



A Critical Review of English-Medium Instruction in Thailand: Emergence, Conceptualization, Implementation, and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Driven by the forces of globalization, internationalization agendas, ASEAN regional integration, and increasing competition within higher education institutions, English-medium instruction (EMI) has expanded rapidly across Thai universities. Despite its growing prominence, EMI implementation in Thailand remains conceptually contested and pedagogically uneven. This article examines the emergence, conceptualization, and implementation of EMI in Thai higher education by synthesizing contemporary research on policy, pedagogy, language, and assessment. It then identifies five persistent conceptual ambiguities that result in EMI development, including the conflation of EMI with English language teaching, the belief that native-like English proficiency is necessary for EMI teaching, the assumption that

	EMI automatically improves students' English proficiency, the perception that EMI guarantees educational quality and internationalization, and the belief that effective EMI requires English-only instruction. The review reveals a range of implementation challenges, including uneven English proficiency among students and lecturers, limited pedagogical preparation, assessment and curriculum tensions, institutional resource disparities, and the absence of a coherent national EMI framework. Taken together, these issues reflect a broader policy–practice disconnect in which internationalization goals often exceed local institutional capacity and classroom realities. Drawing on comparative insights from Taiwan's Bilingual 2030 initiative, the article argues that sustainable EMI development requires moving beyond monolingual and deficit-oriented assumptions toward multilingual, context-sensitive approaches that integrate language support, disciplinary learning, and educational equity. The paper concludes with policy, pedagogical, institutional, and research recommendations for strengthening EMI implementation in Thai higher education. Keywords: EMI, EMI challenges, EMI implementation, Thai higher education, internationalization
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Introduction

The landscape of global higher education (HE) has undergone substantial transformation during the last three decades, characterized by the rapid expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI). A major catalyst for this development was the Bologna Process, formally launched in 1999 to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Its initiative aimed to enhance academic mobility, institutional cooperation, degree comparability, and the international competitiveness of European universities (Caddick, 2008; Coleman, 2006). Because universities in Europe increasingly sought to attract international students and participate in global academic networks, English emerged as the dominant language for teaching, research, and cross-border collaboration. As a result, EMI became closely associated with broader internationalization agendas and was widely adopted across European HE systems (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014).

The expansion of programs taught in English in Europe subsequently influenced HE systems in many other regions, including Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East (Kirkpatrick, 2018; Tsou & Baker, 2021). This global growth has been driven by broader socioeconomic forces, including globalization, internationalization, student and staff mobility, and

competition within international university ranking systems (Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Dearden, 2018). As a result, EMI has increasingly been promoted as a strategy for enhancing institutional visibility, graduate employability, international competitiveness, and participation in global academic networks (Galloway & Rose, 2021; Rose et al., 2021).

EMI expansion seems to be prominent in Asia. Governments and universities across East and South Asia have incorporated EMI as part of broader national agendas related to HE reform, economic modernization, and internationalization (Barnawi, 2023; Galloway et al., 2017; Hamid et al., 2013). In East Asian countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, EMI has been linked to national strategies aimed at strengthening university rankings, increasing English proficiency, and enhancing global competitiveness (Galloway & Ruegg, 2022; Lei & Hu, 2024). In South Asian contexts, including Bangladesh and Pakistan, EMI has additionally been associated with aspirations for social mobility, access to global knowledge, and participation in international educational and economic networks (Bolton et al., 2022). Consequently, in East Asian context, English has increasingly shifted to function as a medium for teaching disciplinary content (Curle et al., 2024).

Within Southeast Asia, EMI expansion has been further reinforced by regional integration initiatives associated with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), where English functions as the principal working language (Kirkpatrick, 2018). Many countries in the region, including Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand, have expanded EMI provision to support internationalization, labor mobility, graduate employability, and regional competitiveness. Across the Southeast Asia region, EMI has become increasingly visible in bilingual, international, and English-medium programs, particularly in disciplines such as science, technology, business, medicine, and international studies (Galloway & Rose, 2021; Sahan et al., 2022).

Thailand presents a distinctive context for EMI development. Unlike several neighboring countries, Thailand was never colonized by a Western power. The Thai language has historically maintained a dominant position within government, administration, and formal education. For much of the twentieth century, English was taught primarily as a foreign language subject rather than used as a medium of instruction.

However, the early twenty-first century witnessed significant changes in Thailand's educational and economic policies. National initiatives such as Thailand 4.0 and Education 4.0 emphasized the need to enhance national competitiveness, strengthen graduate employability, and increase participation in global knowledge economies. In response, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) has promoted internationalization across the HE sectors. Unlike some countries that have

adopted more centralized approaches as in Vietnam and Taiwan, however, EMI in Thailand has developed through diverse institutional models, including International Programs, English Programs (EP), bilingual programs, and discipline-specific English-medium tracks (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017; Sahan et al., 2022). As a result, considerable variation exists in how EMI is interpreted, organized, and implemented across Thai HE institutions (Liyanage & Phantharakphong, 2023).

Despite its rapid expansion, important questions remain regarding how EMI is defined, understood, and operationalized within the Thai context. The diversity of EMI provision, together with continuing debates concerning language, pedagogy, assessment, and internationalization, suggests the need for a more critical examination of its development and implementation. Accordingly, this article critically reviews the emergence, conceptualization, and implementation of EMI in Thailand with the aim of clarifying its evolving forms, examining assumptions, and offering practical implications.

While this review seeks to challenge several common assumptions surrounding EMI, it does not assume that EMI is inherently beneficial or universally applicable. Rather, the review adopts a critical perspective that recognizes EMI as a complex and context-dependent educational approach whose effectiveness depends on sociolinguistic, institutional, and pedagogical conditions. In the Thai context, where English functions primarily as a foreign language and opportunities for authentic language use outside educational settings remain limited, some concerns commonly framed as conceptual ambiguities may also reflect legitimate stakeholder expectations and practical challenges. Accordingly, this review aims not only to interrogate oversimplified assumptions about EMI but also to examine the extent to which dominant EMI models align with the realities of Thai higher education.

Review Methodology

This article adopts a narrative critical review approach to synthesize and evaluate the development, conceptualization, implementation, and challenges of EMI in Thai HE. Although the review aims to provide a critical and interpretive analysis rather than a fully systematic synthesis, explicit procedures were employed to enhance transparency and rigor.

Relevant literature was identified through searches conducted between January and May 2026 using major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, and ThaiJO (Thai Journals Online). Additional sources were identified through backward and forward citation tracking of key publications.

Search terms included combinations of keywords such as “English-medium instruction,” “EMI,” “Thailand,” “Thai higher education,” “internationalization,” “bilingual education,” “English programs,” “translanguaging,” “EMI policy,” and “EMI challenges.” The inclusion criteria comprised: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, policy reports, and official institutional documents; (b) publications focusing on EMI in higher education; (c) studies addressing the Thai context or offering comparative insights relevant to Thailand; and (d) publications written in English or Thai between 2000 and 2026. Seminal works published before 2000 were included where necessary to provide historical or conceptual foundations.

