

Understanding Students' Views on English as the Medium of Instruction: Insights from Non-English Majors

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions of non-English major students toward the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in a general English class. The growing implementation of EMI in higher education aims not only to enhance students' English proficiency but also to prepare them for the academic and professional demands of a globalised context. However, for students outside English-related disciplines, this practice often presents both opportunities and challenges that require closer investigation. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four first-year students from various majors at a higher education institution in Manado, Indonesia. The interviews focused on students' experiences, perceptions, difficulties, and motivation when taught in English. The findings revealed that while most students initially faced comprehension difficulties, particularly in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary and complex grammatical structures, they also recognised the long-term benefits of EMI. Students reported increased motivation, greater exposure to English in authentic contexts, and improvements in communication skills. Nonetheless, several participants emphasised the importance of employing adaptive strategies, such as incorporating bilingual explanations, interactive activities, and practical examples, to support understanding and alleviate anxiety. The study demonstrates that EMI has the potential to influence students' language development and learning attitudes positively. However, its effectiveness depends on how well teaching strategies address the diverse needs of learners with varying levels of proficiency. These insights provide valuable implications for lecturers and educational institutions in designing inclusive instructional models that balance English exposure with accessibility, ultimately fostering both language acquisition and academic success among non-English major students.

Keywords: English as A Medium of Instruction (EMI), Non-English Major; Perceptions, Learning Motivation

Introduction

In the era of globalisation and the development of English as an international language, the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) at higher education

institutions is gaining widespread attention in some countries. The use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is a rapidly growing trend that is shaping the present and future of higher education in non-English-speaking countries (Bradford & Brown, 2017). Many educational institutions adopted the EMI policy to develop students' English ability and prepare them to face global challenges. This trend happened in non-English-speaking countries, where English is used not only as a subject but also as a medium of instruction in several fields of study.

English as a medium of instruction has a daunting and remarkable role to play in being set up across the globe (Mukhtar et al., 2021). The use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has become a centre of much research in recent decades. EMI is a teaching practice where English is used to deliver academic material. EMI aims to enhance students' English proficiency while simultaneously developing their academic skills in a global context. According to Andrew (2017), the students generally felt that learning with English instruction was not a problem, and assessing their language competence was good to excellent.

Some studies showed that English medium instruction had a positive impact on the improvement of English skills and students' readiness in facing the international world (Macaro et al., 2018). When students become accustomed to receiving instruction in English, they will indirectly become more familiar with the English language, which will benefit them in their future endeavours. Although the EMI is increasingly being implemented, its effectiveness and impact remain uncertain. Previous studies have shown that EMI has both advantages and disadvantages, especially for non-English major students. On one hand, EMI can enhance the language skills and academic competitiveness of students; however, on the other hand, EMI may become an obstacle to understanding the material and actively participating, especially for students with a limited English background.

(Srimalee et al., 2025) Conducted a study of first-year students learning English in the context of EMI involved 493 students by using questionnaires to study their motivation. The findings showed a strong motivation, especially supported by their learning instruments, the grading of English for their future careers, and academics. These findings provided crucial insight for English educators in the context of EMI for improving students' learning motivation. (Indriani, 2025) Investigated a study about the transformation through the use of EMI in the classroom, especially for the pre-teachers in Indonesia. Through a class observation, questionnaire, and interview, this study highlighted how the EMI can build a supportive English culture. The findings revealed that the strategy of developing self-confidence, translanguaging, and a reflective task became a key factor in fostering independent learning and the consistent use of English. This study focused on the importance of responsive pedagogy in the cultural and emotional aspects of EMI's success.

In the context of higher education institutions in Indonesia, the implementation of English as a medium of instruction in English general classes for non-English major students has become an important research area. The first-year students who join

this class usually have limited English proficiency outside of the classroom, so their perceptions and experiences of EMI need to be understood deeply. This understanding is crucial to ensure that the learning strategy implemented will be effective and inclusive. However, some challenges arose for non-English major students, whose English proficiency is limited, which may affect their understanding of the material and participation in the learning process (Setiyadi et al., 2016). Non-English major students sometimes faced difficulties in fully following lessons taught in English, which influenced their motivation and learning outcomes.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the perceptions of first-year non-English major students toward the use of English as a medium of instruction in the English general class. By conducting semi-structured interviews, this study aims to provide insight into students' attitudes, challenges, and advice, which can serve as a reference for the development of English teaching practices in a multilingual educational environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has gained increasing attention in the last two decades, particularly in higher education systems across non-English-speaking countries. EMI refers to the practice of teaching academic content subjects through English rather than the students' first language, with the dual aim of fostering both content knowledge and English language development (Macaro et al., 2018). As English continues to serve as a global lingua franca, the adoption of EMI is often viewed as a strategy to internationalise education and equip graduates with competitive skills for academic mobility and global careers (Bradford & Brown, 2017).

