

A Literature-Based Perspective on Learner-Centred EMI Pedagogies in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, universities worldwide, especially in non-native English-speaking countries, have increasingly adopted English Medium Instruction (EMI) as part of their internationalisation strategies. This review paper examines the role of learner-centred pedagogy in EMI higher education programs, focusing on students' experiences and perceptions. A thematic analysis of recent peer-reviewed literature was conducted, with studies selected based on relevance to EMI and learner-centred teaching in higher education. The review identifies key challenges, pedagogical practices, and institutional factors influencing learner-centred EMI. Findings indicate that while learner-centred approaches have the potential to enhance engagement and learning outcomes, their effectiveness is often limited by inconsistent institutional support, cultural mismatches, and language barriers that emphasising that student-centred approaches are critical to EMI success, promoting inclusivity, participation, and meaningful learning. Implications for researchers, policymakers, and educators are discussed, with recommendations for evaluating and improving learner-centred EMI practices in internationalised higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has led to a significant rise in English Medium Instruction (EMI) programs, particularly in countries where English is not the first language (De Wit, 2023). Recent data show that 126 countries now offer internationalized higher education programs in English, reflecting a global trend toward cross-border academic collaboration and competitiveness (Deardorff, 2023). EMI refers to the use of English to teach academic subjects other than English itself (Niazi et al., 2023), and its expansion has created both opportunities and challenges for students and institutions. The effectiveness of EMI programs depends not only on language proficiency but also on the pedagogical approaches employed.

Untrained or inadequately prepared faculty can hinder student learning, underscoring the need for professional development and certification in EMI pedagogy (Kim, 2020; Iyobe, 2017; Yu, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2023). As universities increasingly adopt EMI, attention has been shifted toward learner-centred teaching methods, which prioritize student engagement, autonomy, and critical thinking. However, the

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literature reveals a gap in understanding how learner-centred pedagogy functions within EMI contexts and how it addresses the unique challenges faced by students. This review aims to synthesize recent research on learner-centred EMI pedagogy in higher education, with a focus on student experiences, institutional factors, and the implications for policy and practice. By addressing this gap, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of effective teaching and learning in internationalized higher education settings.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this review is to critically examine the implementation and conceptualization of learner-centred pedagogy within EMI in higher education. The review seeks to:

- Analyse how EMI is conceptualized across non-native English-speaking contexts.
- Examine students' experiences and perceptions in EMI classroom settings.
- Reflect on the implications of policy and pedagogy for learner-centred EMI practices.

Research Questions

- What challenges do students face when enrolled in EMI programs in non-native English-speaking countries?
- How do students perceive and experience learner-centred pedagogy in EMI settings, particularly regarding barriers to content learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is structured thematically to provide a foundation for understanding learner-centred pedagogy in EMI higher education. It is divided into three sub-sections: (1) the theoretical foundations of learner-centered pedagogy, (2) the application of this pedagogy in EMI contexts at macro, meso, and micro levels, and (3) gaps and limitations in the existing literature.

Theoretical Foundations of Learner-Centred Pedagogy

Learner-centred pedagogy represents a shift from traditional lecture-based instruction toward a model that emphasizes the active participation, needs, and voices of students. Grounded in constructivist learning theories, it encourages autonomy, inquiry-based learning, and collaborative engagement (Baeten et al., 2012; Wright, 2011). Chickering and Gamson (1987) outlined principles such as student-faculty interaction, cooperation among students, and prompt feedback as essential to effective, student-focused learning. In higher education, learner-centred approaches have been linked to increased motivation, academic engagement, and critical thinking skills (Merrill, 2002; Ramsden, 2003). These pedagogical strategies promote deeper understanding by encouraging students to take ownership of their learning, connect new knowledge to existing frameworks, and apply it in real-world contexts.

Learner-Centred Pedagogy in EMI Contexts

The integration of learner-centred pedagogy in EMI environments presents unique challenges and opportunities. Research shows that EMI classrooms vary widely in instructional quality, often influenced by institutional policy, teacher preparedness, and student diversity (Macaro et al., 2020; Curle et al., 2020).

