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LANGUAGE-AWARE EMI IN CONTENT COURSES: INTEGRATION, METHODOLOGY, AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Abstract. The article examines the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in content courses in Ukrainian higher education and substantiates a language-aware EMI approach as a pedagogically grounded framework for English-taught disciplinary learning in a non-Anglophone context. The study argues that EMI should not be interpreted as a simple language switch. Its effectiveness depends on pedagogical course design and planning that ensure conceptual access to disciplinary knowledge, support academic interaction, and reduce affective barriers, particularly language anxiety and fear of making mistakes.

The purpose of the paper is to identify pedagogical conditions and transferable methodological solutions that enable students to achieve content learning outcomes while simultaneously developing academic communication through English. The research is presented as a case study using a mixed-method design. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured student interviews, and a Likert-scale questionnaire. This combination of methods enables examination of the relationship between observable engagement indicators (participation in discussions, willingness to ask clarifying questions, involvement in small-group tasks, readiness to present outcomes) and students' self-reported confidence in academic English and their evaluation of specific instructional supports.

The findings indicate that EMI is most effective when language is treated as an integral component of content learning. Productive strategies include structured scaffolding with explicit language objectives; multimodal delivery of content (visual supports, guided examples, cases) to reduce cognitive load and facilitate meaning-making; guided interaction formats (think–pair–share, role-based small-group work, staged discussion prompts) that broaden participation and distribute speaking opportunities; project-based tasks organised through checkpoints, iterative revision stages, and rubric-based assessment; and pedagogically justified code-switching used briefly to clarify meaning and

negotiate terminology, followed by re-formulation in English. The article emphasises the importance of constructive alignment between intended outcomes (content + communication), learning activities, and assessment practices, as well as the role of formative feedback in strengthening psychological safety and encouraging active participation in EMI classrooms.

The practical value of the proposed model lies in its applicability across disciplines: the principles and tools described can be adapted and used as a methodological basis for improving teaching quality and documenting evidence-informed EMI practices within internal quality assurance and accreditation processes.

Keywords: English-medium instruction (EMI), language-aware pedagogy, scaffolding, multimodality, student engagement, rubrics, formative feedback.

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АНГЛІЙСЬКА МОВА ЯК ЗАСІБ ВИКЛАДАННЯ ФАХОВИХ ДИСЦИПЛІН (EMI): МОВНО-ОРІЄНТОВАНА МОДЕЛЬ, МЕТОДИКА ТА ЗАЛУЧЕННЯ СТУДЕНТІВ

Анотація. У статті досліджено використання англійської мови як засобу викладання фахових дисциплін у неангломовному середовищі закладів вищої освіти України та обґрунтовано доцільність мовно-орієнтованого підходу до EMI (English-Medium Instruction, language-aware EMI). Вихідним положенням є те, що EMI не зводиться до формального переходу на англійську мову: ефективність такого навчання визначається педагогічним проєктуванням курсу, яке забезпечує концептуальний доступ до змісту, підтримує академічну взаємодію та зменшує афективні бар’єри, зокрема мовну тривожність і страх помилки.

Метою статті є визначення педагогічних умов і методичних рішень, що сприяють досягненню предметних результатів у межах англомовного викладання за одночасного розвитку академічної комунікації студентів. Дослідження виконано в логіці кейс-стаді із застосуванням змішаних методів: аудиторних спостережень, напівструктурованих інтерв’ю зі студентами та анкетування на основі шкали Лайкерта. Комбінація методів дозволила зіставити показники залучення (участь у дискусіях, ініціативність у постановці запитань, активність у груповій роботі, готовність до усного представлення результатів) із самооцінкою мовної впевненості та оцінкою корисності конкретних інструментів підтримки.

Результати засвідчують, що найбільш продуктивними є стратегії, які інтегрують мовний компонент у змістове навчання: поетапне навчання (scaffolding) із чітко визначеними мовними цілями; мультимодальне подання матеріалу (візуальні опори, приклади, кейси) як засіб зниження когнітивного навантаження; керовані формати взаємодії (think–pair–share, рольовий розподіл у групі, структуровані дискусійні запитання), що розширюють коло активних учасників; проєктна робота з проміжними контрольними точками, етапами повторення та оцінюванням за рубриками; педагогічно доцільне коду-перемикання як точковий інструмент уточнення смислів і термінології з поверненням до англомовного формулювання. Наголошено на важливості конструктивного узгодження між результатами навчання (content + communication), навчальними активностями та оцінюванням, а також на ролі формувального зворотного зв'язку у підтримці психологічної безпеки й активної участі студентів.

Практична цінність статті полягає в універсальності запропонованої моделі: описані принципи та інструменти можуть бути адаптовані до різних фахових дисциплін як методична основа підвищення якості викладання та обґрунтування освітніх практик у межах внутрішнього забезпечення якості й акредитаційних процедур.

