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PLENARY SPEECH

Preparing students for success in English medium instruction: What works, what doesn't, and why it matters

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Abstract

This plenary critically examines the role of English medium instruction (EMI) preparatory programmes in supporting student success across global higher education. Drawing on a systematic, critical review of empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025, it explores how such programmes influence learning outcomes, motivation, pedagogy, and equity. Through the narrative lens of a Turkish student, Eylül, the discussion highlights how linguistic proficiency alone seldom ensures disciplinary engagement or academic confidence. Evidence from recent EMI research demonstrates that programmes integrating language and content, authenticity, and translanguaging practices most effectively prepare students to 'think through English'. The paper concludes by identifying gaps in longitudinal and cross-contextual evidence and calls for pedagogical and policy designs that move beyond language support toward sustainable, inclusive, and identity-affirming EMI education.

Keywords: disciplinary literacy; English medium instruction; higher education; preparatory programme; translanguaging

1. Introduction

When I first arrived at graduate school, dragging my suitcase up the narrow wooden stairs of the old graduate residence, I met a young woman in the shared kitchen who would later shape how I thought about English medium instruction (EMI) preparatory programmes. Her name was Eylül. She was from Türkiye, preparing to begin a master's degree in international law. She had just completed a year-long preparatory programme in Istanbul, an English-medium foundation course designed to help her transition into postgraduate study in the UK.

I still remember the moment she corrected my pronunciation of her name: *'Not Eye-lul, but Eylül, like the month of September'*, she said, smiling, translating her name into a familiar reference to bridge our linguistic worlds. We lived in intimate quarters, sharing a kitchen and a bathroom. I would often find her sitting by the small window, surrounded by piles of law books, whispering English legal terms under her breath. She was fluent, ambitious, and endlessly curious, but also quietly uncertain about whether her English really allowed her to *think* like a lawyer.

Eylül's story captures the paradox at the heart of EMI worldwide. Over the past decade, EMI has become one of the defining features of higher education (Macaro et al., 2018), a global phenomenon reshaping how knowledge is taught and learned. Universities across Asia, the Middle East, Europe,

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and increasingly Africa and Latin America, have turned to English as a medium of instruction in a bid to internationalise, attract global talent, and prepare graduates for participation in an interconnected world (Dafouz & Smit, 2020; Macaro, 2018; Rose et al., 2020). Whether in engineering programmes in Türkiye, business schools in China, or medical training in the Gulf states, English is now firmly embedded in the higher education landscape. But with this rapid expansion come persistent questions. How ready are students to learn complex disciplinary content in a second or additional language? What support do they need before they enter EMI programmes, and does that support truly make a difference?

For some institutions, the solution has been to create EMI preparatory programmes, foundation years, pre-sessional courses, or bridging modules, designed to 'level the playing field' and equip students with the skills to succeed (Alqarni et al., 2024, p. 22). On paper, the idea is both logical and reassuring. If students are not yet ready for EMI, give them time and targeted training before they enter. However, the research tells a more complicated story. Systematic reviews of EMI outcomes (Curle et al., 2025) show that while preparatory programmes can boost English proficiency and sometimes academic readiness, their effectiveness is uneven (also see Lasagabaster, 2022). Gains in reading and writing are common (An, 2023); gains in oral communication, disciplinary literacy, or sustained academic performance are far less assured.

At the same time, preparatory programmes remain under-examined in EMI research. While numerous studies have explored EMI classroom practices, policy discourses, and student experiences (Macaro, 2018; Soruç et al., 2024), far fewer have asked what happens *before* students even enter the EMI classroom (Yuan et al., 2024), in that critical stage of linguistic and academic transition that Eylül herself had just completed.

That is where this plenary begins.

