Bridging Worlds: How English-Medium Instruction Shapes Learner Identity and Perspectives in Tertiary Education

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ABSTRACT

English-medium instruction (EMI) is increasingly common in tertiary education, yet its influence on learners extends beyond the language used to teach disciplinary content. This conceptual paper develops an integrated framework explaining how EMI experiences may shape learner perspectives towards EMI through learner identity construction. A structured narrative review was conducted using Scopus. Across three searches, 18 records were exported; after three duplicates were removed, 15 unique publications formed the core analytic corpus. Additional foundational sources were then used for theoretical, methodological, and contextual framing, but were not included in the thematic coding. The core corpus was synthesised through an integrative thematic analysis, in which have identified five interrelated themes: academic opportunities and learning demands; identity construction and multilingual positioning; context-sensitive learner evaluations; identity-related responses to EMI; and institutional, cultural, and future-oriented influences. This review indicates that EMI can expand access to disciplinary knowledge, international communication, mobility, and professional opportunities, while also generating linguistic difficulty, insecurity, cultural tension, or exclusion in some contexts. Importantly, learner perspectives are defined here as evaluative orientations towards EMI including perceived value, benefits, challenges, and willingness to continue whereas self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement are treated as related but distinct constructs. The framework therefore proposes, rather than empirically establishes, learner identity construction as a mediating mechanism between EMI experiences and learner perspectives. Its contribution lies in reorganising previously parallel relationships among EMI, identity, and learner evaluations into a testable direct-and-indirect model. The paper concludes with specific implications for multilingual inclusion, academic support, equitable assessment, and future empirical testing across diverse contexts.

Keywords: English-medium instruction; learner identity; learner perspectives; tertiary education; mediation model.

INTRODUCTION

English-medium instruction (EMI) has become an increasingly prominent feature of tertiary education, as universities internationalise their curricula, expand cross-border academic engagement and prepare graduates for participation in global educational and professional environments. EMI broadly refers to the use of English to teach academic subjects other than English itself in countries where English is not the first language of the majority of people (Macaro et al., 2018). However its expansion signifies more than a shift in the language through which disciplinary content is delivered. EMI provides an educational context in which students are required to acquire knowledge of the subject matter, while negotiating academic participation through an additional language. Therefore, learners' experiences are not only influenced by their English proficiency but also by disciplinary expectations, pedagogical practices, institutional language

policies and the wider sociolinguistic meanings associated with English (Dafouz & Smit, 2016). Recent evidence confirms the rapid international expansion of EMI research, while also pointing to ongoing variation in language-related challenges, learning experiences, and institutional practices across contexts (Rose et al., 2026).

Past research increasingly shows that these experiences also extend to questions of learner identity and students' evaluations of EMI. In Oman, Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2019) discovered that students recognised the academic, communicative, and employment value of EMI while also expressing concerns about comprehension and Arabic's position in higher education. Similar to this, students in Kazakhstan negotiated fluid multilingual identities instead of merely replacing their existing linguistic identities with English-oriented ones (Zhunussova et al., 2023). Additionally, Han (2023) demonstrated that students' experiences with EMI at a Sino-foreign university were influenced by linguistic preparedness, motivation, pedagogical expectations, and academic adaptation processes, whereas Nguyen and Dang (2024) reported that EMI participation could be associated with declining self-efficacy among some Vietnamese business students. More recent work has reinforced the connection between EMI and identity negotiation. Wang and Jiang (2025) applied investment theory to show that Chinese university students negotiated linguistic capital by competing investment priorities and future identities through their EMI experiences. Similar findings from universities in six Gulf countries suggest that students negotiate the relationship between English, educational opportunity and cultural and linguistic identity rather than experiencing EMI as either uniformly empowering or culturally threatening (Aljehani & Modiano, 2026).

