers. However, rather than being owned by native speakers (Fang, 2018; Ren, Chen, & Lin, 2016), English can be shared as a medium of communication by people of different nations and ethnicities, so the appropriate interpretation of 'E' is ELF (Murata & Iino, 2017). The purpose of learning English is not only to communicate with native English speakers, but also to communicate with people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a globalised world. For students, the variant of English that conforms to the local discourse may be preferred, according to Qiu and Fang (2022). In their survey, students reported that foreign teachers had a strong native accent compared to Chinese teachers, which made the lecture difficult to understand. A local variant of English would be consistent with the linguistic and cultural conventions of the local students, thus facilitating effective communication in the classroom (Ren, 2014).

## 2) Possibility of Inequality in Educational Resources

Some universities have set thresholds for EMI courses. For example, students with a certain standard of English language achievement are only given access to EMI courses, and the tuition fees for EMI courses are higher than those for Chinese as a medium of instruction (CMI) courses (Hu et al., 2014). In this way, the EMI program benefits an elite group of students who are more proficient in English due to their receiving more educational resources from an early age than their poorer peers, and who can afford the high cost of EMI tuition (Hu et al., 2014). For poor families, however, both low English proficiency and high tuition fees become stumbling blocks that prevent students from further development.

## 3) Possibility of Threats to Traditional Chinese Culture

According to Xu (2004), students' enthusiasm for English may lead them to overlook traditional culture and develop a sense of superiority in their ability to speak English. Also, some Western cultures can subconsciously influence students and have an impact on their thoughts and values despite the role of English as a medium of communication, which can be seen as a negative influence of linguistic imperialism.

### 3.1.3 Findings and Suggestions at a National Level

Based on the preceding discussion, the EMI program as a whole is beneficial to the development of the country, but its efficacy is hardly ideal in every university. The policy can be improved with some additions and adjustments. The policy should be more detailed and set out clearly the criteria for EMI programmes, such as what is the threshold for universities to meet in offering EMI, what is the standard of English proficiency of teachers and what is the English proficiency of students to be able to take EMI programmes. It should be made clear that 'English' is a lingua franca rather than a standard English, so that the stereotype of learning standard English can be changed, and this will also prevent the encroachment of Western culture on Chinese culture by undermining the high status of English in the minds of the public. ELF is appreciated by students in the research by Hino (2017). Hino (2017) conducted a case study of 60 Japanese students in an undergraduate classroom at a Japanese university. The English of the EMI teachers in this study was seen as a model of Japanese English in international communication, and most of the students appreciated this non-native English. The financial sector should increase funding and subsidies for EMI programs so that poorer students can also afford EMI courses, which would increase the equity of the EMI strategy.

### 3.2 From the Students' Perspective

The EMI policy also aims to help students improve their professional knowledge as well as their English proficiency. Under ideal conditions where students have a solid knowledge of English, teachers are competent in English proficiency and teaching skills, and the materials are appropriately selected, EMI courses can act as a catalyst for student learning. In practice, EMI can have a positive impact on some students; however, the large gap between ideal EMI implementation and the actual English proficiency of teachers and students has led to the failure to achieve the intended purpose of EMI in some instances (Hu et al., 2014).

#### 3.2.1 EMI and Students' Academic Performance

Kong and Wei (2019) found that EMI strategies can improve students' nonlanguage subjects. The students interviewed in their study indicated that the EMI approach improved their academic level because they could have access to well-organised first-hand reading materials in English. However, it may be that not all students will improve in academic learning. Students' academic performances may be positively related to their English proficiency (Lin & Lei, 2021), and students with high English proficiency are able to adapt to EMI instruction, whereas students with low English proficiency may perceive EMI to be a negative influence on content learning (Huang & Curle, 2021). For students with proficient English, the English instructions are comprehensible and English provides no barrier to their learning, so the EMI course will not negatively affect their academic

performance. In contrast, EMI courses for students with poor English proficiency are challenging because they have to not only cope with the academic content, but also struggle to understand the teacher's instructions in English. They are therefore at risk of falling behind their classmates due to the language barrier, which may also cause them to suffer from anxiety and low self-esteem. Although the policy of setting English language thresholds for enrolment in EMI courses in some universities may lead to inequity, it is justified from the perspective of ensuring the quality of learning and the psychological well-being of students.

The depth of academic learning content in the EMI classroom may vary depending on the teacher, the students and the content being taught. According to a study by Guo, Tong, Wang, Min and Tang (2018) with sophomore mass media majors, there is more dense cognitive higher-order thinking in the teaching content of EMI strategies compared to CMI, which indicates that EMI lessons are more likely to elicit deeper cognitive thinking from the students. However, it may be different at other universities. Hu and Duan (2018) conducted a study of EMI courses for students of hydraulic engineering, business management and so on and found that teachers mostly ask straightforward questions in class that involve rote memorisation and understanding of the given information that can be answered with simple vocabulary, rather than questions that require students to perform deep critical thinking. The reason for this may be that teachers are concerned that the class will be in silence because students are not able to express their deeper thinking with limited English language skills. These simple questions, however, are not significant for higher education and will not promote independent thinking of students, which will lead to a lack of depth in their content learning.

