Students' Perspectives and Attitudes toward EMI and Translanguaging: A Cross-Country Comparative Study of China and Spain

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Abstract

English-medium instruction (EMI) is expanding worldwide, with China and Spain playing an increasingly active role in its implementation. While EMI promotes internationalisation and academic development, few studies compare contexts across countries. Drawing on interview data, this qualitative study examines students' attitudes toward EMI and translanguaging in China and Spain. Findings reveal generally positive views of EMI, though Chinese students faced more difficulties due to lower English proficiency. Both groups showed neutral-to-positive attitudes toward translanguaging but preferred limited L1 use. Chinese participants were stricter about avoiding L1 to improve English. The study offers implications for adopting flexible, inclusive language policies that enhance learning and promote linguistic equity in multilingual EMI settings.

Keywords: attitudes; English-medium instruction; translanguaging; cross-country contexts

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1. Introduction

English-medium Instruction (EMI) refers to the teaching of academic subjects, excluding English language courses, through English in regions where English is not the first official language (Macaro, 2022). The rapid expansion of EMI courses and programs at universities is largely driven by the internationalisation agenda of higher education institutions (HEIs). This trend has facilitated increased student and staff mobility globally (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). Countries such as China and Spain, which have historically allocated limited emphasis to foreign language instruction, have recently accelerated the implementation of EMI programs (Wingrove et al., 2025).

Looking at the contexts of the present study, EMI in China was first proposed in 2001 as bilingual teaching (called *"Shuang yu jiao xue"* in Chinese) to strengthen undergraduate teaching and prioritise university students' English proficiency (Lei & Hu, 2014). It was later promoted through top-down policies aimed at building world-class universities and advancing internationalisation (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Since 2015, universities have gained greater autonomy to manage language policies (Liao et al., 2025), but challenges exist, including lacking well-defined policies for EMI implementation (Botha, 2014), the enforcement of traditional ideology of native speaker idealism and tendency for EMI to perpetuate inequality (Hu et al., 2014), and the low proficiency levels of both students and faculty (Hu & Lei, 2014).

In Spain, EMI has been implemented for several decades. While traditionally lagging behind other European countries (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014), a recent report shows that

Spain has experienced a 49% increase in EMI programs in the past ten years, more than any other European country (Wingrove et al., 2025). In line with the European recommendations (European Commission, 2013), the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECD, 2014) put forth a strategy for internationalisation of Spanish universities which prioritises i) a strong national system, ii) international attractiveness, iii) international competitiveness, and iv) the promotion of international collaborations. The implementation of EMI courses and programs is institutionally viewed as a duty or responsibility of the university or staff members to ensure the quality of education (Villares, 2019) making it a grass roots effort, with each university or department responding to the policies and pressure to internationalize by offering one to a few EMI programs. This tendency has led to a "wide but not deep" EMI implementation process (Wingrove et al., 2025, p. 14). The effects of this ad hoc EMI implementation can be seen through inconsistent quality assurance measures such as student entry requirements, teacher requirements, and teacher and student training or support. As Macaro et al. (2019) noted, "the growth of EMI in Spain has not been matched by the planning needed nor the resources required to ensure its success" (p. 113). Among the key concerns regarding EMI implementation in Spain are English proficiency of the students, faculty, and administration (Arnó- Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015), the effect of EMI on minority languages and the national Spanish language (Lasagabaster, 2021), and the effectiveness of content learning, with linguistic barriers identified as a major obstacle (Lasagabaster, 2022).

Translanguaging has been increasingly explored as a possible pedagogy to address some of the challenges inherent in the EMI context (Fang & Liu, 2020). Translanguaging refers to the natural classroom practice where input and output languages are intentionally alternated

(García & Li, 2014). As a pedagogy, translanguaging fosters inclusive, student-centred classrooms and enhances engagement through the use of students' full linguistic repertoire (Li, 2024). Recently, research on translanguaging has experienced rapid growth, particularly within multilingual educational contexts such as EMI (Lu et al., 2023). Applied to the EMI context, one of the goals of translanguaging is to enhance students' learning by strategically integrating both English and the first language (L1) (Muguruza et al., 2023). Specifically, it encourages students to use their L1 to deepen their understanding of subject content, interpret complex concepts during EMI lectures, ease anxiety, improve confidence, and, ultimately, enhance learning outcomes despite the linguistic barriers present in EMI (Williams, 2022). Besides these practical affordances, the integration of translanguaging in EMI courses is increasingly being recognised as a strategy to break language barriers that language hierarchies create and offer more inclusive multilingual and intercultural learning spaces (Yang & Wang, 2025). With the widespread practice of EMI around the globe the deeper long-term effects of Englishisation on students' identities, creative expression, value for L1 and other languages as well as intercultural and multilingual communication competencies cannot be ignored. The targeted use of translanguaging pedagogical strategies seems to be a promising method to address some of these important issues (Williams, 2024)

