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English-medium instruction as an internationalisation strategy at a second-tier Chinese University: instructors' challenges and their shaping factors

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Abstract

Joining the tide of global internationalisation of higher education, Chinese universities have embraced English-medium instruction (EMI) as a strategic response. The adoption of EMI is to comply with government mandates and for institutional survival, as it will increase the international ranking and bring in more income from international students. The switch of medium of instruction and pedagogical issues arising therefrom have drawn considerable scholarly attention. However, little attention has been paid to the implementation of EMI in second- or mid-tier universities, and, particularly, to the attendant pedagogical issues. In comparison to top-tier universities, second-tier universities' instructors must deal with amplified tensions created between the pedagogical needs and institutional requirements brought by the EMI policy. This study seeks to shed light on the challenges, and their contributing factors, confronted by educators in these universities. Employing a language policy analysis framework informed by policy enactment theory, the research draws upon an examination of both national and institutional policy documents, as well as interviews conducted with nine educators and administrative leaders across three distinct faculties. The investigation reveals that the emergent challenges in implementing EMI stem from several sources, including lax admission standards for international students and the divergent backgrounds and requirements of local versus international student populations. These findings underscore the imperative for a thorough appraisal of contextual nuances before the formulation and implementation of language-in-education policies. This is particularly salient in second-tier academic institutions, which often grapple with limited resources and may not possess the same level of preparedness to adapt their systems as swiftly as their more resourced counterparts.

Keywords: Higher education (HE), English medium instruction (EMI), Internationalisation, Policy, Non-elite university, China

Introduction

Internationally, the English as a medium of instruction (EMI) wave has been ever-intensifying in higher education, as foreseen by Dearden (2014). The shift is driven by both local and international considerations. For instance, Kang (2018) elucidates that the impetus for the adoption of EMI in Korea emanates from both global staff and student exchanges as part of an internationalisation strategy, as well as the local governmental allocation of funding. In China as well, a concerted effort by the government has been undertaken to promote EMI adoption within its higher education institutions with EMI being designated as a pivotal index of internationalisation (Gao, 2018). Consequently, a broad uptake of EMI has been observed across Chinese universities. Initially, starting with elite universities (“985” and “211” project universities,¹ or “double first-class” universities), EMI adoption gradually expanded to second-tier (or mid-tier) universities. Second-tier universities are not selected for the above-mentioned national university development projects but are recognised as leaders in the region. By 2019, a total of 127 universities spanning 25 provinces in China had implemented 620 EMI undergraduate programmes (figures adapted from CampusChina, 2019).

These institutions have had varying degrees of success with their language policies, subject to contextual factors such as human and fiscal resources (Hu, 2019), stakeholders’ engagement such as strategic planning by senior management, and ongoing adjustment of the policy in response to identified problems (Choi & Adamson, 2021). Previous studies found that power dynamics may also affect the MOI policy implementation processes. For instance, Hum and Choi (2020) show that high power distance in a Cambodian university led frontline teachers and mid-managers to refrain from voicing their concerns, which resulted in the creation of language curricula ill-suited to its students and teachers. Besides these institutional level factors, classroom level issues also attracted scholarly attention. The internationalisation-driven EMI movement has presented particular pedagogical challenges. Dearden (2014), after analysing the implementation of EMI programmes across 55 nations, identified challenges such as inadequate linguistic readiness of educators and a paucity of organisational or pedagogical frameworks conducive to the facilitation of effective EMI teaching and learning. A survey conducted by Macaro et al. (2018) indicates that instructors implementing EMI often resort to code switching, either for elucidating terminologies or in instances where articulation in English proves challenging. Jon et al. (2020) even found that some instructors disregarded the official policy to use EMI.

While proving insightful, previous studies have not paid due attention to issues resulting from the specific context of the institutions, particularly their status, which impacted policy enactment at the institutional level (e.g., Ball et al., 2012; Unerschütz et al., 2023). Considering the contextual constraints influencing the enactment of medium of instruction (MOI) policies, Galloway et al. (2020) called for the proposition of context-sensitive methodologies for the implementation of EMI. The

¹ 1 These refer to “Project 985” and “Project 211”, which collectively represent prestigious universities in China. The name “Project 985” derives from the date of announcing the policy to promote the development of China’s HE (May 1998) while “Project 211” is the abbreviation of the slogan “in preparation for the twenty-first century, (we) focus on promoting around 100 universities and a number of target subjects”.

present study has responded to this call and seeks to present EMI design and implementation strategies within second-tier Chinese universities.

This study has analysed the practised EMI policy of a second-tier university, providing implications for contextually similar HE institutions catering to the internationalisation trend. In understanding the factors shaping the implementation of EMI policy, Choi's (2018) analytical framework was deemed appropriate for the purpose, as it was designed to help systematically analyse language policy implementation and impact. The framework was developed synthesising previous studies on the processes and impact of language-related and other reforms. It reflects the view that policy is an iterative and discursive process (Ball et al., 2012; Lipsky, 2010). This study, drawing on an interview-based study conducted at a second-tier university in China, contributes to exploring the interweaving relationship between the implementation of EMI policy in higher education institutions and the institutional context, and suggests ways to address the distinctive needs of local and international students.