There is also a correlation between a teacher's English proficiency and the academic achievement of the students. When teachers do not have the ability to express themselves clearly in English, the students' academic performance will inevitably be affected even if they have a good grasp of English. According to Macaro and Han (2020), most teachers do not have EMI program entry training or qualifications, resulting in teachers who do not meet English teaching standards engaging in EMI programs.

### 3.2.2 EMI and Students' English Proficiency

Students in EMI courses have more exposure to English than students in CMI courses, so it is likely that EMI courses have a beneficial effect on students' English language skills. In Wei and Feng's (2017) study, the vast majority of participants believed that the EMI programme would help to improve their English language skills, despite the fact that they had not attended an EMI class. This suggests that students have good expectations of EMI classes. Zhang and Pladevall-Ballester (2021) examined the learning outcomes of EMI lessons for students in film production and international trade courses and found that students showed improvement in productive and receptive vocabulary tasks and writing tasks. The research conducted by Kong and Wei (2019) also reflects the contribution of the EMI programme to students' English language proficiency. They discovered that EMI strategies could improve some aspects of students' English proficiency such as reading, listening and speaking. One participant explained that their listening improved because they had to adapt to the teacher's English accent. However, in Lei and Hu's (2014) study, EMI strategies did not help students much in terms of English proficiency and English use. Some challenges may exist in teaching EMI in China.

First, the teaching model is teacher-dominated with limited time for students to speak (Tong & Tang, 2017) in the typical large-size Chinese university classroom. Also, students tend to remain quiet when the teacher asks questions in English (Hu & Li, 2017), resulting in a lack of teacher-student interaction. Although students are provided with language input in the classroom, language acquisition is achieved through the process of communication, in which both language input and output processes are essential. The teacher-centred teaching model fails to provide students with an authentic language communication environment and deprives them of the opportunity to interact meaningfully with English (Lei & Hu, 2014), making it difficult for students to improve their English proficiency.

Second, in EMI classrooms, teachers tend to use Chinese to deal with content that is difficult to express in English (Tong & Tang, 2017), or use Chinese to supplement explanations after covering complex concepts and terms in English (Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2019). This type of EMI classroom treats English instruction as an external form, with the real teaching proceeding in Chinese, and the students' cognitive understanding, logical analysis and abstract thinking skills will be conducted through their native language (Tong & Tang, 2017). This method of using Chinese to address the difficulties of teaching in English saves time and ensures that students' professional learning will not be compromised by English; however, it provides little help in terms of English language improvement. The content taught in English is simpler and is within the student's ability, so there may be little room for improvement for students. Also, explanations in Chinese may make students dependent on Chinese rather than focusing on explanations in English. The reasons behind such a need for Chinese support in

EMI lessons are the students' insufficient English language skills and inadequate consideration of students' level in the construction of EMI curriculum. Notably, if there are international students in the class, the Chinese explanations may not be helpful to them.

### 3.2.3 Findings and Suggestions from the Students' Perspective

It is thus clear that, due to the limited English proficiency of students and teachers and the large-class teaching mode of Chinese universities, the EMI program in some institutions has not yet achieved the goal of promoting students' professional learning and English learning at the same time, and needs to be further improved in practice. The essence of the EMI program meets the needs of university students because they have high motivation to learn English to get a good job due to the international development of China and the increasing demand for English in the fields of education, business and technology, and so on (Liu, 2007). Students felt that the EMI programme helped them in their job search (Zhu, 2021) and gave them more career options (Huang & Curle, 2021). In the study by Guo et al. (2018), the mentors interviewed indicated that students on EMI courses were more actively engaged in activities and tasks than CMI students. Therefore, students still have positive expectations of the EMI programme. This top-down EMI policy should take into account the needs of students and their learning realities, making improvements to match students' enthusiasm with concrete policy implementation to achieve the most effective and productive results. For example, to adapt the English proficiency of all students to the EMI programme, free extracurricular English electives could be offered to students with poor English proficiency, and Chinese translations of teaching materials could be provided to Chinese students who need them; regulations are needed to measure the qualifications of teachers; and the large classes at Chinese universities could be divided into smaller ones according to students' English levels to increase class interaction.

## 3.3 From the Teachers' Perspective

### 3.3.1 Challenge for Teachers

In EMI courses, teachers should not only have the required English proficiency but also have the skills to teach English, such as being able to encourage more interaction in large size classes to improve students' communication skills, and knowing how to explain complicated specialist knowledge in an easy-to-understand way at the students' level to prevent them from relying on their native language (Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2019). Teachers also have to spend more time on lesson planning (Rose, McKinley, Xu, & Zhou, 2020). Specifically, teachers have to prepare not only the academic content, but also how to teach in English, anticipating terminologies that students may not understand and being prepared to explain them. Teaching in full English may be stressful for teachers, especially for those who have not had professional pre-service training. Also, there is a lack of motivation for teachers to participate in EMI programmes. According to interviews in Macaro and Han's study (2020), teachers in Chinese universities are promoted based on academic publications and grants, so they pay less attention to teaching, let alone EMI courses, which require more effort. This may result in some teachers being inadequately prepared for the EMI programme and therefore teaching less effectively.

