

Making Education Sustain Aspirations: Challenges and Coping Strategies in EMI Tertiary Education in Macao

Xing Fang^{1*}

***Corresponding author's email: xfang@utm.edu.mo**

¹Macao University of Tourism

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Abstract

The global spread and use of English have attributed immense value to the language and established its status as a popular international language. Today, making English the medium of school instruction is no longer confined to English-speaking countries but widely implemented around the world to fulfill the needs and aspirations of non-native English learners. Given this shifting global context of education, this study aims to conduct a literature review to sort out the benefits and challenges of teaching non-language courses through English in contexts where English is usually not spoken as a native or first language. It intends to further explore tertiary education in English in Macao and seeks to approach the challenges therein with coping strategies recommended by literature concerning the local and wider educational contexts. It is anticipated that with joint efforts from learners, teachers and institution administrators, English-medium education in Macao or similar contexts may sustain learners' passion for academic achievements, encourage teachers' professional development, and enable institution administrators to further calibrate management policies and development plans.

Keywords: EMI, challenges, coping strategies, tertiary education, Macao

Introduction

As the current lingua franca of the global community, English facilitates intercultural communication, expands career development opportunities, and provides access to a wealth of learning resources and knowledge. The considerable instrumental value of English has enabled it to acquire the status of a medium of instruction on campuses in countries and regions where English is not spoken as a native language. Despite that adopting English for teaching and learning may connect individual learners and institutions to a broader international academic community, it also poses hurdles that learners and educators often need to overcome, for example, students' difficulty in comprehending course content (Alhassan et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2022; Su & Kong, 2023; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022), their lack of motivation for learning (Yuan, Qiu, Wang, et al., 2025; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022), and inefficient classroom interaction (Alhassan et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2022; Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022; Su & Kong, 2023). These challenges tend to be more evident when learners' English proficiency is limited, and they are not uncommon in tertiary education in EAL (English as an Additional Language) contexts such as Macao, one of China's Special Administrative Regions, where English served as a language of instruction early in East Asia and still functions as a popular social and working language and a desirable medium of instruction at local universities today. As the following discussion unfolds, these challenges in Macao's higher education seem to be associated with its language education policy and current situation of secondary education. For the purpose of seeking coping strategies for managing the challenges, this study situates the discussion in a review of literature and suggests that institutional stakeholders (i.e., learners, teachers, and administrators) in Macao and other contexts with similar concerns tailor the recommended solutions to their needs and review the outcomes for further improvement of education quality.

The majority of the literature involved in this study was identified through Google Scholar, and keywords such as EMI (English as a medium of instruction), challenges, solutions, strategies, university, learners, Macao, and policy were combined as different short phrases for performing the search. A total of 68 sources were selected because their contents are closely related to the topic or the aim of this study. These sources include 47 peer-reviewed journal articles, 15 book chapters, and one book, which were published by well-established academic publishers; one report regarding EMI released by the British Council; one language education policy document of Macao; one news article; and two historical texts (a periodical and a memoir). 45 of the sources (66.2%) were published in or after 2020, and 19 (27.9%) were published between 2010 and 2019. Due to practical constraints, mainly sources published in English were incorporated in this study, except the memoir that is bilingual in English and Chinese. The EMI contexts that the sources explored and discussed are diverse, including Asian countries such as China, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Qatar, African and European countries such as Sudan, Spain, and Italy, and transcontinental countries such as Turkey and Kazakhstan. This study is exploratory in nature; therefore, the review of literature does not intend to be

exhaustive but attempts to recommend feasible strategies for tackling challenges in EMI tertiary education in Macao or other EAL contexts and unveil future directions for research. Readers are advised to read the following sections with reference to their own context and experience of EMI.