Background: EMI policy in Chinese HE

Initially introduced in 2001, EMI policy in China was formulated partly in response to the prevailing global trend of internationalising HE. The intention behind this policy was to actively contribute to the internationalisation of domestic students within the country. According to the policy directives set by the Ministry of Education [MoE] (2001), EMI must be adopted in five to ten per cent of courses associated with high technology and international trade majors within three years from 2001. This applies to both general education courses and discipline-specific courses within undergraduate programmes. In instances where universities cannot deliver EMI courses, an alternative option permits the use of English materials while retaining Chinese as the medium of instruction (CMI). The MoE incorporates a university's performance in EMI as one of the indices to assess the extent of internationalisation. Consequently, this evaluation influences the overall assessment and ranking of the institution.

Should a university's performance in implementing EMI be deemed unsatisfactory, the repercussions extend beyond its reputation and student recruitment efforts. Such assessment outcomes not only impact the institution's leadership but also jeopardise their professional careers. This assessment mechanism underscores the resolute commitment of the Chinese government to advancing the internationalisation of HE.

An additional factor propelling EMI policy was the MoE's ambition to establish China as the primary destination for international students in Asia (MoE, 2010). Recognising the escalating global mobility of students and the intensified global competition in attracting international students, the MoE introduced the *Study in China Plan* in 2010. The MoE posited that by offering degree programmes in English, the appeal of studying in China would be augmented for international students, as they would be relieved of the necessity to invest time in learning the Chinese language.

These measures have led to the widespread implementation of EMI courses and programmes in Chinese universities resulting in a significant increase in the enrolment of international students.

Previous research on EMI policy implementation and issues

With the increasing popularity of EMI in non-English speaking countries, researchers have identified numerous challenges associated with its implementation. In addition to the linguistic barriers frequently encountered by EMI teachers (Floris, 2014; Loy & Wahab, 2020), various authors (Bradford, 2019; Macaro, 2018) report on pedagogical challenges. For instance, Macaro (2018) observes that EMI classrooms tend to be more lecture or monologue based and less interactive compared to classes conducted in the first language (L1). Loy and Wahab (2020) also underscore teachers' insufficient confidence in EMI, often stemming from a fear of failure or feelings of anxiety. Similarly, within the Chinese context, Wang (2016) discovered that many instructors in EMI business classes faced limitations in language proficiency, leading them to conduct scripted lessons. While meeting the EMI requirement, they struggled to address unforeseen needs.

Moreover, the exploration of various factors influencing the successful implementation of EMI has revealed noteworthy insights. Foremost among these factors is the crucial role of policy actors' skills. Rose et al. (2019) study underscores that instructors' proficiency in the English language serves as a positive indicator of the success of EMI in a Japanese university context. Floris (2014) further contends that teachers' ability to articulate complex concepts in simple and clear language is essential for ensuring student comprehension. Furthermore, as the student body in EMI courses becomes more diverse, lecturers' intercultural skills assume a pivotal role in facilitating communication with students from various cultures (Bradford, 2019; Mazak & Carroll, 2017). Of course, it needs to be acknowledged that some teachers resist EMI, due to its perceived irrelevance to students' needs, for instance, due to its misalignment with high-stakes exams such as the college entrance exam (Choi, 2017).

From the institutional perspective, Yuan (2019) reports the ambivalent attitudes of senior management regarding EMI practice. While emphatically promoting the practice, human resource decisions do not recognise the extra efforts required to conduct a high-quality EMI lesson, but awarding high demanding publication records. Many authors (e.g., Dang et al., 2021; Lasagabaster, 2022) have delved into institutional support for teachers' language and pedagogical preparation and found such support to be generally inadequate. This inadequacy can contribute to potential reluctance among teachers to engage in EMI courses and leave in-service teachers feeling helpless.

While insightful, previous research paid limited attention to the influence of contextual features, in particular, the status of the university (but see Unser-Schutz et al., 2023 for an exception), and this study has aimed to address that gap.

Research design

Analytical framework

This research was based on the theory of policy enactment, which delves into a more detailed and nuanced implementation of policies within specific contexts. It has aimed to understand how policy actors interpret, adapt, and transform policy messages, creating context-specific actions to support teaching and learning (Ball et al., 2012), as how the actors perceive the policy will affect its implementation. It has also identified the potential shapers of enacted policy, which are summarised into three main factors: policy features, policy actors, and the context

Table 1 Comparative framework on the implementation and impact of language-in-education policies (Choi, 2018)

Factors shaping policy implementation and impact		Examples
Policy features	Policy-specific	Relevance, complexity, feasibility, self-containability
	Relational	Alignment with other policies, maturity
People	Identification of implementers	Implementers in the specific context (e.g., officers in the regional educational offices, teacher trainers, teachers)
	Individual readiness	Cognition, attitude, skills
	Interpersonal readiness	Communication, collaborative system
Contextual features	Specific to a policy in question	Resources, legal preparation, educational system, historical role of the target language
	Policy-making in general	Political, educational; long-term preparation or fast-paced issuance of reforms

(Ball et al., 2012; Woods, 2012). Choi (2018) maps out sub-factors of these three major language-in-education policy shapers, synthesising research from the two disciplines of administration (e.g., Walker & Qian, 2012) and critical policy research (e.g., Ball et al., 2012). Thus, the framework has helped identify the sources of tension around EMI reform. For instance, policy-specific features include the perceived relevance of the change to key stakeholders (e.g., addressing the needs of students); and actor-related factors include identifying all actors in the chain of policy implementation, and preparing these actors for the planned changes, e.g., persuading them of the need for change and equipping them with necessary skills. Finally, contextual features include resources, or the policy's compatibility with the educational system (see Table 1).

