



Pre-Service teachers' Perceptions of English Medium Instruction in an EFL Context

Vannisa Hakoon¹, Sudares Sirisittanapak^{2*}, In-on Leoprasertkul³, Chittra Chanagul⁴,
Dacha Jantakat⁵, and Parinda Yawongsa⁶

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Abstract

English medium instruction (EMI) has become a global trend in higher education, particularly in non-English-speaking countries. This study explored 176 second-year pre-service teachers during the first semester of the 2025 academic year. Data was analysed and reported based on four sections of the questionnaire: (1) factors making EMI classes difficult, (2) problems encountered in EMI classrooms, and (3) attitudes towards EMI. The study found that almost all pre-service teachers perceived EMI classes to be difficult to understand due to their limited English proficiency. When surveyed regarding potential issues in EMI classes, more than half of the students (57%) identified low comprehension of course content as the most significant problem. However, forty-eight percent agreed that English should be the medium of instruction at their university. The findings have implications for preparing students' English proficiency before implementing EMI. The recruitment and assignment of EMI teachers should pay more attention to both their English proficiency and pedagogical skills in delivering content knowledge clearly and comprehensibly.

Keywords: EMI, EMI perception, Challenges, Pre-Service teachers

¹Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Maharakham University

²Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Maharakham University

³ Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Maharakham University

⁴Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Maharakham University

⁵Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Maharakham University

⁶Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Maharakham University

* Corresponding E-mail: sudares@msu.ac.th



Introduction

English-medium instruction (EMI) is the use of English to teach academic subjects in countries or areas where the majority of the population speaks a language other than English (Macaro et al., 2018). EMI is a growing global phenomenon in all phases of education and educational settings, particularly in higher education. Globally, more and more universities are caught up in the rush to offer both undergraduate and postgraduate programs in English (Block & Moncada-Comas, 2019; Bowles & Murphy, 2020; Jenkins, 2019; Macaro et al., 2018; Richards & Pun, 2021). Reasons for the choice of EMI include to improve the learning of English, provide a common language of instruction in countries with multilingual populations, promote economic competitiveness through developing an English proficient workforce, produce graduates with global literacy skills, enable institutions to attract international students, raise university rankings, increase the prestige of an institution and promote the competitiveness of universities (Richards & Pun, 2021).

Implementing EMI in an EFL context presents challenges for both students and teachers, primarily related to low English proficiency, which impacts content comprehension and classroom participation. Other challenges include a lack of pedagogical support for teachers, difficulties in course design, anxiety and low self-confidence among students, and the need for collaboration between English and content-area teachers (Kim, 2017; Çağatay, 2019; Hu, 2019; Galloway & Ruegg, 2022; Lee et al., 2025; Tien, 2023; Sameephet et al., 2025).

Several initiatives have impacted the growth of EMI in Thai higher education. Two 15-year plans (1990–2004; 2008–22) were proposed to internationalize higher education, improve the global competitiveness of Thai graduates, and contribute to the country's economic development. The Office of Higher Education Commission (2017, 2018) reports 769 international programs, including 20,497 international students. The Ministry of Education aims that all university classes in all subjects be conducted in English or adopt English-medium instruction (Galloway & Sahan, 2021). Previous research on EMI in Thailand found that although university students generally viewed EMI as beneficial for improving English skills and future opportunities, they still encountered major difficulties. These included limited English proficiency, low confidence in speaking, reduced participation, and insufficient instructional support (Tang, 2021).



This paper aims to explore the perceptions of pre-service teachers in the Faculty of Education, regarding the possibility of implementing an EMI program. Specifically, it examines reasons why classes taught in English are difficult to understand, the issues students view as likely to occur in EMI classes, and their attitudes towards EMI. The findings of this study provide data to guide the university's strategic decisions and actions regarding the adoption of EMI.

Method

1. Participants

The participants were 176 second-year pre-service teachers during the first semester of the 2025 academic year. They were selected through convenience sampling. The participants were distributed across five majors: English (n = 46, 26.14%), General Science (n = 44, 25.00%), Social Studies (n = 40, 22.73%), Early Childhood Education (n = 30, 17.05%), and Thai Language (n = 16, 9.09%). Participation in the study was voluntary, and the confidentiality of all respondents was strictly protected throughout the data collection process.

2. Research Instrument

To assess the validity of the questionnaire items, three specialists in English language teaching and curriculum and instruction were consulted to evaluate the instrument's validity and provide feedback on the items.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, the researchers used an online survey. The main benefit of the online survey was that it increased productivity by saving the researcher time. Data was analysed and reported based on four sections of the questionnaire: (1) demographic information, (2) factors making EMI classes difficult, (3) problems encountered in EMI classrooms, and (4) attitudes towards EMI.