Drawing on a systematic, critical review of empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025, I explore what we currently know, and what we still don't about EMI preparatory programmes. I focus on four guiding questions:

1. How do EMI preparatory programmes affect student learning outcomes? Do they genuinely prepare learners, or simply improve English language test scores?
2. What role do student motivation, linguistic resources, identity-related challenges, and socioeconomic contexts play in shaping EMI preparatory experiences and learners' academic trajectories?
3. What does effective preparatory teaching look like? Which pedagogical strategies are supported by evidence, and which remain problematic?
4. How sustainable are these programmes? Are they equitable, scalable, and effective over the long term, or do they risk reproducing inequalities?

These questions structure the discussion that follows. Each major section of the paper addresses one or more of the research questions, moving from evidence on learning outcomes, through learner motivation and pedagogy, to questions of sustainability, equity, and linguistic inclusivity. My aim is not to provide definitive answers, but to open up a conversation grounded in evidence and lived experience, to reflect on *what works, what doesn't, and why it matters* for students, teachers, and institutions alike.

Ultimately, I will argue that EMI preparatory programmes must evolve beyond narrow models of 'English support' to embrace integrated academic preparation, approaches that recognise the inseparability of language, content, and identity. By doing so, these programmes can move from being a linguistic stopgap to becoming a genuine cornerstone of inclusive and sustainable internationalisation in higher education. And perhaps, in that shift, more students like Eylül will come to feel, not just linguistically ready, but intellectually and personally at home in English-medium universities.

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2. What EMI preparatory programmes achieve

If EMI preparatory programmes are to justify their growing presence in higher education, the first question we must ask is a deceptively simple one: what do they actually achieve for students once they enter English-medium study? (RQ1)

Across contexts, evidence shows that preparatory programmes *do* improve students' English proficiency (An, 2023) and academic readiness at a surface level (Tajik et al., 2024). In many ways, they deliver exactly what they promise: measurable linguistic gains and greater confidence entering English-medium study. In their longitudinal study of Hong Kong undergraduates, Evans and Morrison (2011) found that students who completed a foundation-year English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course adapted more smoothly to EMI lectures, assignments, and assessments. Their study demonstrated clear benefits in note-taking, summarising readings, and essay writing, areas where linguistic precision could be explicitly taught and assessed. Similarly, research in Korean higher education (Bolton et al., 2023; Choi, 2024; Kim, 2017) shows that students completing pre-sessional EAP courses reported improved general academic English and felt better equipped to meet the demands of EMI coursework during their first year.

More recently, An (2023) notes that preparatory interventions in Asian universities tend to yield visible short-term proficiency gains, but these do not necessarily translate into sustained academic or disciplinary achievement. Yuan et al. (2024) also conclude that most preparatory programmes remain limited to developing surface-level linguistic competence, rarely engaging the deeper epistemic practices students encounter once inside EMI classrooms.

The distinction, then, is subtle but critical: learning *in* English versus learning *through* English. The former refers to acquiring language skills that allow participation; the latter to engaging meaningfully with disciplinary knowledge and academic reasoning. This shift, from English as a subject to English as a medium of thought, is precisely where many preparatory programmes fall short.

When Eylül described her preparatory year in Istanbul, she put it simply: '*We learned how to write essays, but not how to argue like a lawyer*'. Her reflection captures the heart of the problem. Preparatory curricula often prioritise generic academic English, such as writing structures, grammar, and vocabulary, but neglect the disciplinary literacy students need to succeed in specific academic domains. As Wingate and Tribble (2012) argued over a decade ago, and as Airey (2020, 2011) reaffirmed, true readiness for EMI requires access to what he calls 'disciplinary ways of thinking and practising'.

In other words, it is not enough to master English; students must learn to inhabit the *discourses* of their field, to think like an engineer, argue like a lawyer, reason like a scientist. Eylül's experience is echoed in countless EMI classrooms worldwide, where students may have the language to complete assignments, yet still lack the confidence or conceptual tools to engage fully with disciplinary knowledge (Aizawa, 2025).

3. Motivation and identity

To understand whether EMI preparatory programmes genuinely prepare students for English-medium study, we need to look beyond language gains and focus on how motivation, identity, and emotional experience shape students' trajectories (RQ2).