Despite increased attention to translanguaging in EMI, comparative research that investigates students' learning experiences remains scarce (Fang et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2023; Muguruza et al., 2023). Yet, understanding translanguaging practices in EMI is essential, as translanguaging goes beyond simple language switching; it involves activating students' entire linguistic repertoire to enhance meaning-making, facilitate

comprehension, and reduce learning difficulties and anxiety (Muguruza et al., 2023). Further EMI research that transcends continental boundaries is crucial; as such cross-regional investigations may reveal significant variations in student experiences and perceptions across EMI contexts (Shao & Rose, 2022).

This study examines university students' attitudes toward EMI and translanguaging in China and Spain, analysing how institutional, linguistic, and pedagogical conditions shape perceptions of language use, learning, and translanguaging practices. Rather than comparing equivalent systems, it highlights how differing EMI structures and contexts influence students' adaptation and aims to inform more inclusive, context-sensitive pedagogical strategies for multilingual EMI settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Students' EMI attitudes and perceptions

Research on students' perspectives regarding EMI reveals two trends: language learning and content learning. Research in the first trend reports favourable student attitudes toward EMI, and the belief that EMI facilitates English language development (Aguilar & Rodríguez, 2012; Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022). However, this expectation contrasts with findings indicating that completion of EMI programs does not necessarily lead to measurable improvements in general English proficiency (Ament & Pérez-Vidal, 2015; Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2021). Despite this discrepancy, the belief that EMI participation improves language skills remains a key motivation for enrolling in EMI programs (Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2023). The research shows that multiple factors

influence students' language learning experiences in EMI such as prior language proficiency (Lei & Hu, 2014; Zhou & Rose, 2024), exposure to English outside the classroom (Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2021; Yuan et al., 2023), motivation (Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2023), anxiety (Yuan et al., 2023), and attitudes (Lei & Hu, 2014).

Research into the second trend, content learning, reports that students worry that EMI may hinder their content learning outcomes (Fang & Liu, 2020; Lasagabaster, 2022; Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022; Siegel et al., 2024), a concern often shared by faculty. Research also identifies a lack of language proficiency as one of the most frequently cited obstacles in EMI (Fang & Liu, 2020; Siegel et al., 2024). Low English levels have been shown to hinder content learning and contribute to negative emotional experiences such as increased anxiety or fear (Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2023; Yuan et al., 2023). Specifically, a study conducted by Ament and Zhang (2025) comparing the Chinese and Spanish contexts found significant differences regarding agency, motivations, and perspectives in EMI. The Chinese group reported experiencing EMI as more challenging and anxiety-provoking, which can affect content learning. A different comparative study between Japan and Sweden revealed that students reported increased difficulties and shock due to insufficient English skills, particularly at the initial stage of taking EMI courses; students felt anxious and nervous due to the language of instruction (Siegel et al., 2024). Finally, the English proficiency of teachers has been identified as a significant barrier to content learning, potentially impacting both students' attitudes and academic performance. For example, Yuan et al. (2023) revealed that students had difficulty understanding lectures due to their teachers' accents and spoken English.

2.2 Perceived benefits and drawbacks of translanguaging in EMI contexts

One of the main affordances of translanguaging in EMI is the role it plays in the scaffolding of content learning by compensating for students' gaps in English proficiency (Fang et al., 2023; Muguruza et al., 2020; Williams, 2022). For instance, Muguruza et al. (2020) found that Spanish students held favourable attitudes towards a flexible classroom language policy and that translanguaging strategies facilitated EMI learning, particularly because their English proficiency was low. Similarly, Williams (2022) found that South Korean students favoured translanguaging in EMI classrooms on some occasions, for example, to ask teachers questions to improve content understanding, for discussions, and to negotiate meaning. In Japan, Itoi and Mizukura (2023) found that translanguaging was an effective scaffolding strategy to mediate academic learning and that students activated all their language resources during EMI learning. In the Chinese context, several studies noted that students' attitudes toward translanguaging were closely linked to the importance they placed on content learning (Fang & Liu, 2020; Zhou & Mann, 2021). In addition, Yuan et al. (2023) found that students linked L1 use to content understanding and English improvement. These findings underscore translanguaging as a pedagogical response to EMI learners' needs. In particular, translanguaging was seen as an effective strategy to improve content understanding, specifically to explain task answers, give homework instructions (Zhou & Mann, 2021), clarify key concepts, and assist students with limited English ability (Fang & Liu, 2020; Fang et al., 2023). Supporting these findings, Shao and Rose (2022), in their comparative study of EMI teachers in the Netherlands, Japan, and China, found that translanguaging only occurred in the Chinese context, mainly because students' English proficiency was low for an EMI-only approach. In this case, L1 use enhanced teaching flow

and helped facilitate content learning. Overall, these examples demonstrate the positive effects of translanguaging, when used strategically, on content learning.