Sources were excluded if they: (a) focused exclusively on primary or secondary education; (b) examined English language teaching without explicit connections to EMI; (c) lacked sufficient methodological detail; or (d) addressed contexts with limited relevance to higher education in Thailand.

The selected literature was analyzed thematically, with particular attention to four areas: (1) the emergence and drivers of EMI in Thailand, (2) conceptualizations and models of EMI, (3) implementation challenges and stakeholder experiences, and (4) policy and pedagogical implications. The review also drew upon official policy documents and institutional vision statements to contextualize EMI development within broader internationalization agendas.

Understanding EMI: Definitions, CLIL and EMI, and Major EMI Programs

Prior to reviewing the conceptualization and implementation of EMI in Thailand, it is imperative to establish a clear understanding of EMI, particularly its definitions, its relationship with CLIL, and the major models through which it has been conceptualized and implemented.

Defining EMI

Over the past two decades, policy documents and institutional strategic plans suggest that EMI has become one of the most influential developments in HE worldwide, particularly in regions seeking to enhance internationalization, graduate employability, and global competitiveness (Galloway et al., 2017; Rose et al., 2021). Despite its growing prominence, EMI remains a contested concept, with ongoing debate regarding its purposes, pedagogical assumptions, and relationship to language learning.

One of the most widely cited definitions describes 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” (Macaro, 2018, p. 19). This definition emphasizes the language of instruction while distinguishing EMI from foreign language teaching. However, critics argue that such definitions may oversimplify the complex linguistic realities of EMI classrooms, where multiple languages are frequently used to facilitate learning, interaction, and disciplinary understanding (García & Wei, 2014; Tai & Wei, 2021). Therefore, McKinley (2025) tried to distinguish EMI as an intentional policy decision to shift the medium of instruction from local L1 to English. He defines EMI as “the teaching of academic content through English in settings where other languages have traditionally been used as mediums of instruction with an intention, stated or unstated, of developing learner’s skills for using English for specific academic purposes.” (p. 2). This definition allows for a more focused examination of key issues surrounding EMI in HE, particularly those related to both language and content outcomes (Rose, Sahan, Wei, Aizawa, Zhou, & Shepard, 2026).

A key feature distinguishing EMI from other bilingual or language-integrated approaches is that EMI is primarily content-driven rather than language-driven. The primary objective is the teaching of disciplinary knowledge through English, although language development may occur simultaneously (Macaro et al., 2018). In practice, however, the separation between content and language is often less clear-cut, particularly in multilingual contexts where students’ access to disciplinary knowledge is closely tied to their linguistic resources and communicative competence (Rose et al., 2021). Consequently, recent studies increasingly conceptualize EMI not simply as the use of English as a medium of instruction, but as a multilingual and context-dependent educational practice shaped by local linguistic, institutional, and sociocultural conditions (Dafouz & Smit, 2020; Tai & Wei, 2021).

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and EMI

The rapid global expansion of EMI has created conceptual overlap with other content-language integrated approaches, particularly Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Although both approaches involve the use of English within academic learning environments, they emerged from different traditions and pursue different educational objectives. CLIL developed within European school education during the 1990s as part of multilingual education policies promoting bilingualism and intercultural competence (Coyle et al., 2010). It was designed as a dual-focused approach in which content learning and language development are integrated within the curriculum. Consequently, language objectives are explicitly incorporated into

teaching, learning, and assessment, and linguistic development is systematically scaffolded alongside content mastery.

In contrast, EMI emerged primarily from HE internationalization agendas rather than language education policy (Galloway & Rose, 2021). EMI generally prioritizes disciplinary content learning, while language development is often treated as secondary or assumed to occur through exposure to EMI (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020; Rose & McKinley, 2018). Unlike CLIL, EMI typically does not include explicit language-learning objectives, nor are content lecturers expected to provide systematic language instruction (Block & Moncada-Comas, 2019; Macaro, 2018). As a result, EMI is commonly conceptualized as a content-driven rather than language-oriented approach.

Despite these differences, the distinction between EMI and CLIL is not always clear in practice, particularly in Asian HE contexts where universities often expect EMI programs to simultaneously deliver disciplinary knowledge and improve students' English proficiency (Galloway & Rose, 2021; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2023). This has led some scholars to question whether the separation between content and language remains pedagogically sustainable, especially in EFL settings where students often require substantial linguistic support to engage effectively with academic discourse (Curle et al., 2024; Rose & McKinley, 2018).

Major EMI Programs

The varying definitions of EMI highlight its conceptual complexity and demonstrate that it should not be viewed as a fixed or standardized construct. Rather, EMI is a flexible and context-sensitive educational phenomenon shaped by institutional priorities, disciplinary demands, sociolinguistic conditions, and available resources (Curle et al., 2024). Consequently, its implementation varies considerably across institutions, disciplines, and national contexts.

This diversity is reflected in the distinction between full and partial EMI. In full EMI programs, English functions as the principal language of instruction across most aspects of teaching and learning, including lectures, textbooks, classroom interaction, assignments, presentations, and examinations. Such programs are commonly associated with international degree programs, international colleges, and globally oriented universities seeking to attract international students and strengthen institutional internationalization profiles (Rose et al., 2021). However, even within officially full EMI programs, classroom communication is often more flexible than policy descriptions suggest. Lecturers and students may strategically draw on the first language (L1) to explain difficult concepts, clarify technical

terminology, and facilitate classroom interaction (Curle et al., 2024; Galloway & Rose, 2021). As a result, full EMI rarely represents completely monolingual classroom communication in practice, particularly in multilingual educational environments.

In contrast, partial EMI programs combine English-medium and local-language instruction in different ways. English may be used for lectures, textbooks, assignments, or examinations, while classroom explanations and interaction occur partly in the local language. Such models have become increasingly common because they allow institutions to balance internationalization goals with students' linguistic readiness and local classroom realities (Galloway & Sahan, 2021).

The distinction between full and partial EMI is further influenced by factors such as classroom language flexibility, students' linguistic backgrounds, and the level of language support provided. Even in full EMI programs, lecturers may alternate between English and the local language in response to students' comprehension needs, disciplinary complexity, or classroom interactional needs. Therefore, despite attempts to distinguish between these forms of instruction, the boundary remains blurred, as EMI exists along a continuum of language use rather than as a set of discrete categories, reflecting the inherently dynamic and multilingual nature of classroom practice.

Emergence of EMI in Thailand

As in many other Asian contexts, the expansion of EMI in Thailand has been shaped by both external pressures and local educational realities. The emergence of EMI in Thailand developed gradually through the interaction of historical developments in English language education, broader processes of globalization and internationalization, and changing institutional and economic conditions within higher education. Understanding how EMI emerged in Thailand therefore requires attention to three interrelated dimensions: the historical development of English language education, the major forces driving EMI expansion, and the contemporary scenario in which EMI programs operate.