Ключові слова: EMI, англійська мова як засіб викладання, мовно-орієнтована педагогіка, поетапне навчання , мультимодальність, залучення студентів, рубрики, формувальний зворотний зв'язок.

Problem Statement and Relevance

Over the past two decades, the global trend towards internationalisation in higher education has led to the widespread adoption of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), even in non-Anglophone countries. EMI is no longer confined to natural sciences or business programmes; it has expanded into the humanities, where the choice of language carries not only cognitive but also cultural and ideological significance. In disciplines such as Culturology—a field inherently rooted in identity, symbolic expression, and social interpretation—the use of English raises important pedagogical, epistemological, and psychological questions. This study examines how EMI functions within the teaching of Culturology to non-native English-speaking students in Ukraine, focusing on pedagogical strategies and student engagement.

The growing demand for English-medium degree programmes is driven by several factors: universities' pursuit of global competitiveness, increased mobility of students and faculty, and a desire to engage in worldwide knowledge production. In this context, EMI is often seen as a pathway to access broader academic networks and resources. However, its implementation within complex,

culturally rooted disciplines such as Culturology remains insufficiently studied, particularly within Eastern European education systems. Most current EMI research focuses on STEM subjects or business education, where the content tends to be more procedural and less interpretive. Conversely, Culturology requires students to engage with abstract ideas, theoretical frameworks, and sociocultural narratives that are often closely linked to their native languages and cultural experiences.

This article addresses a practical and research gap by analysing language-aware EMI implementation in content-course teaching through a mixed-methods case study. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Which language-aware EMI strategies support student understanding and participation in English-taught content courses (case: Culturology)?

2. How do these strategies influence student engagement, linguistic confidence, and the perceived relevance of course content in a non-Anglophone university context?

The topic is timely and pertinent for several reasons. Firstly, as Ukraine undergoes rapid educational reforms and aligns more closely with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), there is a growing institutional focus on EMI to attract international students and staff. However, this change often proceeds without sufficient attention to discipline-specific needs or the preparedness of students and teachers to operate in an English-dominant environment. Non-language disciplines demand more than language proficiency; they require a pedagogical approach that values both linguistic accessibility and cultural relevance.

Second, the literature on EMI in the humanities highlights a pattern of "language over content," where students may prioritise decoding English texts rather than engaging critically with ideas.

As Dearden (2015) and, more recently, Smit et al. (2024) have observed, this imbalance can lead to superficial learning and diminished cognitive autonomy, particularly when learners are required to perform complex interpretive tasks in a second language.

Third, student engagement in EMI settings is closely linked to their sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and emotional safety. Numerous studies have shown that language anxiety, identity negotiation, and fear of judgment can limit participation, especially in group discussions and presentations [1]. This is particularly relevant in an interpretive content course (Culturology case) classes, where students are often asked to express personal views, interpret cultural symbols, or critique ideological structures. These tasks require confidence, cultural familiarity, and linguistic skill—any of which may be compromised in an unfamiliar medium of instruction.

Meanwhile, EMI provides distinctive opportunities for content courses. By using a global lingua franca, students encounter transnational perspectives, comparative approaches, and intercultural dialogue. They learn to express culturally specific ideas to an international audience, thereby building both intercultural competence and academic literacy. Furthermore, EMI can enhance a sense of intellectual prestige and future-oriented thinking, especially among students aiming for careers in international academia, diplomacy, or cultural policy.

This dual nature of EMI—both an enabler and a barrier—renders it a fascinating subject for exploration in the realm of cultural education. Our research aims to illuminate how instructors and students negotiate this complexity through tangible pedagogical practices. We emphasise the use of multimodal resources (e.g., images, videos, performance tasks), culturally responsive content design, and scaffolding strategies that address linguistic challenges without sacrificing academic rigour.

We also explore institutional dynamics: the pressures on faculty to deliver EMI courses, the availability of training and support, and the alignment (or lack thereof) between EMI policy and classroom practice. Interviews with students and classroom observations form our main data sources, supplemented by a student questionnaire aimed at capturing perceptions of confidence, motivation, and perceived effectiveness of instruction strategies.

In doing so, this research adds to the broader discussion on inclusive and context-aware EMI implementation in the humanities. It addresses calls from scholars like [2], who advocate for a more nuanced, ecology-based understanding of EMI that includes linguistic, cognitive, affective, and sociocultural dimensions. We support the "critical EMI" perspective, which challenges the instrumentalist view of English as merely a skill and instead sees it as a space of power, identity, and epistemic decision-making.

To conclude this section, we emphasise that teaching an English-taught content course (Culturology case) in English is not merely a technical challenge of vocabulary and syntax; it is a deeply pedagogical task that demands reconsidering curriculum design, classroom interaction, and student support frameworks. By analysing how EMI operates in this context, we seek to produce practical recommendations and theoretical insights that can be utilised in similar settings globally.