When I asked Eylül why she chose to study law through English, she smiled and said, '*Because I want to think globally*'. That phrase, *to think globally*, captures the heart of instrumental motivation, a common driver of EMI participation. Across diverse contexts, students often perceive English not merely as a medium of instruction but as a medium of opportunity, a language that grants access to international careers, postgraduate study, and the prestige associated with global citizenship (Simbolon et al., 2025). Studies by Doiz and Lasagabaster (2018) and Alanazi and Curle (2025) reveal that many students view EMI as a pathway to mobility, employability, and increasing social capital. In both European and Asian settings, English operates as what Bourdieu might call *symbolic capital*, a resource that confers legitimacy in transnational academic and professional

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spaces (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). In second language motivation research, this orientation has been conceptualised as international posture (Yashima, 2002), a form of motivation grounded not in belonging to a specific Anglophone community, but in identification with an imagined international community. This perspective resonates strongly with EMI contexts, where students' motivation is often tied less to language itself than to the futures, identities, and forms of participation that English is perceived to enable.

More recent work echoes these findings. In a study in Japan, Aizawa et al. (2023) found that students enrolled in EMI programmes consistently linked English-medium study with aspirations to 'international thinking', even when they had little day-to-day interaction with global networks. As later research has shown, orientations of this kind, often described as international posture, are associated with both language proficiency and sustained engagement in EFL contexts (Botes et al., 2020), suggesting their relevance for understanding motivation in EMI settings as well. Additionally, Macaro and Han (2020) note that students in EMI classrooms often equate English proficiency with intellectual sophistication, a perception that can be both empowering and anxiety-inducing. However, as Rose et al. (2020) found, students' confidence often dips once they realise that linguistic competence does not guarantee comprehension, nor does it ensure equal participation. This decline is intensified by the emotional strain of constant self-comparison with native or near-native peers and the subtle hierarchies of legitimacy that shape classroom interactions. Hu and Lei (2014) further observed that EMI learners frequently internalise these hierarchies, perceiving their own accents or slower processing speeds as evidence of inadequacy rather than natural markers of multilingualism.

Bouchard (2024) describes this phenomenon as *linguistic insecurity*, the feeling of being a *'semi-legitimate academic actor'*. Eylül experienced this daily. During seminars, she hesitated to speak, afraid of sounding unsure or imprecise. Yet in the corridor, where she switched back to Turkish, her speech flowed easily. As she once told me, *'It's the only place I feel fully myself, fully fluent'*. Eylül's story mirrors that of countless EMI students who live between linguistic worlds, confident in one language, cautious in another. It is in these in-between spaces that identity and motivation intertwine: the desire to belong colliding with the fear of exposure.

EMI, then, opens doors, but it also quietly determines who feels welcome inside.

3.1. What works: Integrating language and content

If improving English alone is not enough, the next question becomes a practical one: what does effective preparation for English-medium study actually look like in the classroom? (RQ3) What distinguishes successful preparatory programmes from those that stop at language is not the amount of English taught, but the authenticity of the academic work students are asked to do. In a recent longitudinal study of Turkish EMI undergraduates, Soruç et al. (2024) showed that students' academic success in EMI was shaped not only by language proficiency, but by their increasing engagement with discipline-relevant academic practices and expectations over time. Rather than proficiency alone, the strongest predictors of success were students' growing familiarity with disciplinary reasoning, academic conventions, and the cognitive demands of EMI study. These findings suggest that preparation is most effective when language learning is inseparable from the epistemic practices of the discipline students are about to enter.

Green (2023) argues that the effectiveness of EMI preparation depends on how deeply academic literacies are embedded in disciplinary contexts. The research highlights that learners benefit most when language and content specialists co-design activities that mirror real university study, projects, presentations, and written tasks grounded in disciplinary knowledge. Authenticity, collaboration, and explicit links to epistemologyare the key mediating factors of success.