Benefits of EMI

A substantial body of research highlights the potential benefits of EMI. Macaro et al. (2018) argued in a systematic review that EMI can significantly enhance students' linguistic competence while simultaneously strengthening their cognitive and academic performance. Andrew (2017) also found that students often perceive EMI positively, associating it with greater confidence and readiness to use English in academic and professional contexts. In Thailand, Srimalee et al. (2025) observed strong motivation among undergraduates learning through EMI, suggesting that the use of English supports both instrumental goals, such as career advancement, and integrative goals, such as participating in a global academic community.

In the Indonesian context, Indriani (2025) found that EMI fosters a supportive English-speaking classroom culture. Through classroom observation and interviews with pre-service teachers, she reported that strategies such as reflective tasks, translanguaging practices, and self-confidence building can strengthen students' motivation and help sustain long-term use of English. These findings

suggest that EMI is not merely about language input but also about shaping classroom practices that promote cultural responsiveness and student agency.

Challenges of EMI

Despite its advantages, EMI presents significant challenges, particularly for non-English majors. Mukhtar et al. (2021) reported that teachers and students in Pakistan faced obstacles when classes were conducted entirely in English, as limited vocabulary and grammar competence hindered understanding. Similarly, Tajik et al. (2022) found that university students in Kazakhstan experienced difficulties with comprehension and participation, largely due to insufficient English proficiency. For many learners, this created a sense of frustration, reduced engagement, and in some cases, negative attitudes toward EMI. In Indonesia, Setiyadi et al. (2016) found that students with limited exposure to English often struggle to follow lectures fully in English, resulting in gaps in comprehension and reduced classroom participation. These findings highlight that while EMI may increase language exposure, it can simultaneously exclude or disadvantage learners who lack the linguistic foundation needed to cope with complex academic material.

Pedagogical Responses to EMI

To address these challenges, researchers have recommended adaptive teaching strategies. Translanguaging, or the strategic use of both English and the students' first language, has been shown to reduce anxiety and strengthen comprehension (Indriani, 2025). Visual aids, interactive learning activities, and the integration of games have also been identified as effective methods for sustaining motivation and easing comprehension difficulties (Srimalee et al., 2025). Furthermore, Macaro et al. (2018) emphasised that EMI should be supported by teacher training programs that equip educators with strategies for scaffolding language without undermining content delivery. Bilingual or hybrid models of instruction are increasingly suggested as a practical solution. These models allow instructors to maintain English as the main medium while providing explanations or clarifications in the students' native language when necessary (Tajik et al., 2022). Such approaches help ensure inclusivity by striking a balance between English exposure and accessibility.

Implications for Non-English Majors

For non-English majors, EMI carries both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, it offers exposure that accelerates English language acquisition and prepares students for global academic challenges. On the other hand, insufficient support mechanisms can lead to inequity, as students from non-English-speaking backgrounds may struggle more than their peers. This suggests that the effectiveness of EMI is context-dependent and must be carefully adapted to local needs. Overall, the literature indicates that EMI is a promising yet complex pedagogical approach. Its success depends largely on the interplay between institutional policy, teacher preparedness, and student readiness. For contexts like

Indonesia, where English is not widely used outside the classroom, adaptive strategies such as bilingual support, scaffolded instruction, and motivational practices are critical to ensure that EMI does not become a barrier to learning but instead functions as a bridge toward academic and linguistic development.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions and experiences of non-English major students toward the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI). A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of students' attitudes, challenges, and learning motivations, which quantitative methods cannot fully capture. The participants were four first-year students enrolled in a general English class at a higher education institution in Manado, Indonesia. All participants were from different academic majors, Accounting, Management, Informatics, Economics and Business, providing a range of perspectives across disciplines. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who could best represent the experiences of non-English majors learning in an EMI context.

Instruments and Procedures

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. This format enabled the researcher to prepare core questions in advance while still allowing for flexibility to explore emerging issues raised by participants during the interviews. The interview questions were designed to address students' perceptions of EMI, their classroom experiences, the challenges they encountered, their level of motivation, and their suggestions for improving instructional practices. Data collection was conducted face-to-face to ensure rapport and facilitate the researcher's ability to observe nonverbal cues. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in a quiet setting within the university to ensure a comfortable and focused environment. With the participants' consent, all interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved coding and categorising the transcribed interviews to identify recurring themes and patterns. Initially, open coding was applied to label key concepts emerging from the data. These codes were then grouped into broader categories, including perceptions of EMI, learning challenges, motivational factors, and suggested strategies. Finally, the categories were synthesised into overarching themes that reflected the students' collective experiences. This process ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' perspectives while allowing for meaningful interpretation in relation to existing literature.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher employed strategies such as triangulation of sources (comparing across participants), peer debriefing, and member checking, which involved asking participants to review the transcripts and preliminary interpretations. These measures aimed to strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are drawn from semi-structured interviews with four first-year non-English major students from the fields of Accounting, Management, Informatics, and Economics and Business. While all participants had only been exposed to English at the university level for about a month, their backgrounds varied considerably, influencing their readiness and comfort with English as a medium of instruction (EMI). The analysis identified five central themes: background and readiness, perceptions of EMI, challenges in comprehension, the impact of EMI on motivation, and students' suggestions and preferences for instruction.