Literature Review

The increasing use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in global higher education has generated a rich and evolving body of literature over the past decade. Much of the early research concentrated on structural and policy-level aspects—such as motivations for adopting EMI, institutional preparedness, and

faculty development [3]. However, recent studies have shifted focus to the micro-level dynamics within EMI classrooms, highlighting student experiences, disciplinary differences, and pedagogical adjustments. In this section, we examine the literature on EMI with respect to four key themes relevant to teaching an English-taught content course (Culturology case): linguistic complexity and accessibility; multimodality and scaffolding; cultural relevance; and affective engagement and identity.

Aim of the Article

This article examines how language-aware English-Medium Instruction (EMI) can be designed and implemented to support pedagogy and student engagement in English-taught content courses at a Ukrainian university, using Culturology as an illustrative case.

- To identify transferable challenges and affordances of EMI in high language-demand content teaching, with attention to conceptual access and participation.
- To analyse how instructors mediate disciplinary content through English via scaffolding, multimodality, interactional support, and (where appropriate) strategic code-switching while maintaining academic rigour.
- To explore how students perceive and respond to EMI in terms of engagement, confidence, and the alignment between content learning and language demands.

By addressing these goals through a mixed-methods approach—including classroom observations, student interviews, and survey data—the article offers both theoretical and practical insights into the implementation of EMI in the humanities. It ultimately aims to support educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in developing more inclusive, contextually aware EMI strategies that respect both linguistic diversity and academic integrity.

Main Findings of the Study

Linguistic Complexity and Cognitive Access

A key issue in the EMI literature is the impact of language proficiency on cognitive access to disciplinary content. While EMI is often advocated for its ability to enhance students' English proficiency and support academic mobility, its implementation frequently occurs in settings where neither students nor instructors are fully proficient in English. This mismatch can result in superficial understanding, rote learning, or disengagement [4].

In humanities subjects like Culturology, the problem is further heightened by the abstract and interpretive nature of the content. As Airey (2012) and Smit et al. (2024) have observed, disciplines differ greatly in their "language demand." Culturology requires not only lexical knowledge but also the ability to develop arguments, analyse symbolic meanings, and express culturally grounded

interpretations. These tasks are considerably harder in a second language, especially when academic discourse conventions differ from those in students' native languages.

In EMI content-course (Culturology case) classrooms, students often spend more time decoding the language than engaging with the ideas themselves [5]. This cognitive overload hampers deep learning and critical reflection. It also adds extra burdens on instructors, who must balance content delivery with implicit language instruction—often without formal training in English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

Multimodality and Pedagogical Scaffolding

Given these linguistic barriers, recent research has emphasised the importance of multimodal instruction and pedagogical scaffolding in EMI contexts. Multimodal learning involves the utilisation of diverse semiotic resources—such as images, videos, gestures, and interactive media—to facilitate meaning-making beyond verbal text [6]. This approach is particularly advantageous, as it aligns with the discipline's focus on aesthetics, performance, and symbolism.

Smit et al. (2024) found that including visuals, analogies, and dramatisations in EMI humanities classrooms enhances student engagement and understanding. Similarly, Breeze, R., & Sancho Guinda, C. [7] argue that effective EMI teaching involves intentionally layering meaning: using examples, case studies, and multimodal materials to reinforce complex concepts. These strategies lessen the cognitive load of language processing and create opportunities for differentiated learning.

Pedagogical scaffolding is another vital element in effective EMI instruction. It includes techniques such as pre-reading activities, guided note-taking, sentence frames, concept mapping, and formative feedback. These methods help students organise their thinking and progressively build academic language skills while engaging with disciplinary content [3]. In Culturology, where interpretive accuracy is crucial, scaffolding is not a remedial measure but a foundation for fair participation.

Cultural Relevance and Localisation

Another significant theme in the literature is the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in EMI settings. Research consistently indicates that students are more engaged and perform better when the course material aligns with their lived experiences and local contexts [7]. This principle is especially relevant in an interpretive content course (Culturology case), where culture functions both as the subject and the medium of learning.

Global EMI curricula often rely on Western-centric theories, case studies, and examples, assuming a shared academic culture that might not exist. This leads

to what Canagarajah (2005) calls “epistemic dissonance,” where students feel alienated from the material and uncertain of their interpretive authority. Conversely, including locally relevant material—such as folklore, regional art, and postcolonial perspectives—allows students to engage meaningfully and critically.

Zhang X., Lütge C., Zou L. [8] have demonstrated that when EMI humanities courses include localisation and enable strategic code-switching, student participation increases significantly. Similarly, Dafouz E., Smit U. [2] propose an “EMI ecology” model that emphasises contextualisation, arguing that effective EMI must adapt to institutional culture, student demographics, and disciplinary norms.