In accordance with the analytical framework and the identified research gap, this research examined the perceptions of the actors and identified the factors which shaped the implementation of the MOI policy, guided by two research questions: (1) What are the pedagogical challenges in implementing EMI policy in a second-tier university? And (2) What factors have contributed to such challenges? Concerning the 2nd question, where relevant, the strategies that instructors adopted to navigate the challenges were also reported. Below, the methods of investigation are explained, before the findings from the study are discussed.

Research setting, participants, data collection, and analysis

Research setting

This study has drawn on a qualitative case study conducted at a second-tier university situated in the economically prosperous eastern coastal region of China, where the promotion of EMI is widespread across universities in the vicinity. Being a comprehensive university, it encompasses 18 faculties, three of which run a total of eight EMI undergraduate programmes and 12 postgraduate programmes. While it does not belong to the elite universities, the regional government has officially recognised it as a proficient implementer of EMI, a designation shared with eleven other institutions in the province. Still, in comparison to elite or double first-class universities, the case university does not have as many resources and the academic calibre of both its staff and students is modest. This study may inform the general EMI situation of universities with similar status.

The case university has run parallel EMI and CMI courses for students' options in thirteen specialities. Based on information obtained from the international students' office

Table 2 EMI teachers' demographic information

Name	Gender	Age	Faculty	Educational background related to EMI	Title	Years of teaching	Years of teaching EMI
Shelley	F	33	Management	N/A	Lecturer	4	2
Susan	F	37	Management	N/A	Lecturer	7	2
Johnson	M	45	Management	Taught English before shifted to Economics	Associate Prof	16	5
Victor	M	34	Management	Visiting scholar in South Africa (1 year)	Lecturer	4	2
Jenny	F	36	Engineering	PhD. in USA	Lecturer	6	3
Mary	F	34	Engineering	N/A	Lecturer	3	2
Leo	M	35	Engineering	Visiting scholar in USA (1 year)	Lecturer	6	3
Lily	F	35	Science	Visiting scholar in USA (1 year)	Lecturer	8	3
Ada	F	41	Science	Visiting scholar in USA (1 year)	Associate Prof	11	3

of the university, approximately 96 per cent of undergraduate international students at the case university use English as an additional language. The majority of these students originated from African and Asian countries, a trend attributed in part to China's Belt and Road initiative. Notably, there is observed variability in the English proficiency levels among these international students. Although the university's enrolment guide stipulates that international students must submit an English proficiency certificate, the specific type of certificate or the corresponding English proficiency level are not specified.

Participants and data

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine EMI instructors, all of whom used Chinese as their L1. Instructor participants were purposefully selected to reflect a range of experiences, beliefs and reactions concerning EMI. Four categories of teachers were selected for the interviews, including those who had studied abroad as visiting scholars; one who held a doctoral degree from an overseas university; one from the discipline of English language education; and those who did not have any such experiences (See Table 2 for their details with pseudonyms; leaders' details are not provided to assure anonymity.). All three faculty deans who are running the EMI programmes, as well as the director of the Teaching Affairs Department (TAD), were also interviewed to capture the perspectives of senior management.

The interview questions focused on the following: interviewees' understanding of the EMI policy, such as the purpose of the policy and its benefits to students; teachers' attitudes towards the policy; teachers' self-evaluation of their English proficiency; perceived supporters of EMI; and challenges and navigational strategies in conducting the EMI programmes (see the "Appendix" for details). To facilitate the interviewees' accurate expression of thought, the interviews were conducted in Chinese. Each interview lasted around one hour and was audio-recorded and transcribed; however, only excerpts were translated and the data analysis was conducted in Chinese.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the background and policies at various levels, relevant policy documents from the state (17 documents), province (11 documents), and university (19 documents) on EMI, student enrolment, and curricula were collated. The content of the documents at each level primarily fell into two categories: general educational outlines related to internationalisation, such as state and provincial mid-and-long-term education reform and development schemes. Also included were documents specifically addressing EMI deployments and measures at the three levels of state, province and university, e.g., *Notice about the Competition for University Level Excellent EMI Courses* issued by the TAD and the *Curricula of Undergraduate Programmes* at the university.

Data analysis

The analysis of the interview data followed thematic content analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019), with a focus on the research questions. It was both inductive and deductive. The analysis of the EMI practice and challenges were driven by the data, and an inductive approach was employed. The thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014) identified themes such as the top-down feature of the EMI policy, teachers' and students' insufficient language proficiencies, teachers' transcultural proficiency, limited resources and power dynamics of the university; the relationship among these themes was sought to understand the phenomena. The analysis of the practice-shaping factors was guided by Choi's (2018) framework, that is, they were analysed in terms of the policy features, actors and contextual features, which also organised the reporting of the findings. In addition to the authors, a bilingual scholar reviewed the data analysis and the translation to ensure accuracy.

