Beyond Proficiency: A Mixed-Methods Study of Student Readiness, Learning Awareness, and Comprehension in an EMI-Based Sociolinguistics Course

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in an Indonesian university implementing English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 70 undergraduate students enrolled in a Sociolinguistics course taught fully in English. Questionnaire results indicate moderate levels of learning readiness and metacognitive awareness, alongside notable differences in content comprehension between students from urban and rural backgrounds. Follow-up interviews and classroom observations contextualized these disparities, highlighting issues such as cognitive overload, gaps in prior English exposure, and varied use of metacognitive strategies. The findings suggest that readiness for EMI involves more than language proficiency; it reflects students' learning habits, background preparation, and ability to regulate their learning. Practical implications include the need for targeted academic support, scaffolded instructional materials, and metacognitive strategy training to foster more equitable and effective EMI learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

The global rise of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in higher education has been positioned as a catalyst for internationalization and enhanced graduate competitiveness (Macaro et al., 2018). In non-Anglophone contexts such as Indonesia, EMI has increasingly been adopted, particularly within English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) programs, to promote immersive learning environments (Hamid et al., 2013; Lauder, 2008). Although its pedagogical rationale is well established, EMI implementation often overlooks an important consideration: students enter higher education with varying levels of academic preparation, linguistic proficiency, and metacognitive development shaped by socio-economic and educational differences (Hannaway & Richardson, 1987; Hyland, 2016).

This issue is evident at Universitas Negeri Makassar (UNM), a state university in Eastern Indonesia that enrolls students from multiple regions across the province and neighboring areas—a pattern documented in institutional admissions reports and regional enrollment studies (Bastiana, 2016; Sung, 2023). Within the English Language Education Study Program, courses such as Sociolinguistics—conceptually dense and analytically demanding—are delivered entirely in English. This presents a dual challenge for many students: they must engage with complex theoretical content while also processing

it through a language that is not their first (Doiz et al., 2013). Preliminary observations by instructors suggest that while some students adapt well to this environment, others face difficulties, indicating potential gaps in learning readiness and metacognitive awareness.

This study aims to systematically examine how student readiness, metacognitive awareness, and EMI-based instruction interact to influence content comprehension. We argue that preparedness for EMI involves more than language proficiency alone; it encompasses motivational factors, established study habits, and the metacognitive ability to manage cognitive and linguistic demands (Clark et al., 2024). The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the levels of learning readiness and metacognitive awareness among undergraduate students in the Sociolinguistics course?
2. How does full EMI implementation affect students' perceived comprehension of course material?
3. Are there significant differences in readiness, awareness, and comprehension based on students' geographic backgrounds (urban vs. rural)?
4. What underlying factors, identified through qualitative inquiry, help explain the quantitative patterns of student preparedness and comprehension in this EMI context?

By employing a mixed-methods approach, this study seeks to provide a nuanced, evidence-based account of student learning experiences. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on EMI in EFL settings and inform practical strategies for developing more inclusive and effective instructional practices at UNM and comparable institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nexus of Student Readiness and Learning Awareness in Higher Education

Student readiness for higher education has traditionally been conceptualized through the lens of cognitive preparedness, often measured by prior academic achievement or standardized test scores (Conley, 2007). However, contemporary scholarship advocates for a more holistic model that integrates non-cognitive dimensions, including motivation, self-regulation, and study skills (Abid et al., 2023; Jaafar & Awaludin, 2014). This broader perspective is crucial, as students who are academically capable may still falter if they lack the affective and metacognitive tools to navigate the demands of university-level learning (Korea & Kim, 2025). Readiness is, therefore, not a static trait but a dynamic state influenced by a student's ability to adapt their strategies to new and challenging academic contexts (Jugembayeva et al., 2022; Küsel et al., 2020).

Closely intertwined with readiness is the concept of metacognitive awareness, often described as "thinking about one's own thinking" (Flavell, 1979a). Metacognition involves two key components: knowledge of cognition (what one knows about their own cognitive processes and strategies) and regulation of cognition (the use of this knowledge to plan, monitor, and evaluate learning) (Flavell, 1979b; Fleming, 2024; Lebuda & Benedek, 2023; Li et al., 2023). In the context of language learning, metacognitive awareness allows learners to take control of their own learning process, set realistic goals, identify areas of difficulty, and select appropriate strategies to overcome challenges (Abdelhalim, 2024; Schraw & Dennison, 1994; Teng, 2025).

