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Reconceptualising English Medium Instruction in Higher Education: Insights from a Global Englishes Meta-Synthesis in the Chinese Context

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in higher education is largely driven by the forces of globalisation and marketisation. Although existing EMI syntheses have evaluated language and content outcomes or synthesised factors associated with academic success, programme quality, teacher development, and translanguaging research, less is known about how language ideology, knowledge legitimacy, curriculum, assessment, teacher positioning, and learner identity interact within the multilingual ecology of mainland Chinese universities. Through the lens of Global Englishes (GE), this study addressed this gap by using the 13 dimensions of the Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) framework to synthesise finding segments from 25 qualitative studies. The meta-synthesis generated a higher-order account of Chinese EMI as an analytical progression from systemic misalignment, through multilingual reconceptualisation, to the institutional, curricular, and pedagogical embedding of multilingualism. By explaining how linguistic and epistemic legitimacy is organised across EMI, the study extends outcome- and factor-oriented reviews and reframes EMI quality as a problem of curricular alignment rather than English delivery alone.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction; Global Englishes; translanguaging; multilingualism; Higher education

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Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI) has become one of the most visible manifestations of internationalisation in higher education, particularly in contexts where English is associated with global academic mobility, institutional competitiveness, and access to disciplinary knowledge. In mainland China, the expansion of EMI has been closely connected to universities' efforts to participate in international knowledge economies and to prepare students for English-mediated academic and professional futures. Yet EMI is not merely a change in instructional language. It also reorganises the relationship among English, Chinese, local languages, disciplinary knowledge, teacher authority, assessment practices, and learner identities (Fang & Hu, 2025). This complexity makes EMI a particularly important site for examining how English is pedagogically imagined and institutionally managed. The Global Englishes (GE) paradigm, including Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT), brings together related ideologies, such as World Englishes (WE), English as a lingua franca (ELF), English as an international language (EIL), translanguaging, and multilingualism, around shared concerns with linguistic diversity and multilingual practice (Rose & Galloway, 2019). It foregrounds the linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural diversity of English practices and users worldwide, thereby informing EMI in contemporary global and multilingual settings.

From a GE perspective, English is not treated as a fixed Anglophone possession, but as a plural, mobile, and multilingual resource shaped by diverse users across local and global contexts (Rose & Galloway, 2019; Rose et al., 2021). Recent GE-oriented work has further challenged native-speakerism, monolingual assumptions, and the marginalisation of multilingual users by arguing for more inclusive approaches to language teaching, curriculum design, and educational equity (Fang & Dovchin, 2024; Fang & Hu, 2025). The question, therefore, is not simply whether English should be used in higher education. The more pressing issue is what kind of English-mediated education is being constructed through EMI. Following Pennycook and Makoni (2020), the Global South in this study is not treated as a fixed geographical category, but as a relational and epistemic perspective concerned with unequal distributions of linguistic and knowledge authority. From this perspective, Fang and Dovchin (2024) have similarly foregrounded how dominant conceptions of English marginalise particular users, repertoires, and forms of knowledge. China, however, cannot be positioned uncritically as either wholly inside or outside this framing. In Chinese higher education, Anglophone academic norms continue to influence what counts as legitimate English and academic knowledge, while hierarchies within the national context also privilege English and Putonghua over local and minority languages (e.g., Fang & Hu, 2025; K. Wang & Jiang, 2025). Therefore, this study approaches EMI in Chinese higher education as a multiscale site in which global and internal inequalities intersect and are reproduced, negotiated, or potentially reconfigured through curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and language policy.

Existing syntheses have answered important but different questions. Lee et al. (2025) estimated the effects of EMI on content and English learning, while Rose et al. (2026) synthesised global trends, language and content outcomes, and language-related challenges. Tang and Curtis (2026) developed a model of undergraduate academic success around English proficiency, student characteristics, educational background, and English-language support. In mainland Chinese higher education, Y. Wang (2026) used the Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) model to identify eight factors influencing EMI quality across English- and Chinese-language studies employing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Teacher-focused reviews have examined professional-learning provision and routes to EMI teacher development across national settings (e.g., Dang et al., 2023; K. Wang et al., 2025). Qualitative or translanguaging-oriented syntheses have foregrounded learner-centred obstacles or mapped methodological and thematic trends across EMI or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) contexts (e.g., Liao et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2025). GE-oriented pedagogical research, meanwhile, has remained concentrated in university language classrooms rather than disciplinary EMI curricula (Rose et al., 2021). However, these reviews have not jointly

explained how language ownership, multilingual repertoires, cultural and epistemic representation, teacher positioning, assessment, and learner identity are configured across the contemporary curriculum ecology of mainland Chinese EMI.

This study therefore primarily addressed a different review question: not simply whether EMI is effective or which factors are associated with success and quality, but how Chinese EMI organises linguistic and epistemic legitimacy and how this ecology is reconceptualised through GE. It conducted a GELT-guided meta-synthesis of findings from 25 qualitative studies of mainland Chinese higher education published between 2021 and 2026. The 13 GELT dimensions were used relationally to connect language ideology and ownership with curriculum materials, teacher roles, learning goals, assessment, and participation across institutional, curricular, and classroom levels. The synthesis generated a higher-order analytical progression from systemic misalignment, through multilingual reconceptualisation, to the structural embedding of multilingualism. It shows how the dimensions of Chinese EMI cohere, conflict, and constrain one another rather than producing another account of outcomes, predictors, or implementation factors.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilised the GELT framework (Rose & Galloway, 2019) to examine language norms, multilingual practices, curriculum design, teacher roles, assessment, and students' academic identities in EMI programmes in mainland Chinese higher education. It did not assume that EMI and English language teaching (ELT) had the same primary aim. EMI courses primarily teach academic subjects through English, whereas ELT courses focus on language learning (Rose et al., 2023). GELT was therefore used to examine language-related aspects of disciplinary teaching, such as multilingual practices, material selection, teacher roles, and assessment, rather than the accuracy or sequencing of disciplinary content. In this framework, GELT was understood as the pedagogical and curricular operationalisation of the GE paradigm. Rather than treating GE as a broad sociolinguistic orientation alone, GELT translated its central concerns, including plural ownership of English, multilingual language use, diverse communicative norms, and locally situated educational needs, into a framework through which English language teaching and English-mediated curricula can be critically examined. Both GE-informed research and EMI research question native-speaker norms, recognise teachers and students as multilingual users of English, and consider the use of multiple languages in teaching (Rose et al., 2022). For these reasons, GELT is relevant to the analysis of language-related practices in EMI.

Rose and Galloway (2019) developed the 13 dimensions to compare traditional ELT with GE-informed approaches to language teaching (see Figure 1). First, target interlocutors moved from imagined native English speakers to all English users, including multilingual academic and professional participants. Second, ownership shifted from Inner Circle (Kachru et al., 2009) authority to global ownership, thereby challenging the assumption that English was controlled by native-speaking communities. Third, target culture moved from static native-English cultures to fluid and diverse cultures in which English was used across local, regional, and transnational contexts. Fourth, norms shifted from standard English as a fixed benchmark to diverse, flexible, and multiple forms of English. Fifth, teachers were no longer evaluated through the binary of native and non-native English-speaking teachers, but through professional competence, qualification, and contextual responsiveness. Sixth, role model changed from the native English speaker to the expert user of English. Seventh, source of materials expanded from native-English contexts and speakers to salient English-speaking communities and contexts, including multilingual and locally meaningful ones. Eighth, other languages and cultures were reconceptualised from sources of interference to resources within learners' linguistic and cultural repertoires. Ninth, needs were no longer defined primarily by Inner Circle (Kachru et al., 2009) expectations, but by global, local, disciplinary, and

learner-specific communicative demands. Tenth, assessment criterion moved from accuracy according to prescriptive standards to communicative competence. Eleventh, goals of learning shifted from native-like proficiency to the development of competent English users. Twelfth, ideology changed from an exclusive and ethnocentric view of English to an inclusive GE perspective. Finally, orientation moved from monolingualism to multilingual and translingual understandings of language use.