The document data analysis employed a textual analysis approach following Smith's (2017) methodology. A matrix was utilised for organising categorical coding during the analysis process. The selection of the aforementioned documents served the purpose of representing both the national and provincial contexts of internationalisation, shedding light on the university's comprehension of the policy, and illuminating its response to the overarching internationalisation initiative. These documents played a crucial role in providing interpretations and explanations for teachers' pedagogical choices, as well as their active engagement with the policy. The EMI policy, being integral to their professional environments, compelled them to conform to the language-in-education policy as far as their capacities would allow.

The analysis of the two data sets was synthesised, that is, the interview data were understood in reference to the contextual features captured in the documents (Maxwell, 2012). In other words, we sought the relationship between the actors' beliefs and dilemmas in EMI implementation and the policy features, as well as the policy implementation environment at the university.

Findings

General practice

In the initial phase, where the government primed universities for EMI with solely local Chinese students in classrooms, instructors enjoyed the freedom to revert to the students' mother tongue. This trans-language practice mirrors the widespread practice in

the Chinese-speaking region as captured in the previous research (e.g., Su et al., 2021). This strategy is often adopted to enhance students' understanding of academic content and foster their confidence within the region. This practice is also observed elsewhere where English is a foreign language (e.g., Choi & Poudel, 2024; Macaro et al., 2018).

However, in the current second phase of the EMI policy, universities were mandated to address the educational needs of both Chinese and international students. With international students who do not understand Chinese in classrooms, it has become obligatory to deliver all content exclusively in English. The detailed EMI practice will be embedded in the discussion in the following section where the related challenges are discussed.

Challenges in practicing EMI policy in a second-tier university

Senior administrators and teachers alike discussed the challenges in practising the EMI policy, which can be categorised as (1) issues stemming from linguistic barriers, and (2) challenges arising from disparate educational and cultural foundations across local and international students.

Linguistic barriers and pedagogic compromise

The most frequently highlighted challenge was the limited proficiency in English among EMI teachers. From a study conducted in Japan, Unser-Schutz et al., (2023) found that such a barrier is more common in a second-tier university. The challenge is not merely limited to communication breakdown. Numerous other pedagogical challenges resulted from linguistic barriers, including simplification of intricate concepts, excessive reliance on multimedia course materials, and conducting controlled teacher-centred lessons with little interaction, as was the case in other contexts (e.g., Macaro, 2018). Most of the teachers, six out of nine across all three faculties, experienced difficulties in articulating complex ideas in English. They perceived the adoption of EMI as being detrimental to students, as it resulted in a reduction of instructional efficiency and depth. Jenny, representing the engineering faculty, exemplified the challenges she encountered:

I understand the knowledge. But how to make our students understand [in English]; how to explain a theory explicitly to students in English, I need to learn. Confined by the language, some examples I can express in Chinese without thinking, but I cannot improvise in English.

Jenny, who had a combination of native proficiency in Chinese, a deep understanding of Chinese students and a wealth of overseas study experience, was regarded as an exemplary EMI teacher by the dean, yet she still reported facing language barriers.

Distinctive to this second-tier university context was the fact that the majority of international students originated from countries where English is not the primary language of daily communication. Consequently, instructors were compelled to acquaint themselves with varied forms of English expressions they were not familiar with, occasionally resulting in a shift towards a more teacher-centred instructional approach. The dean of the management faculty observed:

If there are international students, some teachers have difficulty communicating with them owing to the accents of international students. Therefore, [some teachers] just avoid interactive communication in class.

As mentioned, in the second phase of internationalisation where international students were invited to China, the teachers could not freely switch between English and Chinese. Still, some teachers reported using their trans-language practice to cater to the learning needs of the majority, i.e., the local students, and utilized translations of key terms into Chinese both verbally and on slides. Lily, a photobiology teacher who had 29 Chinese and 6 international students in her class, also acknowledged mixing languages. Despite complaints from some international students that this practice marginalised them, she felt it necessary to assure in-depth learning.

Some teachers felt they had yet to be familiarised with diverse accents. In efforts to overcome frequent communicative breakdowns, instructors resorted to strategies such as employing simplified language, utilising visual aids like diagrams, and presenting slide texts concurrently with their verbal instructions. Ada elucidated her pedagogical approach after two teaching cycles:

Now, in my third round, based on my previous knowledge [of the course], I try to use the simplest [instructional] language and terminologies to help students understand. And then, [I use] diagrams, tables, videos and so on. For the terminologies, I put special emphasis on them when encountering them. However, many teachers haven't such methods in their repertoires.... Teaching in English helps teachers improve their specialities...mainly in teaching approaches and also in English. My vocabulary bank has expanded through teaching.

Ada's experience serves as a noteworthy example of employing effective pedagogy in the face of students' linguistic barriers. With 11 years of teaching experience, she recognised the significance of simplifying instructional language to alleviate comprehension challenges for students. Ada's pedagogical practice coincides with the assertion made by Floris (2014), underscoring the crucial necessity for teachers to possess the ability to articulate complex concepts in accessible language. This proficiency has been deemed essential for fostering comprehensive understanding among EMI students. However, she acknowledged that achieving this level of clarity was not easily attainable for novice teachers.