The Ascending Popularity of EMI

The solid instrumental value of the English language fuels the popularity of education through English. As an international language, English enables people to do business, travel, maintain social interactions, enjoy entertainment, and receive education across regions around the world (Soruç & Griffiths, 2018). In order to sharpen their competitive edge in the job market, university students tend to prefer receiving an education in English (Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022; Soruç et al., 2018; Yuan, Qiu, Wang, et al., 2025). In view of globalization, universities also seek to improve their international rankings, reinforce global reputation, and attract foreign students through providing more programs taught in English (He & Chiang, 2016; Hu, 2007; Yeh, 2014). These programs are termed EMI programs, which are defined as using the English language to teach academic content courses (excluding the English language course) in countries where the majority of the population does not speak English as their first language (L1) (Garner, 2024; Macaro, 2018; Tsou, 2021). The implementation of EMI does not progress without challenges, criticism, and doubts. Dearden (2014) reported, “EMI is sometimes being rejected for political reasons, to protect a national identity, a home language or the freedom to study in a home language” (p. 17). Eser and Dikilitaş (2017) mentioned that some countries are not supportive of EMI as it only benefits a small portion of learners and can result in social inequalities. In addition, Phuong and Nguyen (2019) stated that EMI is not smoothly implemented in some Asian countries because local learners lack interest in EMI programs or it attracts little support from the representatives of the nations. Despite these challenges, EMI is still gaining increasing popularity and rapid expansion (Dearden, 2014).

Aside from providing international business and academic opportunities as aforementioned, EMI programs may come with other benefits. Dearden (2014) informed that EMI had been introduced to some countries because it could enhance learning of the English language and culture, facilitate cultural exchanges between countries, and help promote global peace. Phuong and Nguyen (2019) also noted that EMI programs may improve learners’ English proficiency and train them to think more flexibly in the process of learning a different language. In addition, M. Zhang and Pladevall-Ballester (2022) found that EMI boosted learners’ confidence in using English and made them interested in learning English vocabulary related to content courses. As a large number of academic publications have been conducted in English, EMI also enables learners to access a broader range of learning resources (Aizawa et al., 2024; Y. Wang & Yu, 2025). With all these benefits, it is reasonable that EMI programs have won preference from university stakeholders.

EMI as a Mixed Blessing

Although EMI programs demonstrate multiple advantages for education, the challenges they have posed to university students' learning also merit attention. The most remarkable issue is that students, who are not L1 English speakers, may have increased difficulty in understanding lectures, concepts, terminologies and textbooks (Aizawa et al., 2024; Alhassan et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2022; Ekoç, 2020; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2017; Soruç & Griffiths, 2018; Su & Kong, 2023; Tsou, 2021; Yao et al., 2022; Yeh, 2014; Yu et al., 2021; Yuan, Qiu, Wang, et al., 2025; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022; S. Zhou et al., 2022). Students' reduced comprehension of course content may result from teachers' use of English, for example, their lack of English proficiency (Barrios et al., 2016; Dearden, 2014; Galloway & Ruegg, 2022; He & Chiang, 2016; Kim, 2017; Yao et al., 2022), their accent (Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022; Yao et al., 2022; Yuan, Qiu, Wang, et al., 2025; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022), and their speed of speaking (Yuan, Qiu, Wang, et al., 2025; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022). Listening to English lectures also splits students' focus during class as they have to cope with content and a second language at the same time; therefore, it becomes difficult for them to maintain concentration for a long time (Hua, 2019; Tai & Tang, 2021). Some studies also found that learners could not focus on lectures and take notes effectively at the same time (Alhassan et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2022; Yıldız et al., 2017; S. Zhou et al., 2022). Lack of comprehension and concentration, in turn, makes it arduous for students to internalize the contents taught (Ekoç, 2020).

Moreover, productive learning activities such as speaking and writing may become more demanding for university students in EMI programs, which can lead to negative affective consequences. Low confidence or English proficiency may cause students to be hesitant in expressing their ideas or engaging in class discussions with each other (Alhassan et al., 2021; Dearden, 2014; Dong et al., 2022; Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2017; Su & Kong, 2023; Yıldız et al., 2017; Yuan, Qiu, Wang, et al., 2025), or have limited or no interaction with teachers (Dong et al., 2022; Ekoç, 2020; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2017; Soruç & Griffiths, 2018; Su & Kong, 2023; Yeh, 2014; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022). In addition, S. Zhou et al.'s (2022) study of 364 students' learning difficulties in EMI programs and 88 teachers' responses from 29 universities showed that productive skills (e.g., academic writing, communication, answering questions) tend to be more challenging for EMI learners compared with receptive skills. Alhassan et al.'s (2021) study of 31 EFL (English as a foreign language) learners' challenges in EMI programs in Sudan also revealed that advanced writing skills such as summarizing and paraphrasing were difficult for the participants. Not being able to express academic ideas smoothly may cause students to receive low grades in assessments (Phuong & Nguyen, 2019). With all these challenges from EMI programs, it is natural to find that students' learning motivation decreased (Yuan, Qiu, Wang, et al., 2025; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022), some of them skipped classes to regain calmness (Yuan et al., 2023), or some had a high intention to withdraw from these programs (Su & Kong, 2023).