Figure 1. The GELT framework (cited in Rose & Galloway, 2019, p. 21).

	Traditional ELT	GELT
Target interlocutors	Native English speakers	All English users
Ownership	Inner Circle	Global
Target culture	Static NE cultures	Fluid cultures
Norms	Standard English	Diverse, flexible and multiple forms
Teachers	Non-NE-speaking teachers (same L1) and NE-speaking teachers	Qualified, competent teachers (same and different L1s)
Role model	NE speakers	Expert users
Source of materials	NE and NE speakers	Salient English-speaking communities and contexts
Other languages and cultures	Seen as a hindrance and source of interference	Seen as a resource as with other languages in their linguistic repertoire
Needs	Inner Circle defined	Globally defined
Assessment criterion	Accuracy according to prescriptive standards	Communicative competence
Goals of learning	Native-like proficiency	Multicompetent user
Ideology	Underpinned by an exclusive and ethnocentric view of English	Underpinned by an inclusive Global Englishes perspective
Orientation	Monolingual	Multilingual/translingual

For the EMI analysis, the 13 dimensions were defined in terms of disciplinary teaching rather than language teaching. For example, teachers referred to subject lecturers, including whether they were judged according to native-speaker status, and to their collaboration with language specialists; source of materials referred to the countries, English varieties, and cultural perspectives represented in disciplinary texts and cases. Goals of learning referred to the communicative abilities expected within a discipline, while assessment criterion referred to whether students’ disciplinary work was judged by communicative effectiveness or conformity to native-English norms. The framework did not evaluate disciplinary content or teaching practices unless the primary studies explicitly linked them to language.

In this study, the GELT framework (Rose & Galloway, 2019) functioned as both a coding framework and an interpretive lens. As a coding framework, it provided a priori categories for comparing the language-related features of EMI reported across the included studies. As an interpretive lens, it supported comparisons across studies of language norms and classroom practices, curriculum design, teacher roles, assessment, and student identities. These two functions informed the following three research questions (RQs):

1. How do the key challenges of EMI implementation in mainland Chinese universities manifest and interact across the 13 GELT dimensions?
2. How does the synthesised qualitative evidence support a GE-informed reconceptualisation of EMI around multilingual realities?
3. What institutional, curricular, and pedagogical implications follow from embedding multilingualism into EMI in mainland Chinese universities?

Methodology

Search strategy

A meta-synthesis design was used to examine this research area. Because qualitative inquiry offers rich evidence about perceptions and beliefs, this method was selected to integrate findings from qualitative research in a systematic manner (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The Web of Science Core Collection was selected for its cross-disciplinary coverage and transparent indexing structure. On 2 August, 2026, the Web of Science Core Collection was searched for studies indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI), and Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-EXPANDED). The search was limited to studies published between 2021 and 2026 to capture recent qualitative developments in EMI research during a period of growing attention to multilingual and GE perspectives. This period also follows chronologically from the 2010–2020 publication window reviewed by Rose et al. (2021), while the present meta-synthesis shifts the focus from GE pedagogy in predominantly university language classrooms to disciplinary education through English in mainland Chinese higher education. The Topic field (TS) was used to search titles, abstracts, author keywords, and Keywords Plus. The following Boolean search string was entered:

TS= ((EMI OR “English medium instruction” OR “English as a medium of instruction” OR “English-medium instruction”) AND (China OR Chinese OR “mainland China” OR PRC) AND (“higher education” OR “higher institution*” OR “tertiary education” OR universit* OR college*)) NOT (“literature review” OR “meta-analysis” OR “systematic review” OR “meta-synthesis” OR “scoping review” OR “bibliometric analysis”))

The initial search yielded 229 records. Study selection and identification followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021). Before screening, four records representing ineligible publication types, including review articles and editorial materials, were removed using the Web of Science document-type filtering function; no duplicate records were identified. The remaining 225 records underwent title-and-abstract screening. At this stage, 116 records were excluded because the setting, population, focal phenomenon, or evidence type did not meet the review scope. The remaining 109 records were further assessed against the research-design and substantive-scope criteria. Of these, 47 were excluded because they employed quantitative methods or mixed-methods designs without separately extractable qualitative findings ($n = 39$), adopted a quasi-experimental design ($n = 1$), or fell outside the substantive scope or did not report primary research ($n = 7$).

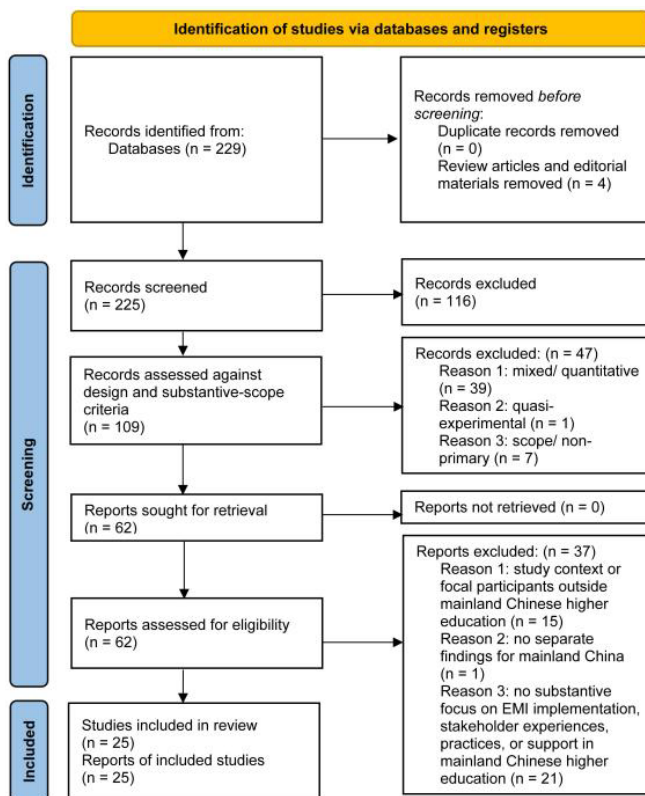
Full texts were sought and successfully retrieved for the remaining 62 reports ($n = 0$ not retrieved). These reports were then assessed against the full-text eligibility criteria. Where more than one criterion could apply, the primary reason most directly determining ineligibility was recorded. Reports were excluded when:

- Studies or focal participants were not situated in mainland Chinese higher education contexts (e.g., Chinese university students enrolled in overseas EMI programmes), even if they addressed EMI or were adapted from previous case studies related to Chinese universities.
- Studies compared EMI implementation in mainland China with that in other countries or regions (e.g., Singapore, Japan, the Netherlands) without reporting findings for mainland China separately.