Despite these benefits, some drawbacks of translanguaging have also been noted. For example, Serna-Bermejo and Lasagabaster (2024) revealed that although Spanish students generally held a negative attitude toward translanguaging practices and did not want to see an increased use of their L1 in their classes, they allowed teachers' L1 use in specific cases, such as to explain key contents or specific terms. Itoi and Mizukura (2023) found that Japanese exchange students experienced negative emotions when local students and teachers used L1 in class. This was attributed to their lack of proficiency in the local language (Korean or Mandarin), which made them feel excluded. Similarly, in China, students worried that the overuse of their L1 would discourage them from speaking English in class and negatively affect English language improvements (Zhou & Mann, 2021). These findings suggest that while translanguaging can support learning, it should be applied judiciously and strategically, without undermining the goals of EMI, inclusivity and the linguistic diversity of the students. To contribute to the literature on the potential challenges and drawbacks of translanguaging in EMI settings, we designed a qualitative study utilizing focus group interviews to compare students' attitudes toward EMI and translanguaging practices in China and Spain. Specifically, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What are students' attitudes towards taking EMI courses in China and Spain?

RQ2: What are students' perceptions regarding language and content learning via EMI in China and Spain?

RQ3: What are students' attitudes towards translanguaging practices in EMI courses in China and Spain?

3. Methodology

3.1 Setting and Participants

This study took place at two public universities, one in China and one in Spain. The Chinese group consisted of ten, third-year undergraduates majoring in English language and Literature (Education). Most courses they took in the first and second year focused on English language skills, and they had one EMI course in the third year of studies All the participants had passed the Test for English Majors, Band 4 (TEM4[2]); which corresponds to a B2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The teachers in this degree program were proficient in English with English Master's or PhD degrees.

The Spanish group consisted of eight participants in their third and fourth year of studies on a four-year program in Education with special mention in English and took two to three EMI courses per year, meaning approximately 50-65% of their degree through English, with the remaining courses being taught in either Catalan or Spanish. There is no required level for students to enroll in this program, but a B2 level is recommended. The participants reported having between a B2-C1 English level (CEFR). The professors were not required to have any English language certificate to teach EMI courses in the program.

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[2]The TEM 4 is a national standardized exam in China used to assess English language level of students entering English Majors.

3.2 Research design

To compare students' translanguaging experiences, focus group interviews were conducted targeting students' attitudes, perceptions, and language practices within their respective EMI contexts. While the groups differed in EMI exposure, English proficiency, and teacher qualifications, these differences were intentionally incorporated into the study design. Rather than seeking equivalence, the study aims to examine how local institutional, linguistic, and pedagogical factors shape student experiences across distinct national settings. In order to understand how the design and implementation of the EMI program impact experiences and attitudes towards translanguaging. The interview contained thirteen questions; however, due to the focus of this paper, we report on eight of them, four relating to EMI perspectives and four relating to translanguaging attitudes. The EMI perspective questions were created by the researchers based on previous studies (Shao & Rose, 2022; Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022), and the translanguaging attitude questions were inspired by the studies of Fang and Liu (2020) and Serna-Bermejo and Lasagabaster (2024).

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Focus group interviews were conducted from January to July. The participants were asked in which language they wanted to carry out the interview. The Spanish students requested English, while the Chinese students chose Chinese. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed of the purpose of the study and signed consent forms.

The focus groups lasted from one to one and a half hours each. The interviews were recorded, transcribed into English (if necessary), and then analysed using ATLAS.ti 7.5.7.