Tensions arising from discrete educational and cultural backgrounds across local and international students

Educational and cultural tensions emerged among both teachers and students, stemming from disparities in learning foundations and expectations between Chinese and international students. According to the interviewees, international students typically exhibited weaker foundations in discipline-specific knowledge compared to their Chinese counterparts who underwent screening via the Chinese college entrance examination. In response to the strong encouragement of international student recruitment shown in the *Study in China Plan*, the university tended to accept international students without examining their academic abilities. As communicated by the dean of the TAD, there were no prerequisites regarding academic performance in secondary education, nor were there any mandates for admission interviews or examinations.

These differences posed significant challenges to effective teaching. Shelley shared her experience:

It is difficult to teach courses like microeconomics to my international students, especially concerning mathematics skills. Their mathematics is weak. For example, for Chinese students, the slope function is a piece of cake. Students can easily come up with a demand curve when given the elements. However, for international students, it is too difficult. What you explain does not fit their ability. It is quite painful.

The pronounced disparities in foundational knowledge between the two student groups created a formidable challenge for teachers, particularly in science subjects. Given that a considerable number of local students were preparing for graduate exams, instructors tended to prioritise meeting the needs of Chinese students. The gap between the two groups was perceived as insurmountable by teachers, and prompted the dean of the engineering faculty to propose the only viable solution—segregating the two groups when there was a sufficient number of international students to form their own class. Notably, this approach mirrors the optional strategy employed by some higher-tier universities, a luxury that second-tier universities cannot afford due to their limited numbers of international students.

Divergent assumptions regarding pedagogy were evident across the two student groups. International students expressed criticism of the teacher-centred approach, highlighting its failure to foster classroom discussions and deeming it outdated. Both the senior management and the teaching faculty acknowledged this concern:

International students like interactions. They like expressing themselves. This is somewhat difficult for our teachers. (Dean of the management faculty)

Our Chinese teaching mode is somewhat like duck-stuffing. The international students don't accept this and find it very painful and boring. (Susan)

Conversely, when teachers allocated substantial time for discussions and addressing questions from international students, Chinese students tended to perceive the class time as being squandered. Susan provided insights from teachers' perspectives on this matter:

If I give students a question to discuss, the Chinese students' behaviour is obviously different from international students. They start to read books by themselves and nobody wants to discuss them.

This pedagogical dilemma was a prevalent phenomenon in the university under consideration. The preference for teacher-centred lessons by both instructors and Chinese students partly stemmed from their uncertain confidence in English proficiency, which made them uneasy about expressing themselves spontaneously, as well as the culturally naturalised way of educating. Teachers also perceived the active participation of international students, marked by frequent questions, as an impediment to the planned learning progress. Opting for a teacher-centred pedagogy reminiscent of traditional Chinese classrooms also helped with the planned content coverage. Johnson, for instance, asserted, "I seldom conduct discussions. Otherwise, I cannot cover the planned content."

It was not unusual to observe a slower pace of teaching and learning progress in EMI streams, as opposed to parallel content in CMI streams. Managing time effectively in EMI classes presented a notable challenge. The adoption of a teacher-centred approach provided instructors with better control over the class progression and met the needs

of the majority of Chinese students. However, this approach resulted in the neglect of the welfare of international students as they became disengaged, leading to a discernible inequality, a phenomenon many scholars have detected when instructors dealt with disparate student cohorts in EMI classrooms (Choi & Poudel, 2024).

The majority of teachers perceived the necessity to navigate a delicate equilibrium between the distinctive norms co-existing in the multicultural classroom. Susan remarked, “If we receive an increased number of international students in the future, the issue of diversified pedagogical expectations will become more pronounced.”

Seeking suitable teaching methods to accommodate classroom diversity posed a formidable challenge for educators, notwithstanding their acknowledgement of its imperative nature. As underscored by Shelley, this constitutes a strenuous journey, devoid of assured success:

Now, I simply use the traditional teaching approach, which is teacher-centred. I feel exhausted. Both students and I are tired. Actually, I have changed my course materials every year looking for the fittest way, yet I have not found it.

Shelley, discontent with her existing teaching approach, aspired to develop appropriate course materials to facilitate a transition from a teacher-centred to a student-centred paradigm, but her efforts proved futile. This parallel concern was also articulated by Jenny, who found it challenging to meet the expectations of the diverse student group given the cultural disparities.

Factors leading to challenges in implementing EMI policy

EMI policy features

Similar to many other Asian countries, such as South Korea, EMI policy in China appears to be predominantly top-down, serving as a strategic tool to enhance and expedite the internationalisation of HE. Given that EMI practices serve as a performance indicator in high-stakes evaluations of educational institutions, the case university has consistently emphasised the intention to promote internationalisation in its annual work guidelines over the past five years. Confidential documents outlining the university’s commitments feature expressions like “promoting the construction of international disciplines” and “reinforcing the construction of international disciplines and curricula.” These recommendations, as translated by the TAD, along with other internal documents, underscore the adoption of “advanced” educational concepts, curriculum systems, teaching content and approaches from overseas universities, along with the utilisation of English as the MOI.

If the university wants to improve the EMI disciplines, it should set its priority in teaching, and follow up with the institutional policy. If a lecturer is promoted to associate professor because of his excellent performance in EMI teaching rather than research, it will positively impact on other teachers. Otherwise, teachers all prioritise research.

However, in Chinese universities, akin to numerous other contexts such as Korea (Kang, 2018) and Hong Kong (Choi & Adamson, 2021), there exists a prioritisation of research outputs over teaching quality in the evaluation and promotion assessments of academic

staff. The majority of EMI instructors in the case university held junior positions. Understandably, in their pursuit of career advancement, these educators tended to allocate their resources predominantly towards research endeavours.