- Studies did not focus substantively on EMI implementation, stakeholders' experiences, practices, or support in mainland Chinese higher education, but instead addressed broader issues only tangentially related to EMI.

Following full-text assessment, 25 studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the meta-synthesis. The complete study-selection process and the number of reports excluded for each reason are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. PRISMA flow diagram.



Data extraction and synthesis

The 25 included studies formed the source corpus, while finding segments relevant to the three RQs constituted the units of analysis. These findings included themes and categories developed by the authors of primary studies, their accompanying explanations and interpretations, and the participant quotations, classroom exchanges, or observational excerpts presented in support of those accounts. Direct quotations were therefore approached in relation to the analyses in which they originally appeared rather than treated as independently interpretable raw data.

Findings were then extracted into a structured matrix that recorded the study identifier, research setting, participant group, disciplinary or programme context, data source, reported finding, supporting excerpt where available, corresponding RQ, provisional GELT dimension, and an

analytic memo. Extracting the contextual and analytical information surrounding each finding helped preserve the connection between individual excerpts and the conditions under which they had originally been reported. A finding could be linked to more than one RQ or GELT dimension when its meaning operated across several aspects of EMI curriculum and pedagogy. Repeated references to the same finding within one article were consolidated to avoid giving greater weight to studies that reported their results in more extensive detail.

Synthesis proceeded through two connected analytical stages. First, extracted findings were coded deductively using the EMI-specific definitions of the 13 GELT dimensions set out in the theoretical framework: target interlocutors, ownership, target culture, norms, teachers, role model, source of materials, other languages and cultures, needs, assessment criterion, goals of learning, ideology, and orientation (Rose & Galloway, 2019). The finding segment, rather than an isolated sentence or quotation, served as the principal coding unit. Multiple coding was permitted where a segment addressed interrelated dimensions, such as the relationship among language orientation, ownership, and the use of other languages and cultures. Coding remained close to the concepts and contextual meanings reported in the primary studies. A finding was assigned a GELT code only when the primary study explicitly linked it to language use or norms, multilingual resources, access to disciplinary content, classroom participation, or assessment. Findings about disciplinary content or teaching methods without such a link were not assigned a GELT code. Material that did not fit the *a priori* GELT categories was recorded in analytic memos and reconsidered during cross-study comparison rather than being forced into the GELT framework. Second, coded findings were compared both within and across the GELT dimensions. Within-dimension comparisons examined how similar concerns were expressed across participant groups, disciplines, institutions, and forms of EMI provision. Cross-dimensional comparisons focused on recurring relationships, contrasts, and tensions, including those between English-dominant ideologies and multilingual practices, institutional expectations and teacher support, curricular internationalisation and epistemic representation, and language requirements and disciplinary participation. Attention was also paid to divergent or context-specific evidence so that recurrence across studies was not treated as uniformity across settings. Through iterative comparison and memo writing, the coded findings were organised into the higher-order patterns addressing the three RQs: systemic misalignment in EMI implementation, the reconceptualisation of EMI around multilingual realities, and the institutional, curricular, and pedagogical embedding of multilingualism.

The developing synthesis was repeatedly checked against the extraction matrix and the full texts of the contributing studies. Each higher-order pattern retained links to the study identifiers and finding segments from which it was developed, allowing the contribution of individual studies to be traced across the three research questions. Study counts were used to indicate the distribution of evidence within the included corpus rather than the prevalence or relative importance of a phenomenon across Chinese higher education. Selected quotations were subsequently retained in the Findings section to illustrate the published evidence underpinning each pattern, not as substitutes for the cross-study analysis.

Analytic rigour and reflexivity

The first author led data extraction and completed the initial coding of the published findings. The corresponding author then independently coded the full set of extracted finding segments, assigning each segment to the relevant research questions and GELT dimensions and examining its relationship to the accompanying analytic memo and original primary-study context. The two sets of coding decisions showed a high degree of convergence. Minor differences in the allocation of individual finding segments were discussed with reference to their original primary-study contexts until consensus was reached. Both authors then jointly examined the cross-study comparisons, higher-order patterns, and their links to the contributing studies before the synthesis was finalised.

An audit trail was maintained throughout the synthesis, linking each extracted finding to its study identifier, source location, original analytical context, supporting excerpt where available, allocation to the research questions, GELT code or codes, and subsequent contribution to the higher-order patterns. As an additional within-coder consistency check, following a three-week interval, the first author revisited the full extraction and coding matrix and compared the two rounds of coding, with any reconsideration of code boundaries, definitions, or thematic relationships recorded in the analytic memos. The matrix was also examined for divergent, disconfirming, and context-specific evidence, particularly findings that complicated the dominant cross-study patterns or did not fit readily within the predetermined GELT dimensions. Higher-order patterns were retained only when their supporting evidence remained traceable across the contributing studies.

A GE-informed perspective shaped the reading of the corpus, sensitising the analysis to questions of language ownership, multilingual resources, epistemic legitimacy, and curricular inequality while potentially foregrounding evidence congruent with the GELT framework. To reduce this risk, multiple coding was permitted where finding segments crossed several GELT dimensions, material that resisted the predetermined categories was retained for separate consideration, and alternative explanations were discussed during the joint review. The final synthesis was therefore treated as a theoretically situated account developed from the included published studies rather than as an exhaustive or framework-neutral representation of EMI across Chinese higher education.

Findings

The synthesis findings were organised around the three RQs and supported by summary tables. Selected quotations from the included reports illustrate the published evidence underpinning each cross-study pattern and remain situated within the primary authors' analyses. Table 1 summarises the 25 included studies in terms of their research context, qualitative evidence base, and relevance to the three research questions. GELT-dimension mappings are reported separately in Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4, showing how the extracted findings contributed to each stage of the synthesis.

Table 1
Characteristics of the 25 included studies

Study	Author(s)/ Year	Context and qualitative data	Relevance to RQs
S1	Huang and Fang (2023)	6 EMI teachers across different disciplines; 24 classroom observations and 6 post-observation interviews	RQ1–3
S2	Fang and Hu (2025)	Teochew-speaking minority-language university students; individual interviews and focus group	RQ1, RQ2
S3	Zheng and Qiu (2024)	Teachers and Chinese and international students in one EMI master's degree programme; 12-month classroom ethnography	RQ1–3
S4	Y. Wang and Jiang (2025)	18 EMI students in a Beijing law school	RQ1–3
S5	X. Chen et al. (2024)	26 recorded peer interactions in one undergraduate EMI marketing course	RQ1
S6	W. Sun et al. (2023)	4 academics teaching parallel EMI and CMI cohorts	RQ1–3
S7	Hu et al. (2022)	4 Chinese university students; qualitative accounts of EMI writing practices and identities	RQ1
S8	Zhang and Xu (2025)	1 EMI subject teacher in collaborative practice with an EFL teacher	RQ1, RQ3
S9	Xu et al. (2023)	93 institutional policy documents and interviews with 26 senior university staff	RQ1, RQ3
S10	Gu et al. (2026)	4 STEM teachers; classroom observations and interviews	RQ1–3