Affective Engagement, Identity, and Belonging

The emotional aspect of EMI has gained more attention recently, especially concerning student well-being, motivation, and identity development. EMI is not a neutral teaching choice; it carries symbolic meanings associated with power, global capital, and cultural hierarchy [9]. For students, particularly those from marginalised linguistic backgrounds, EMI can provoke a complex mix of hope and anxiety.

Eusafzai [1] discovered that students in Kyrgyz EMI classrooms often see English as a means to achieve upward mobility but also experience feelings of insecurity and inferiority. These emotions influence their classroom behaviour, willingness to speak, and academic self-concept. In Culturology, where personal and collective identities are commonly discussed, such emotional tensions may be heightened.

Wang, Yuan, and De Costa [4] advocate for a comprehensive understanding of student engagement in EMI: one that encompasses emotional safety, identity affirmation, and intercultural openness. They underscore the importance of instructors in fostering inclusive, empathetic spaces where students feel acknowledged and valued. This is particularly vital in disciplines like Culturology that address sensitive, identity-related issues such as ethnicity, gender, and memory.

In summary, the literature indicates that EMI in the humanities—particularly in an interpretive content course (Culturology case)—requires more than just linguistic adaptation. It calls for a pedagogical approach that is multimodal, culturally contextual, and emotionally responsive. While EMI shows potential for broadening access to global academic discourse, its effectiveness depends on how well it combines the local with the international, the symbolic with the practical, and the personal with the broader educational goals.

The next section of this study builds on these insights by explaining how these approaches are currently implemented in a Ukrainian university setting,

drawing on empirical data from classroom observations, student interviews, and survey responses.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to examine how language-aware English-Medium Instruction (EMI) influences pedagogy and student engagement in an English-taught content course within a Ukrainian university setting. While EMI policy is often discussed at an institutional level, this study focuses on classroom-level practices that can be adapted across disciplines.

The research employed a case study approach guided by the interpretivist paradigm. This method was chosen because it enables the researcher to capture the richness of individual experiences and classroom interactions that are difficult to quantify [10]. Culturology inherently involves subjective interpretations of meaning, identity, and symbol systems—thus, it was crucial to adopt a methodology capable of reflecting this interpretive depth.

Data were collected over two academic semesters (September 2023 – June 2024) at one of Ukraine's national universities. The institution had recently introduced EMI courses in the humanities as part of its internationalisation strategy, making it a timely and relevant site for this research.

Transferability. Culturology was selected as a high language-demand humanities course in which interpretation, discussion, and argumentation are central. However, the analysed practices (explicit language objectives, scaffolding, multimodal input, structured interaction, and transparent assessment) are not discipline-specific and can be adapted to other content courses (e.g., social sciences, management, design studies, and professionally oriented modules) by selecting appropriate texts, tasks, and terminology.

Research Context and Participants

The study focused on two undergraduate programmes: Performing Arts and Cultural Studies, both of which offered English-taught content courses (Culturology case) in English. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, targeting students who had attended at least one full semester of EMI-based Culturology. A total of 30 students participated in the survey phase of the study, and six students (four women, two men) volunteered for semi-structured interviews. Their English proficiency levels ranged from B1 to C1 (self-reported and informally confirmed via interview discourse). The diversity in language ability provided a useful spectrum of perspectives. Most participants were domestic students from Ukraine, with a few from neighbouring countries. Interestingly, even among local students, there was a clear recognition of the symbolic value of English as a "language of prestige" in education. Several interviewees reported that EMI gave them a sense of belonging to a larger intellectual community, though not without stress and difficulty.

Data Collection Methods

To develop a comprehensive understanding of EMI's impact on Culturology instruction, the study employed three main data collection methods: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and a student questionnaire. A fourth element—literature-based contextual analysis—supported the interpretation of findings.

Constructive Alignment Snapshot (transferable template)

The table 1 summarises how content and language outcomes can be aligned with learning activities and assessment evidence; it can be adapted to other disciplines by replacing the topic/genre and terminology.

Table 1

Intended learning outcomes (content + communication)	Learning activities (examples)	Assessment & rubrics (examples)	Evidence / indicators
Explain key disciplinary concepts using appropriate terminology	Pre-teach key terms; concept maps; short input + recap prompts	Mini-quiz; glossary check; rubric: concepts vs terminology	Correct use of core terms; fewer conceptual errors
Participate in discussion and co-construct meaning	Structured discussion frames; think-pair-share; small-group roles	Speaking rubric: clarity, reasoning, interaction; formative feedback	More turn-taking; higher self-reported confidence
Analyse sources and build an argument (reading-to-write)	Annotated readings; guided questions; paragraph frames	Critical response; rubric: argument + evidence + language control	Stronger claim-evidence links; fewer citation issues
Produce a collaborative product (project / presentation)	Team project with checkpoints; multimodal artefacts; rehearsal	Project rubric: content, structure, visuals, delivery; peer assessment	Timely milestones; improved audience comprehension ratings

Classroom Observations

A total of eight classroom sessions were observed across two different courses: Cultural Identity in Media and Traditional vs. Modern Culture. The lessons occurred in a blended format—some in person, some via Zoom. Observation criteria included student participation, the types of scaffolding used by instructors, language-switching behaviour, and responses to visual or performance-based tasks. For example, in one class, students were asked to

interpret a short British documentary on subcultural identity. While most students struggled to express their thoughts fluently in English, several used gestures, images from their phones, or brief notes in Ukrainian to clarify their ideas. The instructor responded supportively, switching to simpler English when needed and encouraging code-mixed responses.