Despite the growing body of research, an important conceptual question remains. Earlier studies on EMI mainly evaluated language competence, academic achievement, classroom issues, attitudes, and program success as isolated outcomes (Macaro et al., 2018), whereas more recent enquiries have begun to emphasise the sociolinguistic, identity-related, and contextual elements of EMI. Indeed, the updated systematic review by Rose et al. (2026) synthesising 196 empirical studies published between 2016 and 2023 identifies continuing gaps in sociolinguistic and pedagogical dimensions of EMI and thus calls for greater attention to equity and longer-term educational consequences. The gap, therefore, is no longer that identity or learner perspectives have been completely neglected. Instead, the relationships between these factors that previous studies have investigated tend to be limited to particular national, institutional or disciplinary contexts, and there is little conceptual integration explaining how the identity construction of learners may connect their EMI experiences with the ways they later evaluate English-medium education. This difference matters because some students interpret similar EMI environments as enabling and valuable, while others interpret them as demanding, exclusionary, or identity-threatening. In this paper, learner perspectives towards EMI are therefore conceptualised specifically as learners' evaluative orientations towards English-medium education, including their attitudes, perceived value, perceived benefits and challenges, and willingness to participate in or continue English-medium study.

To address this gap, the present paper proposes a mediation framework in which learner identity construction links EMI in tertiary education with learner perspectives towards EMI. The novelty of the model does not rest on claiming that the three constructs have not previously been connected; rather, it lies in repositioning learner identity from a parallel or descriptive outcome to a potential explanatory mechanism. The framework also maintains a clear distinction between learner identity and related constructs such as self-efficacy, motivation, and academic engagement. In this paper, learner perspectives towards EMI are defined more narrowly as learners' evaluative orientations towards English-medium education, including perceived value, perceived benefits and challenges, and willingness to participate in or continue EMI. The framework is anchored primarily in Norton's conception of identity and investment and Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment (Norton, 2013), while Dafouz and Smit's (2016) ROAD-MAPPING framework provides a contextual lens for understanding EMI as an institutional and disciplinary ecology. By specifying a direct pathway from EMI to learner perspectives and an indirect pathway through identity construction, the model offers a parsimonious and empirically testable explanation of why learner evaluations may differ across EMI contexts.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The literature review examines EMI in tertiary education,

learner identity construction, and learner perspectives towards EMI. The methodology section explains the structured narrative-review design, Scopus search strategy, distinction between the core analytic corpus and supplementary references, study-selection procedures, and thematic synthesis. The findings section then compares the major themes and cross-contextual tensions emerging from the review, followed by development of the theoretical framework and propositions. A separate section outlines how the proposed relationships can be operationalised and empirically tested, and the practical implications section specifies recommendations for university administrators, educators, and policymakers. The conclusion summarises the contribution, limitations, and priorities for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review explores the three conceptual areas that form the basis of the proposed framework: English-medium instruction in tertiary education, the construction of learner identity, and learner perspectives on EMI. These domains often exist as somewhat separate strands of scholarship, but they intersect in students' lived experiences of English-mediated higher education. The review therefore first considers the purposes, characteristics, opportunities, and constraints associated with EMI before examining how learners negotiate identity within such environments and how these experiences subsequently shape their evaluations of EMI. This structure provides the theoretical basis for theorising learner identity construction as a possible mechanism linking EMI experiences with learner perspectives.

English-Medium Instruction in Tertiary Education

English-medium instruction (EMI) is a recognised aspect of higher-education internationalisation, especially in contexts where English is not the dominant community language. In general terms, EMI is more about using English as a medium of instruction to teach academic or disciplinary content rather than specifically teaching English as a language (Macaro et al., 2018). This difference is important because the main goal of EMI is to teach students the knowledge contents, although they may also improve their proficiency in English in long-term academic exposure. According to Chapple (2015), imparting academic knowledge in English should not be synonymous with English language teaching, since language growth cannot be inferred solely from engagement in English-medium instruction. Nonetheless, universities have multiple and often overlapping reasons for adopting EMI, including internationalisation, access to global disciplinary knowledge, student and staff mobility, international recruitment and graduate competitiveness. Therefore, EMI should be perceived not solely as a language selection in educational settings but as integral to a larger institutional and sociolinguistic framework in which the roles and status of English intersect with disciplinary practices, language policies, academic participants, and internationalisation strategies (Dafouz & Smit, 2016, 2020).