S11	Wu et al. (2026)	Business English undergraduates at one university in eastern China; open-ended questionnaires and interviews	RQ1, RQ3
S12	Zhou and Delogu (2026)	20 EAP teachers and 5 PD leads across EMI institutional and programme contexts	RQ1, RQ3
S13	Song (2023)	17 teachers and international students in international EMI programmes	RQ1–3
S14	Mirhosseini et al. (2026)	17 national policy documents and policy texts from 52 Sino-foreign programmes; qualitative policy analysis	RQ1–3
S15	Q.Chen et al. (2023)	10 teachers, 2 managers and 1 administrator across five EMI types; documents, focus groups and interviews	RQ1–3
S16	Jia et al. (2023)	3 engineering EMI lecturers; 510 min of classroom observation, teaching materials and interviews	RQ1–3
S17	Q. Sun (2026)	17 bilingual students across EMI and CMI contexts; writing-process artefacts and text-based interviews; EMI evidence extracted	RQ1, RQ3
S18	Dong et al. (2026)	Policy documents, 18 international students and 5 Chinese EMI teachers in a software programme; interviews and qualitative content analysis	RQ1–3
S19	Yuan et al. (2023)	26 students across disciplines; 4 focus groups and 8 follow-up individual interviews	RQ1–3
S20	Kim et al. (2022)	15 Chinese undergraduates at a multilingual international EMI university; two rounds of interviews	RQ1, RQ2
S21	Jiang and Zhang (2023)	2 teachers and 36 students in an EMI e-commerce programme; 12 observed lessons and stimulated-recall interviews	RQ1–3
S22	Li et al. (2026)	6 EMI teachers across six courses; approximately 56 observed classes, repeated interviews and assessment artefacts	RQ1, RQ3
S23	McKinley et al. (2021)	26 EMI policy arbiters across 8 Chinese universities; semi-structured individual or group interviews	RQ1, RQ3
S24	Yuan et al. (2024)	234 teachers across 66 EMI courses; textual analysis of curriculum proposals and reflections	RQ1, RQ3
S25	Gu et al. (2023)	9 subject teachers across 4 Shanghai universities; two interview rounds and classroom video from 4 teachers	RQ1–3

Note. CMI = Chinese-medium instruction; EFL = English as a foreign language; EAP = English for academic purposes; for S17, only qualitative findings attributable to the EMI context were included in the meta-synthesis.

Table 2

GELT dimensions and studies underpinning systemic misalignment in Chinese EMI

GELT dimensions	Study
Target interlocutors	S4, S20
Ownership	S2, S3, S4, S13, S18, S20
Target culture	S1, S3, S10, S13, S14
Norms	S5, S7, S11, S17, S20
Teachers	S1, S5, S6, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S15, S16, S18, S19, S21, S22, S23, S24, S25
Role model	S8, S15, S20, S21
Source of materials	S1, S3, S10, S13, S14, S16, S17, S21, S24, S25
GELT dimensions	Study
Other languages and cultures	S1, S2, S3, S4, S10, S13, S15, S16, S17, S18, S19, S21, S22, S23, S24, S25
Needs	S2, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S11, S12, S14, S15, S16, S17, S18, S19, S21, S22, S23, S24, S25
Assessment criterion	S7, S11, S14, S17, S19, S22, S24
Goals of learning	S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S19, S20, S22, S23, S24, S25

Ideology	S1, S2, S3, S4, S6, S8, S9, S10, S12, S13, S14, S15, S16, S17, S18, S20, S22, S23, S24, S25
Orientation	S2, S3, S4, S6, S9, S10, S13, S14, S15, S16, S18, S19, S20, S21, S23, S25

Systemic misalignment in EMI implementation

Guided by the GELT framework (Rose & Galloway, 2019), the evidence addressing RQ1 was most broadly distributed across needs, ideology, teachers, orientation, other languages and cultures, and goals of learning, while the remaining dimensions captured more specific tensions concerning assessment, materials, norms, ownership, target culture, target interlocutors, and role models (see Table 2). At the same time, the implementation challenges of EMI in mainland Chinese universities spanned multiple interconnected levels, including policy design, programme support, classroom pedagogy, learner participation, disciplinary communication, and access to knowledge.

A first recurrent pattern concerned English-dominant orientations and ideological hierarchies, especially in the dimensions of orientation, ideology, ownership, and other languages and cultures under the GELT framework (Rose & Galloway, 2019). English was repeatedly positioned as the most legitimate academic resource, while Putonghua functioned as the immediate auxiliary medium, and minority or local languages occupied a markedly weaker position in academic participation (Fang & Hu, 2025; Y. Wang & Jiang, 2025). This hierarchy was particularly visible in minority-language students’ accounts, where linguistic diversity was present in practice but uneven in status. Participants described this hierarchy directly. XPZ noted, “People seldom use Teochew in academic settings, unless people have a project related to the dialect,” while HWQ added, “Teochew is barely used in academic settings even when people share the same first language. I don’t know to whom I shall use Teochew for academic discussion” (Fang & Hu, 2025, p. 3267). In parallel, students’ investments in EMI were often tied to the prestige of English monolingualism, while translingual resources were accorded lower value in imagined international futures (Y. Wang & Jiang, 2025). Similar tensions appeared in classroom-based studies where translanguaging expanded knowledge participation, yet did so against the backdrop of English-dominant assumptions about legitimate communication and legitimate knowing (Gu et al., 2026; Song, 2023; Zheng & Qiu, 2024). Evidence from EMI policy and international students’ perspectives extended this hierarchy beyond individual classrooms. Although institutional discourse could promote multilingualism, English remained privileged in policy implementation; one international student stated, “There is no doubt that English is the only language we should speak and use in the classroom” (Dong et al., 2026, p. 97), even as students drew on Chinese and other languages when English-medium content became difficult to follow. These tensions were also evident in cooperative-programme policies privileging imported materials and Anglophone academic models (Mirhosseini et al., 2026) and in a multilingual international university where native-speaker-oriented English provision continued to shape academic norms (Kim et al., 2022).

A second cluster of issues centred on pedagogical role strain and uneven teacher support, corresponding mainly to the GELT dimensions of teachers, role model, and needs (Rose & Galloway, 2019). EMI lecturers were often positioned and positioned themselves as disciplinary experts first, while English-only expectations placed them between institutional requirements and students’ linguistic needs (Q. Chen et al., 2023; Jia et al., 2023). Classroom evidence showed that teaching remained largely expository, with interaction uneven, dialogic space limited, and linguistic responsiveness dependent on individual teachers rather than built into programme design (X. Chen et al., 2024; W. Sun et al., 2023). One teacher stated this position explicitly: “It is not my responsibility. I am a content teacher not an English teacher” (Zhang & Xu, 2025, p. 12). The same cluster of studies reported that support structures around EMI remained fragmented: institutional initiatives often prioritised English enhancement over pedagogical development, English for academic purposes (EAP) teachers remained under-recognised despite their growing role in EMI

support, and policy incentives did not consistently align with teachers' actual motives or workload realities (e.g., McKinley et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2023; Zhang & Xu, 2025; Zhou & Delogu, 2026). Variation was also marked in different subjects. Humanities and social sciences teachers were more likely to incorporate cultural instruction, whereas science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) teachers were not likely to recognise the need to include it in EMI classes (Huang & Fang, 2023).