This reinforced our understanding that linguistic flexibility and visual aids are key tools in EMI cultural education [11].

Semi-Structured Interviews

- Interviews lasted between 35 and 50 minutes and were conducted in a mixture of English and Ukrainian, depending on the participant's comfort level. The interview protocol was designed to explore themes such as:
- Confidence in using English in academic discussions
- Experiences of linguistic or cultural exclusion
- Opinions on the usefulness of visuals, storytelling, and performance tasks
- How students perceived the relationship between language and identity

One particularly insightful quote came from a third-year female student in Performing Arts:

"In my language, I feel ideas. In English, I translate them. It's not the same."

Another respondent noted:

"Sometimes I don't want to speak because I'm afraid my idea will sound childish in English, even if I know it's interesting."

Such comments reveal the **psychosocial dimension** of EMI that is not always evident in classroom behaviour but emerges strongly in reflective conversation [1].

Student Questionnaire

To complement the qualitative data, a **Likert-scale questionnaire** was distributed to 30 students. The instrument was adapted from the Engagement Measurement Approach (EMA) framework and contained 20 items, divided into four thematic clusters:

1. Linguistic confidence and anxiety
2. Usefulness of visual/multimodal materials
3. Cultural relevance of course content
4. Motivation and perceived value of EMI

Sample statements included:

- *"I feel confident expressing my opinions in English during class."*
- *"Visual materials help me understand cultural theories."*
- *"I engage more with topics that are relevant to my cultural background."*

Respondents rated each item from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

The aggregated results (see Table 2) revealed that while students generally appreciated the EMI format, their levels of confidence and engagement varied significantly depending on the instructional approach. For example, **87%** agreed that visual materials made abstract content easier to understand, and over **70%** stated that culturally relevant examples increased their participation. On the other hand, **45%** expressed anxiety about speaking in English in front of peers—a finding consistent with broader EMI research [4].

Table 2

Sample Questionnaire Results (n = 30)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Confidence in expressing opinions in English	2	4	6	12	6
Visual materials help understanding	0	1	3	15	11
Greater engagement with culturally relevant content	1	2	5	13	9
Anxiety when speaking English in class	4	5	7	8	6
EMI increases motivation to study culture	1	2	5	14	8

Data Analysis Approach

All qualitative data—interview transcripts, observation notes, and open-ended survey responses—were coded thematically using **NVivo**. Both the literature and emergent patterns informed the coding categories in the data. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively using Excel, with key frequencies and percentages calculated for each item.

Notably, the analysis process was **iterative and reflexive**. Initial themes were discussed with a peer academic reviewer to ensure that interpretations were grounded and not overly biased by the researcher's assumptions. This step was essential given the insider-outsider dynamics: the researcher was affiliated with the host institution but not directly involved in teaching the courses studied.

In sum, the methodology adopted in this study combined depth and breadth, capturing both the lived experiences of EMI students and broader trends in engagement, confidence, and instructional effectiveness.

The findings, presented in the following section, illustrate how students navigate the linguistic, cognitive, and emotional terrain of learning cultural content through the English language.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, organised around four interconnected themes that emerged from classroom observations, student interviews, and questionnaire responses: (1) linguistic confidence and participation; (2) the pedagogical role of multimodal resources; (3) the impact of culturally relevant content; and (4) affective responses and motivation. These themes reflect the multidimensional nature of engagement in EMI-based Culturology instruction, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural aspects.

Linguistic Confidence and Classroom Participation

Students' confidence in using English during class was found to be highly variable.

According to survey data, only **60%** of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident expressing opinions in English, while 20% remained neutral, and another 20% expressed some level of discomfort.

This quantitative pattern was confirmed and nuanced by interview data. Several students described a gap between their understanding and their ability to contribute orally to English. As one interviewee explained:

"I understand the topic, but I cannot find the right words in English fast enough. So, I stay silent even though I have something to say."

Such moments of "silent understanding" were observed in several classroom sessions. For example, during a seminar on national identity in postcolonial contexts, students who had actively shared ideas in Ukrainian the previous week appeared hesitant to do so when the medium shifted entirely to English.