A thematic analysis was carried out on the data. We began by identifying recurring themes and core patterns that emerge from the data and that are closely aligned with the research questions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The raw data underwent a rigorous and systematic process before reaching the final results. Initial open codes were developed directly from the transcripts and then grouped into broader code families based on thematic similarity. These were subsequently refined into five overarching themes, each aligned with one of the research questions. This process followed logical progression and included careful review at each stage to ensure accuracy, consistency, and reliability of the findings. The procedure was the following: First, the researchers re-listened to the interviews and reviewed the transcripts to become familiar with the raw data. Second, using ATLAS, initial open codes (i.e., *students can switch to L1 if discussing in English is difficult*) were written next to the text to identify their meanings and ideas. Then, all the instances coded were classified into different code families by grouping them into similar patterns (i.e., *positive to students' translanguaging practices*). To ensure the reliability of the analysis and to minimize researcher bias, two researchers independently coded the transcripts, and compared their coding, discussed discrepancies, and refined the coding scheme collaboratively. This process helped establish inter-coder reliability and ensured that the themes reflected shared interpretations rather than individual assumptions. This grouping resulted in five overarching themes

RQ1: What are students' attitudes towards taking EMI courses in China and Spain?

- *Theme 1: Students' attitudes towards taking EMI courses.*

RQ2: What are students' perceptions regarding language and content learning via EMI in China and Spain?

- *Theme 2: Students' perceived effects of EMI on language learning.*

- *Theme 3: Students' perceived effects of EMI on content learning.*

RQ3: What are students' attitudes towards translanguaging practices in EMI courses in China and Spain?

- *Theme 4: Perspectives towards teachers' use of L1 in the EMI class.*

- *Theme 5: Perspectives towards students' use of L1 in the EMI class.*

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4. Results

4.1 Students' attitudes towards taking EMI courses

Chinese Participants

The Chinese participants reported mixed views in regards to the emotional experiences of the EMI study: on the one hand, they expected to improve their language skills and content knowledge through EMI; on the other hand, they reported anxiety about understanding the lectures and concerns that learning through English might negatively impact their grasp of the content. This led to most Chinese participants (N=9) reporting an overall neutral attitude

towards their EMI classes, and one expressing a positive view.

Spanish Participants

In contrast, all Spanish participants (N=8) expressed a positive attitude toward EMI study. They viewed it as a beneficial experience that contributed to their English language development while simultaneously allowing them to learn content. Several participants also noted an increase in academic confidence and motivation from participation in EMI classes.

Because of the close relationship between students' overall attitudes toward EMI and their anticipated and actual experiences with language and content learning. The following sections provide a detailed analysis of these dimensions based on interview data.

4.2 Students' perceived effects of EMI on language learning

Chinese Participants

Regarding language learning in EMI, most Chinese participants (N=8) reported noticeable improvements in discipline-specific vocabulary, largely attributed to the need for pre-class preparation and in-class exposure. Students highlighted that consistent effort was required to preview textbook materials and vocabulary lists, particularly those related to educational theories. As one student explained: *"We needed to preview the textbook a lot… the words in educational theory improved because we had to learn them to understand the content." (S8 Chinese)*

Listening skills were perceived as the most improved language domain (N=8), with

participants attributing these gains to the necessity of paying close attention during EMI lectures. Reading (N=6) and writing (N=5) were also thought to improve due to coursework demands, while speaking skills (N=4) were mentioned less frequently, largely due to limited speaking opportunities. Several participants attributed the lack of improvement in speaking skills to the teacher-centred nature of the lectures, which limited students' practice. One student noted:

"...during the teacher's lesson...he/she is speaking, and we are listening." **(S2 Chinese)**

Spanish Participants

The Spanish participants, despite being less enthusiastic about language gains compared to the Chinese participants, did note some improvements. For example, most of them (N=6) mentioned improvement in discipline-specific vocabulary, specifically stating they acquired many professional words through EMI learning. Gains in writing (N=4), reading (N=3), and speaking (N=3) skills were evaluated similarly, and gains in listening (N=2) skills were the least mentioned. Participants attributed their perceived gains to the fact that they had to use English for class tasks, one stated that:

"I also think that due to the lots of readings that we have, and the tasks, also that we need to improve our oral expressions. It's for improving lots of skills, in order to develop our skills." **(S17 Spanish)**

In addition to linguistic gains, several participants also attributed participation in EMI to

boosting their confidence when speaking English. They felt that the program provided continuous opportunities to use the language, which helped them develop a stronger sense of confidence using English. For example, one participant said:

"I have improved a lot my skills…and also the confidence." (S12 Spanish)

4.3 Students' perceived effects of EMI on content learning

Chinese Participants

Regarding content learning, the Chinese students reported more concerns or difficulties than gains or benefits. These concerns primarily stemmed from two key factors: firstly, the difficulty in understanding lectures due to their own self-perceived low English proficiency. This was mentioned by all participants (N=10). Secondly, their lack of discipline-specific vocabulary was highlighted as the main obstacle to learning, and they mentioned that this lack contributed significantly to the difficulty of learning the course content. Moreover, students pointed out that there was no preparatory support or scaffolding provided by the university or department to help them adapt to EMI courses, which they felt was especially necessary when dealing with abstract concepts such as educational theories and literature. Consequently, they perceived limited depth in learning through EMI. As a result, students complained that they had to spend many extra hours previewing the lessons, particularly regarding discipline-specific vocabulary.