Stakeholder readiness

Evidently, stakeholders within the case university, specifically those instructors unaccustomed to EMI, demonstrated a lack of preparedness. The English proficiency of local instructors, constituting the predominant teaching cohort, was constrained by the prevalent examination-oriented approach to English education in China. This pedagogical paradigm prioritises reading, writing and grammatical knowledge over speaking, as the latter is not assessed in high-stakes examinations. Consequently, numerous instructors expressed diminished confidence in English oral communication, with over half of the faculty acknowledging such challenge. This discovery aligns with the observation made by Loy and Wahab (2020) that a lack of confidence is a prevalent phenomenon among EMI instructors.

In their assessments of English proficiency, Shelley and Mary characterised their linguistic abilities in a self-deprecating manner, utilising terms like “dumb English”, revealing an inadequacy in English-speaking training. Frequently, educators experienced a sense of shame regarding their instructional methods, coupled with feelings of uncertainty and incompetence at the onset of their EMI teaching endeavours. In the initial year of EMI instruction, Ada prohibited visits from faculty or university personnel to her classes. Summarising her initial year, Shelley encapsulated the experience with the term “panic”.

The government is currently tackling the issue through initiatives such as government-funded visiting scholarships, enabling educators to engage in overseas study for durations spanning 6–12 months, during which they can undertake research or participate in academic courses. Beyond the enhancement of English proficiency, this endeavour facilitates exposure to student-centred pedagogical approaches and curriculum structures prevalent in English-speaking societies. Such firsthand encounters serve as invaluable references for the development and enhancement of their own EMI courses. Lily, Ada, and Leo all underscored the advantageous impact of their experiences as visiting scholars on their subsequent EMI teaching endeavours. The focal university also assigned some teachers with English majors to teach EMI courses. However, this strategy poses its own problems, as these teachers lack content knowledge, as noted by Goodman (2014). Sometimes, the weight is misplaced on language learning to the detriment of the subject mastery. Illustratively, Johnson, an economics teacher, placed a greater emphasis on enhancing English proficiency than on fostering students’ comprehension of economics, partly influenced by his background in English language education. His instructional approach centred on the meticulous mastery of terms, frequently employing dictation as a pedagogical tool in the classroom.

Interpersonal readiness also affects implementation. While the senior management team has acknowledged that EMI courses demand far more preparation, there was no collaboration system which enabled such drastic change in work to be readily reflected in human resources decisions. The director of TAD elucidated the university’s predicament:

The Human Resources Department (HRD) is in charge of teachers' promotions. They set the rules. For us (TAD), we promote EMI. However, it is difficult to add extra points for EMI teachers in their teaching performance assessment merely because they teach EMI courses. We have to consider the balance between the EMI and CMI teachers. What we can do is to urge the faculties to increase their course payments.

Within the framework of teaching reform, TAD assumed the responsibility of advocating for EMI policy, while the authority to modify teacher promotion rules rested exclusively with HRD. Without a coordinated system, HRD will not adjust the promotion criteria to acknowledge the contributions of EMI lecturers. According to the director of TAD, establishing new norms for teacher appraisal within its purview was not an easy matter, considering the equity between EMI and CMI thread teachers. While financial compensation with TAD's limited discretionary fund has been used as a motivator, this approach was deemed ineffective by teachers as it failed to accurately reflect the extent of their exertions.

Contextual features

System readiness As previously highlighted, the categorisation of this institution as a second-tier university has exerted its influence on the scale of the international student cohort and available resources, consequently impacting effective implementation of EMI policy. Within the case university, the enrolment of Chinese and international students in the same class served a dual purpose: fostering interaction between the two cohorts; and optimising operational costs, particularly when the number of international students did not warrant the formation of a distinct class. In the absence of a support system designed to actively promote interaction or assist faculty in addressing the distinct needs of both groups concurrently, students tended to segregate into their respective social circles. This class arrangement, consequently, imposed additional pedagogical challenges for instructors, possibly resulting in EMI students reaping fewer educational benefits from the programme.

Institutional culture Chinese society is characterised by a high power distance orientation. As noted by Hum and Choi (2020), in such a societal framework individuals with elevated social status and resources typically spearhead EMI initiatives, and the remainder of the community follows their lead. This dynamic has been mirrored in the EMI practices within the case university. Despite the previously delineated challenges and impediments associated with EMI implementation, predominantly junior staff have exhibited a propensity to accept teaching assignments for EMI courses without overt resistance.

The university and faculty leaders regarded teachers' compliance as a standard practice; consequently, senior management harboured no anticipation of encountering challenges in the implementation of the EMI initiative. The dean of the faculty of management elucidated:

To young teachers, whether they are willing to do it or not, this is the faculty's arrangement, so they have to accept it. ... If their English proficiency is sufficient, they are unable to change the executive decision.