Historical Development of English Education in Thailand

To fully appreciate the current state of English education in Thailand, it is essential to examine the historical evolution of English language education in the country. English exposure in Thailand began during the mid-nineteenth century under the modernization initiatives of King Rama IV and King Rama V. At that time, English was primarily associated with diplomacy,

elite education, and access to Western knowledge rather than mass education or classroom communication (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). English learning was largely restricted to members of the royal court, aristocracy, and diplomats, reflecting its strategic role in maintaining international relations and national sovereignty.

Over time, English became increasingly institutionalized within the national education system. The National Education Scheme of 1960 established English as a compulsory foreign language from the upper elementary level (K4-6) and positioned it as an important tool for national development and modernization. Despite its growing importance, Thai remained the dominant medium of instruction throughout public education, reflecting its central role in administration, nation-building, and cultural identity (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017; Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). During this period, English instruction was largely influenced by grammar-translation approaches, with relatively limited emphasis on communication and interaction.

A major shift occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s following the enactment of the National Education Act of 1999. The reform promoted greater curricular flexibility and contributed to the expansion of English-focused educational programs, including International Programs (IP), English Programs (EP) and Mini-English Programs (MEP) in both public and private schools.

Drivers behind EMI Adoption in Thai Higher Education

The adoption of EMI in Thailand has been shaped by a combination of global, regional, institutional, and economic forces. As universities increasingly operate within internationalized knowledge economies, they face growing pressure to enhance global visibility, improve rankings, attract international students, and strengthen participation in international academic networks (Galloway et al., 2017; Liyanage & Phantharakphong, 2023; Office of the Education Council, 2023; Rose et al., 2021). The following sections discuss the major forces underpinning the adoption of EMI in Thai higher education, with particular attention to globalization and internationalization, ASEAN and regional economic pressures, and institutional prestige and marketization.

Globalization and Internationalization

The contemporary push for EMI across Thai universities is heavily driven by global metrics of institutional status. In an era where global university rankings heavily influence a school's reputation and funding

opportunities, Thai institutions are under intense pressure to improve their internationalization scores. Because these indexing agencies assess institutions based on their percentages of international faculty, international student enrollment, and cross-border research outputs—all of which require English—EMI has become the primary mechanism used by university administrations to signal global relevance (Tipprachaban, 2022). In this regard, EMI in Thailand functions not only as a teaching approach, but also as an institutional strategy for visibility and prestige (Liyanage & Phantharakphong, 2023).

This emphasis on internationalization is reflected in national policy documents. Thailand's 20-Year National Strategy (2018–2037) identifies the development of globally competitive human capital and enhanced international collaboration as key national priorities. Similarly, MHESI has emphasized the internationalization of HE through policies designed to increase international student enrolment, strengthen global research partnerships, and improve universities' international visibility (Office of the Education Council, 2023).

At the institutional level, major Thai universities have explicitly incorporated internationalization and English-medium provision into their strategic plans. For example, Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University identify international partnerships, international student recruitment, and English-medium curricula as central mechanisms for enhancing global competitiveness. These institutional vision statements demonstrate that EMI is increasingly embedded within broader organizational strategies rather than functioning solely as a pedagogical innovation.

ASEAN and Regional Economic Pressures

Regional integration has played a crucial role in strengthening the perceived importance of English in Thailand. The formal establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 significantly altered regional labor market requirements. With Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter identifying English as the sole official working language of the bloc, the Thai policymakers and universities have increasingly viewed English proficiency as important for regional participation and labor-market competitiveness (Galloway & Sahan, 2021). Consequently, EMI was framed as a direct policy intervention to prepare a workforce capable of navigating multinational corporate environments, participating in regional supply chains, and communicating across borders with regional neighbors.

Institutional Prestige and Marketization

Amid severe demographic declines across Thailand—characterized by a rapidly aging society and plummeting birth rates—many universities have faced pressure related to student recruitment and long-term institutional sustainability (Sinlarat, 2017). This demographic reality has accelerated the marketization of HE, where university increasingly compete for student enrollment, institutional visibility, and international reputation. Institutions use the branding of “International Programs” as a premium marketing strategy to attract affluent domestic students who might otherwise study abroad. In other words, EMI may function not only as an educational initiative, but also as a market-oriented linked to tuition revenue, institutional reputation, and competition for students (Tipprachaban, 2022). By commodifying EMI, universities can justify charging tuition fees that are often three to five times higher than standard Thai-medium programs, turning English into an essential source of institutional revenue. This trend reflects neoliberal developments in HE, where internationalization and English-medium education are often tied to institutional prestige, market competitiveness, and revenue generation (Block & Moncada-Comas, 2019).

Evidence from university marketing materials and international program websites further suggests that EMI is frequently positioned as a marker of educational quality, employability, and international status. International colleges and English-medium degree programs commonly highlight opportunities for global careers, international mobility, and participation in multinational workplaces. Such discourses indicate that EMI has become closely associated with institutional branding and market differentiation within Thailand’s increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

Current Scenario of EMI in Thailand

The current scenario of EMI in Thai HE is highly fragmented, reflecting considerable variation across institutional types and tiers. Rather than operating under a unified national model, EMI has developed through diverse institutional initiatives shaped by differences in resources, internationalization strategies, student recruitment goals, and local capacity for English-medium teaching (Tipprachaban, 2022).

At one end of the spectrum, elite public universities and established international colleges operate relatively well-resourced EMI programs characterized by selective admissions, internationally oriented curricula, and higher proportions of foreign-trained or international faculty (Tipprachaban, 2022). These programs are closely linked to institutional goals concerning

international visibility, student recruitment, and global competitiveness. Students entering such programs often possess stronger English proficiency due to prior exposure to English-medium education.

In contrast, many regional public universities and private institutions have expanded EMI provision under more constrained conditions. These programs frequently face shortages of EMI-prepared lecturers, limited language-support services, and lower student English proficiency levels. Such disparities reflect broader inequalities within the Thai education system (Tang, 2020; Wilang & Nupong, 2022).

A further challenge is the disconnect between English language preparation in schools and the linguistic demands of EMI programs in HE. While graduates from international schools and English Programs may enter university with adequate academic English skills, many students from mainstream public schools struggle to adapt to the intensive reading, writing, and communication demands of EMI courses (Tang, 2020). Similarly, Sameephet et al.(2025) reported that students in East Asian EMI contexts, including Thailand, frequently experienced anxiety, comprehension difficulties, and reduced classroom participation when language demands exceed their proficiency levels. Consequently, the current EMI landscape in Thailand remains characterized by significant institutional disparities and uneven student preparedness, creating ongoing challenges for equitable and effective implementation.

Examining Common Conceptual Ambiguities about EMI in Thailand

The rapid expansion of EMI in Thailand has been accompanied by several conceptual ambiguities concerning the role of English, language learning, pedagogy, and internationalization in HE. These conceptual ambiguities have an impact on institutional decision-making, curriculum design, classroom interaction, and perceptions of educational quality. The following section examines five persistent conceptual ambiguities that result in diverse implementations of EMI in Thailand and discusses their implications for teaching and learning.