The rapid expansion of EMI has generated a considerable debate on its educational benefits and challenges. Early studies had shown that the transition towards English-medium higher education could somehow produce tensions between institutional aspirations and classroom realities. For example, Byun et al. (2011) found discrepancies between policies supporting English-medium instruction and the linguistic and pedagogical circumstances faced by instructors and students in South Korea, while Evans and Morrison (2011) detailed the linguistic and academic difficulties faced by first-year university students transferring to English-medium higher education in Hong Kong. Similar issues have been noted in other situations, especially when students have to learn new disciplinary concepts and use a second language at the same time. Such findings challenge the assumption that replacing the local language of instruction with English automatically produces either internationalisation or improved educational outcomes. Rather, the effectiveness of EMI is determined by the interaction of students' linguistic readiness, disciplinary demands, lecturer practices, institutional support, and opportunities for meaningful academic participation (Han, 2023).

There are more recent evidence that have reinforces this contextual interpretation while also providing a more developed picture of EMI outcomes. Macaro et al. (2018) systematic review concluded that the evidence base was insufficient to make unequivocal claims, concerning the effects of EMI on either English-

language development or disciplinary learning. The updated systematic review by Rose et al. (2026), drawing on 196 empirical studies published between 2016 and 2023, demonstrates that the field has expanded substantially but that outcomes remain differentiated. Their synthesis indicates generally positive effects on receptive language skills and vocabulary, whereas findings for productive skills remain mixed. Importantly, the available evidence does not indicate that EMI necessarily reduces disciplinary attainment, with some studies reporting outcomes comparable to or stronger than first-language instruction. Nonetheless, challenges remain, particularly in academic writing and transitions from first-language to English-medium education, and the review identifies continuing gaps concerning sociolinguistic equity, employability, postgraduate EMI, and longer-term educational outcomes (Rose et al., 2026). These results suggest a need to consider EMI as a context-specific educational setting and not an intervention with uniformly positive or negative effects.

Students' experiences of EMI also demonstrate the fact that perceived value of EMI is closely linked to the opportunities and constraints associated with English. To give an example, Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2019) reported that students and lecturers in Oman has associated English-medium education to employment, international communication and wider educational opportunities, but also expressed concerns about content comprehension and the position of Arabic within higher education. Furthermore, Han (2023) discovered that English-medium provision within Sino-foreign cooperative education did not guarantee meaningful internationalisation because students' experiences were influenced by language proficiency, motivation, pedagogical practices, and adaptation to unfamiliar learning expectations. Therefore, English has both symbolic and instrumental value in higher education. It can provide access to professional opportunities, academic knowledge, and international mobility while also posing new challenges for students lacking adequate English-language resources. This longer-term dimension is illustrated by research on medium-of-instruction backgrounds in India, which shows that English proficiency and English-medium educational experience can influence higher education access, professional confidence, employment opportunities, and career paths (Khan & Jayaraj, 2026).

Overall, the literature suggests that EMI in tertiary education should not be defined solely in terms of whether English is used as the instructional language. Its educational significance stems from how English-medium education is perceived and implemented through disciplinary instruction, academic interaction, institutional expectations, language support, and access to educational and professional opportunities. The current conceptual framework revolves around this gap. EMI provides the educational context in which students come into contact with English as an academic resource and negotiate with the opportunities and constraints of its institutional use. However, these experiences do not always translate directly into learner perspectives that are either positive or negative. These elements are interpreted in terms of learners' understandings of themselves as language users and participants in academia. This provides the conceptual shift to the next section which considers learner identity construction in English-mediated tertiary education.

. Learner Identity Construction in English-Medium Instruction

The construct of learner identity has gained increasing significance in understanding participation in second-language and multilingual education, simply because language learning involves not only the development of linguistic competence, but also the negotiation of how individuals see themselves and are positioned by others. Identity is therefore not understood as a fixed individual property; rather, it is socially constructed, multiple, fluid, and continuously re-negotiated across contexts and over time (Norton, 2013). From this perspective, learning and using English can open up opportunities for learners to claim new academic, linguistic, social and professional positions, while at the same time challenging existing affiliations. Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment extends this argument by placing learners' engagement at the intersection of identity, ideology and capital. Learners may recognise the instrumental value of English but not necessarily commit themselves to particular language practices when institutional norms define them as inadequate and when participation offers only limited access to valued resources. In contrast in settings in which learners' existing linguistic resources are acknowledged and authentic opportunities for participation are provided, students may be able to develop identities as successful multilingual users of English and as acknowledged members of academic communities. Identity construction is therefore highly relevant to EMI

as students are required to demonstrate their disciplinary competence in English while negotiating the implications of their English language use for their academic legitimacy, cultural affiliations and future possibilities.