The instructor attempted to mitigate this by prompting students with sentence starters (e.g., "In my opinion…", "One possible interpretation is…"), which slightly improved participation. This supports findings by Smit [11] that **structured linguistic scaffolding** can reduce communicative hesitation.

Notably, the fear of making mistakes was not only linguistic but also **cognitive and emotional**. As another student shared:

"I don't want my classmates to think my ideas are stupid just because my grammar is wrong."

This echoes what Wang, Yuan, and De Costa [4] describe as "linguistic vulnerability"—a state in which fear of judgment undermines both participation and identity development. These findings underscore the need for EMI instructors to create **emotionally safe spaces** where imperfect English is accepted as a regular part of the learning process.

The Pedagogical Power of Multimodal Resources

A striking 87% of respondents agreed that **visual materials—images, videos, infographics—helped them better understand abstract cultural theories**. This was evident in classroom sessions where instructors used curated video content, PowerPoint visuals, and symbolic artefacts to illustrate complex concepts.

For instance, in a class on symbolic violence (drawing on Bourdieu), the instructor used political cartoons and street art from different cultures to initiate discussion. This visual prompt allowed students to interpret meaning without relying solely on advanced vocabulary. Even students who had previously been quiet began contributing when asked to describe what they saw, rather than explain abstract theory. As one said:

"When I see the image, it gives me an idea. Then I can explain my opinion, even if I don't know the academic term."

This aligns with findings by Breeze and Sancho Guinda [7], who argue that multimodality enables students to access academic ideas through alternative channels, which is particularly beneficial in EMI settings.

Moreover, instructors who used videos with subtitles or paused to explain key terms were perceived as more accessible and supportive. The effectiveness of these practices confirms that **EMI should not rely on lecture-centric, text-heavy approaches**, especially in cultural disciplines that naturally lend themselves to visual and performative modes of expression.

Cultural Relevance as a Driver of Engagement

Perhaps the most consistent and compelling theme to emerge from the data was the impact of **culturally relevant content** on student engagement. Over 70% of students reported that they felt more motivated and confident when course examples connected to their own cultural background or national context.

This was clearly observed during a class focused on cultural rituals and festivals. When the instructor invited students to present a local tradition using English (rather than study a Western case), participation soared. Students eagerly described folk holidays, national dances, and family customs—often supplementing their talk with images, videos, or short performances.

One student noted:

"I feel proud to talk about our culture in English. It's not only learning language, it's also sharing who we are."

Another added:

"When the teacher asks about something from my country, I don't feel like I'm translating. I feel like I'm contributing."

These reflections confirm the findings of Lütge and Zhang [8], who show that **culturally responsive EMI** creates a sense of belonging and ownership

among learners. It also resonates with Canagarajah's [12] argument that students become more intellectually active when they are allowed to bring their "funds of knowledge" into academic discourse. However, students also noted that not all instructors encouraged this level of localisation. In courses that focused solely on Western theorists and examples, many felt detached. One survey comment read:

"It's hard to relate when all the materials are about cultures I don't know."

This highlights the tension between **standardised global curricula and the need for local epistemologies in EMI programs,** especially in disciplines where culture is not an object of study but a living system of meaning.

Affective Dimensions: Anxiety and Motivation

The emotional effects of EMI instruction were mixed. As noted earlier, **45% of students reported experiencing anxiety when required to speak English in front of others**. This anxiety was not solely about language competence but also about **performing identity** in a foreign academic register.

At the same time, **73% of respondents agreed that EMI increased their motivation to study Culturology**. In interviews, students expressed that learning in English made them feel part of an "international space" or "modern education." One participant put it this way:

"Even if it's hard, I know this will help me in the future. I want to do a master's abroad, and this is preparing me."

This tension between linguistic discomfort and aspirational drive is a common theme in EMI studies. It suggests that **motivation in EMI is often extrinsic at first**, tied to imagined futures, but can become intrinsic if learners are supported emotionally and intellectually along the way.

Interestingly, students who had access to peer support (e.g., study groups, shared notes) reported significantly lower levels of anxiety. This supports the argument made by Wang et al. [4] that **community-based coping mechanisms** are essential for success in EMI environments.

In summary, the findings indicate that student engagement in EMI content-course (Culturology case) courses is shaped by a dynamic interplay of factors: language confidence, accessibility of materials, cultural resonance, and emotional safety. While students face real challenges—particularly around oral expression and academic vocabulary—these can be mitigated through **intentional, responsive pedagogy**. The following section explores how these findings contribute to broader discussions on EMI and outlines practical implications for instructors and curriculum designers.

Discussion

The results of this study provide a nuanced picture of the dynamics that shape English-medium instruction (EMI) in English-taught content courses (Culturology case) at a Ukrainian university. The findings confirm many trends

observed in the broader EMI literature, while also revealing discipline-specific considerations that deserve further attention. In this discussion, we interpret the empirical findings in light of existing scholarship, address key tensions within the EMI model, and provide recommendations for instructors, curriculum designers, and institutional policymakers.