Conceptual Ambiguity 1: EMI Equals English Language Teaching

A widespread conceptual ambiguity in Thai HE is the conflation of EMI with English Language Teaching (ELT). Although EMI is fundamentally intended to teach disciplinary content through English rather than English itself, many institutions in both Asian and European contexts continue to assume that EMI courses will automatically improve students' English proficiency, even when language learning is not explicitly integrated

into the curriculum (Galloway & Rose, 2021; Rose et al., 2021). The primary objective of EMI is therefore to facilitate parents' expectations and students' understanding of disciplinary knowledge rather than provide formal language instruction.

The problem arises when this content-oriented purpose conflicts with institutional expectations and public perceptions. In Thailand, EMI is often promoted as a dual-benefit model capable of simultaneously delivering subject knowledge and improving English proficiency despite the absence of explicit language-learning outcomes, academic literacy support, or language assessment criteria (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2023; Sameephet et al., 2025). This ambiguity is further reinforced by the close association between EMI and international programs, which frequently position English improvement as a central objective (Galloway & Sahan, 2021; Tipprachaban, 2022).

As a result, content lecturers are often expected to address students' language difficulties while teaching complex disciplinary concepts. Meenasantirak and Chaiyasuk (2024) and Kanoksilapatham (2025) found that many Thai EMI lecturers were uncertain whether their primary role was to teach content, language, or both, particularly when students' English proficiency varied considerably and institutional language support remained limited. Consequently, lecturers may simplify content, reduce conceptual complexity, or avoid cognitively demanding classroom interaction to accommodate language difficulties. This confusion can also influence curriculum design, potentially reducing the depth and rigor of disciplinary learning in order to compensate for students' language limitations.

Nevertheless, the distinction between EMI and English language teaching should not be interpreted as suggesting that language development is unimportant or can be left to occur incidentally through content exposure alone. In EFL contexts such as Thailand, where many students have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom and often enter HE with uneven levels of English proficiency, the content-focused orientation of EMI may present significant challenges. Indeed, one of the major criticisms of EMI is that its emphasis on disciplinary content does not always align with the expectations of students, parents, policymakers, and institutions, many of whom view EMI as a mechanism for improving English proficiency alongside disciplinary learning. Research has shown that language gains in EMI settings are neither automatic nor guaranteed and depend heavily on the availability of explicit language support, opportunities for interaction, and language-sensitive pedagogy (Lei & Hu, 2024; Galloway & Rose, 2021; Macaro et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2026). Consequently, the issue may not simply be confusion between EMI and ELT, but also whether conventional EMI models, which maintain a strict separation between content and language, are fully appropriate for EFL environments. Rather than abandoning EMI altogether,

recent scholarship advocates more integrated approaches that preserve the content-learning objectives of EMI while incorporating explicit support for academic language development through scaffolding, EAP provision, and collaboration between content specialists and language educators (Dafouz & Smit, 2020; McKinley, 2025). From this perspective, effective EMI implementation in Thailand requires recognizing content learning and language development as complementary rather than competing goals.

Conceptual Ambiguity 2: Native-Like English Proficiency Is Required for EMI Teaching

Rooted in the ideology of native-speakerism, this conceptual ambiguity assumes that successful EMI teaching depends on lecturers achieving or approximating native-like English proficiency (Ahmed, 2025; Prabjandee & Nilpirom, 2022; Sahan et al., 2022). In Thailand, where most EMI lecturers are Thai or other non-native English-speaking academics, such expectations can create anxiety and linguistic insecurity even among highly qualified scholars with strong disciplinary expertise and international academic backgrounds (Prabjandee & Nilpirom, 2022; Tang, 2020).

The conceptual ambiguity is further reinforced by institutional and societal perceptions that equate native-like English proficiency with teaching quality and academic legitimacy. Therefore, universities may place greater emphasis on perceived English fluency or native-speaker status than on disciplinary expertise, pedagogical competence, and experience in multilingual classrooms. Sahan et al. (2022) found that EMI contexts in Thailand and Vietnam continue to reflect strong associations between native-speaker norms, English-only instruction, and perceptions of educational quality. However, these assumptions overlook the reality that English now functions primarily as an international lingua franca. In multilingual academic environments, effective teaching depends less on native-like pronunciation and more on lecturers' ability to explain concepts clearly, facilitate interaction, and support student learning (Kanoksilapatham, 2025; Khamkhien, 2025; Meenasantirak & Chaiyasuk, 2024).

At the same time, critiquing native-speakerism should not be interpreted as suggesting that native English-speaking lecturers are inherently less effective or lack the disciplinary expertise required for EMI teaching. As Farrell (2015) argues, teaching effectiveness depends not on linguistic background but on a range of professional competencies, including pedagogical knowledge, content expertise, reflective practice, interpersonal skills, and the ability to create supportive learning environments. From this perspective, native-speaker status alone neither guarantees nor precludes effective EMI instruction. Evidence from Thailand further suggests that

students often value lecturers who can explain complex concepts clearly, provide appropriate linguistic and academic support, and demonstrate sensitivity to local learning contexts, regardless of whether they are native or non-native speakers of English (Meenasantirak & Chaiyasuk, 2024). Consequently, the central issue for Thai HE is not whether EMI lecturers are native or non-native speakers, but whether institutions recruit, prepare, and support teachers to develop the pedagogical and disciplinary competencies necessary for multilingual classrooms (Kanoksilapatham, 2025). Therefore, EMI teacher recruitment and professional development should prioritize pedagogical competence, disciplinary expertise, multilingual awareness, and the ability to support student learning over idealized native-speaker standards.

Conceptual Ambiguity 3: EMI Automatically Improves English Proficiency

Another common conceptual ambiguity is the belief that exposure to EMI will automatically lead to significant improvements in students' English proficiency. This assumption reflects what Block and Moncada-Comas (2019) describe as a "naive notion of learning by osmosis," namely the belief that students can acquire advanced academic English simply through immersion in English-medium environments. However, empirical research consistently challenges this assumption. Rose et al. (2021), for example, note that many universities in ASEAN contexts promote EMI as a mechanism for improving English proficiency even when language-development components are limited or absent.

Although students in EMI programs are exposed to English through lectures, textbooks, presentation slides, and assessments, opportunities for meaningful language use are often more restricted (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2023; Ulla et al., 2022). Without explicit linguistic scaffolding, vocabulary development, and academic writing support, students may improve receptive skills such as listening and reading while continuing to struggle with productive skills, including academic writing, discussion, and disciplinary communication.

Evidence from Thailand supports this concern. Sameephet et al. (2025) reported that students frequently experience difficulties expressing content knowledge in English, participating confidently in classroom discussions, and producing discipline-specific written work. Similarly, Meenasantirak and Chaiyasuk (2024) found that students experienced anxiety and reduced participation when engaging with complex disciplinary concepts through English without sufficient language support. These findings suggest that English exposure alone, particularly in the Thai context where opportunities to use English outside the classroom remain limited, is

insufficient for developing and sustaining students' communicative competence. Effective language development requires systematic support rather than reliance on immersion alone.