A third pattern involved misaligned language demands, learning goals, and evaluative norms, most clearly linked to the GELT dimensions of needs, goals of learning, assessment criterion, norms, and target interlocutors (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Across learner-focused studies, EMI participation entailed simultaneous pressure to understand specialised content, process large volumes of English input, contribute orally in class, and produce disciplinary writing in acceptable academic forms (e.g., Hu et al., 2022; McKinley et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2026). Students' difficulties appeared in comprehending lecturers' speech, completing English reading tasks in time, expressing ideas during classroom interaction, and handling academic writing conventions and expressions (Wu et al., 2026). One participant described this succinctly: "We are still academic English writers... [I am still] at the peripheral area [of the community]" (Hu et al., 2022, p. 6). Another comment turned immediately to regulation: "These rules have somewhat made a standard for academic writing, which a novice writer like me can refer to". In the student's recall, citation and wording were treated as matters of precision and legitimacy, as "The use of original words and sentences makes it more reliable" (Hu et al., 2022, p. 7). In writing-focused evidence, students' texts were shaped by tension between writing as participation in an English-medium academic community and writing as compliance with course requirements, with different writer identities producing different discourse, linguistic, and formatting choices (Hu et al., 2022). Writing-process and assessment evidence further showed that students and teachers negotiated the relationship between language and content rather than simply complying with a fixed English-only standard. Students drew on English, Chinese, and digital resources during composing under institutional output requirements (Q. Sun, 2026), while classroom observation documented participant Chan's use of bilingual quizzes "H₂O: 水 / water" and terminology drills within an inherited assessment structure to scaffold both disciplinary understanding and English terminology (Li et al., 2026, p. 13). Student accounts similarly favoured process-oriented assessment linking knowledge application, sustained English use, and formative feedback (Yuan et al., 2023). Interactional evidence from EMI classrooms showed that students were also engaged in ongoing repair work around factual, procedural, processing-related, and grammar or lexical troubles (X. Chen et al., 2024). At the programme level, language support was repeatedly described as insufficiently targeted, especially where students needed disciplinary or business-specific academic English support rather than general English development alone (Wu et al., 2026; Zhou & Delogu, 2026).

A fourth recurring pattern was cultural and epistemic narrowing in curricular mediation, which resonated most strongly with the GELT framework's dimensions of target culture, source of materials, other languages and cultures, ideology, and ownership (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Although EMI was often associated with internationalisation, the curricular and classroom evidence showed uneven opportunities for multilingual, multicultural, and plural knowledge participation. Policy-document evidence located the same narrowing in curricular materials. Whereas national policy texts emphasised locally grounded materials and "Chinese characteristics", some cooperative-programme documents specified "the primary use of imported materials" or the "adoption of original foreign textbooks" (Mirhosseini et al., 2026, p. 10). Epistemic orientation was therefore configured not only through classroom discourse but also through decisions about which texts and knowledge sources entered the EMI curriculum. In culture-focused classrooms, the inclusion of culture was highly discipline-sensitive, and where it occurred, often depended on teachers' willingness to bring local concepts and home-culture perspectives into English-medium teaching (Huang & Fang, 2023). One teacher asked, "和' (hè) in Chinese. Does anyone know how to translate this into English?" A student responded, "Harmony," after which the teacher

encouraged the class to “try to explain our Chinese philosophical concepts to the world” (Huang & Fang, 2023, p. 215). In the international EMI programme examined by Song (2023), Chinese philosophy had to be actively protected from being measured solely against Anglo-Eurocentric disciplinary benchmarks, and flexible shuttling between Chinese and English formed part of that work. In ethnographic evidence from a transnational EMI classroom, translanguaging was mobilised not just to clarify terminology but to create interpretive room for participation, supply explanatory resources, and counter the credibility deficits attached to non-Anglophone voices (Zheng & Qiu, 2024). Classroom-based work across disciplinary settings showed a related pattern: teachers and students drew on multilingual and semiotic resources to connect local knowledge, existing understanding, and disciplinary content, even while the wider programme continued to frame English as the central medium of legitimate knowledge production (Gu et al., 2023; Gu et al., 2026; Jiang & Zhang, 2023).

A GE-informed reconceptualisation around multilingual realities

In response to the tensions identified in current EMI practices at mainland Chinese universities, the evidence addressing RQ2 clustered around a narrower set of GELT dimensions (Rose & Galloway, 2019). The strongest evidence supporting this reconceptualisation concerned orientation, ideology, ownership, other languages and cultures, target culture, source of materials, teachers, and goals of learning (see Table 3). Across 15 of the 25 included studies, EMI was not consistently represented as a self-contained English-only arrangement. Instead, the evidence showed flexible use of different linguistic resources, changing views of what counted as appropriate English, and uneven recognition of different languages and forms of knowledge. Three shifts captured this reconceptualisation: from a monolingual medium to a multilingual orientation, from an Anglophone curricular centre to diverse cultural and knowledge sources, and from teacher-centred delivery to more interactive and supported classroom participation.

From the perspective of orientation, ideology, ownership, and other languages and cultures (Rose & Galloway, 2019), the “E” in EMI was repeatedly shown to be more layered than the label itself suggested. English retained high symbolic and academic value, but it was not the only language through which students processed content or positioned themselves. Fang and Hu (2025) showed, in a Teochew-speaking context, that this minority language did not disappear from students’ academic lives in EMI even though it had lost institutional status. One participant recalled a historical shift in schooling by noting that “teachers used Teochew to teach when I was in primary school but now it’s replaced by Putonghua”. Another participant described language choice in a more mobile way: “I choose to speak Teochew depending on context. I don’t struggle much with Teochew”. They also recorded Teochew as an active cognitive resource rather than a merely symbolic identity marker: “I think Teochew sometimes helps me to understand a concept which can’t be explained in either English or Putonghua. I think it is deep-rooted” (Fang & Hu, 2025, pp. 3266–3267). Meanwhile, in student narratives of EMI investment, English was repeatedly attached to academic mobility, future opportunity, and disciplinary advancement, while multilingual resources were less readily named as capital for international participation (Y. Wang & Jiang, 2025). Evidence from a multilingual international EMI university further questioned native-speaker norms as the default model for academic communication. One student explained, “I don’t believe that it is good to follow American English in all situations because it frequently interferes with natural conversation” (Kim et al., 2022, p. 9). Students instead described learning to adjust their wording, accent, and communicative strategies when interacting with speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. Classroom ethnography offered a more explicit example of this change. A professor recalled his earlier stance by saying,

When I started teaching EMI classes, I found it rather challenging, because I always felt that EMI courses were like English language classes. After a few years, I changed my

mind. I think that EMI classes are actually the same as Chinese classes (Zheng & Qiu, 2024, p. 109).

Classroom observations also showed that teachers' preferences for fuller English use did not always match what they did when disciplinary explanations became difficult; Chinese and multimodal resources were brought in to sustain students' understanding (Jia et al., 2023).