Beyond Language: EMI as an Emotional and Epistemic Space

One of the most striking themes to emerge from this study is that **EMI is not merely a linguistic challenge, but an emotional and epistemic one**. Students were not only translating vocabulary—they were negotiating voice, authority, and belonging in a cultural discourse that was no longer anchored in their mother tongue. This aligns with what Wang, Yuan, and De Costa [4] refer to as the "socio-affective domain" of EMI, which encompasses feelings of vulnerability, exclusion, and empowerment.

Several students described how their **cognitive ideas felt "diminished" or "childlike" in English**, even when those ideas were sophisticated in their native language. This sense of expressive constraint is not only a matter of grammar or fluency; it reflects more profound questions about whose language sets the tone for valid knowledge. As Phillipson [9] warns, EMI—if not carefully implemented—can replicate structures of **linguistic imperialism**, where English becomes a gatekeeper rather than a bridge.

However, this emotional tension was not uniformly negative. Many students also viewed EMI as a source of aspiration and legitimacy. Learning Culturology in English allowed them to **imagine futures beyond national borders**, including graduate school abroad, academic publishing, or work in international NGOs. This supports the idea that EMI can function as a **symbolic and aspirational economy**, offering students more than just content—it provides access for status, identity, and mobility [5].

Culturology as a High-Stakes Discipline for EMI

The findings strongly suggest that EMI requires **discipline-specific adaptation**, and Culturology presents unique challenges in this regard. Unlike disciplines that rely on formulas, lab results, or procedural knowledge, Culturology requires interpretation, reflection, and emotional engagement. The content is not value-neutral; it is often about contested meanings, historical injustices, and identity politics.

Therefore, the standard EMI toolkit—PowerPoint slides, assigned readings, and classroom discussions—is insufficient without **intentional scaffolding and multimodal design**. Instructors must find ways to make abstract, theory-heavy material accessible without oversimplifying it. This means **curating visuals**, using storytelling techniques, and explicitly teaching the discourse conventions of cultural analysis.

Smit [11] emphasises that **the epistemic demands of the discipline must shape EMI pedagogy**, not the other way around. If Culturology is reduced to textbook summaries or disconnected lectures in simplified English, students miss the richness of the field and become passive language learners rather than active cultural interpreters.

The Power of Cultural Relevance

Perhaps the most powerful pedagogical insight from this study is the central role of **cultural relevance** in motivating student participation. When instructors included local traditions, regional case studies, or invited students to share their cultural experiences, engagement increased dramatically. This was not only evident in verbal participation but also in body language, creativity, and emotional resonance.

These findings support the arguments made by Breeze and Sancho Guinda [7], who contend that EMI should not be an exercise in "global English detachment," but rather a way to bring **local voices into global conversations**. The role of the instructor, then, is not to erase local cultures in favour of global academic norms, but to create space where cultural identities are welcomed and translated, not replaced.

This principle has resonance in Eastern Europe, where many students have been historically taught to view English as a "prestige language," but have limited models for how to use it to discuss their own cultural realities. In that sense, EMI content-course (Culturology case) becomes a political act—a space where students learn not only in English but also about English as a tool for cultural mediation.

Anxiety and Safe Spaces: Managing Emotional Risk

As noted in the findings, **linguistic anxiety continues to be a significant barrier to participation**. The fear of being judged for grammatical errors or for "sounding unintelligent" was reported by nearly half of the respondents. This suggests that even when students understand the content, they may opt out of discussion due to emotional risk.

To counter this, instructors must adopt **psychologically safe practices**. This includes validating student contributions regardless of linguistic accuracy, encouraging code-switching when necessary, and implementing low-stakes formative assessments that focus on process, not just performance. Group work, peer feedback, and structured academic dialogues can also reduce pressure and normalise imperfect English.

Wang [4] highlights that successful EMI environments are **relational as much as they are instructional**. A skilled EMI teacher is not just a content expert but a facilitator of emotional safety, cultural negotiation, and linguistic experimentation.

Institutional Considerations and Equity

Ultimately, it is crucial to situate these findings within broader institutional contexts. The university in this case study introduced EMI as part of its strategic push toward internationalisation. While the goal is laudable, the implementation was uneven. Not all instructors had EMI training, and not all courses were adapted for language learners. This mirrors patterns found in other EMI transitions, where policy ambitions outpace classroom realities.

If EMI is to succeed in disciplines like Culturology, institutions must invest in **teacher development, curriculum redesign, and material support**. This includes workshops on multimodal pedagogy, access to visual and digital resources, and time for collaborative lesson planning. Moreover, language support should not be left solely to students. EMI must be seen as a shared responsibility—linguistic, pedagogical, and ethical.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study was limited to a single institutional context and had a relatively small sample size. As such, the findings are not universally generalizable. However, they offer grounded insights that can inform EMI practice in similar settings. Future research should consider longitudinal studies that follow students across multiple semesters or trace how EMI impacts their academic identity over time.