At this juncture, it is important to recognize that the expectation that EMI should contribute to students' English development is deeply embedded in the Thai HE context. For many students, parents, and institutions, EMI is valued not only for its role in supporting internationalization and disciplinary learning but also for its perceived potential to enhance English proficiency. Consequently, a rigid adherence to traditional EMI principles that separate content learning from language instruction may not fully align with local educational needs and stakeholder expectations. Rather than assuming that language gains will occur incidentally, Thai EMI programs may benefit from adopting more language-sensitive approaches that integrate explicit support for academic English development through scaffolding, EAP provision, and structured opportunities for meaningful language use alongside disciplinary learning.

Conceptual Ambiguity 4: EMI Guarantees Internationalization and Educational Quality

A widely circulated conceptual ambiguity is the assumption that the use of English automatically guarantees educational quality and successful internationalization. In Thai HE, EMI programs are frequently marketed as premium educational pathways associated with global standards, academic excellence, and international status (Thumvichit & Laoriandee, 2024; Ulla et al., 2022). However, the language of instruction alone cannot determine the quality of teaching and learning (Kanoksilapatham, 2025).

If students struggle to comprehend complex disciplinary content because of language barriers, learning outcomes may be compromised despite the “international” label attached to a program (Nomnian & Fang, 2025). Similarly, Lasagabaster and Doiz (2023) argue that meaningful learning and classroom participation can be restricted when students have difficulty processing academic content through English. Consequently, EMI may create only the appearance of internationalization without necessarily improving educational quality.

Furthermore, changing the language of instruction alone is insufficient if universities fail to invest in faculty development, learning resources, and appropriate student support systems (Barnawi, 2023). In Thailand, concerns have been raised regarding inadequate teacher preparation, large class sizes, uneven English proficiency, and limited academic language support (Kanoksilapatham, 2025; Khamkhien, 2025; Sameephet et al., 2025; Tiprachaban, 2022). These structural constraints may

create a considerable gap between institutional promotional discourse and students' actual learning experiences, suggesting that educational quality depends on broader pedagogical and institutional conditions rather than the use of English itself.

Conceptual Ambiguity 5: English-Only Pedagogy Is Necessary

A final conceptual ambiguity concerns the belief that effective EMI requires strict English-only instruction. This ambiguity is rooted in the monolingual fallacy, which assumes that students' first language must be excluded from the classroom for successful second-language learning to occur. Some EMI programs therefore discourage or prohibit the use of Thai, viewing it as an obstacle to language development (Sahan et al., 2022). However, research shows that teachers and students frequently draw on both English and Thai to explain disciplinary concepts, clarify technical terminology, negotiate understanding, and maintain classroom participation (Khamkhien, 2025; Ra & Baker, 2021; Sameephet et al., 2025; Tang, 2020).

Contemporary sociolinguistic research challenges rigid monolingual approaches, arguing that multilingual classroom interaction should be viewed as a resource rather than a problem (García & Wei, 2014; Tai & Wei, 2021). Through translanguaging, learners mobilize multiple linguistic resources to facilitate meaning-making and connect new concepts with prior knowledge. In EMI settings, strategic use of Thai can reduce cognitive overload, improve comprehension of complex disciplinary content, and support student participation (Khamkhien, 2025; Sameephet et al., 2025). Similarly, Meenasantirak & Chaiyasuk (2024) found that multilingual interaction may increase confidence and engagement, particularly among students with lower levels of English proficiency.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that translanguaging remains a contested concept within applied linguistics. While many scholars view it as a valuable framework for understanding multilingual meaning-making, others have questioned its conceptual boundaries and argued that the term is sometimes used inconsistently or interchangeably with related constructs such as code-switching and multilingual pedagogy (Treffers-Daller, 2024). Rather, translanguaging should not be interpreted as the unrestricted use of the first language. While strategic use of Thai can support learning, excessive reliance on it may reduce opportunities to develop academic English proficiency, particularly in EFL contexts where exposure to English is already limited (Chaisiri, 2022; Fang & Liu, 2020; Tai, 2025). Effective EMI therefore requires a balanced approach in which translanguaging functions as a pedagogical resource that supports disciplinary

learning while maintaining meaningful engagement with English as the primary medium of academic communication.

Implementation Challenges of EMI in the Thai Context

The implementation of EMI in Thailand continues to face a range of pedagogical, linguistic, institutional, and structural challenges. Although EMI programs have expanded rapidly across Thai HE, classroom implementation is constrained by uneven English proficiency, limited pedagogical preparation, institutional resource disparities, and tensions between policy aspirations and local realities. These challenges include teacher-related challenges, student-related challenges, and institutional and policy challenges.

Teacher-Related Challenges

In any educational setting, teachers play a pivotal role in determining the effectiveness of EMI because they are responsible not only for facilitating disciplinary learning but also for teaching through English. In the context of EMI in Thailand, however, teacher-related challenges remain a significant concern and may be broadly categorized into three areas: language proficiency, pedagogical readiness, and issues pertaining to teacher identity and professional burden.

Language Proficiency Concerns

Most EMI lecturers in Thai HE are non-native speakers of English who must teach complex disciplinary content through English. Many experience communication difficulties and reduced confidence when explaining abstract concepts or responding to spontaneous student questions in English (Tang, 2020). The demands of academic English, including specialized vocabulary and real-time communication, can therefore become a significant source of professional stress.

To manage these challenges, lecturers often adopt compensatory strategies such as scripted lectures, simplified explanations, reduced use of open-ended discussion, or strategic shifts between Thai and English during instruction (Meenasantirak & Chaivasuk, 2024). While these practices may facilitate communication, they can also limit opportunities for spontaneous interaction, collaborative learning, and deeper disciplinary discussion.

However, it is important to acknowledge that some language-related challenges in EMI extend beyond perceptions associated with native-speakerism and reflect the genuine linguistic demands of teaching disciplinary content through English. Effective EMI requires lecturers to possess

sufficient proficiency in spoken and written academic English to explain complex concepts, facilitate discussion, respond spontaneously to students' questions, and provide constructive feedback. In contexts such as Thailand, where opportunities for sustained professional use of English may be limited, not all instructors may feel adequately prepared to teach through English, regardless of their disciplinary expertise. Recognizing this practical reality does not imply that lecturers should be evaluated against idealized native-speaker norms; rather, it underscores the need for institutions to establish contextually appropriate language proficiency benchmarks and provide sustained professional development that integrates language support with EMI pedagogy (Kanoksilapatham, 2025).

Beyond the genuine linguistic demands of EMI, these challenges may be further intensified by the tendency of some lecturers to evaluate themselves against idealized native-speaker norms (Rose & Galloway, 2019). In Thailand, such expectations may contribute to professional insecurity and reluctance to participate in EMI programs, particularly among instructors with lower confidence in spoken academic English (Kanoksilapatham, 2025; Prabjandee & Nilpirom, 2022).

