



## Editorial

# Jim McKinley\*, Heath Rose and Xiao Lan Curdt-Christiansen EMI in Chinese higher education: the Muddy water of ‘Englishisation’

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**Abstract:** English in Chinese higher education has shifted from being taught as a foreign language alongside other disciplinary-focussed courses to becoming an important medium of instruction used for learning and teaching non-language related academic subjects. While using English medium instruction (EMI) seems a natural and neutral academic exercise, the switch has muddied the water of EMI implementation and caused a number of social and academic issues for both students and lecturers. These problems include unfair promotion opportunities, unequal access to EMI classes, inadequate learning outcomes, and poor teaching quality. This special issue builds on past and current EMI work that explores issues related to EMI implementation in Chinese higher education institutions and in classrooms. Through the selection of several empirical papers, the special issue shines light on current knowledge, policies and practices of EMI in China to pave the way for research-informed recommendations.

## 1 Introduction

In the past decades, many non-English speaking countries including China have witnessed great changes in the role of English in education, especially in higher education. The expansion of English medium instruction (EMI) has been especially rapid in higher education (Macaro et al. 2018; Wächter & Maiworm 2014). The switch in medium of instruction to English across academic disciplines has occurred as a dyad with curriculum ‘Englishisation’ (i.e., converting to English-language materials, establishing English as the academic lingua franca)

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(Rose & McKinley 2018). As such, English is no longer taught as part of foreign language studies, but rather plays a crucial role for the teaching and learning of a wide range of academic subjects, such as Business, Engineering, and so on. While using EMI seems a natural and neutral academic exercise, the switch has muddied the water of EMI implementation and caused a number of social and academic problems for both students and lecturers (Hu & Lei 2014; Piller & Cho 2013) such as unfair promotion opportunities, unequal access to EMI classes, inadequate learning outcomes, and poor teaching quality (Hu & Duan 2019; Rose et al. 2020a). This special issue builds on past and current EMI work that explores issues related to EMI implementation in institutions and in classrooms.

In this special issue, all contributors have adhered to an understanding of EMI as ‘the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English’ (Macaro 2018: 19). In China, this definition is relevant as the growth of EMI provision at some universities amounts to teaching partial courses, whole courses, and entire programs in English, muddling the understanding of EMI in the region (e.g., Sahan et al. 2022). Expectations surrounding language learning in EMI are not well-defined, but research in China often states a dual aim: to learn discipline content and to improve students’ academic English proficiency (Zhou et al. 2021). This dual purpose, where EMI is accompanied by English language support systems (see McKinley & Rose 2022), might more accurately capture the actual practice of implementing EMI in Chinese higher education, in which bilingual education practices are common (Hu 2008). The special issue, thus, is timely as it will provide a range of current investigations that will serve as an important resource for EMI researchers and policymakers at a time when EMI programmes, particularly in Asia, are expanding rapidly. It also contributes to the shortage of empirically based EMI studies in China as the promotion of EMI “has been largely driven by some popular yet simplistic assumptions about how EMI can benefit students’ disciplinary and English learning” (Hu 2019: 2). Most importantly, the collection of papers advances our understanding of the complex driving forces for EMI implementation envisioned by policymakers as well as challenges and difficulties encountered by students and academics in Chinese higher education.

## 2 Why a focus on China?

The past two decades have witnessed a rapid growth of EMI programmes in many Chinese higher education institutions (Hu & Lei 2014; Jiang et al. 2019; Rose et al. 2020b). Scholars identify several factors regarding this rapid growth. Among them,

internationalisation, rankings of the universities and benefits in language and disciplinary learning are the most important ones (Hu 2019; Rose et al. 2020b). These driving forces have led to the expansion of EMI across universities, particularly in top-tier universities.

With European student mobility and integration initiatives such as the Erasmus programme and Bologna processes (Wächter & Maiworm 2014), EMI growth has had a longer history of development and documentation in Europe. This growth has been accompanied by a large volume of research (see Coleman 2006 for an overview). EMI growth in the Asia-Pacific region is a much more recent phenomenon (Rose et al., 2020b). Although Chinese universities have increased the number of EMI programmes, and EMI has begun to boom across different disciplines in tertiary education, empirical research is still underdeveloped. Given that universities have enjoyed strong top-down initiatives over the past two decades (e.g., Hu & Lei 2014; Li et al. 2019; Macaro & Han, 2019), there is an urgent need to examine the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the implementation process across different levels of policy environments. Indeed, internationalisation perspectives in higher education in China have been noted to have shifted from ‘inward-oriented’ to ‘outward-oriented’ (Wu 2018: 620). The Chinese government has introduced several higher education internationalisation initiatives, including ‘Project 985’ and ‘Project 211’, and the ‘Double First Class’ programme—all of which seek to raise the international profile of the university, which is tied to greater internationalisation of the curriculum. In addition, the government’s Belt and Road Initiative has also raised further internationalisation opportunities.