In the EMI environment, this negotiation can be heightened since English is also acting simultaneously as the medium of instruction, academic resource, and as a form of linguistic capital. Students may enter EMI programmes with established identities that is already formed around their first languages, previous schooling, disciplinary backgrounds, and local communities. However, engagement with English-medium higher education may introduce additional identities linked to multilingualism, international education, disciplinary expertise and imagined professional futures. Empirical research suggests that this type of identity development is not typically a simple move from a local identity to an English-speaking identity. Zhunussova et al. (2023) found that multilingual students at EMI universities in Kazakhstan developed multiple and fluid identities that are shaped by language ideologies, power relations, sociopolitical discourses, and individual agency. Moreover, their findings also indicate that an over-emphasis on English at the institutional level can threaten local or national linguistic identities and that learners are capable of resisting positions imposed from outside and negotiating alternative identities. This evidence suggests that EMI can expand students' identity repertoires but also create tensions around linguistic legitimacy and cultural belonging. In addition, Denman and Al-Mahrooqi's (2019) findings from Oman similarly reveal that the perceived value of English coexists with concerns surrounding Arabic, academic comprehension, and sociocultural identity. Learner identity in EMI should therefore be understood as additive, negotiated, and context dependent, rather than as a process through which English simply replaces an existing linguistic or cultural identity.

The relationship among identity, investment, and linguistic capital is particularly important in explaining how learners interpret opportunities offered by EMI. Wang and Jiang (2025), drawing directly on Darvin and Norton's investment model, found that Chinese university students negotiated competing priorities concerning disciplinary knowledge, English-language capital, and future identities during their EMI experiences. Students generally prioritised disciplinary knowledge over English improvement and varied their investment in EMI according to whether participation was perceived as providing worthwhile academic returns. Their identity negotiations also involved disciplinary and national identities as well as imagined international professional identities, while ideologies privileging English monolingualism constrained some students' perceptions of their multilingual resources. This finding is particularly significant for the present framework because it demonstrates that identity is not produced by exposure to English alone. Instead, learners evaluate how English-mediated participation relates to the forms of knowledge, recognition, capital, and future positions they value. In this sense, EMI offers an identity space within which learners continuously assess who they are as students, what kinds of academic participants they can become, and whether English expands or restricts their imagined educational and professional possibilities.

The idea of identity construction in EMI is also intertwined with learners' psychological and behavioural experiences, although the direction of these relationships should not be oversimplified. Huang's (2025) longitudinal study of Taiwanese undergraduates found significant relationships between behavioural engagement, motivational intensity, self-efficacy, and positive and negative self-identity. Importantly, the study examined these factors as contributors to identity development, with behavioural engagement emerging as a particularly strong predictor of positive self-identity. These findings suggest that identity construction is recursive. Successful participation may reinforce learners' perceptions of themselves as capable English users, while negative experiences may contribute to less favourable self-positioning. Identity may subsequently shape how learners interpret future opportunities for participation, but the relationship is unlikely to operate in a single direction. This reciprocal quality is consistent with identity theory, which views identity as continually reconstructed through learners' interactions with institutional expectations, available resources, and their own agency. For the present conceptual model, this means that learner identity should not be reduced to confidence or self-efficacy. Rather, it concerns the broader process through which students construct and negotiate their linguistic legitimacy, academic membership, multilingual positioning, and imagined future identities within EMI environments.

Taken together, the literature indicates that EMI provides a significant context for identity construction because learners must reconcile the institutional value of English with their existing linguistic repertoires, disciplinary aspirations, cultural affiliations, and desired future roles. The resulting identities may be empowering when learners are recognised as legitimate multilingual participants and perceive English as expanding access to valued academic and professional opportunities. They may become contested when English is associated with linguistic deficiency, exclusion, monolingual expectations, or threats to existing cultural and linguistic affiliations. Learner identity construction therefore offers a theoretically plausible mechanism for explaining why students exposed to apparently similar EMI environments may develop markedly different evaluations of those experiences. This provides the conceptual bridge to the next section, which examines learner perspectives towards EMI and considers how students evaluate the value, benefits, challenges, and desirability of continued participation in English-medium education.