Joint Efforts for Crossing the Hurdles

Efforts can be made to tackle the above learning difficulties in EMI programs by students, teachers, and institution administrators. As informed by Yu et al. (2021), students in EMI programs can attempt L1-mediated, L2-mediated, tool-mediated, and community-mediated strategies to assist and enhance their learning. Regarding L1-mediated strategies, they may use their L1 to read translated learning materials such as textbooks and PowerPoint slides (Y. Wang et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2021), to clarify terminologies or concepts (Garner, 2024; Graham et al., 2021; Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022; Yao et al., 2022), or to facilitate communication with peers and teachers with the same L1 background in class (Alhassan et al., 2021; Dalziel & Guarda, 2021; Garner, 2024; Yu et al., 2021). Tsou (2021) believed that using both L1 and L2 (second language), or translanguaging, in learning and teaching allows learners to leverage multilingual resources and various modes of communication to support their learning. In addition, it was reported that university students also used L2-mediated strategies to assist learning in EMI programs, for example, taking English skill courses (e.g., speaking, TOEFL preparation), finding native speakers to practice speaking, using English actively and consistently in class (Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022), joining short-term exchange programs to visit English-speaking countries, or reading English materials related to content courses (Yu et al., 2021). Moreover, it was noted that university students in EMI programs adopted tool-mediated strategies for enhancing learning. For instance, they used online sources for self-study or used apps to improve speaking (Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022). Furthermore, students in EMI programs may consider community-mediated strategies for learning, such as seeking help from peers by forming study groups (A. R. Lee & Curry, 2018; Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022; Yeh, 2014; Yu et al., 2021) or talking to their classmates or family to prevent emotional breakdown (Yuan et al., 2023). Last but not least, researchers discovered that university students in EMI programs used a couple of other learning strategies to assist their study, such as taking notes attentively in class, raising questions in class, previewing and reviewing learning materials, consulting other relevant learning materials, using vocabulary learning techniques (e.g., visuals, contextual clues), and thinking creatively and critically (Soruç & Griffiths, 2018; Tai & Tang, 2021; Yao et al., 2022; Yeh, 2014).

In EMI classes, teachers may facilitate and enhance students' learning through various efforts. First of all, they need to maximize learners' contact with English by requiring them to read and use English more during class or listen to more podcasts in English (Su & Kong, 2023; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022). In addition, teachers should recognize students' L1 as a learning strategy and allow leeway for multilingual and translingual practices in the classroom rather than prohibiting its use, especially when students' English proficiency is low (Graham et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2017; A. R. Lee & Curry, 2018; Yu et al., 2021). When explaining course content, teachers may use students' L1 for consolidating their understanding, simplify language for explanation, or present terminologies

clearly on PowerPoint slides for students' reference. They may also provide students with opportunities for collaborative learning or conduct dialogic questioning to engage students more in class (Yuan et al., 2023). Furthermore, they can teach students learning strategies, such as problem-solving, teamwork skills, and skills for managing emotions (Alhassan et al., 2021; Soruç et al., 2018; Soruç & Griffiths, 2018; Tai & Tang, 2021). As C. Zhou and Wang (2026) recommended, teachers may also develop students' AI literacy and guide them to learn with generative AI as a supportive assistant that provides personal feedback for learning and reduces emotional challenges such as anxiety and fear from negative teacher evaluation. Last but not least, teachers ought to conduct an evaluation of the effectiveness of EMI programs to achieve measurable outcomes demonstrating "students' pursuit of academic depth" (Kim, 2017, p. 60) and detect areas of improvement (Barrios et al., 2016). Recent studies, which compared parallel EMI and non-EMI or L1MI programs in tertiary education, have reported mixed findings regarding the impact of EMI on disciplinary content learning. Some researchers did not find significant negative influence of EMI on content learning in accounting (Lin & Lei, 2021), engineering (Chung & Lo, 2023), and chemistry courses (Aizawa et al., 2024) because learners' academic achievements in EMI could also be affected by their strong academic skills (Lin & Lei, 2021; S. Zhou et al., 2025), self-efficacy, learning motivation and attitudes (Chung & Lo, 2023; S. Zhou et al., 2025). On the contrary, compared with non-EMI students, a decline in content learning experienced by EMI students was reported by A. Nguyen (2024) and Y. Wang and Yu (2025). After all, students' absorption and development of disciplinary content knowledge should be the central target of EMI programs; therefore, teachers need to pay due attention to its measurement and assist students to enhance their academic competence, self-confidence, and learning motivation.