Another recurring issue was their lack of prior experience in immersive EMI environments and limited exposure to learning subject knowledge in English, as one student noted:

"If you ask the Chinese students, most of them have not participated in EMI classes… they don't know how to get used to it." (S5 Chinese)

This unfamiliarity with EMI learning practices, combined with limited exposure to English outside the classroom, likely hindered students' ability to grasp subject knowledge.

Students agreed that their greatest improvement was in discipline-specific vocabulary, as the course emphasized professional theories and terminology during both preparation and class. While they acknowledged some content learning, most felt the EMI course mainly reinforced knowledge previously acquired in L1 subjects rather than fostering deeper or new understanding. As one student commented:

"… in fact, we have all learned relevant knowledge in various courses…in the form of Chinese. Then the lesson…is to let us absorb the knowledge of that subject in English through the article, and then through the English form…I think that the improvement in English vocabulary is relatively large, and then the subject knowledge has a strengthening effect, but there is no great improvement."(S4 Chinese)

Spanish Participants

In contrast to their Chinese counterparts, the Spanish participants experienced fewer difficulties

learning content through EMI. Most notably with regard to language-related challenges. Only a few (N=3) mentioned that their English level was low, problematic, or highlighted that their lack of discipline-specific vocabulary posed a significant challenge.

Another notable difference between the two groups was that, unlike the Chinese participants, who widely perceived their limited vocabulary as a major barrier to understanding course content, most Spanish participants (N=7) thought that it was their teachers' limited English proficiency that hindered their understanding of the EMI lectures and reduced the depth of content. The Spanish students perceived that some EMI teachers had lower English levels than the students and struggled to express themselves and deliver the subject knowledge in English.

"Well, I think that possibly the first concept to improve is the English level of teachers, which I repeat it's not something that that we do not understand, we do understand but Um if the degree is in English, it would be nice to (improve)." (S16 Spanish)

Thus, students felt that having EMI teachers who speak English fluently would enhance the effectiveness of the instruction. They also noted that it was important to ensure that they themselves had a certain English level to learn the course content effectively, considering a B2 level adequate. Finally, they suggested having an English course for language support.

Similar to the Chinese group, the Spanish students did not specifically mention gains in content knowledge but focused on using English for academic purposes and as an international language.

*"I do think that maybe now I relate English more to the academic side when it comes to articles...English is the globalized, accepted language, and if you know English, then you can go anywhere." **(S11 Spanish)***

These findings indicate that students from both groups did not perceive the EMI course or program to significantly improve content knowledge. Instead, they emphasized the challenges encountered, and underscored the need for increased institutional support, tailored interventions, and pedagogical adjustments to enhance the effectiveness of EMI for content learning.

4.4 Perspectives towards teachers' use of L1 in the EMI class

Students in both contexts generally supported the strategic use of L1 by teachers. However, Chinese students were more inclined to view L1 as a necessary tool to ensure understanding the content, while Spanish students emphasized maintaining English as the primary instructional language, particularly to support international students.

Chinese Participants

All ten Chinese participants expressed positive attitudes toward teachers' use of L1, particularly for scaffolding understanding of subject content and clarifying difficult terminology. They commonly identified discipline-specific vocabulary as the main obstacle to comprehension and believed that switching to Chinese could help alleviate this issue. For instance, one participant noted:

*"…teachers…can use their mother tongue when necessary…some obscure proper nouns or the key and difficult points…mother tongue will be more helpful to our understanding" **(S10 Chinese)***

While the majority of participants (N=6) preferred English as the primary instructional language, four participants expressed a preference for greater use of Chinese in class, believing that L1 use could help solidify their understanding of key concepts. Overall, students showed a willingness to maintain an English learning environment.

Spanish Participants

Spanish participants did not oppose occasional teacher use of L1. Only two favoured L1 for explaining complex terms, and one noted this was mainly helpful during the first year while adapting to EMI. Another, despite difficulties with abstract concepts, preferred instruction in English. Overall, all participants agreed that English should remain the primary medium of instruction, as one student explained:

*"Yeah. Um, probably they can switch it at the end of the class when you go and ask something, you ask them can I ask you in Catalan? And then they answer you. But during the class. Umm, no." **(S17 Spanish)***

Concerns were raised about fairness and inclusivity, especially given the presence of Erasmus[3]

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[3] Erasmus students: Exchange students in the European Union exchange program

students. Several students pointed out that switching languages was unfair to international students and that sometimes teachers switched to Spanish or Catalan for convenience without offering support to non-local students.