Once EMI was understood as more than English-only instruction, questions also arose about which target culture and sources of materials should enter the curriculum (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Cultural content in EMI curricula did not simply travel into Chinese universities through English. It was selected, translated, balanced, and reworked. Huang and Fang (2023) illustrated that culture entered EMI when teachers actively opened space for it, through code-switching, comparison, authentic material, or guided discussion, rather than as an inevitable by-product of teaching through English. Policy documents showed that these curricular choices also operated beyond individual classrooms. Some cooperative programmes specified "the primary use of imported materials" or the "adoption of original foreign textbooks" (Mirhosseini et al., 2026, p. 10), even though national policy placed greater emphasis on locally grounded materials and Chinese characteristics. The issue was sharper in the study of Song (2023). Teachers and students in an EMI programme on Chinese philosophy were not merely translating pre-existing content into English; they were deciding how Chinese philosophy should appear, and on whose terms. One teacher captured the risk of a narrow curricular focus by stating: "Focusing exclusively on ancient Chinese thinkers can easily create an impression that contemporary China has no state-of-the-art thoughts, and that China is an ancient, exotic country fixated on the past". In the same interview sequence, the role of Chinese as a medium of intellectual transformation was stated more forcefully: "When these Western thoughts were translated into [the Chinese language], they become an inherent part of Chinese thinking. Language has this power". Another teacher linked the reading of classic texts more directly to students' sense of belonging: "When we read a classic text, we gradually develop a sense of belonging" (Song, 2023, p. 446). In STEM classrooms, Gu et al. (2026) showed how EMI teachers used translanguaging and transknowledging to connect disciplinary concepts with students' prior knowledge, local experience, and bilingual resources. Across these studies, EMI curriculum content was therefore not determined by English alone. Teachers and institutions also made choices about which languages, cultural references, materials, and sources of knowledge students encountered.

A third shift concerned teachers and goals of learning (Rose & Galloway, 2019): EMI moved beyond content delivery alone toward helping students participate in disciplinary learning through flexible language use and classroom support. W. Sun et al. (2023) provided an important contrast point because EMI in their research remained largely expository, with lecturers strongly aligned to subject expertise and with interaction limited by monologic organisation. Other studies, however, showed how classroom participation could be organised differently. In Zheng and Qiu (2024), students were not required to produce complete English sentences before they could contribute to classroom discussion; a teacher explicitly told students, "You don't need to tell me full sentences in English at all, and you don't need to tell me paragraphs, just tell me a few words" (Zheng & Qiu, 2024, p. 109). In the same study, another teacher explained the pedagogical rationale for introducing Chinese fables and idioms into EMI classroom talk: "If you tell them a [Chinese] fable or an idiom, it may become a memorable episode. It is an extra gain" (Zheng & Qiu, 2024, pp. 109–110). Some international students also valued these teachers' translanguaging practices. One student explained, "even if I don't know what they mean, it's a great opportunity for me to learn something new" (Zheng & Qiu, 2024, p. 110). Students themselves called for this broader teacher role. In Yuan et al. (2023, p. 538), one participant argued that EMI teachers should "observe students' responses and attend to their learning needs" and adjust their strategies when difficulties emerged. Classroom observation showed how such responsiveness could work in practice: teachers used cross-language labels, recapping, Chinese, and visual resources differently according to the task and the difficulty of the disciplinary content, while students' use of Chinese supported more extended reasoning and

participation during teacher–student interaction (Jiang & Zhang, 2023). Evidence across disciplines reinforced this shift. Gu et al. (2023, p. 1598) showed teachers combining English, Chinese, visual materials, gestures, and locally familiar examples to support disciplinary understanding; as one teacher explained, “I can use English only but if I use English only, the students may not be able to follow the meaning effectively”.

Table 3

GELT dimensions and studies underpinning a GE-informed reconceptualisation of Chinese EMI

GELT dimensions	Study
Ownership	S2, S3, S4, S13, S18, S20
Target culture	S1, S10, S13, S14
Teachers	S3, S6, S10, S15, S16, S19, S21, S25
Source of materials	S1, S10, S13, S14, S16, S21, S25
Other languages and cultures	S1, S2, S3, S4, S10, S13, S15, S16, S18, S19, S21, S25
Goals of learning	S3, S4, S6, S10, S19, S20, S25
Ideology	S1, S2, S3, S4, S10, S13, S14, S15, S16, S18, S20, S25
Orientation	S2, S3, S4, S10, S14, S15, S16, S18, S19, S20, S21, S25

Embedding multilingualism across institutional, curricular, and pedagogical levels

In response to the EMI implementation problems in Chinese higher education identified in RQ1 and the reconceptualisation developed in RQ2, the findings for RQ3 were concentrated in a more practice-facing cluster of GELT dimensions in Table 4, most visibly teachers, needs, goals of learning, other languages and cultures, source of materials, target culture, ideology, orientation, and assessment criterion (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Across the studies contributing to RQ3, multilingualism was not presented simply as permission to use languages other than English when difficulties arose. Instead, the findings pointed to how multilingual resources could be built into EMI through three connected layers: institutional and programme support, curriculum and knowledge selection, and responsive classroom pedagogy, assessment, and teacher development.

Table 4

GELT dimensions and studies underpinning the institutional, curricular, and pedagogical embedding of multilingualism

GELT dimensions	Study
Teachers	S6, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S15, S16, S18, S19, S21, S22, S23, S24, S25
Needs	S6, S8, S9, S11, S12, S14, S15, S16, S17, S18, S19, S21, S22, S23, S24, S25
Goals of learning	S6, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S19, S22, S23, S24, S25
Other languages and cultures	S1, S3, S4, S10, S13, S15, S16, S17, S18, S19, S21, S22, S23, S24, S25
Source of materials	S1, S10, S13, S14, S16, S17, S21, S24, S25
Target culture	S1, S10, S13, S14
Ideology	S1, S4, S8, S9, S10, S12, S13, S14, S15, S16, S17, S18, S22, S23, S24, S25
Orientation	S3, S6, S9, S10, S14, S15, S16, S18, S19, S21, S23, S25
Assessment criterion	S11, S14, S17, S19, S22, S24

At the macro layer of institutions and programmes, multilingual embedding was most clearly organised through the GELT dimensions of teachers, needs, goals of learning, ideology, and orientation (Rose & Galloway, 2019). The evidence concerned how universities defined the purposes of EMI, matched provision to students’ linguistic readiness and learning needs, supported

teachers, and recognised the additional work required for EMI. In Xu et al. (2023, p. 1553), teachers described the extra work of EMI course preparation as being only weakly acknowledged, with the bonus reduced to “a very small amount of money” and “definitely not enough” for the labour required to create an English-taught course. Programme design also needed to align with the needs of the students for whom EMI was intended. In one university, an administrator described EMI as “important for the university because it’s a performance indicator” but “not as important for students”, many of whom were considered to lack either the motivation or the linguistic capacity to take such courses through English (Q. Chen et al., 2023, p. 10). Across institutions, admissions requirements, foundation provision, EAP support, and language-use policies likewise varied considerably, indicating that language support was most effective when connected to the actual demands of EMI programmes rather than provided as general English instruction alone (McKinley et al., 2021). The same cluster of dimensions resurfaced differently in other teacher-development studies. In the study of Zhang and Xu (2025, p. 20), the teacher later described the experience as “rewarding and fruitful” and reported that “language and content form an integrated and inseparable whole”, showing a movement in teachers and goals of learning away from content-only delivery. In Zhou and Delogu (2026, p. 8), needs became even more differentiated: EAP teachers did not ask for professional development generally, but for “something more EAP focused, something more relevant and deeper”, while others explained that most development had been pursued “through my own” efforts. At the student end of programme support, Wu et al. (2026, p. 9) recorded a parallel emphasis on differentiated provision. One student noted that if teachers knew learners’ backgrounds in advance, they could “teach us in accordance with our competence.”