Pedagogical Readiness

Although many EMI instructors possess strong disciplinary expertise, they often lack formal training in EMI pedagogy. Teaching disciplinary content through English requires specialized skills, including explaining complex concepts clearly, scaffolding academic language, facilitating classroom interaction, and supporting students who are simultaneously learning content and processing information in English. However, many instructors struggle to adjust their speech, design effective learning materials, simplify complex texts, and develop assessments that evaluate content knowledge fairly without over-penalizing language limitations (Kanoksilapatham, 2025).

In many Thai universities, lecturers are assigned to EMI programs because of their disciplinary specialization or English proficiency rather than formal preparation for EMI teaching. Studies have shown that many instructors enter EMI classrooms with limited training in multilingual pedagogy, academic discourse scaffolding, interactive teaching methods, and assessment design for multilingual learners (Sahan et al., 2022, 2026; Wilang & Nupong, 2022). Sameephet et al. (2025) further reported that lecturers often experience difficulty designing assessments that balance disciplinary learning with students' varying language abilities. As a result, instructors may struggle to adapt teaching practices effectively to EMI environments.

Teacher Identity and Professional Burden

The transition to EMI also places considerable professional and emotional demands on teachers (Lasagabaster & Fernández-Costales, 2025). Teaching through English often requires additional time for preparing materials, simplifying disciplinary terminology, anticipating language-related difficulties, and planning classroom delivery. Despite these demands, universities rarely reduce research expectations or administrative responsibilities.

Beyond workload concerns, EMI may also affect teachers' professional identities. Rose et al. (2021) observed that some Thai EMI teachers felt less expressive when teaching through English because they were unable to communicate ideas, humor, or disciplinary nuance as naturally as in Thai. Consequently, some lecturers experience tension between their identities as confident disciplinary experts and the linguistic constraints associated with teaching through a second language.

Student-Related Challenges

EMI students are recognized as one of the principal stakeholders in EMI because their ability to engage with disciplinary content is directly influenced by academic demands of English-medium learning. In Thailand, some student-related challenges can be grouped into three interrelated areas, including English proficiency gaps, learning anxiety and participation dynamics, and issues concerning academic achievement and equity.

English Proficiency Gaps

Students in Thai EMI classrooms often display substantial differences in English proficiency. Access to high-quality English education remains strongly influenced by socioeconomic status, school quality, and urban–rural disparities (Wilang & Nupong, 2022). Students from international schools and well-resourced educational backgrounds typically enter EMI programs with greater familiarity with English-medium textbooks, academic writing, and classroom interaction, whereas many students from mainstream public schools face significant linguistic challenges (Tiprachaban, 2022).

These disparities make it difficult for teachers to design instruction that meets the needs of all learners. Content that is appropriately challenging for more proficient students may be inaccessible to those with weaker English skills (Ahmed, 2025; Tang, 2020). As a result, classroom participation often becomes uneven, with stronger English students engaging more actively while less proficient students remain silent or disengaged.

Learning Anxiety and Participation Dynamics

Language anxiety further shapes participation in Thai EMI classrooms. Influenced by cultural norms such as *kreng jai* and concerns about *sia naa* (losing face), many students are reluctant to speak publicly in English, ask questions, or participate spontaneously in discussion (Tang, 2020). Linguistic insecurity may therefore discourage classroom interaction even when students understand the content.

Previous studies suggest that students often remain silent because they fear making grammatical mistakes, mispronouncing words, or appearing academically weak rather than because they lack interest or understanding (Meenasantirak & Chaiyasuk, 2024; Pomat et al., 2024; Sameephet et al., 2025). As a result, EMI classrooms may become increasingly lecture-oriented, limiting opportunities for discussion, critical engagement, and collaborative learning.

Academic Achievement and Equity Issues

When academic performance relies heavily on English writing or examinations, students with weaker language skills may struggle to demonstrate disciplinary understanding despite possessing adequate conceptual knowledge (Curle et al., 2014). Studies have shown that Thai students often experience difficulty expressing complex ideas in English even when they understand the content itself (Khamkhien, 2025; Sameephet et al., 2025). Consequently, assessment outcomes may reflect language limitations rather than disciplinary competence.

These challenges are closely linked to broader educational inequalities. Students from affluent urban backgrounds and private or international schools generally enter university with stronger English preparation than those from rural or under-resourced public schools (Tang, 2020; Wilang & Nupong, 2022). Similarly, Kanoksilapatham (2026) argues that educational opportunities in Thailand are unevenly distributed because of structural inequalities in access to quality English education, digital infrastructure, and learning resources, with disadvantaged and rural learners frequently experiencing reduced opportunities for English development. As a result, access to EMI programs and the educational opportunities associated with them may become unevenly distributed across different social groups.

Institutional and Policy Challenges

Beyond teacher- and student-related issues, EMI implementation in Thailand is also constrained by a range of institutional and policy challenges.

Considerable variation exists in how EMI programs are organized, supported, and evaluated across institutions. Three interrelated challenges are evident, including the absence of clear EMI policies, limited institutional support, and curriculum and assessment issues.

Absence of Clear EMI Policies

Thailand seems to lack a comprehensive national framework to govern EMI implementation. Although MHESI promotes internationalization, it provides limited guidance regarding language requirements, quality assurance, teacher preparation, or assessment practices. As a result, EMI policies were determined by individual universities based on their available resources, target students, settings, etc., leading to considerable variation in EMI implementation across institutions and disciplines (Wilang & Nupong, 2022).

Tipprachaban (2022) notes that the absence of national guidance affects admissions criteria, language expectations, and teacher preparation. Some universities adopt relatively high English proficiency requirements, whereas others apply more flexible standards based on institutional needs and recruitment goals. Similarly, Meenasantirak and Chaiyasuk (2024) argue that the lack of guidance on pedagogy, multilingual communication, and language support leaves teachers and administrators to make decisions independently, often without strong institutional frameworks.

Limited Institutional Support

A further challenge concerns the limited institutional support available for sustaining EMI programs. Many universities establish international programs without investing sufficiently in lecturer development, instructional support, or long-term language services (Galloway & Sahan, 2021; Tipprachaban, 2022). Consequently, instructors often receive limited preparation in EMI pedagogy, multilingual classroom management, and academic discourse scaffolding before being assigned to teach through English (Kanoksilapatham, 2025; Prabjandee & Nilpirom, 2022; Sahan et al., 2026; Wilang & Nupong, 2022). Moreover, student support systems are often similarly constrained. Language centers may lack the resources necessary to provide sustained EAP instruction, writing support, and academic language development throughout students' degree programs (Meenasantirak & Chaiyasuk, 2024).

Curriculum and Assessment Issues

Curriculum and assessment design present additional challenges. Many EMI programs rely on imported textbooks and instructional models developed in different educational and linguistic contexts (Galloway & Sahan, 2021; Pomat et al., 2024; Tipprachaban, 2022). While these materials provide access to international disciplinary knowledge, they may create difficulties for students unfamiliar with English-medium academic discourse and specialized terminology.

