

# English medium higher education in China: challenges and ELT support

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*This mixed-methods study explores the language-related difficulties and ELT support offered in English-medium programmes at eight universities in China. Data included a student questionnaire (n = 394) measuring the difficulties of 45 academic tasks, organized around the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Results revealed students faced the largest difficulties with productive skills, especially writing. To explore structural language support for overcoming such challenges, fieldwork interviews with twenty-six senior faculty at eight universities in four cities in China were conducted. These revealed three main types of institutional support: concurrent language support from English language teachers offered alongside English medium programmes; preparatory programmes taken before students enrolled in English medium courses, which were prevalent in language-specialist universities; and self-access learning and writing centres, which were found at two transnational universities. When structural support was lacking, content teachers reported making grassroots efforts to help students understand content via use of the students' multilingual repertoires in explanations, interactions, and materials.*

**Key words:** Chinese higher education, language support preparatory programs, English medium self-access learning

## Introduction

The recent growth of English medium education in multilingual university settings (EMEMUS) has led to a sharp rise in students studying academic content, and entire degree programmes, through English (Dafouz and Smit 2020). In emerging EMEMUS contexts such as in China, where English is not widely used in daily life, there are concerns that students' lack of academic English proficiency poses challenges for their education. These concerns may be left unaddressed because English medium instruction (EMI) does not, by definition, target English language learning, and many content teachers do not consider the provision of language support as part of their role.

Our study presented in this paper draws on mixed methods including a student and teacher questionnaire as well as faculty staff interviews

that formed part of a larger policy and implementation study recently conducted in China (Rose *et al.* 2020). We highlight concerns about the need for language support for local Chinese students in the following four different university types:

- C9 League: an official alliance of nine very high-ranking, highly competitive, elite universities with special resource allocation and collaboration;
- Double First-Class Universities: forty-two elite universities with faculty departments selected for comprehensive development into world-leading institutions by 2050;
- Language-specialist universities: universities established with a focus on and a wide range of language-related disciplines;
- Transnational universities: full-degree programme universities established in partnership between a local and foreign university, with degrees awarded by both universities.

Our findings have implications for ELT support in English medium education to ensure students are equipped to function academically in increasingly multilingual universities in China.

## Literature review

Following the lines of the affordances English medium education provides students in multilingual university settings (Dafouz and Smit 2020), investigations into the implications for ELT in Chinese universities are needed. While recent research into English medium education in this context has highlighted the need for targeted language support for learners (Galloway and Ruegg 2020; Hu and Wu 2020), there is little consideration given to how ELT support systems and curricula might best address the academic challenges they face. In our review of relevant literature, which explores not only EMEMUS in China but also other East Asian contexts, we focus particularly on discussions of language challenges and support for students' development of EAP, which traditionally focuses on the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

For preparatory and concurrent EAP courses, a much-criticized issue lies in their irrelevance to disciplinary learning in EMEMUS. In China (Hu, Li, and Lei 2014), Japan (Galloway and Ruegg 2020), and Korea (Lee and Lee 2018), students complained that the extra English courses (some were general English, some were EAP) failed to help them overcome the difficulties experienced in content classes. The divorce between language and subject courses, as Galloway, Kriukow, and Numajiri (2017) note, was a major concern for both students and staff. Along this line, many researchers have called for tighter collaboration between language and subject experts (Jiang, Zhang, and May 2019; Li 2020). This collaboration could range from integrating discipline-specific skills and tasks into English preparatory courses to team-teaching by both language and subject specialists (see Li 2020). Although some successful efforts have been documented in this respect (e.g. Chang, Kim, and Lee 2017 in Korea), scholars point out that collaboration between content and language instructors remains rare in most English medium programmes (Li 2020). Barriers stem from a recognition that content teachers are

responsible for subject teaching, whereby they are neither willing to dedicate extra time nor capable of overseeing the language performance of students (Galloway and Ruegg 2020).