Background and Readiness

Students' prior experiences with English shaped their ability to adapt to EMI. Those with earlier exposure, such as attending schools where English was partially used, described English as familiar and manageable. In contrast, students with minimal exposure expressed greater difficulty in following lessons. For example, one participant reflected positively on their foundation:

*"I already studied in an international school, so I feel it is easier because it has become a habit."
(Student 3, Q.2)*

Meanwhile, another student admitted feeling overwhelmed due to limited experience:

*"It has been only about a month, so I am still confused when the teacher uses English all the time."
(Student 1, Q.2)*

This contrast highlights that readiness for EMI is not uniform, but rather deeply dependent on students' educational backgrounds and language exposure prior to entering university.

Perceptions of EMI

When asked about their views on having English as the main language of instruction, participants demonstrated a mixture of appreciation and uncertainty. Some valued the constant exposure as a way to become more accustomed to English, while others expressed that it was difficult at the start. One student explained the developmental benefits of EMI:

"It is good because that way, we indirectly get used to responding in English, which helps our development."
(Student 2, Q.1)

In contrast, another expressed hesitation:

"Eeh, it is confusing, like I am still confused."
(Student 1, Q.1)

These varied perceptions suggest that EMI is simultaneously seen as a beneficial tool for long-term learning and a source of initial struggle, depending on students' levels of preparedness.

Challenges in Comprehension

Across participants, comprehension difficulties were most often linked to limited vocabulary and unfamiliar grammar. These obstacles made it more challenging for some students to follow the lecture flow and fully grasp the material. As one student explained:

"There may be some words that are difficult to understand because you are not used to them yet."
(Student 2, Q.1)

To address these challenges, students developed different coping strategies. Some relied on independent practice, such as listening to English music or searching for meanings, while others preferred direct support from their instructors. One student described this approach:

"Maybe I will go to the teacher and ask, or sometimes I listen to music to understand better."
(Student 4, Q.2)

These strategies demonstrate the agency that students employed to adapt to EMI, while also highlighting the need for instructional support to bridge comprehension gaps.

Motivation and Learning Impact

Despite these challenges, all participants described EMI as a source of increased motivation and engagement. Being taught in English was perceived as exciting, inspiring, and beneficial for their confidence both inside and outside the classroom. One student expressed their enthusiasm clearly:

"I am interested and motivated, because I think it is cool to use English all the time."
(Student 1, Q.1)

Another highlighted how EMI reduced the sense of strangeness around English in their daily life:

"Honestly, it has a big impact because, by studying and because most lecturers use English, it does not seem foreign to us anymore."

(Student 2, Q.2)

Such responses suggest that EMI not only influences students' immediate classroom engagement but also shapes their broader attitudes and willingness to use English in everyday contexts.

Suggestions and Preferences

When asked how instruction could be improved, students emphasised the need for interactive, engaging, and flexible teaching strategies. Several participants appreciated games and fun activities that encouraged participation and made lessons less intimidating. One explained:

"Like yesterday, learning through games, I think I am quicker to respond and understand."

(Student 1, Q.1)

Others suggested occasional translation or clarification in Indonesian, particularly for difficult terms, to ensure comprehension. As one student stated:

"Definitely, translate it into Indonesian, then explain it again, especially the difficult words."

(Student 3, Q.1)

At the same time, some participants preferred that lessons remain fully in English to maximise exposure. This range of preferences suggests that students desire a balance between maintaining English immersion for long-term benefits and receiving support to reduce anxiety and improve understanding.

These findings indicate that while EMI presents significant challenges, particularly in vocabulary comprehension, it also serves as a powerful motivator for non-English major students. Students acknowledged the long-term benefits of EMI, even as they requested more adaptive methods to make lessons accessible. Their voices underscore the importance of striking a balance between immersion and scaffolding strategies, such as games, translanguaging, and interactive activities. In this way, EMI can function not only as a tool for language learning but also as an inclusive and supportive instructional approach.

The results of this study indicate that non-English major students hold complex and varied perceptions of English as a medium of instruction (EMI). On one hand, participants acknowledged substantial benefits, particularly in enhancing English proficiency and preparing them for future academic and professional demands. On the other hand, they also reported significant challenges, most notably difficulties in understanding lectures and engaging in communication when lessons were delivered fully in English.