These initiatives have intensified the boom of bilingual and English-medium programmes within a short time—a phenomenon depicted by Hu as “a runaway juggernaut that is rattling across the country with fierce velocity” (2008: 195). The EMI context of China is markedly different to that of Europe and entails its own unique solutions to tackle its policy implementation challenges, pedagogical challenges, learning problems, and various teething issues. As Chinese higher education grapples with the runaway juggernaut of EMI, research is needed in this context to shed new light on a global phenomenon. In this context, research is particularly important because it reveals how English has been perceived and promoted as an unquestionably valuable instrument in Chinese higher education, yet access to quality EMI and resources to deliver quality EMI are largely restricted to top-tier universities which leads to already disproportionately sourced facilities between key and non-key universities. New conceptual frameworks and various research methods are needed to further address issues that seem natural and uncontested regarding the nature and effects of English as the language of instruction. Research is needed to understand how internationalisation of higher education and rankings of universities across the region, as well as the globe, lead

to further social inequality between and within individual higher education institutions.

### 3 Aim of the special issue

This special issue aims to consolidate research on EMI in Chinese higher education from multiple perspectives within the broad field of applied linguistics. It brings together five papers that explore EMI in terms of: reviewing extant research in English and Chinese, policy implementation, learner characteristics that affect students in EMI, as well as teacher requirements to conduct EMI courses effectively. As EMI has muddied the waters of Englishisation of the curriculum, all papers in this special issue address the following fundamental questions:

- What is the current language policy in Chinese universities?
- What motivates higher education key stakeholders to teach/learn through English in China?
- What level of linguistic competence and what pedagogical approaches do lecturers need to have to teach through English effectively?

In answering these questions, these papers provide new ways of looking at EMI in Chinese higher education context from multiple perspectives including the driving forces at macro level, the interpretations of the policies at the mezzo level of individual institutions to different departments, and the implementations at the micro level in classrooms. The investigation of EMI at the different levels enables the research lenses in the Chinese EMI context “to zoom in and out of EMI policy to explore” (Rose et al. 2020b: 7) issues of incentives, motivations, and linguistic and pedagogical needs from both the teachers’ and students’ perspective.

The issue also provides empirically grounded studies examining EMI phenomena by using a variety of research methods including questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and classroom observations. Employing these tools of inquiry, the authors can identify different types of institutional support, positive and negative indexicality of multimodal and linguistic practices leading to enriched or improvised learning environments. A systematic review is conducted to identify key policy initiatives that lead directly to patterns of differences in institutional supports (Jablonkai & Hou 2021), and questionnaires are used to identify patterns of motivations for students to choose EMI courses (Iwaniec & Wang 2021). In-depth interviews reveal different types of incentives targeting EMI teachers and EMI courses at key universities (Xu et al. 2021), as well as detailed teacher needs at key and non-key universities for conducting effective EMI courses (Curdt-Christiansen et al. 2021). Classroom observations provide much needed empirical data on

classroom discourse to understand how teachers engage students of different proficiency levels in English in the process of learning both content knowledge and English language (Gu et al. 2022).

### 3.1 Thematic topics of inquiry

The aim of the special issue is to contribute further to our understanding of solutions that are being sought to combat issues arising from the rapid expansion of EMI. The scope of the special issue includes five papers and a commentary. It begins with a systematic review of EMI research in China by Jablonkai and Hou (2021). The paper covers the research literature written in both English and Chinese. The latter remains largely undiscovered in the English-language research literature. This valuable addition helps to establish what we currently know, and still need to know, about EMI implementation in China to establish a clear research agenda.

The second paper, by Curdt-Christiansen et al. (2021), looks into “what teachers need in order to bring about successful language learning as well as adequate subject content learning”. Using a mixed method of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the authors provide much needed information about what EMI teachers need from institutional support regarding professional and pedagogical training.

Xu et al. (2021) continue this topic with their research on institutional support in the process of policy implementation. Analysing 93 policy documents from 63 key higher education institutions and 26 interviews with senior academic staff from eight Chinese universities, they identify a variety of incentivisations, from financial rewards to career moves, from increased workload to professional and academic intrinsic motivations. The findings indicate that incentivisation of EMI may perpetuate an ideology of “Western superiority by granting privilege to the stakeholders engaged in EMI and disenfranchising those excluded from incentivised activities”.

Also focusing on motivation measures, Iwaniec and Wang (2022) draw on Dörnyei’s theory of *L2 Motivational Self System* (2005) to investigate what motivates Chinese undergraduate students to enrol in EMI studies. Their findings suggest that the students were goal-driven and that they were “intrinsically motivated and had a clear professional bilingual outlook”. While the results indicate that students view EMI as a facilitator to their career and provide them with opportunities to be part of the international community, the authors point out that a longitudinal research design with cross-sectional studies will yield much clearer patterns of differences in their motivations between cohorts of students over the years.

In the final paper entitled “A trans-linguaging and trans-semiotizing perspective on subject teachers’ linguistic and pedagogical practices in EMI programme”, Gu et al. (2022) explore EMI teachers’ language and teaching practices in situated classroom contexts and their pedagogical challenges. Through classroom observations and interviews, they found that teachers use different materials to engage students with different proficiencies. They also incorporate semiotic resources to facilitate their teaching of content knowledge. The study is a valuable contribution to the much-needed classroom-based research on the teaching experiences of EMI professionals across different disciplines.

The issue concludes with a commentary by Guangwei Hu (2021), who provides a critical review of the common issues underlying all five papers. We trust that the findings of these empirical studies can help to inform language educators, educational administrators, and policymakers regarding the promotion of EMI in the Chinese contexts. We also believe that the findings will help language educators, educational administrators, and policymakers to offer similar support in contexts other than China.

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