At the meso-curricular layer, multilingual embedding was most visibly articulated through the dimensions of target culture, source of materials, other languages and cultures, and ideology (Rose & Galloway, 2019). The key questions concerned which materials, cultural references, disciplinary examples, and linguistic resources were included in EMI courses and how they were used to support learning. For example, Song (2023) demonstrated that the central question was not whether Chinese philosophy could be translated into English, but how it would appear, which traditions would count as contemporary, and which linguistic resources could mediate conceptual access without reducing Chinese to a merely auxiliary code. In STEM classrooms, Gu et al. (2026) showed how translanguaging and transknowledging connected disciplinary concepts with students’ prior knowledge, local experience, and bilingual resources. Curriculum proposals demonstrated how this could be planned explicitly. One teacher proposed using formative assessment throughout the semester so that both the lecturer and students could participate in assessment and the results could be used to “adjust my pedagogical approaches and teaching modes” (Yuan et al., 2024, p. 2642). Writing-process evidence also suggested that curriculum and assessment need to recognise that students move between English, Chinese, translation tools, and other digital resources while producing an English-medium academic text (Q. Sun, 2026). From the learner perspective, Y. Wang and Jiang (2025) showed that EMI choices remained connected to disciplinary mobility and future identities, while English monolingualism often retained greater symbolic value than translanguing competence.

At the micro layer of EMI classrooms, the main GELT dimensions were teachers, needs, goals of learning, other languages and cultures, orientation, and assessment criterion (Rose & Galloway, 2019), and multilingual embedding depended on how teachers adjusted explanation, interaction, feedback, and assessment to the demands of particular students, tasks, and disciplinary content. W. Sun et al. (2023) documented that EMI teaching was still frequently expository, with lecturers often retaining a monologic rather than dialogic role. Zheng and Qiu (2024, pp. 108–109), by contrast, documented a more dialogic use of multilingual resources and recorded a different classroom orientation. In one episode, a teacher used the Chinese fable “盲人摸象” as an interpretive resource for explaining epistemology and concluded, “Different people have different experiences, so they have different understanding towards the world.” Fine-grained classroom observation showed that such flexibility also needed to vary with instructional purpose. Jiang and Zhang (2023)

found that teachers used cross-language labelling, recapping, code-mixing, spontaneous Chinese, and multimodal resources differently in monologic lecturing and interaction with students; their translanguaging practices changed with both the activity and the complexity of the disciplinary content. Wu et al. (2026) documented the same layer through more ordinary support routines, including pre-class materials, interactional room for questions, selective Chinese explanation for abstract or technical concepts, and differentiated language support. Assessment required the same attention. Li et al. (2026) documented teachers adjusting tasks, feedback, language support, and grading practices when English became a barrier to demonstrating disciplinary understanding. In one observed lesson, a teacher interrupted a content-focused assessment episode to practise the pronunciation of “Heisenberg uncertainty” with the whole class before returning to the disciplinary question, illustrating how language support could be incorporated into assessment without replacing the content focus. The teachers nevertheless reported that much of this adjustment developed through personal experience and reflection rather than formal EMI assessment training. Evidence across disciplines further showed that teachers could coordinate English, Chinese, visual materials, gestures, and other semiotic resources to support understanding, but such practices were often developed without systematic preparation (Gu et al., 2023; Jia et al., 2023).

Discussion

The findings of this meta-synthesis suggest that the central challenge of EMI in Chinese higher education lies not simply in the use of English to teach disciplinary content, but in the uneven transformation of the wider curriculum ecology around English. Across the three RQs, the synthesis points to a progression from systemic misalignment in EMI implementation, through a GE-informed reconceptualisation of EMI, to the institutional and curricular embedding of multilingualism.

Systemic misalignment of EMI implementation in Chinese higher education

In response to RQ1, the 13 GELT dimensions revealed that the most persistent challenges in Chinese EMI were not isolated implementation problems, but interlocking misalignments across the curriculum ecology. Read configurationally, these dimensions exposed why EMI reform often remained partial. A programme may replace Chinese-medium lectures with English-medium lectures while retaining traditional assumptions about target interlocutors as native English speakers, ownership as Inner Circle authority (Kachru et al., 2009), norms as standardised accuracy, and assessment as conformity to prescriptive correctness. In such cases, the teaching medium changes faster than the EMI curriculum’s underlying language ideology. The same tension extends to materials, culture, and teachers. Privileging Anglophone academic traditions can narrow the range of epistemic resources represented in the curriculum, while evaluating content lecturers against native-speaker norms and positioning EAP teachers as peripheral language-support providers reproduce the hierarchies that GELT seeks to unsettle. Thus, EMI curricula in Chinese higher education remain pedagogically fragile when orientation, ideology, assessment, teacher development, and materials continue to operate under traditional ELT assumptions.

Recent research reinforces the need to understand EMI quality as multidimensional (e.g., Lee et al., 2025; Tang & Curtis, 2026; Y. Wang, 2026), but the present synthesis extends this discussion from effectiveness to questions of linguistic and epistemic legitimacy: EMI quality should not be reduced to a ledger of content scores, English gains, or satisfaction ratings. From a GE perspective, quality also concerns whose English is legitimate, which languages can mediate knowledge, whose cultures and epistemologies enter the curriculum, and whether assessment recognises intelligible disciplinary communication rather than approximations of native-like performance. This also clarifies the relevance of a relational Global South perspective to Chinese EMI. The issue is not whether China

can be assigned an uncomplicated geographical or developmental label, but how linguistic and epistemic authority is distributed within a particular educational ecology (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). The synthesised evidence extends the account of Fang and Dovchin (2024) about power and inequality among English users by showing that such inequalities operate at multiple scales: Anglophone norms constrain the legitimacy of Chinese knowledge and English use internationally, while English and Putonghua can simultaneously marginalise local and minority-language resources within Chinese universities.

Teacher development and assessment further expose this systemic misalignment. Recent reviews of EMI professional learning (e.g., Dang et al., 2023; K. Wang et al., 2025) have shown that teachers often assume linguistic, pedagogical, disciplinary, and intercultural responsibilities without commensurate preparation or institutional support, which resonates with GELT's rejection of the native English speaker as the default role model (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Whereas teacher-development reviews treat professional learning as their primary object, this meta-synthesis positions it as one component of alignment among teachers, role models, needs, learning goals, assessment, materials, and language ideology. Professional development therefore cannot be confined to pronunciation training, lecture delivery, or general English enhancement, nor can language-related work simply be separated from content teachers' pedagogical responsibilities. Viewed through the GELT dimensions of teachers, role models, needs, goals of learning, and assessment criteria, EMI teacher development becomes a matter of curricular repositioning rather than language remediation alone. Assessment constitutes a parallel site of tension. GELT's movement from accuracy based on prescriptive standards toward communicative competence does not make accuracy irrelevant; rather, it questions its status as the sole or overriding measure of academic ability. Recent systematic work also indicated that linguistic demands in academic writing, oral participation, discipline-specific vocabulary, and transition into English-medium academic work remained substantial (Tang & Curtis, 2026). Hence, the alignment problem lies in whether EMI assessment can distinguish linguistic difficulties that obstruct disciplinary meaning from variation that remains intelligible, while recognising the disciplinary reasoning and communication that students are expected to develop.