Support provisions need also to consider the transition from secondary to tertiary education. General English classes that target grammatical and lexical correctness in high schools no longer help students address difficulties in English medium university classes (Yung and Fong 2019). In a study of EMI students' language needs in China, Jiang, Zhang, and May (2019) found that the ability of reading subject literature and writing for publication were more valued than grammar and syntax. Another important yet often neglected aspect is to foster independent English learners, who proactively seek support tailored to personal needs (Ishikura 2016). One such approach is to set up self-access language support, for instance, drop-in language sessions or writing centres. In China, however, such support is rather limited in availability, and usually gets overlooked by students even if it exists (Galloway and Ruegg 2020). In one writing centre within an English medium faculty in Japan, McKinley (2010) observed that the concept of cultivating students' independence was missing, where students sought help to simply fix the grammar in their assignments rather than to become better writers. Hence, it is necessary that ELT support in EMEMUS builds in elements to foster learner agency so that students know not only *what* to learn, but also *how* to learn by accessing appropriate resources, tools, and support. In China, a few studies have examined the nexus of ELT and EMI in terms of language support at the tertiary level. However, little is known about how different types of universities might vary in their offering of support services. In addressing this lacuna, the present study aimed to investigate institutional differences in ELT support, on top of its investigation of the specific academic skill areas that teaching needs to address.

## Research questions

1. What language-related academic skills do students in English medium programmes and courses in China find most difficult? (These findings may inform ELT curricula in EMEMUS.)
2. What language support is provided for students in English medium programmes? (These findings may inform programme structures to better integrate language support systems such as pre-sessional and in-sessional EAP.)

## Methodology Data collection

Data were first collected via online questionnaires using Qualtrics, one for teachers and one for students. The student questionnaire focused on students' reported challenges with the four academic skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—using a seven-point (from 1 = very difficult to 7 = very easy) Likert scale. This was adapted from Evans and Morrison's (2011) questionnaire investigating university students' difficulties in Hong Kong. For the teacher questionnaire, we adapted Galloway, Kriukow, and Numajiri's (2017) EMI study in China and Japan.

We then travelled to eight universities located in four different cities where we conducted on-site semi-structured interviews with twenty-six senior management staff and EMI lecturers. All interviews were audio-recorded

and conducted in English, except for a few members in the two group interviews, for whom simultaneous interpretation from Chinese to English was conducted by one of the researchers. Those sections of the interview transcripts were translated from Chinese to English by the same researcher.

## Participants

We received 364 valid student responses from mainland China, mostly Mandarin Chinese L1, but also Cantonese and Tibetan. Around 87 percent of the participants were undergraduates. Due to strict data-protection regulations at the time of collection (which coincided with the seventieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China), we were not permitted to capture any university information from student respondents. For the teachers, we received eighty-eight valid responses (eighty-six Chinese nationals and two UK nationals) from twenty-nine universities representing a range of university types, specifically: Class A Double First-Class universities ( $n = 8$ ), universities with double first-class disciplines ( $n = 4$ ), language-specialist universities ( $n = 4$ ), transnational universities ( $n = 2$ ), and ordinary universities ( $n = 11$ ). These teachers were in the medical sciences ( $n = 29$ ), humanities ( $n = 22$ ), sciences/engineering ( $n = 18$ ), social sciences ( $n = 14$ ), and others ( $n = 5$ ). While a small number had been teaching for less than a year ( $n = 13$ ), most had been teaching for one to four years ( $n = 46$ ), some five to nine years ( $n = 17$ ), or over ten years ( $n = 12$ ). Teaching was primarily at undergraduate ( $n = 80$ ), but also at the master's ( $n = 26$ ) and doctoral level ( $n = 8$ ). A majority of teachers ( $n = 47$ ) taught classes comprising of only Chinese students, but others ( $n = 21$ ) had only international students or a mixture of both ( $n = 20$ ).

Interview data were collected with twenty-six staff (twenty-four Chinese nationals, one US, one UK) at eight universities (two universities each of C9 League, Class A, language-specialist, and transnational). The role of staff ranged from those working in very senior managerial roles ( $n = 4$ ) (i.e. vice-presidents and heads of divisions), senior positions in faculty professional development ( $n = 4$ ), heads of international student offices ( $n = 2$ ), programme directors of English medium programmes ( $n = 4$ ), and EMI lecturers ( $n = 12$ ).

## Data analysis

For the quantitative questionnaire data, we provide descriptive statistics mainly centring on the four skills areas to provide targeted areas of focus for ELT practitioners. For the qualitative interview data, thematic analysis was done using NVivo 11. For coding, we mixed literature-based deductive codes to identify language difficulties and support as our primary categories, and inductive coding to allow themes to emerge from the data within these categories. These data helped to contextualize the challenges students encountered and to better understand the support available to them.

## Findings

What language-related academic skills do students in EMI programmes and courses in China find most difficult?