In addition, comparative studies across disciplines would be valuable. How does EMI function differently in an interpretive content course (Culturology case) versus Sociology, History, or Art Studies? What lessons can be shared across the humanities to create more inclusive and effective EMI environments?

In summary, EMI in an interpretive content course (Culturology case) presents both challenges and opportunities. It requires more than English-language proficiency; it demands pedagogical creativity, cultural sensitivity, and emotional awareness. When implemented thoughtfully, EMI does not dilute Culturology—it transforms it into a translingual, transcultural practice of learning and meaning-making.

The final section of this article outlines specific recommendations based on these findings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to investigate how English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) operates within the specific context of English-taught content courses (Culturology case) at a Ukrainian university. Using a mixed-methods approach—comprising classroom observations, student interviews, and a targeted survey—we sought to understand not only how EMI operates in theory, but also how it is experienced by students in real classrooms, with real language barriers, cultural expectations, and emotional risks.

The findings confirm what many EMI scholars have already suggested: EMI is not a neutral or technical pedagogical shift. It is a complex, multifaceted practice that intersects with questions of identity, access, power, and belonging. In a discipline like Culturology, where content is interpretive, symbolic, and often highly personal, these intersections become especially significant.

Students in this study generally viewed EMI as valuable and motivating, particularly in relation to their future academic and professional goals. However, they also expressed a strong need for support—linguistically, emotionally, and culturally.

The desire to participate fully was evident, but the tools and space to do so were not always available. This gap highlights a broader challenge: how to implement EMI in a manner that is not only ambitious but also equitable and responsive.

Key Takeaways

The study produced several core insights that can inform both practice and policy:

- **Language confidence is fragile but improvable.** Students do not need perfect English to think critically or make meaningful contributions. What they need is consistent scaffolding, patient facilitation, and opportunities to develop fluency through authentic use.
- **Multimodal resources are not a luxury—they are a necessity.** Videos, images, infographics, and physical movement (especially in Performing Arts programs) allow students to access complex ideas without becoming overwhelmed by academic language.
- **Cultural relevance is the strongest predictor of engagement.** When students are invited to discuss or analyse elements of their cultural background, their participation, confidence, and depth of thinking increase significantly.
- **Anxiety is real and must be addressed explicitly.** Language errors should be de-stigmatised. Instructors must create environments where it is safe to speak, to fail, and to learn from that failure.
- **EMI is only as strong as the institutional support behind it.** Without training, time, and resources, even the most dedicated instructors will struggle to adapt their teaching to EMI demands, particularly in content-heavy, abstract disciplines like Culturology.

Recommendations for Instructors

1. **Use visual prompts regularly**, especially for complex theories or culturally distant examples. Even simple charts or icons can reduce cognitive load.
2. **Design tasks that allow cultural comparison.** For instance, after introducing a Western cultural theory, ask students to apply it to a tradition from their home country.

3. **Allow code-switching when it supports meaning.** Students should not be penalised for thinking in their first language or for expressing part of an idea in Ukrainian while searching for the right word in English.

4. **Adopt reflective questioning techniques.** Instead of open-ended, high-pressure prompts ("What do you think about cultural hybridity?"), try structured stems ("One way hybridity appears in my culture is…").

5. **Provide optional rehearsal time.** Before presentations or discussions, let students prepare their ideas in small groups or via writing. This helps reduce the fear of spontaneous error.

Recommendations for Universities

1. **Offer EMI-specific pedagogical training.** Not all instructors are trained in language-aware or culturally responsive teaching. Short, focused workshops can make a big difference.

2. **Create resource libraries.** This includes curated videos, culturally diverse case studies, glossaries, and templates for lesson scaffolding.

3. **Align EMI policy with capacity.** If the institutional goal is to expand EMI, then academic calendars, teaching loads, and assessment policies must support that vision realistically.

4. **Support student communities.** Peer study groups, tutoring centres, or discussion clubs can help reduce anxiety and normalise collaborative language learning.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for further investigation:

- Longitudinal research is needed to track how EMI influences not just semester outcomes, but students' long-term academic identity and career trajectories.
- Comparative studies across countries and disciplines would offer valuable insights into how Culturology differs from related fields (e.g., sociology, anthropology) in its EMI demands.
- Action research involving teachers themselves would deepen our understanding of what works in EMI pedagogy, and what remains aspirational or problematic.

In conclusion, this article argues that EMI, when used thoughtfully and critically, can enrich the teaching of non-language disciplines. It enables new voices, global dialogues, and the growth of both language and cultural understanding. But this potential can only be realised if we move beyond the assumption that English alone guarantees quality or engagement. It is not the language itself, but what we do with it—and how we support those using it—that makes the difference.

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