Students with high metacognitive awareness are better equipped to handle complex information, adapt to new learning environments, and become more autonomous and effective learners (Purwaningrum, 2023; Ruswandi et al., 2024; Zhuoma, 2023). This self-regulatory capacity is particularly vital in content-based courses where students must simultaneously manage language and content acquisition (Haley & Austin, 2003).

Pedagogical Challenges in Teaching Sociolinguistics in EFL Contexts

Sociolinguistics, the study of the intricate relationship between language and society, is a cornerstone of ELTE programs. It equips future teachers with a critical understanding of language variation, identity, power, and ideology (Deckert & Vickers, 2011). However, teaching this subject in an EFL context presents unique pedagogical hurdles. Firstly, many core concepts (code-switching, diglossia, language policy) are directly observable in students' multilingual lives, yet they may lack the analytical metalanguage to discuss them academically (Shimono & Nobis, 2018). Secondly, the canonical literature and case studies in sociolinguistics are often rooted in Western, Anglophone contexts, requiring significant pedagogical effort to bridge their relevance to the local linguistic ecologies of students (Mair, 1992).

The instructor's role thus becomes one of a facilitator, helping students connect abstract theories to their lived linguistic realities (Lakoff, 1975). This requires pedagogical approaches that are dialogic, critical, and context-responsive (Enemuoh, 2022; Morrison, 2020). The challenge is amplified when instruction is mediated entirely through English. Students must not only grasp abstract theoretical constructs but also articulate their nuanced understanding of local language phenomena in a language that is not their own, potentially limiting the depth and criticality of their engagement (Binder & Smith, 2013; Kovacevic et al., 2018).

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI): A Double-Edged Sword

The implementation of EMI is driven by the "ideology of immersion," which posits that constant exposure to the target language maximizes language acquisition and prepares students for globalized academic and professional spheres (Dafouz, 2018; Zhou, 2025). Proponents argue that EMI fosters higher levels of linguistic proficiency and promotes content and language integrated learning (CLIL), where students learn the subject matter while simultaneously improving their language skills (Graham et al., 2018; Wannagat, 2007). This approach aims to produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable in their field but also fluent communicators in the global lingua franca (Baharun & Suleiman, 2009; Noel & Qenani, 2013).

However, a growing body of critical research highlights the potential drawbacks of a one-size-fits-all EMI policy, particularly in contexts with heterogeneous student populations (Macaro, 2022; Rose et al., 2023). The primary concern is cognitive load; students are forced to process complex academic content through a linguistic filter, which can divert cognitive resources away from deep learning and critical thinking toward basic linguistic decoding (Wannagat, 2007). This can lead to surface-level understanding, rote memorization, and a reluctance to participate in classroom discussions for fear of making linguistic errors (BELOUAHEM, 2020; Dinsmore & Alexander, 2016). This phenomenon is what we term the 'EMI paradox': the very tool designed to enhance linguistic fluency may inadvertently become a barrier to academic mastery (Block, 2022; Iino, 2018). Furthermore, strict EMI policies can devalue students' L1, which is a crucial cognitive tool for scaffolding understanding of complex ideas, a practice known as translanguaging (Conteh, 2018; García & Kleifgen, 2020).

The Indonesian Higher Education Landscape and the Research Gap

In Indonesia, higher education institutions are under pressure to internationalize, with EMI being a key strategy (Macaro, 2020). Studies within the Indonesian context have explored various facets of EMI, including policy implementation, lecturer readiness, and its impact on language proficiency (Dafouz, 2018; Zhou, 2025). However, much of this research has focused on macro-level policy or institutional perspectives. There remains a significant gap in micro-level, classroom-based research

that examines the student experience from a holistic standpoint, integrating cognitive, affective, and linguistic dimensions.

Specifically, few studies have employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate how the diverse backgrounds of Indonesian students—particularly the urban-rural divide, which often correlates with disparities in educational quality and English exposure (Al Zoubi, 2018)—mediate their ability to cope with the demands of EMI. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a thick description of student readiness and comprehension within a specific EMI-based Sociolinguistics course at UNM. By connecting quantitative patterns of performance with qualitative narratives of student experience, we seek to provide a nuanced understanding that can inform more equitable and effective EMI pedagogy in Indonesia and beyond.

METHODS

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data were first collected and analyzed, followed by qualitative data to explain and expand upon the initial results (Creswell & Clark, 2017). This design was selected to allow deeper insight into patterns emerging from the quantitative phase, particularly regarding differences in student readiness, metacognitive awareness, and perceived comprehension.