Results from the student questionnaire revealed that, in general, tasks related to the productive skills of writing ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) and speaking ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ) tended to be reported as more challenging by EMI learners than receptive skills such as reading ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) and listening ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ). [Table 1](#) lists the top five items rated by students as most difficult regarding each skill, with higher numbers indicating greater ease on a seven-point scale. The 'percentage' column refers to the total proportion of respondents who considered the

Items of difficulties	Mean	SD	Percentage
<b>Academic writing</b>	<b>3.68</b>	<b>0.87</b>	
Using appropriate academic style	3.23	1.12	63.3%
Writing a bibliography/references section	3.44	1.34	56.4%
Writing the body of an assignment	3.52	1.13	48.9%
Revising written work	3.62	1.07	42.3%
Expressing ideas in correct English	3.65	1.07	42.8%
<b>Academic speaking</b>	<b>3.81</b>	<b>1.00</b>	
Communicating ideas confidently	3.53	1.30	51.1%
Speaking accurately (grammar)	3.57	1.07	47.0%
Communicating ideas fluently	3.58	1.23	48.9%
Answering questions	3.72	1.16	43.1%
Speaking clearly (pronunciation)	3.81	1.27	36.7%
<b>Academic reading</b>	<b>3.84</b>	<b>0.91</b>	
Working out the meaning of difficult words	3.43	1.06	53.0%
Understanding specific vocabulary	3.66	1.04	43.4%
Reading carefully to understand a text	3.78	1.10	33.7%
Reading quickly to find specific information	3.82	1.14	35.6%
Using your own words when taking notes	3.89	1.13	37.0%
<b>Academic listening</b>	<b>3.98</b>	<b>1.03</b>	
Identifying different views and ideas	3.87	1.20	36.2%
Understanding classmates' accents	3.89	1.20	35.1%
Understanding lecturers' accents	3.98	1.20	32.0%
Following a discussion	3.98	1.23	32.0%
Understanding the overall organization of lectures	3.99	1.15	19.6%

TABLE 1  
Students' perceived  
language-related difficulties  
in EMI classes

Note: Seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very difficult to 7 = very easy.

item 'very difficult', 'difficult', or 'somewhat difficult', indicating the total percentage of the population who deemed this task as challenging.

Among all types of difficulties, those related to academic writing topped the list ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ). In particular, *using appropriate academic style* ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) seemed to be most problematic, which was reported by 63.3 percent of the respondents. Over half of the participants (56.4 percent) also regarded *writing a bibliography* ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) as challenging, indicating their difficulties extended to academic literacies in writing. Other aspects of writing perceived as difficult included *writing the body of an assignment* (48.9 percent), *revising written work* (42.3 percent), and *expressing ideas correctly in English* (42.8 percent). Compared to writing, students seemed to experience fewer difficulties in speaking ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ), with the greatest concerns expressed over their *confidence in communication* (51.1 percent). Difficulties with *accuracy* and *fluency* were reported by approximately half the population: 47 and 48.9 percent, respectively. Additionally, some students also reported problems with *answering questions* (43.1 percent) and *speaking clearly with correct pronunciation* (36.7 percent).

In terms of receptive skills, tasks associated with reading ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) seemed to incur more problems than listening ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ). In reading, vocabulary remained a primary concern. Over

half of the students (53 percent) reported problems with *working out the meaning of difficult words*, while a notable ratio (43.4 percent) struggled with trying to *understand specific words* while reading. *Scanning for specific information* ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) was perceived slightly easier than *in-depth and careful understanding of a text* ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ), followed by *using one's own words to take notes* ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ). In terms of listening, *identifying different views and ideas* seemed to be an obstacle common to 36.2 percent of students. Issues related to *accents*, either for *understanding teachers* or *classmates*, as well as *following discussions*, also stood out as a problem for just over 30 percent of the respondents. In contrast, understanding the overall organization of lectures only resulted in difficulties for fewer than 20 percent of the students, which could thus be regarded a minor issue.

What language support is provided for students in English medium programmes?

**Questionnaire data**In the teacher questionnaire, EMI teachers reported different types of support available at their universities in response to the statement, 'My university provides the following support to students on the EMI programme' (see Table 2). Support included ongoing language support throughout the EMI programmes/courses (41.8 percent of respondents), self-access study support (40.8 percent), and preparatory language courses (36.3 percent). Less prevalent were writing centres, which were reportedly in place at the universities of 14.5 percent of the teacher respondents. Notably, an observable proportion of teachers were unaware whether different forms of language support existed, alluding to the fact that some subject experts might be oblivious to the language curricula available to their students.