Reconceptualising EMI around multilingual realities

The systemic misalignment identified in RQ1 also clarifies why EMI in Chinese higher education requires more than improvements to English-medium delivery. The evidence synthesised for RQ2 supports a GE-informed reconceptualisation of EMI by showing how English-only norms constrained multilingual participation, curricular representation, and access to disciplinary learning. Institutional ranking, global competitiveness, and student employability remain important drivers of Englishisation, but this policy-oriented account is incomplete. Englishisation also redistributes symbolic authority by shaping which voices sound academic, which texts count as authoritative, and which linguistic resources are treated as legitimate contributions to disciplinary learning. GE-oriented research has challenged such assumptions by questioning the continued privileging of native-speaker norms and aligning language teaching more closely with the diverse ways English is used across global and local communities (e.g., Rose et al., 2021).

In Chinese EMI, this shift has direct curricular consequences. If students are being prepared to communicate with diverse English users rather than an imagined native-speaker audience, target interlocutors can no longer be defined narrowly. Likewise, global ownership of English places Chinese users, international students, multilingual content teachers, and local disciplinary communities within, rather than at the margins of, the communicative realities for which EMI prepares students. The same logic applies to materials: Anglophone scholarship remains important, but it can be placed alongside local cases, regional knowledge, multilingual academic texts, and examples of English use beyond Anglophone settings. GELT treats learners' linguistic repertoires as resources rather than interference (Rose & Galloway, 2019), yet this principle does not amount

to an unqualified endorsement of spontaneous code-switching. Recent review studies concerning translanguaging practices (e.g., Liao et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2025) have highlighted both its pedagogical affordances and the need for more systematic investigation across contexts. In EMI contexts, assessment remains notably underdeveloped despite growing evidence of translanguaging in classroom pedagogy and interaction (Lu et al., 2025). This meta-synthesis brings these concerns together at the level of curriculum. Translanguaging becomes a question of curricular coherence when multilingual resources are accepted in explanation but excluded from assessment, welcomed in informal peer interaction but absent from materials, or used to repair comprehension while remaining ideologically stigmatised. Under such conditions, EMI retains a monolingual architecture beneath a multilingual surface.

A GE-informed reconceptualisation therefore advocates a move from permission to design. Permission concerns whether teachers and students may draw on Chinese, local or minority languages, and other semiotic resources when English alone is insufficient; design concerns what pedagogical and epistemic work those resources are expected to accomplish. Multilingual resources can support comparison across knowledge traditions, disciplinary terminology building, peer negotiation, the interpretation of locally grounded cases, and movement between everyday, professional, and academic registers. Their pedagogical value lies not in reducing meaningful exposure to English, but in preventing English exposure from becoming synonymous with epistemic narrowing. Translanguaging and GELT converge most clearly here around orientation, other languages and cultures, goals of learning, and assessment criteria. A multilingual or translanguing orientation no longer positions students as incomplete approximations of monolingual English users, but as developing multicompetent academic repertoires. EMI can then be judged not only by how much English students produce, but by how effectively they mobilise their repertoires for disciplinary reasoning, audience awareness, and knowledge negotiation.

Embedding multilingualism into EMI curriculum and practice

The evidence for RQ3 indicates that multilingualism in EMI in Chinese higher education cannot be sustained as an occasional classroom accommodation or an individual teacher's improvisation. Rather, it needs to be embedded across the institutional, curricular, and pedagogical ecology of EMI. This extends the discussion beyond whether multilingual resources are permitted toward how EMI systems are designed to make productive use of them. The meta-synthesis therefore suggests that EMI reform requires alignment among programme aims, curriculum organisation, assessment expectations, teacher development, and classroom practices. Without such alignment, multilingual practices remain peripheral: teachers draw on multiple languages to facilitate understanding, while institutional policies, materials, and assessment regimes continue to privilege monolingual English norms. In this sense, the issue is not simply whether multilingual resources appear in EMI classrooms, but whether they are recognised as legitimate components of disciplinary learning.

At the institutional and curricular levels, embedding multilingualism requires a clearer articulation of what students should be able to do through EMI programmes. If EMI aims to prepare students for participation in multilingual academic and professional communities, then curriculum goals cannot be restricted to English proficiency improvement alone. Instead, they need to incorporate the ability to negotiate meaning across linguistic resources, communicate with diverse interlocutors, and engage with knowledge produced across cultural and linguistic contexts. This has implications for materials, assessment, and teacher collaboration. Anglophone academic resources play a role to some extent, but they need not represent the only legitimate source of disciplinary knowledge. Likewise, assessment should evaluate students' disciplinary reasoning and communicative effectiveness while distinguishing between linguistic variation and communication that genuinely obstructs meaning. Such alignment would move EMI away from a language-substitution model toward a broader model of disciplinary participation.

At the classroom level, teachers become the key mediators through whom institutional orientations are translated into pedagogical practices. Our findings suggest that effective multilingual EMI depends not on asking teachers to abandon English, but on enabling them to strategically coordinate English with other linguistic and semiotic resources according to disciplinary purposes and classroom needs. This requires collaboration between content specialists, language educators, and programme leaders rather than positioning language support as separate from disciplinary teaching. Teacher development should therefore focus on developing the pedagogical judgement needed to decide when, why, and how multilingual resources support learning. Through such situated practices, EMI policy can move beyond symbolic commitments to multilingualism and become a lived educational reality. EMI quality in Chinese higher education is ultimately shaped not only by the language chosen as the medium of instruction, but by the educational ecology that determines how languages, knowledge, and participation are organised.

Conclusion and Limitations

Across the 25 included studies, EMI in mainland Chinese higher education emerged not simply as a technical shift in instructional medium but as a contested curriculum ecology in which language ownership, disciplinary knowledge, cultural legitimacy, teacher identity, learner participation, and assessment were negotiated together. By synthesising recent qualitative evidence through the GELT framework (Rose & Galloway, 2019), the study generated a higher-order interpretation of Chinese EMI as a movement from systemic misalignment to GE-informed reconceptualisation, to the structural embedding of multilingualism. It contributed to the EMI and GE scholarship by demonstrating that the central question was not simply whether English improved learning outcomes, but what kinds of English, multilingual repertoires, knowledge traditions, and academic identities were legitimised through EMI.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged in this study. First, reliance on Web of Science also bounded the synthesis to scholarship indexed within this database. Relevant research published in locally oriented, Chinese-language, or other outlets not indexed in Web of Science may therefore be underrepresented. Second, this study necessarily depended on the findings and supporting excerpts selected and contextualised by the authors of the 25 included studies. It could not recover participant-level material or contextual detail omitted from the published reports, and recurrence across the included corpus should not be understood as the prevalence of a phenomenon across Chinese higher education. Third, the methodological quality of the 25 included studies was not formally appraised using an established tool such as the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Studies Checklist, limiting systematic consideration of how limitations in individual studies may have shaped the synthesis. The conclusions should therefore be read as a GE-informed analysis of the included literature rather than a representative account of all Chinese EMI contexts. Future research should test and extend this interpretation through longitudinal qualitative studies of students' multilingual academic trajectories, design-based interventions on GE-informed EMI pedagogy, and comparative disciplinary case studies that examine how multilingual curriculum alignment operates differently across contexts.

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