Finding

1. The frequencies and percentages derived from the questionnaires are presented in the following tables.

Table 1

English Medium Instruction Classes	Overall Mean	Overall Percent (%)	Interpretation
1. The reason classes taught in English are hard to understand	2.36	66.0%	Students' limited English proficiency.
2. Problem in EMI classes	2.72	57.00%	Low understanding of the course content

2. What do you think are the reasons why classes taught in English are hard to understand?

Table 2

The reason classes taught in English are hard to understand	Mean	Percent (%)
Students' limited English proficiency	2.36	66.0%
Students' low intellectual ability to understand the content	2.45	63.8%
Professors' unorganized teaching/unpreparedness	2.54	61.5%
Difficult course content	2.62	59.5%
Professors' limited English proficiency	2.79	55.3%

As shown in the results presented in Table 2, the level with the highest number of responses is the identified reason classes taught in English are hard to understand; limited English proficiency (66.00%, Mean = 2.36). The least reported reason was professors' limited English proficiency, although it still represented more than half of the responses (55.3 %, Mean = 2.79).



Table 3

Various factors contribute to the difficulty of understanding classes taught in English	English (n=46)	General Science (n=44)	Social Studies (n=40)	Early Childhood Education (n=30)	Thai Language (n=16)
Students' limited English proficiency	2.09 (73.00%)	2.40 (65.00%)	2.47 (63.25%)	2.81 (54.75%)	2.06 (73.50%)
Students' low intellectual ability to understand the content	2.20 (69.94%)	2.43 (64.25%)	2.74 (56.50%)	2.83 (54.25%)	1.86 (82.81%)
Professors' unorganized teaching/unpreparedness	2.31 (69.57%)	2.66 (58.50%)	2.73 (56.75%)	2.66 (58.50%)	2.41 (60.94%)
Difficult course content	2.41 (64.75%)	2.14 (71.50%)	2.52 (62.00%)	2.63 (59.25%)	2.13 (71.75%)
Professors' limited English proficiency	2.63 (60.75%)	2.84 (54.00%)	2.87 (53.25%)	2.78 (55.50%)	3.00 (50.00%)

Table 3 presents the five factors contributing to the difficulty of understanding classes taught in English by major. Thai language major ranked students' limited English proficiency (73.50%, Mean = 2.06). Thai language major ranked students' low intellectual ability to understand content (82.81%, Mean = 1.86). English major ranked professors' unorganized teaching/unpreparedness (69.57%, Mean = 2.31). Thai language major ranked the difficult course content (71.75%, Mean = 2.13). English major ranked professors' limited English proficiency (60.75%, Mean = 2.63).



3. In your view, which issues can occur in EMI classes?

Table 4

Problem in EMI classes	Mean Rank	Percent (%)
Low understanding of the course content	2.72	57.00%
Students with low English proficiency disadvantaged	2.79	55.25%
Aggressive/hesitant attitudes toward asking questions	2.81	54.75%
Low concentration	2.87	53.25%
Unpreparedness of students/instructors	3.09	47.75%
Class quality lowered	3.26	43.50%
No comment/unsure	3.82	29.50%

As shown in Table 4, the most frequently reported problem in EMI classes is Low understanding of the course (57.00%, Mean = 2.72). The least reported reason was Class quality lowered (43.50%, Mean = 3.26).

Table 5

Problem in EMI classes	English (n=46)	General Science (n=44)	Social Studies (n=40)	Early Childhood Education (n=30)	Thai Language (n=16)
Low understanding of the course content	2.67 (58.25%)	2.45 (63.75%)	3.08 (48.00%)	2.87 (53.25%)	2.44 (64.00%)
Lack of discussion/participation	2.54 (61.50%)	2.84 (54.00%)	2.98 (50.50%)	3.07 (48.25%)	2.56 (61.00%)
Aggressive/hesitant attitudes to asking questions	2.78 (55.50%)	2.88 (53.00%)	3.04 (49.00%)	3.03 (49.25%)	2.69 (57.75%)
Low concentration	2.89 (52.75%)	2.55 (61.25%)	3.08 (48.00%)	3.20 (45.00%)	2.63 (59.25%)



Problem in EMI classes	English (n=46)	General Science (n=44)	Social Studies (n=40)	Early Childhood Education (n=30)	Thai Language (n=16)
Unpreparedness of students/instructors	2.67 (58.25%)	2.80 (55.00%)	2.95 (51.25%)	3.01 (49.75%)	2.56 (61.00%)
Class quality lowered	3.05 (48.75%)	3.15 (46.25%)	3.27 (43.25%)	3.38 (40.50%)	3.16 (46.00%)
No comment/unsure	3.32 (42.00%)	3.42 (39.50%)	3.71 (32.25%)	3.76 (31.00%)	3.63 (34.25%)

Table 5 presents seven factors that contribute to the problem in EMI classes. Thai Language major ranked low in understanding of course content (64.00%, Mean = 2.44). English major ranked lack of discussion/participation (61.50%, Mean = 2.54). Thai Language major ranked aggressive/hesitant attitudes to asking questions (57.75%, Mean = 2.69). General Science major ranked low concentration (61.25%, Mean = 2.55). Thai Language major ranked the unpreparedness of students/instructors (61.00%, Mean = 2.56). English major ranked class quality lowered (48.75%, Mean = 3.05). English major ranked no comment/unsure (42.00%, Mean = 3.32).