Participants

The participants were 70 second-year undergraduate students enrolled in two sections of a compulsory Sociolinguistics course in the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Makassar. The cohort consisted of 52 female and 18 male students aged 19–21. Based on self-reported demographic information, 41 students were categorized as having an urban background (originating from Makassar or other provincial capitals), while 29 were categorized as rural (originating from regencies and smaller towns in South Sulawesi and neighboring provinces). All participants had received at least six years of formal English instruction prior to university. Although the course was taught by two lecturers, both sections followed a standardized syllabus and were conducted entirely in English.

Instruments and Procedures

1. Phase 1: Quantitative Data Collection

A survey instrument, administered during class time, consisted of three sections:

a. Demographic Information (initials, student ID, geographic origin).

b. Learning Readiness Scale (LRS): A 6-item scale adapted from established readiness inventories (e.g., Weinstein et al., 2000). Items were shortened to ensure relevance to the specific EMI context and to minimize respondent fatigue in an in-class survey.

c. Metacognitive Awareness Inventory (MAI): A 6-item adaptation of Schraw and Dennison's (1994) instrument, focusing on core components most relevant to EMI—planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation.

d. Perceived Comprehension in EMI Scale (PCES): A 6-item scale developed for this study to measure students' perceived understanding of English-mediated content.

All items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument was piloted with a comparable cohort, producing acceptable reliability indices (LRS α = .82; MAI α = .85; PCES α = .79). The shortened scales were retained because they demonstrated strong internal consistency while ensuring efficient administration within limited class time.

2. **Phase 2: Qualitative Data Collection**

Following the quantitative analysis, purposive sampling was used to select eight interview participants. This strategy was employed to ensure representation across key categories that would illuminate and contextualize the quantitative trends (Teddlie & Yu, 2007): (1) geographic background (urban vs. rural), and (2) varying levels of readiness, awareness, and comprehension (high, medium, and low scorers). This allowed the qualitative phase to capture contrasting learner experiences that might not surface through random sampling.

Semi-structured interviews lasting 30–45 minutes were conducted in English and Indonesian, allowing participants to express their experiences without linguistic pressure. Interview questions explored students' learning strategies, EMI-related challenges, and perceptions of the Sociolinguistics course. Additionally, four non-participant classroom observations (two per class section) documented interaction patterns, engagement, and observable indicators of comprehension or difficulty.

To reduce potential social-desirability bias, students were assured that participation was voluntary, responses would remain confidential, and data would not affect their course grades. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant not involved in course instruction to further minimize power dynamics.

Data Analysis

1. **Quantitative Analysis**

Survey responses from all 70 students were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were calculated for each scale. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare urban and rural groups across learning readiness, metacognitive awareness, and perceived comprehension.

2. **Qualitative Analysis**

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed along with observation notes using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed six recursive steps: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting.

Multiple strategies were employed to ensure qualitative rigor. Triangulation was achieved by integrating interview data with classroom observations and quantitative findings. Member checking was carried out by returning preliminary interpretations to participants for verification. An audit trail documenting analytical decisions, coding iterations, and theme revisions was maintained throughout the process to enhance transparency and dependability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. **Quantitative Phase**

The descriptive analysis showed that students reported moderate levels of Learning Readiness (M = 3.45, SD = 0.88) and Metacognitive Awareness (M = 3.60, SD = 0.91). Perceived Comprehension in EMI, however, was considerably lower (M = 2.85, SD = 1.05), suggesting that students generally struggled to follow course content delivered fully in English (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for All Participants

Variable	Mean	SD
Learning Readiness	3.45	0.88
Metacognitive Awareness	3.60	0.91
Perceived Comprehension (EMI)	2.85	1.05

Comparisons between urban and rural students indicated no significant differences in Learning Readiness or Metacognitive Awareness. However, a significant gap emerged in Perceived Comprehension, with urban students reporting notably higher comprehension (M = 3.28) than rural students (M = 2.24), $t(68) = 5.21$, $p < .001$ (Table 2). These results confirmed that while motivational and metacognitive levels were similar across groups, comprehension performance varied sharply based on geographic background.

Table 2. Independent Samples t-Test for Urban

Variable	Group	Mean	*t*	*df*	*p*
Learning Readiness	Urban	3.55	1.12	68	0.267
	Rural	3.31			
Metacognitive Awareness	Urban	3.68	0.89	68	0.378
	Rural	3.49			
Perceived Comprehension	Urban	3.28	5.21	68	0.000
	Rural	2.24			

This pattern signaled the need for qualitative insights to explain the underlying factors contributing to the comprehension gap.