Concerning whose duty it was to provide language support, a large majority (85.3 percent) of the respondents preferred to supplement content courses with English classes delivered by language teachers, among whom 23.9 percent strongly agreed with this model of provision. However, most of the EMI teachers also accepted part of the responsibilities to help students with their English (78.4 percent), though some resistance was also observed, with 21.6 percent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that this was in the remit of the content teachers' role.

**Interview data**As questionnaire responses are somewhat decontextualized and reductionist, themes associated with language support were explored in greater depth in the fieldwork data. Four categories of language support emerged from the interview data, three of which were offered by the institutions (see Table 3) and one was initiated by the content teachers. Codes used for universities are: 'Lang-1/2' (language-specialist

TABLE 2  
Teachers' questionnaire responses on language support for EMI

Types of support	Yes	No	Don't know
Ongoing language support	41.8%	24.1%	34.1%
Self-access study support	40.8%	13.1%	46.1%
Preparatory language courses	36.3%	26.2%	37.5%
A writing centre	14.5%	34.2%	51.3%

Support type	University	Support detail
Concurrent language courses	Lang-1	EAP courses at Year 1
	ClassA-1	EAP courses available to Years 3 and 4
	Tran-1	Credited EAP courses at Years 1 and 2
Preparatory language courses	Tran-2	EAP courses starting from Year 1
	Lang-1	General English courses at Years 1 and 2
	Lang-2	General English courses at Years 1 and 2
Self-access language support	ClassA-2	EAP courses at Year 1
	Tran-1	Drop-in session for students with difficulties
	Tran-2	Writing studio with independent learning support

TABLE 3  
Categories of language support provided by institutions

universities); ‘C9-1/2’ (C9 League universities); ‘Class-A-1/2’ (Double First-Class A-type universities); Tran-1/2 (transnational universities).

Concurrent language courses Ongoing language courses concurrent to EMI programmes were the most popular form of support, and was reported at four out of eight universities (ClassA-1, Lang-1, Tran-1, Tran-2). Both transnational universities offered this support, where EAP courses run by an independent language centre were integrated into the curriculum alongside content modules from Year 1. At one of the transnational universities (Tran-1), students were streamed into three different levels based on their scores in a placement test upon arrival. A variety of EAP courses were then tailored to students at each proficiency level. This university also offered a collaborative course where a content teacher and language teacher worked together, as the vice-president explained: ‘from Year 2 we have what is called joint delivery: there will be an English language expert in the class with a subject lecturer’. However, he admitted, ‘there’s a financial burden to the university—not all [universities] can afford it but we can because we have high tuition fees’ (Tran-1, vice-president). In the other transnational university, academic reading and writing were prioritized. Recognizing that ‘the type of reading that [students] do here is very different from what successful reading was in the *gaokao* [entrance examinations]’, EAP courses focused on reading strategies with an aim of ‘pulling more in a genre direction’ (Tran-2, EAP programme director).

Among the remaining two institutions offering ongoing language support, one was a business-related English medium programme at a top language-specialist university (Lang-1). The dean of the business school seemed confident in the learning ability of students recruited and the quality of ESP courses: ‘we don’t have to think about this, the [ESP] school would take care [of it]’. In a similar vein, EMI teachers from a Double First-Class university (ClassA-1) mentioned that there were EAP courses available to students that ran parallel to EMI courses but did not know the content of these courses. Overall, there was a general sense in the

Class A universities that the content teachers left language support up to language centres and did not involve themselves deeply in understanding what kinds of support these programmes delivered. In the C9 League universities, there was no mention of concurrent language support systems, with a general belief that students' English language ability was 'good enough' because the university admitted the 'top students' in China.

**Preparatory language courses** Preparatory support prior to the commencement of English medium courses was in place at the two language-specialist universities and a full English medium programme at a Double First Class university (ClassA-2). However, forms of support varied depending on the institutional and departmental affiliations of the EMI courses. For example, the content courses at Lang-1 and Lang-2 belonged to the English department, where general English courses were built into students' early year curriculum. As one teacher reflected, this progression provided 'preparedness for such intensive programmes in English' in later years of study (Lang-1, lecturer in Australian studies). In contrast, in English medium programmes that were run by other faculties—for example, the school of mechanical engineering at ClassA-2—students took EAP courses 'specially designed for local students' with some 'fundamental courses in Chinese' in Year 1 to prepare for the full EMI programme starting from Year 2 (lecturer in mechanical engineering). Thus, preparatory-style language support seemed dominant in departments which either already had a strong focus on language or had built entirely new English medium programmes with in-house foundation-style language courses. These departments could then draw on expertise from language instructors, who worked with students to develop their skills before they progressed to content classes in later years of study.