As for institution administrators, previous research has suggested practices that may ease the implementation of EMI programs and enhance their quality. First, students should be provided with EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and/or ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses and resources for improving their English language and academic skills (Alhassan et al., 2021; Ekoç, 2020; Garner, 2024; Liao et al., 2026; Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2017; Pun & Jin, 2021; Yeh, 2014; Yıldız et al., 2017; S. Zhou et al., 2022) or they should be required to attend a preparatory program to reach a certain level of English proficiency before the commencement of EMI programs (Ekoç, 2020; A. R. Lee & Curry, 2018; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022; S. Zhou et al., 2022). It is equally crucial for universities to set valid English language benchmarks for admission (Liao et al., 2026) or recruit students from suitable secondary schools to ensure the success of EMI programs at the tertiary level (Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022). In addition, training programs should be launched for EMI teachers to improve their English, pedagogical and disciplinary competence (Curdts-Christiansen et al., 2023; Dong et al., 2022; Galloway & Ruegg, 2022; Liao et al., 2026; Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2017; Pun & Jin, 2021; Soruç & Griffiths, 2018; Yeh, 2014; Yıldız et al., 2017; K. Zhang, 2020). For instance, they may learn to lessen teacher-fronted lecturing and increase teacher-student interactions and student-student interactions during class for developing students' oral and written

English proficiency (Liao et al., 2026). English language teachers and content teachers may also be arranged to collaborate with each other to ensure that the English language course is supportive for content courses (Alhassan et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2026; Yu et al., 2021) or to integrate language and content more effectively in teaching to reinforce the effect of EMI (K. Wang & Yuan, 2026). Furthermore, institution administrators need to attend to students' needs and perspectives as well as teachers' input when designing and managing EMI programs (Dong et al., 2022; A. R. Lee & Curry, 2018; Manan & Hajar, 2024; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2022). Such collaboration among stakeholders may not only allow coherent decisions to be made (K. Wang & Yuan, 2026) but also prevent inducing students' negative emotional responses in the learning process and enable teachers to see institutional recognition of their experience and expertise. EMI curriculum should also be critically reviewed and revised with reference to key stakeholders' feedback and changing academic and professional landscapes to ensure its ongoing alignment with its stakeholders' needs and expectations (K. Wang & Yuan, 2026).

An Early Testing Ground of EMI: Macao's Past and Present

Macao is located in the Pearl River Delta of China, opposite Hong Kong. Like Hong Kong, Macao is a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China with a colonial period of history. Cantonese is spoken as the dominant language in the region. EMI in Macao can be traced back to the Morrison Education Society, which was established in Canton in 1835 in commemoration of Robert Morrison (1782-1834), the first Protestant missionary dispatched to China by the London Missionary Society (Bridgman & Williams, 1837; Yung, 1909/2021). The objective of the Society was "to establish and support schools in China, in which native youth shall be taught, in connection with their own, to read and write the English language; and through this medium, to bring within their reach all the varied learning of the western world" (Bridgman & Williams, 1837, p. 374). In accordance with this objective, the Morrison Education Society School began its operation in Macao in 1839 and was relocated to Hong Kong in 1842 (Yung, 1909/2021). Since the early days, EMI schools have maintained a critical role in Macao's education system until today (Moody, 2019), and the importance of English is further spurred by more recent development of international trade and tourism industry in town (Moody, 2024) and Macao's aim to become an international city (Low, 2020).

Today, Chinese and Portuguese are the official languages in Macao according to its Basic Law, while English is a popular and widely used third language in the city (Young, 2011). Non-tertiary government schools, which account for a small proportion in Macao, only provide Chinese-medium instruction (CMI) or Portuguese-medium instruction (PMI), whereas government-subsidized private schools in the majority can use English as the medium of instruction but need to be evaluated and approved by Macao's education authority. EMI teachers must meet the fundamental requirement for English proficiency (e.g., IELTS or TOEFL scores), and the schools offering EMI courses should

provide training for teachers to hone their English skills, a favorable environment for students to learn English, and the opportunity for students to learn Chinese and/or Portuguese. English as a second language is often a compulsory subject in both government and private schools (Macao SAR Government, n.d.; Moody, 2019). As for fully private unsubsidized schools, which are a minority in Macao, EMI has been commonly implemented. Despite the presence of EMI in Macao's non-tertiary education, it is worth noting that CMI has been the most broadly adopted mode of education in both government and subsidized private schools (Moody, 2019).