2. Qualitative Phase

A thematic analysis of interview and observation data clarified the reasons behind the quantitative trends. The coding process moved from initial codes ("difficulty following lectures," "lack of listening practice," "peer assistance," "L1 clarification") to subthemes, which were then organized into three main themes.

a. Theme 1: The EMI Paradox: Cognitive Overload vs. Aspirational Immersion

Students universally acknowledged the rationale behind the 100% English policy, viewing it as essential training. However, for many, especially those from rural backgrounds, the reality was one of constant cognitive struggle. As one rural student, "Rina" (pseudonym), explained:

"I understand why the lecturer uses full English, it's for our own good. But honestly, sometimes my brain just freezes. I am so busy trying to understand the English words, especially the fast ones, that I miss the sociolinguistic concept itself. I have to re-learn everything at home with Google Translate."

This sentiment was echoed by others who described a "dual-processing" burden. Classroom observations supported this, showing several students frantically typing into translation apps on their phones while the lecturer spoke. In contrast, urban students, while still challenged, often had better coping mechanisms. "Andi," an urban student, noted:

"It's tough, but I'm used to hearing English from movies and YouTube. So, I can follow the general idea even if I miss some words. The challenge for me is the academic vocabulary, not the basic listening."

This highlights that the "comprehension" gap was less about motivation and more about the baseline listening proficiency and linguistic capital accumulated prior to university.

The first theme highlighted EMI as a source of cognitive overload. Many students described struggling to simultaneously decode English input and understand complex sociolinguistic concepts. A rural participant commented that they often missed key explanations because their attention was consumed by trying to interpret the lecturer's English. Classroom observations showed frequent reliance on translation applications, reinforcing this challenge. Urban students reported similar difficulties but were generally able to follow lectures due to greater prior exposure to English.

b. Theme 2: "Modal Bahasa Inggris": Disparities in Linguistic Capital and Prior Exposure

This theme directly addresses the urban-rural divide. Students consistently attributed their comprehension difficulties to a lack of prior exposure to authentic English. A student from a remote regency, "Hasan," stated:

> "In my high school, we learned English by reading and doing grammar exercises. The teacher rarely spoke English. We never practiced listening. My friends from Makassar, they attended English courses, they had foreign friends. They came to university with a different *modal bahasa Inggris* (English capital)."

This disparity was not just about formal schooling but also informal exposure. Urban students spoke of easy access to international cinemas, bookstores, and social environments where English was used. Rural students described environments where English was almost entirely absent outside the classroom. This difference in "linguistic habitus" (Bourdieu, 1986) meant that urban students entered the EMI classroom with a significant, pre-existing advantage that had little to do with their intrinsic motivation or metacognitive ability.

The second theme explained the urban–rural divide through differences in linguistic capital and prior exposure. Rural students consistently noted that their earlier English learning focused on grammar and reading, with minimal listening practice. In contrast, urban students described richer access to English media and informal learning opportunities. These disparities shaped students' baseline proficiency and contributed directly to the statistically significant comprehension gap.

c. Theme 3: Metacognition as a Survival Tool: Strategic L1 Use and Peer Scaffolding

Faced with comprehension challenges, students demonstrated remarkable metacognitive awareness by developing coping strategies. The most common was the strategic use of their L1 (Indonesian and local languages). Observations revealed that during breakout sessions, almost all discussions immediately switched to Indonesian to clarify concepts before attempting to formulate answers in English. As "Dewi," a high-achieving rural student, shared:

> "I always form a study group. After class, we sit together and re-explain the material to each other in Indonesian. First, we make sure we understand the concept in our language, then we find the English terms to use for the assignment. We can't skip the first step."

This translanguaging practice was not a sign of deficiency but a sophisticated metacognitive strategy to bridge the gap between linguistic ability and conceptual understanding (García & Kleifgen, 2020). Students with higher metacognitive awareness were more proactive in forming these support systems, effectively creating a parallel, L1-mediated learning space to make the official EMI-based space accessible.

The third theme demonstrated how students used metacognitive strategies to compensate for EMI challenges. Regardless of background, students commonly used Indonesian during group discussions to clarify concepts before transitioning back into English for tasks and assignments. Study groups played an important role in reconstructing lecture content, with students collaboratively reviewing materials in L1 and then rearticulating ideas in English. This translanguaging practice functioned as an adaptive learning mechanism rather than a sign of linguistic inadequacy.