This phenomenon has been particularly pertinent to junior teachers, primarily those in the early stages of their careers. The university has imposed more stringent research obligations on newly hired faculty members, thereby augmenting their overall workload and intensifying the pressure they experience. These individuals, frequently situated in precarious circumstances regarding contract renewal or promotional prospects, have been compelled to accommodate all assigned tasks. Rather than exposing their potential inadequacy for the associated responsibilities, they have resorted to utilising the Chinese language and relying on presentation slides. Despite their awareness of the limitations inherent in such approaches and the adverse effects on student learning, these educators have not dared to openly discuss the challenges or their inadequacy, which would genuinely improve the situation. While staff's lack of competency may be observed in elite universities, the scale of such is likely to be far greater in second-tier universities.

Pedagogic culture The foundational tenet of pedagogical culture in China is rooted in Confucian values. This cultural framework is characterised by students' tacit acceptance and passive reception of knowledge imparted by educators within the classroom setting (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Hiraga & Turner, 1996). While this depiction has faced criticism from certain scholars who perceive it as a stereotype of Asian educational culture and an overly simplistic analysis of student silence (Zhou et al., 2005), it undeniably mirrors the prevailing conditions in the case university. This phenomenon finds corroboration in interviews conducted with both faculty members and academic administrators, wherein they delineated distinctions between two discrete student cohorts. For example, Leo from the engineering faculty remarked, "Chinese students prefer to stay there silently. They are quite happy if teachers do not disturb them."

Influenced by this cultural tradition, pedagogical expectations among teachers have been predominantly characterised by the imperative to disseminate knowledge while assuming an authoritative role, fostering an atmosphere where they command respect and remain impervious to student challenges. Hu (2002) aptly encapsulates this norm by referencing two Chinese sayings: "To give students a bowl of water, the teacher must have a full bucket of water" and "A teacher of one day is a father of a lifetime." Chinese students traditionally engage in questioning only when invited, maintaining a demeanour of attentiveness and discipline, as confirmed by previous studies (e.g., Tan, 2015). According to the deans, instructors have endeavoured to cover the entire planned curriculum, with teaching plans formulated on the premise of minimal or no "disruption" from students. The predicament faced by Susan and Shelley, as outlined in the previous section, highlights the challenge of accommodating the diverse needs of the two student groups. The predicament generated tension, primarily attributable to the proactive inclination of international students to assertively express their opinions and pose questions without invitation. This conduct was deemed undesirable, given that a substantial proportion of local students had already assimilated the content.

Discussion

This study elucidated the pedagogical dilemmas encountered by EMI instructors within a second-tier Chinese university context. The case university concurrently administered EMI undergraduate programmes to two distinct cohorts, comprising both Chinese and international students who shared a common classroom, despite evident disparities in their linguistic and academic proficiencies. Teachers encountered pedagogical challenges, including linguistic barriers and educational and cultural differences. While linguistic barriers and cultural disparity may be observed in elite universities, the intensity is more severe in second-tier universities, due to differences in the intake of students and the teaching staff's experiences. It is also notable that, due to a lack of appropriate teaching resources and systemic support, together with instructors' limited competence, EMI implementation often becomes an individual struggle. The experience is largely overwhelming even to those considered the most competent, and the huge efforts required to conduct EMI lessons in this context are not appreciated.

The factors leading to these challenges have been identified through investigating policy features, policy actors' readiness, and contextual readiness adopting Choi's (2018) language policy analysis framework. In relation to policy features, the high-stakes nature of any EMI policy prompts governmental scrutiny of universities with a focus on internationalisation. Consequently, senior management, in numerous institutions regardless of their preparedness, tends to adopt and implement such policy. The fact that EMI classes are often given to the least experienced instructors, despite their limited capacity to perform successfully, results in a misalignment with HR policy which does not recognise the efforts EMI instructors are required to exert to make effective implementation a reality. This practice not only leads to teacher burnout but also compromises the quality of student learning. Such lack of administrative support in EMI—namely, the inefficacy of management stemming from segmented working divisions and disparate priorities among functional departments in the case university—is widespread in universities across various regions, such as non-English-speaking countries in Europe (Dearden & Macaro, 2016) and China (Choi & Adamson, 2021). Indeed, a university's status plays a significant role in implementing EMI policy (Curdt-Christiansen et al., 2021).

While government has already started to address the issue, second-tier universities may still enrol international students of limited academic calibre. A facet that has hitherto escaped attention in the existing literature on EMI in higher education is that international students in non-elite universities are often from non-Anglophone Asian and African countries. This fact poses significantly greater challenges for the conduct of EMI classes versus elite universities wherein international students tend to have a high proficiency in English (e.g., Guo et al., 2018).

What should also be emphasised is that teachers do not necessarily lack awareness of diverse needs as some studies insinuate (e.g., Briggs et al., 2018; Dearden & Macaro, 2016), but that implementation of a tailored pedagogical approach has been impeded by both personal and institutional barriers.

Practical and theoretical implications

To maximise benefits from an EMI policy initiative without incurring unwanted costs, several areas regarding its contextual readiness and the readiness of any policy actors deserve attention during its implementation. To begin, if the individual readiness of teachers and students, the key stakeholders, cannot properly be addressed before the reform starts, it can be fostered through strengthening their capacity (e.g., language skills) during the implementation. As EMI sets higher expectations for teachers in terms of their English proficiency for ensuring students' comprehension (Macaro et al., 2016), the university should seek opportunities to polish and refine teachers' English skills. Furthermore, more programmes that help deliver discipline specific knowledge in English are necessary in helping teachers raise their awareness and abilities to skilfully deliver English instructions according to students' traits, e.g., simplifying their language for students' easy comprehension without compromising the quality and depth of learning, and improvising illustrations when an example is needed for explaining complicated concepts (Macaro & Han, 2020).