The practice of EMI at the tertiary level in Macao started with the establishment of the private University of East Asia in 1981, which became the University of Macao in 1991; see Moody (2021) for details. Today there are four public and six private tertiary education institutions in Macao. EMI is common in these institutions and helps sharpen their global competitive edge and attract students (K. Zhang, 2020). As public tertiary institutions are mainly established for the local community in Macao and are held accountable to public funding providers, there is a restriction on the intake of non-local undergraduate students for these institutions, yet this does not apply to private tertiary institutions, so some of them have recruited a large number of non-local students (Moody, 2021), with most of them coming from the Chinese mainland (Moody, 2024; K. Zhang, 2020). The intake of non-local university students in Macao is increasing continuously (Marques, 2024). The public tertiary institutions have made efforts to maintain English as the primary medium of instruction (MOI) and have necessarily launched programs with Chinese as either a primary or additional MOI. Tertiary education through EMI is often considered more preferable by local parents and students (Moody, 2021).

The admission of local students at three public universities and a private university in Macao is usually based on their results of the JAE (Joint Admission Examination, co-organized by the four tertiary institutions in Macao since 2017 and including English as a subject for assessment). For mainland Chinese students, their Gaokao (University Entrance Examination, with English as a subject for assessment) grades are the main criterion. Regarding students from other contexts, relevant test scores are required for matriculation, such as HKDSE, GCE A Level, SAT, IB Diploma. Depending on the tertiary institutions, admission interviews in English or both English and Chinese may be arranged for local and non-local students. Since there is a lack of unification in Macao's education system in history and today (Young, 2011) and less than one-fifth of secondary students graduate from EMI schools in Macao (Choi & Moody, 2024; Moody, 2021), many local students entering university in Macao seem not to be adequately prepared for EMI in terms of English proficiency despite that they have learned the language as a compulsory school subject for years prior to university. In addition, "since the JAE is a norm-referencing test (not a criterion-referenced assessment), the score on the examination does not necessarily reflect an individual student's readiness for EMI" (Moody, 2024, p. 513). The non-local Chinese students from the Mainland have often had little experience with EMI before they attend university. Hence, three public tertiary institutions in Macao encounter a similar struggle of teaching students of low English proficiency. For private universities in Macao, there has

been no regulation of EMI, and it may be treated as a branding strategy instead of being extensively implemented in education (Botha, 2013; Moody, 2024). As a common practice in Macao's tertiary settings, English language courses are arranged for students to enhance their speaking and academic writing skills. Outcome-based learning has also been implemented in higher education in Macao (Y. Wang & Yu, 2025).

Challenges in EMI in Macao's Higher Education

Some empirical studies demonstrate that university students in Macao encountered comprehension challenges in EMI education. Y. Wang et al. (2018) explored monolingual Chinese mainland students' experiences of EMI at a Macao university via in-depth interviews and reflection journals, and they found that all the participants' low English proficiency in the freshman year prevented them from understanding the course content or engaging in classroom discussions. The students made various efforts to improve their English, for example, translating course materials, attending English skill courses and English learning activities, and seeking peer support. The researchers noted that an English-only policy may disadvantage students with low English proficiency by reducing their disciplinary learning, and the students' satisfaction with EMI may not indicate the quality of education but reflect their practical concerns for future academic or career development. Similarly, K. Zhang (2020) explored Chinese mainland students' use of English and language perceptions at a public university in Macao through a language survey and semi-structured interviews, and noted a couple of challenges the students had encountered in their study, for instance, not being able to comprehend lectures or not willing to speak in class because of their low English proficiency or their teachers' code-switching and speaking in Cantonese, which few of them could understand. K. Zhang (2020) suggested that the university make efforts to create a more multicultural learning environment for using English and provide more support for mainland students to adapt to EMI and for non-native English teachers to enhance their English. As for code-switching in EMI, Botha's (2013) exploration of EMI at a private Macao university via a survey questionnaire, follow-up interviews, and class observations also discovered that EMI in reality seemed inconsistent with the institution's stated policy, and the use of Mandarin in teaching could disadvantage Cantonese-speaking local students at the university. The study suggested further examination of teachers' and students' actual English use in academic settings at Chinese universities. In addition, Y. Wang and Yu (2025) conducted a qualitative study concerning 20 senior undergraduate students' perspectives towards EMI and their disciplinary language and content learning outcomes of full-fledged EMI at a university in Macao, and they similarly found that students' low English proficiency caused their limited comprehension of course content, which could further lead to lower knowledge retention and deficient disciplinary content learning. The researchers advised that students should be provided opportunities to develop academic literacy in both English and their mother tongue, and the learning outcomes of EMI programs need to be evaluated.