Macro Level – Institutional and Policy Structures

At the macro level, universities often adopt EMI as a strategic move to increase global visibility, but without sufficient attention to pedagogy or language support (Ismailov et al., 2021). Curriculum frameworks may lack alignment with learner-centred principles or fail to provide resources for effective faculty development. Without institutional support, EMI implementation tends to be inconsistent and poorly integrated into existing teaching cultures.

Meso Level – Instructional Practices

At the classroom level, the gap between intended learner-centred goals and actual practice becomes apparent. Teachers frequently rely on lecture-based methods due to time constraints, linguistic barriers, or lack of training in EMI pedagogy (Richards & Pun, 2023). However, studies also document successful cases where educators use interactive strategies such as group discussions, problem-based tasks, and formative assessment to engage students in EMI environments (Fang & Liu, 2020).

Micro Level – Student Experiences

At the micro level, learner experiences reveal both the benefits and limitations of EMI. Students report feeling excluded or disadvantaged when instruction is not adapted to their linguistic needs. However, those in learner-centred EMI classrooms express higher levels of satisfaction, confidence, and academic engagement (Rowland & Murray, 2020). Personalized feedback, peer interaction, and language scaffolding are especially valued by students navigating EMI contexts.

Gaps and Limitations in Existing Literature

Although research on EMI has grown, the literature is often fragmented and focused on language outcomes, teacher perceptions, or institutional policy. Few studies synthesize qualitative findings to explore how pedagogy affects student learning in EMI settings. Existing reviews tend to overlook the pedagogical dimension or treat it as secondary to policy and linguistic factors (Macaro et al., 2018). Furthermore, many studies are context-specific, limiting generalizability across global EMI implementations. The need for a systematic thematic synthesis that foregrounds learner experiences and pedagogical strategies remains urgent. This review aims to fill that gap by identifying key themes that define learner-centred EMI practices in diverse higher education environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative systematic review approach. The goal is to synthesize peer-reviewed research exploring learner-centred pedagogical practices within English Medium Instruction (EMI) in higher education. A thematic synthesis method was used to analyse qualitative findings and develop conceptual themes grounded in the data.

Research Design

This review employs a qualitative review design to ensure transparency, rigor, and replication. The process involved identifying, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing qualitative research on EMI and learner-centred pedagogy. Thematic synthesis, as proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008), was used to extract and organize recurring insights across studies.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

The literature search was conducted primarily through Google Scholar, supplemented by backward citation tracing from key EMI review articles. A combination of keywords and Boolean operators were used:

- “English Medium Instruction” OR “EMI”
- “learner-centred pedagogy” OR “student-centred learning”
- “qualitative research”
- “higher education”

The search was restricted to articles published between 2010 and 2025 in peer-reviewed academic journals. The initial search yielded over 250 studies.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied:

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria Type	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference proceedings, dissertations, or editorials
Language	Published in English	Non-English publications
Publication Year	Between 2010 and 2025	Published before 2010 or after 2025
Context	Focus on higher education EMI (English Medium Instruction) contexts	Studies focused only on primary or secondary education
Research Design	Qualitative or mixed-method studies with qualitative data	Quantitative-only studies without thematic or qualitative data
Content Focus	Discussion of pedagogy, classroom practices, or student experiences	Studies lacking focus on pedagogy, classroom practices, or student experiences

After screening abstracts and full texts, 40 studies were selected for final analysis.

Data Analysis and Thematic Synthesis

A three-stage thematic synthesis process was followed:

- Initial coding of findings and discussion sections from each study
- Development of descriptive themes by grouping similar codes
- Generation of analytical themes that directly addressed the study's research questions

All studies were coded manually to retain closeness to the original language and context. Recurrent themes were then structured under five major thematic domains, aligned with student experiences and pedagogical effectiveness in EMI classrooms.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

To ensure trustworthiness, a clear protocol for article selection, thematic coding, and analysis were followed. However, the review has limitations: the use of a single primary search engine (Google Scholar) may limit the scope. Only English-language studies were included. Findings rely on secondary data and reflect the original authors' interpretations. Despite these limitations, the review offers a rigorous synthesis of learner-centred pedagogical practices within EMI environments.