4.5 Perspectives towards students' use of L1 in the EMI class

Both the Chinese and Spanish students report using their L1 in EMI classes, especially during peer discussions. Chinese students tended to use L1 more selectively, often to alleviate difficulties expressing themselves, while also showing a strong desire to improve their English. Spanish students prioritised effective communication in discussions and valued L1 as a way to foster inclusivity and reduce anxiety.

Chinese Participants:

Nine out of ten Chinese students acknowledged using L1 in class, especially during group discussions or when struggling to express complex ideas in English. While they made efforts to use English when speaking with teachers, switching to L1 was a natural strategy to ease communication and reduce stress. For example, one student mentioned:

"...but when I am really nervous or unable to express my views for other reasons, I will use Chinese to express my views." (S6 Chinese)

Despite this, most students (N=8) were motivated to use English more actively and viewed EMI classes as an opportunity to enhance their language skills. For example:

"We should use that opportunity to practice more." (S3 Chinese)

Spanish Participants

All the Spanish participants (N=8) reported using L1 during EMI classes, mostly for discussion. They viewed this as necessary to foster equal participation and improve idea exchange, especially among students with insufficient English proficiency. One student explained:

"It was a safe space. There was no judgment… it made the conversations much more enriching because I could see the struggle in some of my classmates when they could not find a word in English, and they were very frustrated." (S11 Spanish)

Only two participants highlighted the goal of practicing English in EMI classes and emphasized that students should make efforts to improve their English skills since they were enrolled in the English specialization degree program. Additionally, three participants mentioned taking notes in their L1, believing that writing explanations in Spanish helped reinforce deeper understanding.

5. Discussion

This study compared Chinese and Spanish Education students' attitudes toward EMI and translanguaging, exploring perceived benefits and challenges in language and content learning. Despite differing EMI structures, the findings show that institutional factors,

particularly programme intensity, timing, prior exposure, and English proficiency, strongly shape students' attitudes, language development, and perceptions of translanguaging.

In response to research question one, which explored students' attitudes towards EMI courses, the findings showed that, first, most of the Chinese students were in contact with EMI for the first time and reported predominantly neutral attitudes. While they expected to experience language and content gains, their experience was somewhat negatively affected by anxiety and fear of not fully understanding lectures. These emotional responses were closely tied to their perceived limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity with discipline-specific vocabulary. In contrast, Spanish students, who had similar English levels and were also in their third year of EMI, demonstrated a positive attitude, reporting perceived improvements in English proficiency, increased academic motivation, and a growing confidence in speaking English.

The main difference between the two groups, besides the context, was that the Chinese group experienced EMI for the first time in the third year of studies. Even though they received formal instruction in English language courses, they seemed to struggle with the adaptation to an immersion classroom. The Spanish group, on the other hand, overcame the initial challenges they experienced in the first year of study and were able to experience more positive benefits. These findings align with Zhou and Rose (2024), who noted that EMI-related anxiety is higher during initial exposure and tends to decrease gradually over time.

Interestingly, despite both groups having comparable English proficiency, the Chinese

students attributed their difficulties to perceived insufficient language abilities, while the Spanish students identified the shift to English-only instruction as the main challenge, particularly during their first year of study. This suggests that the Chinese students' struggles were not primarily due to language ability but rather to the demands of adjusting to EMI pedagogy. Previous research has frequently cited limited English proficiency as a major barrier in EMI (Fang & Liu, 2020; Yuan et al., 2023). However, our findings indicate that adaptation to a new learning style, rather than actual proficiency level, may be a more critical factor in early EMI experiences.

Regarding the second research question, when asked about the language learning effects of EMI, improved discipline-specific vocabulary and terminology was regarded as the skill that improved the most by both groups, followed by listening skills in the Chinese group, and confidence in speaking in the Spanish group. However, not all participants were satisfied with their language gains; some students said their improvement was not noticeable, particularly those who perceived themselves as having a high entry level. This confirms previous findings that students tend to believe that EMI improves their English skills (Aguilar & Rodríguez 2012; Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022) but specifically highlights that the language learning gains are not global but specific to their discipline and genre. This corroborates other studies in different countries (Lei & Hu, 2014; Ament & Pérez-Vidal, 2015; Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2021), which demonstrate that students' general English proficiency does not significantly improve after EMI participation.