In addition, other empirical studies reveal learners' affective challenges in EMI in Macao's higher education. For instance, Yuan et al. (2023) studied the emotional challenges of Chinese mainland students as they joined a pre-service master's degree EMI program at a Macao university. The results were obtained through narrative frames and follow-up interviews, and evidenced that denying learners' needs and unsystematic use of learners' L1 in teaching (random code-mixing) could trigger a number of negative emotions and behaviors among students, such as feeling bored or upset, showing passiveness in learning, and playing occasional truant. The study suggested that teachers attend to students' needs and emotions when delivering knowledge, and stakeholders such as administrators, program leaders, and teachers should conduct critical reflections for achieving more systematic curriculum planning and implementation. It also advised further studies to include observation data of learners' emotional alteration and conduct longitudinal examination to explore how pre-service teachers' future classroom teaching is influenced by their EMI experience, especially their use of translanguaging. Furthermore, Liu (2025) explored how a native English-speaking EMI teacher from North America purposefully incorporated intercultural humor to develop students' intercultural competence in a course on intercultural communication at a university in Macao. The study found that intercultural humor about grades or testing culture could make students from a Chinese cultural background feel uncomfortable or irritated, but may also provide them opportunities to reflect critically on cultural differences. The study called for further research on the impacts of the use of humor on intercultural learning.

In summary, the above empirical studies concerning EMI in Macao's higher education have revealed similar challenges encountered by non-native English speaking students in previous research in other contexts aforementioned. For example, they may lack English proficiency to comprehend lectures (Alhassan et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2022; Su & Kong, 2023; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022) or engage in classroom discussions or interactions (Alhassan et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2022; Muttaqin & Chuang, 2022; Su & Kong, 2023; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022), and their disciplinary content learning was thus negatively influenced by EMI (A. Nguyen, 2024). Also, they may not benefit from teachers' unsystematic use of L1 in teaching (Yuan et al., 2023; K. Zhang, 2020). In addition, when the actuality of an EMI program does not fulfill their needs, students may experience psychological challenges, such as feelings of demotivation for learning (Yuan, Qiu, Wang, et al., 2025; M. Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022).

Coping with Challenges in EMI in Macao's Higher Education

To combat the challenges in EMI, college students in Macao can selectively attempt the coping strategies aforementioned to assist their learning, e.g., L1-mediated strategies, L2-mediated strategies, tool-mediated strategies, and community-mediated strategies (Yu et al., 2021). Such learner efforts in Macao already appeared in Y. Wang et al.'s (2018) study discussed above. In addition, students may

seek guidance from their teachers to select strategies that are most compatible with their individual learning habits.

Other EMI studies conducted in the context of Macao also demonstrate teachers' classroom efforts and exercise of agency in shaping and facilitating teaching and learning. For example, A. S.-J. Lee et al.'s (2023) survey study provided an example of simplifying reading texts in an introductory computer science course at a university in Macao through the software "Rewordify," which was intended to increase engagement of students whose lexical knowledge may not meet the requirements for content learning. The study also noted issues with the software, such as replacing some key vocabulary targeted for content learning, which needed to be manually adjusted by the teacher. It encouraged future research to examine how students with different levels of English proficiency react to the same modified reading text or to explore how the software assists teachers to determine whether students' failure in assessments is due to language or content. Liu and Yuan (2024) explored how a psychology teacher attempted to incorporate a language focus into content class teaching at a Macao university through classroom observations and a semi-structured interview. The study reported that students' divergent English proficiency had caused the teacher to feel deeply frustrated and thus demotivated in teaching. In order to assist her students' learning of technical terms and facilitate their discussions in class, she attempted multiple teaching methods, for instance, providing examples, associating familiar words with unfamiliar words, narrating imaginary stories, teaching word formation rules, rephrasing questions, empathizing with students' difficulty, offering language scaffolding and encouragement for discussion, and recasting students' answers with correct expressions in English instead of using their L1. These attempted methods resonate with Yuan, Li, and Zhang's (2023) recommendations. Liu and Yuan (2024) also call for institutional support for classroom teaching, such as partnering EMI teachers with language teachers to co-develop learners' disciplinary literacy, establishing a community of teachers who can share teaching strategies and mutually offer emotional support, which has likewise been proposed by other studies (see Alhassan et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2026; Yu et al., 2021). As for learners' negative learning emotions, teachers may consider how they can be turned into opportunities for learning and critical reflections, as in the teacher's approach to integrating intercultural humor in education in Liu's (2025) study.