The qualitative findings reveal that comprehension difficulties stem primarily from cognitive overload and unequal prior exposure to English, not from differences in motivation or metacognitive awareness. Students employed deliberate strategies—especially collaborative L1 use—to bridge linguistic gaps and sustain their engagement in an EMI learning environment.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a nuanced perspective on how EMI operates within a linguistically diverse EFL higher education context. By integrating quantitative patterns with qualitative narratives, this discussion situates the results within broader theoretical and empirical debates on linguistic capital, cognitive load, and metacognitive regulation. Unlike many EMI evaluations that rely predominantly on self-report proficiency or overall course performance, this study demonstrates the value of examining *interacting readiness factors*—a contribution that adds a level of granularity rarely explored in EMI studies, particularly in Southeast Asia.

1. Revisiting Student Readiness: A Gap Between Self-Perception and Linguistic Preparedness

Quantitative findings indicate that students from both urban and rural backgrounds reported similarly high levels of learning readiness and metacognitive awareness. This might initially suggest that the cohort was uniformly prepared for EMI. Prior studies in Malaysia and Thailand have reported similar trends, where students self-assessed their readiness positively despite facing substantial language barriers during EMI courses (Iino, 2018).

However, qualitative data from the present study reveal that this self-perceived readiness was fragile. Students frequently described their readiness collapsing under the weight of real-time English processing demands. This disjunction between *affective readiness* and *linguistic readiness* adds nuance to the broader EMI debate. While studies have reported a mismatch between confidence and actual comprehension (Ruswandi et al., 2024; Zhuoma, 2023), our findings shed light on the *mechanism* behind this gap: students' working memory becomes overloaded as they attempt to translate, decode, and understand simultaneously, leaving insufficient cognitive resources for content learning. This explicit linkage to cognitive load processes constitutes a novel contribution to EMI research in the Indonesian context.

2. The Urban–Rural Divide: Linguistic Capital as the Hidden Determinant

The most significant finding is the pronounced difference in perceived comprehension between urban and rural students—despite comparable reported readiness. This reinforces longstanding concerns about unequal English exposure in Indonesia, echoing patterns observed in rural schools (Al Zoubi, 2018) where students with limited English contact struggle disproportionately under EMI.

What distinguishes the present study is its combination of quantitative significance with qualitative depth. Students articulated how their previous schooling shaped their "linguistic habitus," with urban students benefiting from richer English ecologies—private courses, media access, and English-speaking peer groups. Rural students, by contrast, described learning environments focused on grammar drills and exam routines. Although similar findings have been noted ((Jugembayeva et al., 2022; Ruswandi et al., 2024), our study provides evidence that *geographic background itself functions as a proxy for linguistic capital*—a factor rarely operationalized explicitly in Indonesian EMI studies.

3. The EMI Paradox: When English Immersion Constrains Rather Than Enables Learning

The data illustrate a recurring contradiction—while EMI aims to strengthen both language competence and disciplinary understanding, many students experienced diminished comprehension due to the inflexibility of the English-only policy. Instead of facilitating deep learning, the linguistic barrier forced students into superficial processing strategies such as memorizing English terminology without conceptual mastery.

This "EMI paradox" aligns with studies (BELOUAHEM, 2020; Block, 2022; Iino, 2018), which have questioned whether maximal exposure is always beneficial in linguistically heterogeneous classrooms. The present study contributes to this debate by showing how students involuntarily adopt

translanguaging practices—explaining concepts to peers in Indonesian, translating notes, or using mixed-language discussions—to compensate for the cognitive load imposed by EMI. While translanguaging has been identified in other Southeast Asian settings, our findings demonstrate that *students implement it systematically as a survival mechanism*, rather than as a preference or convenience.

4. Metacognitive Awareness as a Modulating Factor

Although linguistic capital emerged as the strongest predictor of comprehension, metacognitive awareness played a critical moderating role. Students with stronger self-regulation skills were able to navigate EMI challenges more constructively—by forming study groups, pre-reading materials, or strategically using their L1. This mirrors findings where metacognitive strategies have been shown to buffer the negative effects of limited proficiency (Jinghui, 2023; Rose et al., 2023).

The contribution of this study lies in identifying *how* metacognition interacts with linguistic limitations: students compensated not only by planning and monitoring their learning but also by strategically engaging with bilingual resources to stabilize comprehension. This adds to the emerging body of evidence suggesting that metacognition plays an even more crucial role in EMI environments characterized by high student diversity.

5. Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

The findings of this study carry several important implications for EMI pedagogy and policy in Indonesian higher education. At the institutional level, the results underscore the need to move away from a uniform, English-only model and adopt more flexible, context-responsive EMI frameworks. One promising direction is the development of EMI bridging modules or foundation programs that focus on academic English, listening comprehension, and disciplinary literacy before students enroll in EMI-intensive courses. Such modules have been implemented with positive outcomes, where preparatory EMI programs significantly reduced comprehension gaps among students with weaker linguistic backgrounds.

Another institutional priority is the implementation of diagnostic screening at entry—assessing not only general English proficiency but also academic listening, reading-to-learn skills, and note-taking performance. This would allow universities to identify students at risk of EMI-related comprehension difficulties and offer targeted support, such as language labs, structured tutoring, or supplemental instruction sessions. Institutions should also consider designing support ecosystems, including peer-assisted learning groups, bilingual learning resources, and optional L1-enhanced discussion tutorials for complex theoretical content.

Beyond institutional measures, curriculum developers and lecturers play a critical role in addressing the challenges identified in this study. Lecturers should incorporate strategic scaffolding practices, such as allowing brief L1 clarification for dense theoretical concepts, providing bilingual glossaries, and offering pre-lecture outlines in accessible language. Pedagogical design should also include explicit instruction in metacognitive learning strategies, equipping students with tools for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning in a linguistically demanding environment. This may include teaching students how to preview readings effectively, how to take meaningful notes during EMI lectures, and how to organize peer-supported study routines. These concrete pedagogical strategies can help level the playing field, particularly for students with less linguistic capital.

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. Its focus on a single EMI-delivered course within one university limits the generalizability of the findings to broader institutional contexts. Additionally, the quantitative data rely on self-reported measures of readiness

and metacognitive awareness, which may not fully capture students' actual competencies or behavioral patterns. Future studies might include performance-based assessments or observational methods for a more comprehensive analysis.

Future research could extend this work across multiple domains. Longitudinal studies following students over several semesters would provide insight into whether the readiness–comprehension gap diminishes as students accumulate more EMI exposure. Comparative research across different disciplines—particularly between linguistically dense fields such as sociolinguistics and more formulaic subjects like mathematics or engineering—would deepen understanding of how disciplinary discourse shapes EMI challenges. Furthermore, action research conducted by lecturers could empirically test the effectiveness of proposed interventions, such as structured translanguaging practices, bilingual scaffolding, or explicit metacognitive strategy instruction, thus translating theoretical recommendations into evidence-based classroom innovations.

CLOSING

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study highlights that effective participation in an EMI-based Sociolinguistics course depends on far more than students' motivation or general academic readiness. The evidence shows that disparities in linguistic capital—shaped largely by students' urban or rural backgrounds—remain the strongest determinant of how well learners can access EMI-delivered content. These disparities are intensified by a strict English-only classroom model, which inadvertently places heavier cognitive demands on students with limited prior exposure to English.

At the same time, students demonstrated agency through the use of metacognitive strategies, particularly peer collaboration and strategic L1 mediation, to compensate for comprehension difficulties. These adaptive practices underscore the need for EMI approaches that recognize learners' diverse linguistic resources rather than suppress them.

Overall, the study underscores that EMI can serve as an effective pedagogical model only when paired with differentiated instructional support, structured scaffolding, and explicit development of metacognitive learning skills. Designing EMI environments that balance language goals with equitable access to disciplinary understanding remains essential for fostering both linguistic growth and meaningful academic learning in diverse EFL contexts.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in higher education, particularly in conceptually demanding courses such as Sociolinguistics, should not be applied uniformly without considering students' diverse linguistic backgrounds. Universities are encouraged to provide structured academic support, including preparatory or bridging programs focusing on academic listening and disciplinary literacy, especially for students with limited prior exposure to English.

At the instructional level, lecturers are advised to adopt scaffolded teaching strategies, such as providing pre-lecture outlines, bilingual glossaries, and opportunities for limited and strategic first-language use to clarify complex theoretical concepts. Such practices may help reduce cognitive overload while maintaining the pedagogical goals of EMI.

Future research should extend this investigation across multiple courses and institutions to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine how students' readiness, metacognitive awareness, and comprehension evolve over time as they gain increased exposure to EMI environments.

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