Notably, speaking skills were identified as the language domain that was least affected by EMI, especially among the Chinese participants. This was commonly attributed to the teacher-centred nature of EMI classrooms, which offered limited interactive opportunities

for oral practice. This highlights the importance of training teachers to provide support and better equip students with practical strategies to navigate EMI.

When asked what the greatest challenges were, the Chinese group thought their English proficiency was the greatest obstacle, while the Spanish group said their teachers' English proficiency was a barrier to understanding. An important reason for this difference could be that the Chinese students took only a single EMI course, their EMI lecturer had a proficient English level and had rich experience in teaching language courses, while the Spanish students were enrolled in an EMI program with multiple EMI courses in different subjects where the lecturers were content specialists rather than language specialists and were not required to have an English language certificate of any kind. From the Spanish students' perspective, some EMI teachers had insufficient English levels, leading to poor-quality lectures. This aligns with previous studies that raised concerns about EMI lecturers' qualifications and English proficiency (Yuan et al., 2023; Siegel et al., 2024). It seems that students with low English levels or low confidence in English are concerned that EMI can hinder content learning and limit the depth of comprehension. These same students also feel that discipline-specific vocabulary is a significant obstacle in EMI study. On the other hand, students with higher confidence and more experience in EMI tend to be more concerned about their teachers' level of English and the possible negative effects it could have on their English language and content learning. Similar concerns have been reported in previous studies (Yuan et al., 2023; Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022). This finding is also a reflection of the EMI policies in Spain, as mentioned, there were no requirements for the teachers and no extra support given for Spanish teachers who transition from L1 to English language teaching. It strongly suggests that more EMI language or

methodological support is needed for both students and faculty.

Some Chinese students noted that EMI reinforced their existing knowledge by requiring more preparation and review time, echoing findings that EMI can strengthen subject learning when effectively implemented (Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022; Yuan et al., 2023).

Students from both contexts emphasized the need for their institutions to better support their adaptation to EMI courses, whether it be by having pre-lessons, requiring a language certificate upon entering, or ensuring their teachers are qualified to deliver content in English. Some students also recommend that teachers adopt more student-centred and interactive teaching approaches, with greater emphasis on scaffolding to aid comprehension. These findings suggest that both contexts could benefit from a more comprehensive EMI implementation strategy that considers both language, content and methodological concerns of the stakeholders.

The third research question targeted students' attitudes towards translanguaging. The results reveal that students from both groups held neutral-to-positive attitudes toward translanguaging practices in EMI classes. This finding aligns with other studies, which also found that students were flexible towards L1 use in EMI contexts (Fang & Liu, 2020; Fang et al., 2023; Itoi & Mizukura, 2023; Williams, 2022; Zhou & Mann, 2021). More specifically, students from both groups supported their teachers' translanguaging practices to explain abstract concepts, difficult terminology, and to scaffold students' understanding. Our participants believed that teachers needed to pay attention to students' learning efficiency, that is, to check if they understood, then switch to L1 to scaffold if they see

someone struggling to comprehend. An important difference to note is that the Chinese students emphasized wanting more translanguaging from the teacher to assist learning in comparison to their Spanish counterparts. This contrast may reflect broader contextual differences in EMI implementation. Spanish students, with more exposure to international peers, greater experience using English as a lingua franca, more experience with EMI, and more confidence in English, positioned themselves as English "users," while Chinese students who were newer to EMI and had less confidence in English viewed themselves more as language "learners", a pattern also reported in Baker and Hüttner (2017), and Siegel et al. (2024).

Students from both contexts valued an English-dominant environment, acknowledging the scaffolding role of L1 but also wanting to maximize English exposure to foster language development. This aligns with Serna-Bermejo and Lasagabaster's (2024) findings, where students accepted translanguaging only in specific circumstances and viewed English as the legitimate language of EMI. Similarly, the overuse of L1 has been negatively viewed, mainly because it reduces English exposure and practice (Siegel et al., 2024; Zhou & Mann, 2021). In our study, international students were only present in the Spanish context, and the Spanish students deemed teachers' translanguaging practices as negative, specifically stating that it was unfair and useless for international students. This is consistent with findings from Itoi and Mizukura (2023), who reported that when teachers and local students used L1 to communicate, international students often feel excluded and experienced negative emotions. Therefore, translanguaging should be used strategically to ensure classrooms remain inclusive and equitable, especially in multilingual settings where students do not share the same first language. This aligns with Li's (2024) view that

translanguaging pedagogy goes beyond flexible language use to foster socially responsive classrooms that value students' voices and lived experiences. Strategic translanguaging should therefore address not only comprehension but also fairness, inclusion, and identity. As Li (2024) emphasizes, bringing students' histories into classroom practices transforms the curriculum into a more equitable and inclusive space.