What is more, EMI reform managers should offer appropriate provision for practice-oriented and experiential professional development. Given that EMI necessitates a shift in the MOI and the adoption of pedagogies tailored to the new context, establishing platforms for seasoned educators to share their strategies, mentor novice EMI instructors, and engage in reciprocal feedback would prove advantageous for pedagogical reforms (Choi & Walker, 2018). For instance, Ada's instructional approach, featuring simplified language and the incorporation of diagrams or tables, demonstrated efficacy in enhancing student comprehension. Furthermore, the implementation of pedagogical curriculum reforms often induces emotional upheaval (Choi, 2017). Thus, providing essential support, such as furnishing adequate and pertinent teaching resources, and refraining from attributing individual accountability for the consequences of hastily enacted reforms, would facilitate a smoother transition.

In addition to assessing the readiness of policy actors, the university must ensure system preparedness by fostering intra-institutional collaborations prior to the introduction of reforms. This involves establishing criteria for contract renewal and promotion of key implementers to adequately recognise and compensate them for their augmented workloads and roles. Senior management can serve as a mediator in facilitating intra-institutional collaboration. Given the continuous promotion and implementation of EMI by numerous universities, aimed at enhancing higher education globalisation, the aforementioned institutionalisation becomes imperative to safeguard the interests of EMI teachers and enhance programme quality, particularly in second-tier universities with limited human resources. Further research is warranted to investigate strategies addressing equality concerns between EMI and CMI teachers, as well as disparities among local and international students.

A deeply ingrained contextual challenge is the hierarchical culture within the institution, presenting a dual impact on the implementation of EMI. On the one hand, this culture compels educators to adhere strictly to directives, expediting the assimilation of the reform. On the other hand, this hierarchical practice often results in a superficial and hurried implementation (Hum & Choi, 2020). Therefore, proactive measures must be instituted to solicit perspectives from junior staff, preventing any undue

sacrifices or compromises in teaching quality. The university could establish teaching positions devoid of research requirements, allowing for an increased focus on teaching and enhancing the overall student learning experience, thereby mitigating the potential negative effects of the hierarchical culture.

Theoretically, while Choi's (2018) framework helps to identify the sources of problems, it focuses more on the top-down policy process, and does not consider cases when the policy is, itself, problematic. In the particular case of EMI implementation we have been discussing, it is apparent that the policy was prematurely implemented and that the frontline teachers were forced to bear any and all emotional and other costs. The framework needs to incorporate such ill-prepared cases. After all, the success of an educational policy is not somehow forcing the implementation of an ill-designed policy, but, rather, ensuring quality learning for all students as well as the well-being of teachers. In this sense, the framework needs to incorporate a system to review the design and implementation of any process. It should also promote questioning the goals and ideals of education and teacher professionalism as reflected in, again, *any* policy process, so as to reach the ultimate goal of placing the wellbeing and effectiveness of both students and teachers at the very centre of educational practise.

In conclusion, the hasty implementation of EMI has resulted in disparate expectations regarding teaching and learning, engendering tension, discomfort and negative sentiments among students, both local and international. Recognising this challenge, it is advisable for both the government and university senior management to conduct interim evaluations. Further, the policy design and process themselves need to be critically reviewed. The policy research should help in this regard. Such a reciprocal practise will enable all teachers and students to ride the tide of EMI rather than becoming victims of EMI's globally expanding wave.

Appendix: Interview schedule

Questions for teachers

- (1) What do you think is the purpose of the university to conduct EMI programs?
- (2) Are the EMI programs beneficial to students and teachers? If yes, in what aspects? If no, why?
- (3) How is your willingness of taking EMI courses? Why?
- (4) How do you think your English skills as an EMI teacher?
- (5) What factors do you think will influence the effectiveness of the EMI?
- (6) In the current linguistic and educational conditions, is it practical to conduct EMI programs? Why?
- (7) What supporters the university has offered for EMI programs? Is it enough? Why?
- (8) From your experience, what are the challenges you have encountered during your teaching practice in EMI? How do you deal with these challenges?
- (9) How does it differ from teaching Chinese students and international students in EMI programs?

Questions for senior administration

- (1) What do you think is the purpose of the university to conduct EMI programs?
- (2) Is it necessary for the university to conduct EMI programs for students? Why? Is it practical to conduct EMI programs? Why?
- (3) How about the teacher resources for teaching EMI courses? What about the number and quality of teachers? Are there any teacher training programs?
- (4) Are the EMI programs beneficial to students and teachers? If yes, in what aspects? If no, why?
- (5) What factors do you think will influence the effectiveness of the EMI programs?
- (6) What supports has the university offered for EMI programs? Is it enough? Why?
- (7) From your experience, what are the challenges you have encountered in promotion of the EMI programs?
- (8) Is it beneficial to put Chinese and international students together in the same program? Why?

Abbreviations

CMI	Chinese as the medium of instruction
EMI	English-medium instruction
HE	Higher education
MOI	Medium of instruction
TAD	Teaching affairs department

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Availability of data and materials

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Declarations

Ethical approval and consent to participate

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the first author's doctoral degree granting university.

Consent to publication

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