Building on this idea, Dafouz et al. (2023) explore how students conceptualise disciplinary literacies within internationalised higher education. Their large-scale survey shows that students perceive learning through English not simply as mastering a language, but as entering the discourse

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community of their discipline. When EMI preparatory courses make this connection explicit, helping students see how argumentation, evidence, and genre conventions differ across fields, they foster both linguistic development and academic identity.

When Eylül began drafting case briefs rather than generic essays, she told me, *'That's when I started to sound like a lawyer'*. Her reflection encapsulates precisely what these studies reveal: disciplinary identity and epistemic confidence emerge only when students engage with the communicative practices of their field *through* English.

Effective preparatory programmes, therefore, do not merely teach English; they teach through English. They immerse students in forms of authentic disciplinary communication, offering early, scaffolded engagement with tasks such as presenting design solutions, describing experimental procedures, or constructing arguments, as a bridge into later discipline-specific learning.

As Hyland and Shaw (2016) remind us, academic discourse is inseparable from disciplinary thinking, as how one argues in the humanities, evidences in the sciences, or justifies in law reflects deeper epistemological orientations. The most impactful EMI preparatory programmes should recognise this interdependence. They should replicate the intellectual, social, and linguistic demands of real university study so that learners are prepared not merely to *use* English, but to *think through* it.

4. The role of translanguaging and local contexts

If English-medium education is intended to widen participation and opportunity, then it cannot be understood as a monolingual enterprise. Students do not enter EMI preparatory programmes as blank linguistic slates; they bring with them rich linguistic repertoires that shape how they make sense of academic knowledge, how they see themselves as learners, and whether they feel able to participate with confidence (RQ2; RQ4).

A growing body of EMI research reminds us that English is never learned or used in isolation (Curle & Pun, 2024; Block, 2022). Across contexts, studies consistently show that students' first languages function as vital cognitive, cultural, and emotional resources in English-medium learning (Yuan et al., 2024). Far from being a distraction, these languages support meaning-making, identity negotiation, and academic participation, particularly during periods of transition into EMI. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that some international students actively choose EMI with the expectation of being taught primarily through English, in part to avoid the need to acquire the local language before engaging with academic content. This tension highlights the need for EMI practices that are responsive to diverse learner expectations rather than uniformly prescriptive, and that allow flexibility in how linguistic resources are mobilised in practice. Empirical work illustrates this clearly. Zhang et al. (2022), for example, found that students in multilingual EMI classrooms who were encouraged to draw on their full linguistic repertoires, switching strategically between English and their home languages, demonstrated higher levels of comprehension, engagement, and academic confidence. García and Wei (2015) also argue that translanguaging represents not merely a pedagogical strategy but a form of *epistemic justice*, allowing multilingual learners to access and express disciplinary knowledge through all the languages they know.

When Eylül and her peers discussed legal concepts in Turkish before articulating them in English, they were not undermining EMI; they were deepening it. They were negotiating the complex movement between languages and identities that defines multilingual learning. Translanguaging, in this sense, is not a fallback but a bridge, connecting linguistic understanding with conceptual insight (Karakaş, 2023).

This perspective is particularly important in EMI contexts outside Anglophone contexts. Erling et al. (2017) show that in African and South Asian higher education, English often coexists uneasily with national and regional languages, creating tensions between aspiration and exclusion. Similarly,

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Milligan and Tikly (2018) highlight how EMI policies, if uncritically applied, can reproduce linguistic hierarchies, privileging students with elite schooling backgrounds while marginalising those educated in local languages.

For EMI preparatory programmes, the lesson is clear: sustainability depends on linguistic inclusivity. Preparation that treats English as the only legitimate medium of thought risks alienating the very learners it seeks to empower. By contrast, programmes that validate local languages and integrate translanguaging practices, for example, encouraging bilingual note-taking, peer discussion, or reflective translation, not only enhance comprehension but also affirm students' identities as multilingual scholars.