Second, students from both contexts supported their own translanguaging practices, to express ideas and facilitate communication among students and between students and teachers. The Spanish students switch to L1 without hesitation when no international students were in their group to share ideas and prioritise content learning and efficiency. They reported that L1 use created a "safe space" where they could express themselves more confidently and collaboratively, particularly when struggling to find the right words in English. These findings are consistent with Williams (2022), who found that South Korean students used their L1 to negotiate meaning and enhance group understanding. Similarly, Li (2024) emphasized that a key benefit of translanguaging pedagogy is its potential to foster a more inclusive, student-centred, and engaged learning environment by encouraging students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire.

Chinese students were more restrained in translanguaging, using English as much as possible and switching to Chinese only under pressure, viewing EMI as an opportunity to improve proficiency. Such differences are related to students' EMI experiences and learning goals. The Chinese group had limited exposure to EMI and therefore prioritised language improvement, while the Spanish group, with more EMI experience, felt more confident in their English and emphasized subject mastery and participation. Similar patterns were observed in Siegel et al. (2024), where Japanese students, with less EMI

experience, viewed EMI as a chance to develop both language and content knowledge, while Swedish students, coming from more multilingual contexts and with greater EMI exposure, focused primarily on content learning. These differences stem from policy structures: China's top-down EMI model fosters anxiety and reliance on L1 scaffolding, whereas Spain's decentralised approach produces uneven teacher training and support. Both cases highlight the need for policies aligning EMI goals with classroom realities.

6. Conclusion

This cross-country study explored students' attitudes toward EMI and translanguaging in Asia and Europe. Overall, students showed neutral-to-positive views, supporting translanguaging for clarity and content learning while cautioning against its overuse. Chinese students were more restrained, prioritising English improvement, whereas Spanish students were more positive and experienced fewer language barriers. The contrast reflects differing EMI exposure, with Chinese students encountering a steeper learning curve. These findings highlight the value of using translanguaging as a temporary scaffold for novice EMI learners and underscore the need for context-sensitive EMI policies that address institutional and linguistic diversity.

This study has several implications for teachers and institutions. First, pedagogical translanguaging can be an effective tool to reduce students' language-related difficulties and enhance teaching efficiency. This suggests that the use of L1 is most suitable to transmit meaning. However, there should be clear limitations to the frequency of L1 use, as students also expressed a desire to maintain an English-medium learning environment in order to

improve their English language skills. It seems teachers should use L1 with caution when international students are present to avoid exclusion. However, the use of some translanguaging could be a positive way to scaffold foreign students into the local language. Second, teachers could adopt a more flexible language policy in EMI classrooms, allowing students to use other languages in addition to English. Translanguaging as a scaffolding strategy seems to be more useful at the beginning of EMI courses/programs, but as time goes by, it may become less necessary. Third, teachers should aim to create socially just EMI classroom environments by recognizing and including students' diverse languages, cultures, backgrounds, and personal experiences in their teaching. This involves being aware that language use can create imbalances, for example, when some students understand the local language and others do not, and taking steps to ensure that no group feels left out. Promoting equal opportunities for all students to participate and succeed should be a key priority. Finally, institutions should take responsibility for ensuring that students and teachers are properly resourced and trained to participate in EMI courses/programs. Our findings demonstrate that learning through EMI poses a number of challenges and that there are both language and methodological factors that cannot be ignored. Thus, to provide the necessary language support, institutions could offer students pre-lessons, preparation English classes to prepare them for EMI lessons, or require a certain English level to be able to enroll in an EMI degree program. Institutions may also implement EMI programs that increase the amount of EMI use over time so that students can better adapt to EMI learning. At the same time, they need to guarantee that teachers have the relevant qualifications and resources to conduct EMI lessons effectively. Institutions will also need support from regional or national levels in order for EMI to effectively meet its

internationalisation goals.

This study has several limitations. Although the small sample provided rich insights, its qualitative design restricts generalizability; future research should include quantitative data to validate these trends. The two groups differed slightly in English proficiency, yet findings suggest that perceived rather than actual proficiency shapes EMI attitudes. Future studies should control for proficiency more precisely. Focusing solely on Education offers depth but limits disciplinary scope; comparisons across fields could yield broader perspectives. Contextual differences between China and Spain, including EMI exposure and design, were intentional to highlight how local contexts shape experiences. Despite these constraints, the study contributes to understanding EMI translanguaging, emphasizing that students' experiences improve with time and that early scaffolding and support are crucial for confidence and learning.

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