With regard to the use of learners' L1 in the classroom, EMI teachers in Macao need to recognize students' L1 as a resource and create a space for multilingual learning, especially for students with low English proficiency, as suggested by previous studies (see Graham et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2017; A. R. Lee & Curry, 2018; Yu et al., 2021). However, they ought to thoughtfully consider effective methods for incorporating other languages in EMI so that these multilingual resources will be conducive to students' learning instead of causing undesired repercussions. Unlike random code switching, which treats languages as separate entities with a monoglossic view and implies possible dominance of one language over another, teachers may adopt a more holistic and heteroglossic approach for teaching with multiple languages and involves translanguaging practices that endorses hybrid language for making

meaning and forming identity (Goodman & Tastanbek, 2021) and mobilizes a broad range of semiotic or communicative resources to enhance teaching and learning (Liu & Yuan, 2025). For instance, Liu and Yuan's (2025) study demonstrated how a non-native English-speaking EMI history teacher in a higher institution in Macao effectively utilized a variety of resources such as varieties and registers of English, onomatopoeia, physical movements, students' L1, her own language repertoire, online platforms for classroom interaction to sustain dialogic interactions with her students in her monologic lectures on Macao's history. In addition, Liu and Li (2025) studied a psychology teacher's management of language use for herself and her students in two EMI courses at a Macao university and demonstrated the teachers' agency and flexibility in responding to (tacit) institutional language policy in EMI classrooms for achieving different teaching goals. The study revealed that in course A with a focus on lecturing for inexperienced EMI learners (freshmen), the teacher repeated content with synonyms and used more signposting language and written Chinese translation for key terms to clarify teaching and facilitate learning. She also used verbal Mandarin occasionally and allowed students' use of L1 in class. In contrast, she implemented a strict English-only policy in course B (a seminar course) for year three and four college students, where she served more as a facilitator for classroom discussions. Similarly, A. R. Lee and Curry (2018) believed that college freshmen and sophomores could be allowed to communicate partially in their native tongue in EMI classes, whereas junior and senior college students should be taught solely or mostly in English. Yuan, Qiu, Wang, et al. (2025) also emphasized careful inclusion of other languages in EMI by reporting Chinese learners' resistance to their course instructor's overuse of Chinese in EMI programs and courses, as it defeats the purpose of EMI.

Moreover, it is crucial for teachers and institutional administrators in Macao to not only offer various forms of scaffolding continuously to support students' learning, such as English language courses that have already been in place, but also set more realistic educational goals for EMI courses in accordance with students' English proficiency. This may require differentiated language policies that are flexible for meeting specific targets at different stages of educational development (Liu & Li, 2025). Treatment of realistic situations in this manner helps ensure that students, especially those inexperienced college freshmen or those graduating from non-EMI secondary schools, can smoothly adapt to EMI. Otherwise, taking courses delivered in English will not be beneficial for them and may in fact be disadvantageous (A. R. Lee & Curry, 2018) in that their pursuit of knowledge depth will be hindered by their English proficiency. For this reason, it is equally indispensable to measure the outcomes of EMI regarding the acquisition of content knowledge (Kim, 2017). When evaluating disciplinary content learning outcomes of parallel EMI and L1MI programs (e.g., CMI programs), it is critical to ensure "comparability between EMI and non-EMI groups through advanced methodological approaches" (H. Lee et al., 2025, p. 15). Besides, in accordance with K. Wang and Yuan's (2026) advice, EMI curriculum makers should attend to changing academic and professional landscapes in critical curriculum review and aim to cultivate students to be "intercultural scholars capable of mediating between local wisdom and global academic dialogues" (p. 8).