Research suggests that students often struggle with dense readings, unfamiliar vocabulary, and highly technical English-language materials (Khamkhien, 2025; Wilang & Nupong, 2022). Consequently, lecturers may simplify content, reduce reading demands, or rely heavily on lecture explanation. Thippayacharoen and Poonpon (2025) further found that assessment practices do not always align with teachers' beliefs about learning. Together, these challenges may reduce opportunities for deeper engagement with disciplinary content and affect the quality of EMI learning experiences.

Recommendations for Effective EMI Implementation in Thailand

The discussion of EMI implementation in Thailand suggests that effective EMI implementation requires coordinated action at multiple levels, including national policy, institutional governance, teacher development, curriculum design, language support provision, and assessment practice. Drawing on both the Thai EMI studies and relevant lesson learned from international experiences, the following recommendations are proposed to support more sustainable and pedagogically effective EMI development in Thai HE.

Policy Recommendations

While policy recommendations should be grounded primarily in local realities, comparative experiences from other Asian EMI contexts can offer valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges of large-scale implementation. Taiwan provides a particularly relevant point of comparison because, like Thailand, it operates within an English-as-a-foreign-language context where English is not used in everyday communication and has expanded EMI as part of broader internationalization efforts aimed at enhancing global competitiveness and graduate employability. At the same time, Taiwan represents a more advanced and coordinated approach to EMI policy development, making it a useful reference for identifying context-sensitive lessons for Thailand.

Thailand and Taiwan also face similar implementation challenges, including uneven English proficiency among students and lecturers, tensions between content learning and language development, limited EMI pedagogical preparation, and concerns about educational equity. Moreover, both higher education systems are characterized by substantial institutional diversity, ranging from internationally oriented research universities to regional teaching-focused institutions.

Despite these similarities, important differences should be acknowledged. Unlike Thailand, Taiwan has adopted a centralized, state-led approach through its Bilingual 2030 initiative (IWAEA, 2025), supported by dedicated funding mechanisms, explicit performance indicators, and a coordinated national framework. Thailand, in contrast, has relied largely on decentralized and institution-driven EMI development. Taiwan also benefits from stronger policy coordination between government agencies and universities, whereas EMI implementation in Thailand remains fragmented across institutions.

Consequently, this review does not advocate direct policy transfer from Taiwan to Thailand. Policy borrowing across contexts should be approached cautiously because educational policies are shaped by distinct sociolinguistic, political, economic, and institutional conditions. Rather than serving as a blueprint, Taiwan's experience is used heuristically to identify principles and practices that may inform context-sensitive EMI development in Thailand, particularly regarding institutional differentiation, sustained support mechanisms, multilingual pedagogies, and equity-oriented implementation.

Taiwan's Bilingual 2030 initiative represents one of the most ambitious state-led efforts to expand EMI within higher education, offering important lessons for policy design, institutional support, and educational equity (Huang, 2024). The policy seeks to strengthen national competitiveness through expanded bilingual education and improved English proficiency while leveraging Taiwan's existing strengths in Mandarin-language education. Within higher education, the Ministry of Education's Program on Bilingual Education for Students in College (BEST) operationalizes these goals through a differentiated implementation model that combines targeted investment in selected "beacon" universities with broader sector-wide enhancement of EMI and bilingual provision. Supported by substantial funding and national performance indicators, this tiered approach aims to strengthen institutional capacity while expanding bilingual education across the higher education sector (Executive Yuan, 2023). For Thailand, the most important lesson lies not in replicating Taiwan's policy directly, but in the existence of a clearer connection between national policy

objectives, institutional support mechanisms, and classroom-level implementation.

One useful aspect of Taiwan's approach is its recognition of institutional diversity. Rather than expecting all universities to implement EMI in the same way, Taiwan has differentiated institutional roles and provided varying forms of support according to institutional capacity and mission. A similar strategy could help Thailand avoid one-size-fits-all policies. Universities with strong international profiles might be encouraged to function as flagship EMI institutions, while regional and teaching-oriented universities could adopt more gradual or context-sensitive approaches aligned with local needs (MOE, 2021).

Taiwan's experience also highlights the importance of sustained support for students, lecturers, and institutions. Research from both Taiwan and Thailand consistently identifies similar challenges, including uneven student English proficiency, limited language support, and insufficient preparation for EMI teaching. Consequently, Thai universities should strengthen long-term language support through EAP and ESP provision, writing centers, tutorial schemes, and ongoing academic language development rather than concentrating support only in the early years of study (Thumvichit & Laoriandee, 2024; TWAEA, 2023).

Lecturer development should also receive greater attention. EMI training should move beyond language proficiency alone and address multilingual pedagogy, classroom interaction, assessment design, and language-sensitive teaching practices. In addition, universities could establish cross-departmental EMI committees or institutional support units to coordinate policy implementation, professional development, and language-support services (NTUST, 2025).

However, Taiwan's experience also demonstrates that EMI expansion may generate unintended inequalities if equity considerations are overlooked. Research suggests that competitive funding systems and performance indicators can concentrate resources within already advantaged institutions and students with stronger linguistic capital (Huang, 2024). Similar patterns are increasingly visible in Thailand, where EMI opportunities are often concentrated in prestigious universities and international programs, accompanied by higher tuition fees and unequal access.

To address these concerns, equity should become an explicit objective of EMI policy. Scholarships, targeted funding for regional universities, and support mechanisms for students from less advantaged backgrounds could help prevent the emergence of an elite EMI track and broaden access to educational opportunities (Huang, 2024; Jiang & Sukying, 2025).

Institutional diversity should also be reflected in evaluation systems. Universities should not be assessed solely according to the number of EMI

courses offered or the extent to which English is used in classrooms. Instead, evaluation criteria should consider how effectively EMI aligns with institutional missions, student needs, and local contexts. Research-intensive universities may prioritize international collaboration and postgraduate EMI provision, whereas regional institutions may focus more strongly on learning outcomes, graduate employability, and equitable access to language support (TWAEA, 2025).

A further lesson concerns the conceptualization of EMI itself. Research on Taiwan's bilingual reforms has highlighted the limitations of English-only ideologies and native-speaker norms, which may marginalize local knowledge systems and multilingual repertoires (Graham et al., 2021). For Thailand, this suggests the importance of recognizing EMI as a multilingual educational practice. Strategic use of Thai and other linguistic resources can support content learning, participation, and epistemic access while maintaining English as the primary language of instruction (Graham et al., 2021; Smallwood, 2025).

Finally, Taiwan demonstrates the value of integrating research into policy development. Studies examining faculty experiences, student learning, and institutional implementation have played an important role in identifying challenges and informing policy adjustments. In Thailand, policymakers should therefore support longitudinal research, national communities of practice, and institutional monitoring mechanisms capable of evaluating how EMI affects learning outcomes, educational access, and social equity (Smithsarakarn, 2024).

Overall, Taiwan's Bilingual 2030 initiative should be viewed not as a blueprint to be copied directly, but as a source of practical lessons. Its experience highlights the importance of differentiated institutional roles, sustained language and pedagogical support, equity safeguards, multilingual approaches to learning, and research-informed policy development. These principles may provide a useful foundation for developing a more sustainable, context-sensitive, and socially inclusive approach to EMI in Thailand.