RESULTS & THEMATIC FINDINGS

This section presents the major findings from the thematic synthesis of 40 peer-reviewed qualitative studies on learner-centred pedagogy in EMI higher education. Five overarching themes emerged, reflecting the core experiences and perceptions of students in EMI classrooms. These themes align with the research questions and are grounded in student-reported challenges, pedagogical practices, and institutional contexts.

Linguistic Challenges in EMI Classrooms

Language barriers consistently emerged as a dominant theme across all studies. Students frequently reported difficulty understanding lectures, expressing themselves clearly in academic writing, and engaging in classroom discussions due to limited English proficiency (Rowland & Murray, 2020; Soruç & Griffiths, 2018). These challenges often led to anxiety, reduced participation, and diminished academic confidence. In many cases, students relied on code-switching, peer translations, or online tools to process

content. However, the effectiveness of these strategies varied. Instructors' language proficiency also played a significant role in student comprehension; when faculty struggled with fluency or pronunciation, clarity suffered (Studer, 2015). While some institutions offered English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support, many students found such programs too generic or disconnected from disciplinary content (Galloway, 2020). The mismatch between language ability and course requirements often hindered deeper cognitive engagement.

Instructional Practices and Learner Engagement

Instructional methods had a significant impact on students' learning experiences. In teacher-centred EMI classrooms, students described the learning environment as rigid, lecture-driven, and lacking in interactivity. They felt disengaged and often hesitated to ask questions or contribute to discussions (Chalapati, 2018; Hua, 2019). In contrast, learner-centred EMI classrooms were associated with higher satisfaction, increased participation, and deeper comprehension. Students valued interactive activities, group projects, and discussion-based learning that allowed them to apply concepts collaboratively (Fang & Liu, 2020). They also appreciated instructors who offered scaffolding, formative assessment, and clear explanations tailored to language needs (Richards & Pun, 2023). However, such practices were not consistently applied. Many faculty members lacked training in EMI-specific pedagogy and struggled to balance content delivery with linguistic accommodation.

Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Multicultural Classrooms

Students in internationalized EMI environments often experienced cross-cultural communication challenges. International students reported feelings of isolation and exclusion when local peers were unwelcoming or when group work lacked meaningful interaction (Lan, 2020). Cultural norms around participation varied significantly. In some cultures, asking questions or challenging instructors is discouraged, which led students to remain silent even when confused (Yu, 2017). Faculty awareness of these cultural differences was found to be crucial in fostering inclusive and respectful classrooms. Successful EMI classrooms implemented intercultural training, encouraged peer mentorship, and created safe spaces for dialogue, allowing diverse students to express themselves without fear of judgment.

Cognitive Engagement and Academic Performance

Students reported a range of cognitive difficulties in EMI settings, particularly when faced with unfamiliar terminology, abstract concepts, or fast-paced lectures. Many relied on rote memorization instead of meaningful learning, especially when assessments emphasized recall over application (Henry & Goddard, 2015). However, in learner-centered environments that encouraged critical thinking, peer explanation, and project-based learning, students felt more confident and better able to understand and retain content. These strategies supported metacognitive development and transfer of knowledge across disciplines. Cognitive engagement was enhanced when instructors provided pre-reading materials, visual aids, and multimodal resources, helping students navigate complex content more effectively.

Institutional Structures and Policy Gaps

At the institutional level, several systemic issues affected the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy in EMI. Students criticized inconsistent policies, poorly designed curricula, and limited academic support as barriers to effective learning (Sibomana, 2016; Sung, 2017). Many institutions introduced EMI without preparing faculty through appropriate training or offering contextualized language support. Students also felt that EAP programs, where available, were disconnected from disciplinary content and rarely involved collaboration with subject-matter instructors. On the other hand, universities that invested in integrated EMI frameworks, faculty development programs, and cross-departmental collaboration saw more positive student outcomes and increased satisfaction with EMI delivery.

Discussion

This section critically interprets the thematic findings in relation to the research questions and broader

literature. It highlights how learner-centred pedagogy influences student outcomes in EMI classrooms and discusses the implications for pedagogy, policy, and future research.