Eylül's experience illustrates this balance. In class, she strove to reason like an English-speaking lawyer; in the corridor, she reclaimed the ease and expressiveness of Turkish. Both languages, in their own ways, were part of her academic growth. Ultimately, effective EMI preparation must recognise local linguistic ecologies, not erase them. It must position English as a shared medium rather than a measure of belonging. Viewed through this lens, translanguaging emerges not as an optional pedagogical add-on, but as a central condition for students to feel motivated, secure in their academic identities, and able to sustain engagement in English-medium study.

5. Future research on EMI preparatory programmes

A lot of EMI research to date has concentrated on short-term outcomes, language test scores, proficiency gains, or early adaptation indicators (Curle et al., 2025) but we still know surprisingly little about how preparatory experiences shape students' academic trajectories over time. The first-year Hong Kong longitudinal work of Evans and Morrison (2011) was an important early step, revealing the linguistic hurdles students face after entering EMI programmes. Yet more than a decade later, genuinely longitudinal studies remain rare. We still do not fully understand how students' early EMI preparation influences their disciplinary engagement, identity development, or sense of belonging as their studies progress.

Recent reviews, such as Zheng et al. (2024), argue that EMI research must move beyond language-centric metrics to capture academic and affective growth, confidence, autonomy, disciplinary literacy, and learner identity. These dimensions are precisely where preparatory experiences might exert the deepest and most lasting influence. Soruç et al. (2024) similarly call for research that links linguistic and non-linguistic factors, noting that sustained success in EMI depends not just on language proficiency but on self-efficacy, motivation, and academic resilience.

Future research must therefore follow students beyond the EMI preparatory classroom, into their first and second years, their disciplinary modules, and even their professional lives. Longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches are essential, combining quantitative evidence (language test data, GPA progression) with rich qualitative insights from interviews, classroom observation, and narrative inquiry. Equally vital is attention to teachers' perspectives. The beliefs and practices of instructors, particularly how they navigate institutional pressures, disciplinary expectations, and linguistic diversity, remain an underexplored yet powerful factor in determining EMI success. As Cenoz and Gorter (2025) point out, teacher agency within multilingual EMI settings is central to whether programmes evolve sustainably or reinforce inequities. Comparative work across global contexts is also urgently needed. EMI preparatory programmes differ dramatically between, say, Scandinavian universities where English might be a near-second language and South Asian or Latin American institutions where English may still represent social mobility and linguistic privilege (Molina-Naar, 2024). Cross-context comparisons can reveal what forms of EMI preparation are most effective, and equitable, within distinct educational ecologies. Finally, the next generation of EMI research should not only describe inequalities but actively contibute to designing solutions that counter them. Sustainable EMI preparation means fostering not just linguistic competence, but also academic confidence and community. When students like Eylül enter an English-medium classroom feeling both linguistically and

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intellectually prepared, supported by teachers who understand their multilingual realities, we move closer to EMI that truly empowers rather than excludes.

6. Concluding reflections

As I think back to that kitchen in graduate school, I remember Eylül surrounded by her casebooks and notes, working late into the night. Her English improved, yes, but what truly defined her success was not a test score or a grade. It was the moment she began to see herself not as a Turkish student studying in English, but as a lawyer *thinking through English*. That transformation, linguistic, cognitive, and emotional, is what EMI preparatory programmes should aim for.

It reminds me of a line often attributed to Ludwig Wittgenstein: *'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world'*. For Eylül, expanding her linguistic boundaries expanded her intellectual world, allowing her to reason, argue, and imagine within new epistemic frames. Yet those limits were not erased by English alone, they were redrawn through the interaction of language, identity, and belonging.

The task before us, then, is both practical and philosophical. We must design preparatory experiences that do more than polish English; they must cultivate the confidence to think critically in English, and the courage to belong in EMI learning communities. EMI preparation should be a space where multilingual learners discover not only how to succeed in English, but how to inhabit their disciplines as global thinkers rooted in their own linguistic and cultural selves. If we can achieve that, if we can help students move from learning the *language of the classroom* to thinking in the *language of their discipline*, then EMI can become what it was always meant to be: not a filter, but a bridge.

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