While Taiwan's Bilingual 2030 initiative offers useful insights into the importance of coordinated language policy, faculty support, and institutional capacity building, its experience should not be viewed as a model to be directly replicated in Thailand. As far as EMI policy implementation is concerned, the two contexts differ substantially in terms of governance structures, institutional diversity, and resource availability. Thailand's EMI landscape is characterized by decentralized higher education governance, considerable variation between public and private universities, and uneven access to financial, linguistic, and pedagogical resources across institutions. Consequently, EMI policy development in Thailand should prioritize flexible and context-sensitive implementation rather than uniform national mandates.

National frameworks can provide strategic direction and support, but institutions must retain sufficient autonomy to adapt EMI practices to their specific missions, student populations, disciplinary contexts, and local capacities. Such an approach would better address regional and institutional disparities while supporting sustainable and equitable EMI development across the Thai higher education sector.

Pedagogical Recommendations

To improve EMI in Thailand, universities should strengthen EMI-specific professional development that extends beyond general English proficiency and includes training in scaffolding strategies, classroom interaction, multilingual pedagogies, feedback practices, and language-sensitive assessment. Such preparation would better equip lecturers to support both content learning and academic communication simultaneously (Kanoksilapatham, 2025).

Thai universities could also adopt a more language-sensitive approach to EMI. Rather than assuming that language development occurs automatically through exposure to English-medium content, lecturers should explicitly integrate disciplinary vocabulary, academic discourse practices, and structured interaction opportunities into classroom teaching. This approach recognizes that language and content learning are mutually reinforcing. Particularly, in EFL contexts such as Thailand, language development cannot be assumed to occur automatically through content exposure alone.

Finally, multilingual pedagogical practices should be recognized as legitimate educational resources. Strategic translanguaging can support comprehension, participation, and disciplinary engagement, while learning-oriented assessment and transparent feedback practices can promote greater fairness and accessibility. Together, these measures would contribute to more inclusive and pedagogically effective EMI classrooms in Thai HE.

Institutional Recommendations

Universities should therefore develop institutional structures that support collaboration among content specialists, language experts, and academic support units. Rather than maintaining a strict separation between disciplinary faculties and English-language departments, institutions could promote cross-disciplinary collaboration in curriculum design, materials development, and language-support provision. Dedicated EMI centers or cross-faculty committees may also help coordinate policy implementation, professional development, and quality assurance across departments.

Additionally, universities should recognize the additional demands associated with EMI teaching. Preparing EMI materials, adapting assessment practices, and supporting students with diverse linguistic backgrounds often require substantially more time than conventional teaching. Institutions should therefore consider workload adjustments, teaching credits, or professional incentives to support lecturers involved in EMI programs.

Universities should also invest in long-term student support systems. Academic writing centers, peer mentoring schemes, tutoring services, and discipline-specific language support can help reduce proficiency gaps and improve students' ability to engage with disciplinary content through English. Such support should be available throughout the degree program rather than concentrated only in the first years of study

Research Directions

To guide future policy, the Thai research community needs to move beyond short-term perception studies and invest in more rigorous, longitudinal investigations of EMI outcomes. In particular, there is a need to examine how EMI influences students' disciplinary learning, academic language development, graduate employability, and long-term educational trajectories.

Moreover, future studies should also pay greater attention to classroom processes. Given the growing recognition of multilingual practices in EMI contexts, researchers could investigate how translanguaging, classroom interaction, participation patterns, feedback practices, and assessment are negotiated across different disciplines and institutional settings (Sahan et al., 2022). Such research would provide a more nuanced understanding of how EMI is enacted in practice rather than how it is described in policy documents.

Finally, greater attention should be paid to issues of equity, access, and institutional diversity. As EMI continues to expand, research is needed to examine who benefits from EMI opportunities, how language policies affect different student populations, and whether current implementation models contribute to educational inclusion or social stratification. Comparative studies involving Thailand and other Asian EMI contexts, including Taiwan, could further help identify context-sensitive approaches to sustainable and equitable EMI development.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this review suggests that many widely held assumptions or conceptual ambiguities about EMI require careful

reconsideration; however, challenging these assumptions should not be interpreted as an uncritical endorsement of EMI. The Thai experience demonstrates that several concerns frequently dismissed as conceptual ambiguities, including expectations regarding English language development, questions about lecturer preparedness, and debates surrounding language use in the classroom—often reflect legitimate tensions arising from the implementation of EMI in an EFL context. Rather than viewing these concerns as evidence of misunderstanding alone, they should be understood as indicators of the need to adapt EMI models to local educational realities. Effective EMI implementation in Thailand therefore requires moving beyond binary debates between advocacy and resistance towards context-sensitive approaches that recognize the interdependence of content learning, language development, teacher preparedness, and multilingual pedagogies.

The expansion of EMI in Thai HE represents a structural shift driven by internationalization, regional integration, global competitiveness, and the marketization of HE. However, as this review has shown, EMI has often expanded without sufficient conceptual clarity or instructional readiness. Its implementation continues to be shaped by persistent conceptual ambiguities, particularly the conflation of content teaching with language instruction and the assumption that effective EMI requires English-only practices. These ambiguities contribute to a range of pedagogical, linguistic, and institutional challenges, including uneven English proficiency among students and lecturers, limited EMI preparation, tensions between policy and practice, concerns about assessment fairness, and ongoing debates regarding the role of Thai and other linguistic resources in EMI classrooms.

To support more sustainable EMI development, Thai higher education must move beyond rigid monolingual interpretations and adopt a more flexible, multilingual perspective. EMI should be understood not simply as teaching through English, but as a pedagogical approach that facilitates meaningful engagement with disciplinary knowledge while supporting academic communication. Success should therefore be evaluated not only by the expansion of EMI programs or English-language indicators, but also by students' learning outcomes, participation, and equitable access to educational opportunities. At the same time, while strategic use of students' first language can facilitate comprehension, participation, and disciplinary learning, excessive or unstructured reliance on translanguaging may reduce opportunities for meaningful engagement with English and limit the development of academic English proficiency. The challenge for Thai EMI, therefore, lies not in choosing between English-only and multilingual approaches, but in establishing an appropriate balance that supports both content mastery and language development.

This review also highlights the importance of aligning EMI policies with local educational realities. Although internationalization remains an important objective, policies that prioritize symbolic indicators of global status without adequate attention to pedagogical support, institutional capacity, and educational equity may produce unintended consequences. Comparative insights from Taiwan further demonstrate that successful EMI implementation requires sustained policy commitment, institutional support, and explicit attention to equity.

Ultimately, EMI is best understood as a multilingual, contextually situated educational practice that requires ongoing adaptation to local linguistic, disciplinary, and institutional conditions. Such an approach provides a more sustainable foundation for balancing internationalization goals with educational quality, inclusivity, and social equity in Thai higher education.

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