Addressing Research Question 1

The review reveals that students in EMI settings face complex and multi-layered challenges chiefly related to language proficiency, instructional delivery, and cultural integration. These experiences are not uniform; they vary based on students' academic preparedness, cultural backgrounds, and institutional support structures. Linguistic barriers such as difficulty understanding lectures and expressing academic arguments were commonly reported (Soruç & Griffiths, 2018). These challenges, coupled with traditional lecture-based instruction, often led to disengagement and lower academic confidence. However, where EMI was supported by clear communication, interactive teaching, and language-sensitive pedagogy, students expressed a greater sense of inclusion and academic agency (Rowland & Murray, 2020). Socio-cultural challenges such as differing participation norms and lack of intercultural communication also impacted student engagement. These findings align with prior studies that emphasize the need for culturally responsive pedagogy in internationalized classrooms (Kuteeva, 2020).

Addressing Research Question 2

Students in learner-centered EMI classrooms reported more positive experiences than those in teacher-centered environments. Interactive teaching methods, formative feedback, group-based learning, and opportunities for dialogue helped students develop not only content knowledge but also confidence in using English academically (Fang & Liu, 2020; Wright, 2011). In contrast, EMI courses that relied heavily on one-way lectures and summative assessments were seen as exclusionary and difficult to navigate. These courses often failed to support students' dual need for language development and content mastery. Interestingly, students employed coping strategies such as peer translation, translanguaging, and online resources to bridge the instructional gaps. This demonstrates the importance of learner agency, but also reveals a pedagogical vacuum that forces students to compensate for ineffective teaching.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

The findings support existing educational theories that link student engagement to autonomy, scaffolding, and active learning (Baeten et al., 2012; Ramsden, 2003). In EMI contexts, these pedagogical principles are not just optional they are essential for academic access and equity. Learner-centred pedagogy in EMI serves as a bridge between language acquisition and content understanding. Its absence disproportionately affects linguistically and culturally diverse learners, undermining the inclusivity goals of internationalization. Thus, EMI implementation must go beyond language policy to prioritize inclusive teaching and learning practices.

Institutional and Policy Implications

Institutional commitment is critical to the success of learner-centred EMI. Universities need to provide faculty with EMI specific pedagogical training, integrate language support with subject teaching, ensure that EMI policies align with learners' academic and linguistic realities, foster intercultural understanding across the institution. EMI should be framed not just as a medium of instruction but as a pedagogical reform that places the student at the centre of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

CONCLUSION

This study conducted a qualitative systematic review to explore the intersection of learner-centred pedagogy and English Medium Instruction (EMI) in higher education. The thematic synthesis of 40 peer-reviewed studies revealed five core themes that shape students' experiences in EMI classrooms: linguistic challenges, instructional practices, socio-cultural dynamics, cognitive engagement, and institutional structures. The findings demonstrate that learner-centered approaches are essential for supporting students in EMI contexts. When EMI is implemented without pedagogical support, students

experience isolation, confusion, and disengagement. However, classrooms that prioritize student interaction, formative feedback, collaborative learning, and scaffolding foster deeper engagement and improved learning outcomes. In short, pedagogy matters just as much as language in EMI success. This review contributes to the growing body of EMI scholarship by highlighting the need for context-sensitive, student-focused pedagogical practices. It also reinforces that EMI should be treated as a comprehensive educational reform one that addresses language, instruction, curriculum, and student well-being in an integrated manner.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. The literature search was conducted primarily through Google Scholar, which may have limited access to subscription-based databases. Only English-language studies were included, potentially excluding important findings from non-English-speaking contexts. The analysis was based solely on qualitative studies, without integrating quantitative evidence that might strengthen generalizability. Despite these limitations, the study offers a rigorous thematic synthesis that captures student voices and reveals key pedagogical concerns in EMI environments.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should explore learner-centred EMI practices across different academic disciplines and cultural regions. Investigate the long-term impact of EMI on academic outcomes and employability. Examine how faculty development programs influence pedagogical shifts in EMI. Integrate both qualitative and quantitative evidence to broaden the scope of EMI research by deepening our understanding of pedagogy in EMI, future research can help build more inclusive, effective, and sustainable educational models in global higher education.

Competing Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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