Furthermore, institution administrators and teachers should strive to construct a more caring and cooperative scholarly community where teachers do not battle against challenges alone but share and compare effective strategies for addressing mutual concerns and difficulties in teaching (Liu & Yuan, 2024). Yuan (2020) emphasized the necessity for institutional administrators to develop effective policies that place greater emphasis on teaching and facilitate teaching endeavors. As discussed earlier, professional training needs to be arranged for enhancing teachers' pedagogical capabilities such as translanguaging pedagogies (Liu & Yuan, 2025) and curriculum development techniques (K. Wang & Yuan, 2026) and their English proficiency (Galloway & Ruegg, 2022; K. Zhang, 2020). Barrios et al. (2016) also recommended that experienced EMI teachers provide workshops and share their know-how with colleagues with less experience. Language teachers may observe content teachers' classes and offer them feedback, and content teachers could collaborate with language teachers to plan language and content integrated learning tasks. EMI teachers with similar subject backgrounds could also work together to design course curricula (Yuan, Qiu, & Zhang, 2025). Effective interventions concerning the psychological well-being of EMI teachers may also be launched to help them manage emotional exhaustion from work stress (Yuan, Qiu, & Zhang, 2025). Teachers can gain emotional awareness and learn strategies for emotional regulation and management through specific training and counseling or consultations with each other (Yuan, 2023).

Overall, only when students are equipped with multiple strategies for coping with challenges in EMI, their changing needs and readiness for EMI are more thoughtfully considered in setting realistic educational goals, and teachers are in a sound emotional state and afforded state-of-the-art pedagogical instruments and collective teaching experience can the implementation of EMI in Macao be better sustained.

Conclusion

Today, educational institutions in different countries are seeking cooperation to launch joint programs, some universities have established overseas campuses, and e-learning programs are becoming popular. In light of this development, strengthening the global competitiveness of higher education institutions may still be the trend, in which EMI programs are implemented to develop learners' English competence and prepare them for international undertakings (Kim, 2017). Given the power of English in facilitating global collaborations and providing opportunities for broader development, this study acknowledges the benefits that EMI bestows upon learners and higher education institutions. On the other hand, it also directs attention to a number of common challenges that learners encounter in EMI programs across various contexts, with insufficient English proficiency and negative psychological reactions being the most prominent. Coping strategies are then proposed for tackling these challenges from the perspective of key stakeholders of EMI programs, i.e., learners, teachers, and institution administrators. Subsequently, the study zooms in on EMI in higher education

in Macao and reveals that university learners' comprehension and affective challenges in EMI in the region can be associated with its language education policy and current situation of secondary education. While these challenges resonate well with previous studies of EMI in other contexts, there is a shifting focus of research on the challenges of EMI teachers and their exercise of agency in tailoring language policy to different learning situations. Overall, it is believed that to obtain and sustain academic achievements in EMI tertiary education in Macao or other similar contexts where English is not spoken as a common native language, non-native English learners need to make continuous efforts and adopt various learning strategies to enhance their English proficiency; teachers should skillfully and flexibly employ teaching methods and multilingual resources to facilitate classroom learning and enhance students' academic skills and learning motivation; and institution administrators ought to attend to classroom reality closely, value students' and teachers' experiences and perspectives in planning flexible language and educational policies, and conduct critical curriculum reviews together with key stakeholders in response to changing local and global settings for education and professional development.

To advance scholarly understanding of EMI in higher education in EAL contexts, future research may further tap into critical use of multilingual resources in the classroom (e.g., translanguaging) to support learning and learning outcomes, examine the collaboration between English language teachers and disciplinary content teachers in curriculum development and classroom teaching, explore issues in EMI teacher training and professional support, and evaluate the effectiveness of EMI on the acquisition of subject content knowledge and the development of intercultural scholarly competence. Comparative studies exploring tertiary-level EMI programs in Macao and other (Asian) contexts may also be conducted to pinpoint similarities and differences in challenges in teaching and learning and approaches for addressing these challenges. It is anticipated that these future endeavors may continue to inspire key stakeholders of EMI in their pursuit of excellence through this popular international language.

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Xing Fang is a certified TESOLer and has taught English language courses at the tertiary level for over 17 years. He is currently a lecturer at Macao University of Tourism, Macao SAR, China. His research interests include global Englishes, language variation and change, multilingualism, content and language integrated learning, and language policy and planning. He has published papers in academic journals concerning applied linguistics, culture, and history.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2242-0682>