4. Attitudes Towards EMI: English should be a medium of instruction at your university.

Table 6

Attitude	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	37	20.74%
Agree	85	48.30%
Neutral	48	28.41%
Disagree	5	2.84%
Strongly Disagree	1	0.68%
Total	176	100%



As shown in Table 6, the majority of respondents agreed (48.30%, $n = 85$). This was followed by Neutral (28.41%, $n = 48$), Strongly Agree (20.74%, $n = 37$), Disagree (2.84%, $n = 5$), and Strongly Disagree (0.68%, $n = 1$), respectively.

Table 7

Attitude	English ($n=46$)	General Science ($n=44$)	Social Studies ($n=40$)	Early Childhood Education ($n=30$)	Thai Language ($n=16$)
Strongly Agree	17.39%	9.09%	32.50%	23.33%	25.00%
Agree	63.04%	47.73%	37.50%	40.00%	50.00%
Neutral	19.57%	38.64%	27.50%	30.00%	18.75%
Disagree	0.00%	2.27%	0.00%	6.67%	6.25%
Strongly Disagree	0.00%	2.27%	2.50%	0.00%	0.00%

As seen in Table 7, the percentages of those who agreed among English major (63.04%, $n = 46$), Thai Language major (50.00%, $n = 16$), General Science major (47.73%, $n = 44$), Early Childhood Education major (40.00%, $n=30$), and Social Studies major (37.50%, $n = 40$) were, respectively.

Discussion

2. What do you think are the reasons why classes taught in English are hard to understand?

The majority pre-service teachers indicated that the reason classes taught in English are difficult to understand is their limited English proficiency. Students with low English proficiency need to improve both communicative and academic language skills to transition successfully to EMI. Thus, universities and teachers need to provide sufficient preparation and support for students. The university or faculty can offer language preparation courses to



improve students' academic English proficiency and be more prepared for learning difficult content knowledge in English. To meet the English language requirement for an EMI program, the university or faculty needs to provide proof of proficiency through standardized tests, previous education, or by completing a preparatory language program. Regarding teachers' qualifications and recruitment, the university may need to reset the criteria for qualified EMI teachers and consider these expected competencies to better meet students' learning needs. Rose, et al. (2023) suggested four main models of language support in EMI. The first, the multilingual model, offers students entering partial EMI institutions some access to instruction in their L1 through a structured system for multilingual practice to occur at the classroom level. A second model of EMI embeds language support provision into the programs themselves to combat variability in students' levels of English proficiency by providing supplementary English courses to aid learning of the chosen academic disciplinary content. A third model, the preparatory year model, is designed to enable students to upgrade their language skills prior to embarking on an EMI program. A fourth model is the selection model, where enrolment in an EMI course is dependent on passing an English language proficiency test with no or little additional required language support. Sameephet (2020) introduced Gears framework to reduce English-language challenges faced by both students and teachers by letting students and teachers choose a level of English use that matches their readiness and context. In Gear 1, roughly 25% of classroom time is conducted in English and the rest in the first language. Gear 2 balances English and L1 at about 50/50. Gear 3 places the momentum on English— approximately 75% of class time in English and about 25% in L1—suited to participants with higher proficiency.

3. In your view, which issues can occur in EMI classes?

Students indicated that the problem they would encounter in the EMI classroom was the low understanding of course content. It is widely acknowledged in academia that EFL students face significant challenges with academic language due to its specialized nature and their limited exposure to it in non-English-speaking environments. This difficulty extends across reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Hong and Basturkmen (2024) suggested that content teachers have to exert substantial effort in aiding students to overcome such



challenges and fostering their development of disciplinary literacy, regardless of the medium of instruction. Li, Zhang, and Chen (2024) suggested that to improve academic language, educators should integrate vocabulary-building activities into EMI curricula to enhance students' language proficiency and academic performance. Educators may consider implementing strategies such as explicit vocabulary instruction, contextualized learning tasks, and frequent exposure to academic English materials to support learners in mastering essential vocabulary for success in EMI courses.

4. Attitudes Towards EMI: English should be a medium of instruction at your university.

The findings suggest that pre-service teachers recognized the value of using and learning English as the medium of instruction. Forty-eight percent agreed that English should be a medium of instruction at their university. The finding that pre-service teachers perceive the importance of EMI is aligned with previous studies. Several studies have explored students' attitudes towards EMI, including Santoso et al. (2024) who explored university students' attitudes towards EMI and whose results showed that the students had a positive attitude. Almudibry (2022) also explored EFL students' attitudes towards EMI in Saudi Arabia, and the results showed a positive perception regarding the use of EMI.

Conclusion

This paper aims to explore the perceptions of pre-service teachers in the Faculty of Education, regarding the possibility of implementing an EMI program. The following are the findings of the study, sixty-six percent of students perceived that English is difficult to understand in EMI classes because of their limited English proficiency. In their view, the most significant problem they encounter in an EMI classroom is the low understanding of course content (57%). Regarding attitudes toward English-medium instruction, forty-eight percent agreed that English should be the medium of instruction at their university.



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