A notable finding of this study is the strong motivational effect EMI had on students, even those with limited prior exposure to English. While previous research

has emphasised the cognitive and linguistic benefits of EMI (Macaro et al., 2018; Dearden, 2015; Rose et al., 2020), this study shows that motivation itself can function as a mediator between language difficulty and persistence in learning. Students described EMI as "cool" and inspiring, suggesting that the symbolic value of English as a global language (Doiz et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2014) played a role in shaping their positive attitudes toward it. This aligns with studies by Srimalee et al. (2025) and Hu and Lei (2014), who found that learners often view EMI as a gateway to international opportunities, reinforcing their willingness to engage despite comprehension challenges.

Another new insight relates to the coping strategies adopted by non-English majors. Students reported turning to digital media, music, and peer interaction to supplement their learning, reflecting an element of learner autonomy not widely documented in earlier Indonesian EMI studies (Indriani, 2025; Widodo et al., 2017). This suggests that EMI may indirectly encourage students to seek out self-directed learning opportunities, bridging gaps left by classroom instruction.

Consistent with prior studies, the greatest barrier for students was found to be insufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge (Tajik et al., 2022; Aguilar & Rodríguez, 2012; Evans & Morrison, 2011). Similar findings have been reported in Asian contexts, where students struggle to follow academic discourse in English due to limited proficiency (Byun et al., 2011; Fang, 2018). For non-English majors in this study, such limitations often led to initial feelings of confusion and disengagement, confirming concerns that EMI can risk excluding learners without adequate support (Nguyen et al., 2017).

Despite these challenges, motivation proved to be a critical factor influencing students' engagement. Those with positive attitudes toward EMI tended to participate more actively and persist in overcoming difficulties. This finding aligns with studies by Lasagabaster (2011) and Yeh (2014), which demonstrate that learners' attitudes have a significant influence on their success in EMI contexts. In this study, motivation was reinforced by the perception that EMI would contribute to employability and international mobility, echoing findings from Bradford and Brown (2017) and Jenkins (2014).

This study has several limitations. First, the small sample size of four participants from a single institution limits the generalizability of the findings. A larger, more diverse sample could provide broader insights across majors and regions (Macaro et al., 2018; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). Second, data collection relied solely on interviews, which, while providing depth, may be influenced by self-reporting biases. Triangulation with classroom observations or surveys could have strengthened the validity of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Third, the short timeframe of students' exposure to EMI (about one month) means their perspectives reflect initial adaptation rather than long-term outcomes, which should be addressed in future longitudinal studies (Hu & Lei, 2014).

Despite these limitations, the findings carry important pedagogical implications. First, teachers should adopt adaptive strategies that balance immersion with accessibility, such as translanguaging, bilingual explanations, and the integration of interactive methods (García & Wei, 2014; Indriani, 2025). Second, institutions should provide training for EMI instructors to scaffold comprehension effectively, ensuring that language barriers do not compromise content learning (Aguilar & Rodríguez, 2012; Ball & Lindsay, 2013). Third, supporting programs such as workshops, tutoring, or language clinics can help non-English majors gradually build proficiency (Setiyadi et al., 2016; Evans & Morrison, 2011). Finally, EMI policies in Indonesia should consider equity issues, ensuring that students with weaker language backgrounds are not disadvantaged but instead supported through inclusive pedagogy.

This study confirms many of the benefits and challenges of EMI reported in the literature while also contributing new insights into the motivational value of EMI for non-English majors and their self-directed coping strategies. While EMI can foster language development, confidence, and global readiness, its success depends on whether institutions and teachers provide adequate scaffolding for learners with diverse backgrounds. A balanced, inclusive approach to EMI is therefore crucial for ensuring that the policy serves as a bridge to opportunity rather than a barrier to participation.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the attitudes of first-year non-English major students toward the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in general English classes. The findings demonstrate that while EMI offers notable benefits, such as improved language proficiency and heightened learning motivation, students also encounter significant challenges related to comprehension and communication. These mixed perceptions highlight the need for teaching approaches that are both adaptive and inclusive, ensuring that instruction accommodates learners with diverse levels of English competence. To address these challenges, lecturers are encouraged to adopt flexible strategies, including the use of bilingual explanations, visual aids, and interactive activities that can scaffold understanding. Furthermore, institutions should provide additional support programs, such as English workshops or supplementary classes, to gradually strengthen students' language skills and confidence. Beyond its immediate pedagogical contributions, this study highlights the importance of striking a balance between language immersion and learner support in EMI contexts. While the findings are limited to a small sample of students at a single institution, they provide a basis for further research and offer practical implications for educators and policymakers seeking to implement EMI more effectively in Indonesian higher education and beyond.

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