**Self-access language support** Other forms of support such as self-access drop-in sessions (Tran-1) and writing studios (Tran-2) were only reported by interviewees in the two transnational universities. Both Tran-1 and Tran-2 reported that students can book the sessions through a virtual learning environment. There are physical spaces for the sessions: at Tran-1 they are face to face; at Tran-2, the sessions are a mix of online and face to face. For the drop-in sessions at Tran-1, also called 'continuing support', EAP tutors can meet up with students in a one-to-one manner and offer feedback or support on their academic writing of the coursework. The provision of self-access support lent itself to fostering students' independent learning, as one teacher commented that the writing studio aimed to 'help students make plans, find resources, set goals' instead of just fixing language problems (Tran-2, EAP programme director). To further integrate writing support, a two-credit intensive course had been recently introduced in all subject divisions at this university, aiming to foster an understanding that 'it's also [faculty staff's] job to support writing within the particular field' (Tran-2, EAP programme director). Thus, the transnational universities stood apart from the other six universities in their implementation of self-access language support systems.

**Teacher-initiated support** In the absence of structured language support, interview data revealed grassroots efforts of language scaffolding initiated by content teachers, backing up the questionnaire data that suggested

many content teachers considered language support as part of their role. Teachers reported setting aside some time in class to help students with English (ClassA-1, lecturer in Sinology), code-switching to Chinese to explain or discuss complicated concepts (C9-2, lecturer in international relations), and allowing students to ask questions and get responses in Chinese (Lang-2, lecturer in linguistics). A certain amount of Chinese was valued: ‘if the jargons are really complicated, especially when I explain something mathematically, I’d explain a little in Chinese and I think my students appreciate that’ (C9-2, lecturer in international relations). Accordingly, other teachers also brought in some Chinese materials to activate interactions with students (Tran-2, lecturer in American literature), or provided extra materials in Chinese for students to deepen their understanding on the subject matter after class (ClassA-1, lecturer in life science). Thus, it is important to recognize that not all language support was the product of a structured component of the curriculum, but also came in the form of grassroots efforts by content instructors, who felt a duty to support the language needs of their students.

## Discussion

We note in our findings that students signalled specific language support needs, particularly the productive skills of writing and speaking. This aligns with other research into Chinese students’ concerns about various aspects of academic writing (Yung and Fong 2019). That writing was perceived as the most challenging language skill for EMI students is notable, as this finding seems to be a consistent finding across many English medium educational settings, including well-established universities in Hong Kong (Evans and Morrison 2011). Some of this difficulty may be due to students not receiving sufficient training in academic writing in *any* language before entering university, which is typical in exam-oriented educational systems (see Chang, Kim, and Lee 2017 in Korea). As writing is seen as an important skill for assessment in higher education, this appears to be one area where more structured support in the form of preparatory writing programmes is warranted, especially for students who have received limited English writing education before entry.

As reported in the literature, EMI writing centres can improve students’ perceptions of their writing skills, although they have limitations if not used appropriately (McKinley 2010). As appropriate academic style was identified by students as the most worrying aspect of English language use, and genres of writing vary greatly according to discipline, writing centres may be best developed within separate faculties to provide targeted support. However, Jiang, Zhang, and May (2019: 117) warn that ‘focusing exclusively on ESP writing skills [risks] neglecting other productive skills’. Indeed, communicating confidently was identified in our data as the primary concern for speaking, and difficulties surrounding asking and answering questions in English medium-classes has long been discussed as a major difficulty for students (Evans and Morrison 2011). For this reason, students may benefit from a mixture of targeted and general English preparation to improve these productive skills. The increasingly multilingual environment of universities may also explain difficulties students face with listening to and understanding different accents of their lecturers and fellow students. This might indicate a need

for language programmes to showcase more diverse accents in listening materials to allow students to become accustomed to listening to a wider range of Englishes beyond the standard norms.

## Future research

What is clear from our sample is that there is not a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to supporting students in EMEMUS. Future research might benefit from exploring individual and group differences in the challenges faced by students at different universities who are studying in different types of programmes and come from differing educational backgrounds and prior experiences (a noted limitation of the present study, due to the seventieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China, is that universities did not permit the collection of individual student data). While it was possible to gain a broad-brush picture of the language-related challenges faced by students in our sample, going forward, it will be pertinent to explore how these challenges differ and are mitigated by programmes offering different forms of language support within different EMI programmes across a broad range of Chinese universities.

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