### 3.3.2 Suggestions from the Teacher's Perspective

Therefore, the EMI policy should emphasise and strengthen pre-service training for teachers and strictly vet their qualifications for teaching in English. One EMI teacher training method is reflective practice, an approach that allows teachers to enhance their teaching professionalism by systematically reflecting on their teaching practice (Farrell, 2019). Incentives and rewards can be set to encourage teachers to actively participate in EMI courses, such as bonus rules based on the teachers' workload.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper discusses the implementation of EMI policy in China from the perspectives of the nation, students and teachers respectively. The EMI policy would ideally help to promote the country's international development process and is embraced by undergraduates who are motivated to learn English. However, in practice, despite the fact that some students have benefitted from some EMI programmes, there have been many factors that have prevented the idealisation of the EMI programme from achieving its objective of promoting students' academic performance and English language proficiency, and therefore the EMI policy has not been able to fulfil its intended purpose to a certain extent at the national level. This top-down policy needs to be supplemented and improved by taking into account the concrete realities, so that it can better achieve its objectives. In general, strengthening students' English language abilities to enable them to adapt to EMI courses is the foundation of EMI programmes, teacher qualifications are the guarantee of EMI implementation, and there should be greater investment in EMI to ensure the equity of resources.

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## Appendix A

### EMI policy in 2001

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A08/gjs\\_left/s5664/moe\\_1623/201001/t20100129\\_88633.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A08/gjs_left/s5664/moe_1623/201001/t20100129_88633.html)

教育部关于印发《关于加强高等学校本科教学工作提高教学质量的若干意见》的通知

(2001年8月28日)

#### 八、积极推动使用英语等外语进行教学

按照“教育面向现代化、面向世界、面向未来”的要求，为适应经济全球化和科技革命的挑战，**本科教育要创造条件使用英语等外语进行公共课和专业课教学**。对高新技术领域的生物技术、信息技术等专业，以及为适应我国加入 WTO 后需要的金融、法律等专业，更要先行一步，力争三年内，外语教学课程达到所开课程的 5%—10%。暂不具备直接用外语讲授条件的学校、专业，可以对部分课程先实行外语教材、中文授课，分步到位。

#### Translation:

Circular of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of Opinions on Strengthening Undergraduate Teaching Work in Higher Education Institutions to Improve Teaching Quality

(28 August 2001)

#### viii. actively promote the use of foreign languages such as English for teaching

In accordance with the requirement of "education is oriented towards modernization, the world and the future", and in order to meet the challenges of economic globalization and the technological revolution, **undergraduate education should create conditions for teaching public and professional courses in English or other foreign languages**. In order to meet the challenges of economic globalization and the scientific and technological revolution, undergraduate education should create conditions for the use of English and other foreign languages in public and professional courses. Specialties such as biotechnology and information technology in the field of high technology, as well as finance and law to meet the needs of China's accession to the WTO are the focus, and we strive to have foreign language teaching courses reach 5%-10% of the courses offered within three years. For the time being, for those institutions that do not have the conditions to teach directly in foreign languages, they can implement foreign language teaching materials and Chinese teaching for some courses first, and put them in place step by step.

## Appendix B

### Supplement to EMI policy in 2007

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A08/s7056/200702/t20070217\\_79865.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A08/s7056/200702/t20070217_79865.html)

教育部关于进一步深化本科教学改革全面提高教学质量的若干意见

教高〔2007〕2号

#### 10. 进一步推进和实施大学英语教学改革。

要全面推广大学英语教学改革成果，充分运用优质教学软件和教学资源，深化大学英语教学内容和教学方法改革，推动高校建立网络环境下的英语教学新模式，切实促进大学生英语综合应用能力，尤其是听说能力的提高。加强大学英语师资培训，造就一批大学英语教学改革的骨干教师。推进大学英语四、六级考试改革，研究建立四、六级网络考试系统。**鼓励开展双语教学工作，有条件的高等学校要积极聘请国外学者和专家来华从事专业课程的双语教学工作，鼓励和支持留学回国人员用英语讲授专业课程，提高大学生的专业英语水平和能力。**

Translation:

Several Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Further Deepening Undergraduate Teaching Reform and Comprehensively Improving Teaching Quality

No. 2 [2007]

**10. Further promote and implement the reform of university English teaching.**

We should promote the results of the university English teaching reform, make full use of high-quality teaching software and teaching resources, deepen the reform of university English teaching content and teaching methods, promote the establishment of a new model of English teaching in the network environment in universities, and effectively promote the improvement of students' comprehensive English application ability, especially their listening and speaking ability. Strengthen the training of university English teachers and create a group of key teachers for university English teaching reform. Promote the reform of the CET4 and CET6, and explore the establishment of an online examination system for CET4 and CET6. Encourage the development of bilingual teaching work. **Higher education institutions that are in a position to do so should actively employ foreign scholars and experts to engage in bilingual teaching of professional courses in China, and encourage and support those who have studied abroad to teach professional courses in English, so as to improve the professional English standard and ability of university students.**

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