Learner Perspectives towards English-Medium Instruction

Learner perspectives are central to understanding how students interpret and respond to English-medium instruction because the implementation of EMI does not necessarily produce uniform educational experiences. In the present study, learner perspectives towards EMI refer to students' evaluative orientations towards English-medium education, encompassing their attitudes towards EMI, perceptions of its academic and professional value, assessments of its benefits and challenges, and willingness to participate in or continue English-medium study. This definition distinguishes perspectives from related psychological and behavioural constructs such as self-efficacy, motivation, engagement, and sense of belonging. While these constructs could influence or be influenced by students' evaluations of EMI, including all of them as parts of learner perspectives would make the dependent construct overly broad. Learner perspectives are thus conceived primarily as students' interpretations and evaluations of EMI within the framework of their educational experiences. Such evaluations are important because institutional policies supporting EMI may look desirable from an internationalisation perspective but be experienced very differently by the students who are expected to learn through English.

Previous studies have shown that students often assess EMI by combining perceived opportunities with actual academic demands. Positive perspectives are often linked to access to international knowledge, English language development, mobility, communication and future employment. For example, Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2019) found that university students in Oman generally acknowledged the value of EMI for employment and wider communication. But their support was also accompanied by concerns about disciplinary understanding, use of Arabic language and the wider sociocultural implications of English-medium education. This co-existence is important, in that it suggests that learner perspectives should not be reduced to a simple dichotomy of 'positive' and 'negative' attitudes. Students might appreciate the professional advantages of EMI, but at the same time question its effectiveness for some modes of academic study. Likewise, Han (2023) revealed that students' perceptions of EMI in a Sino-foreign higher education institution were influenced by their English proficiency, motivation, adaptation to unfamiliar pedagogies, and their experiences of teaching and learning. This research indicates that students make their evaluation of EMI by balancing the perceived future value against the linguistic and academic demands experienced in actual participation.

Learners' perspectives also vary depending on the disciplinary and educational context. In a study of 215 Vietnamese university students, Van et al. (2023) reported a significant difference between students in natural-science and social-science disciplines. Natural-science students were more satisfied with the clear learning intentions, but social-science students were more concerned with the tangible English-language achievement. These disciplinary differences indicate that students do not evaluate EMI independently of what they are expected to accomplish through English. The linguistic demands of lectures, reading, discussion, written assessment, subject-specific vocabulary and academic argumentation differ considerably across disciplines, and these differences influence students' perceptions of EMI as manageable and educationally beneficial. Generalisations about 'students' attitudes toward EMI' are therefore likely to mask important differences in disciplinary expectations, previous language-learning experiences, proficiency, pedagogical support and perceived academic returns. Instead, learner perspectives should be seen as context

sensitive judgements that are constructed through the interaction between what learners expect EMI to provide and what they actually experience within specific programs and disciplines.

Recent evidence further demonstrates that perceptions of EMI are closely connected to broader questions of opportunity, linguistic positioning, and cultural affiliation. Aljehani and Modiano's (2026) study of students across six Gulf Cooperation Council countries found that students negotiated English as both an educational resource and a marker of social and linguistic positioning. English dominated the educational domains, but remained comparatively less prominent in students' home-language practices, producing what the researchers describe as a form of strategic separation between linguistic worlds. Importantly, higher English proficiency was associated with lower levels of cultural anxiety, challenging simplistic assumptions that stronger engagement with English necessarily weakens cultural identification. These findings suggest that learners may value EMI for its association with academic and international opportunities without necessarily abandoning local linguistic or cultural commitments. At the same time, favourable perspectives cannot be assumed merely from the institutional presence of English. Nguyen and Dang's (2024) longitudinal study found that EMI participation was associated with a negative change in self-efficacy among Vietnamese business students. This suggests that English-mediated education can be psychologically demanding when programme requirements and learners' perceived capabilities are poorly aligned. Although self-efficacy is treated in the present framework as distinct from learner perspectives, such evidence illustrates how lived EMI experiences can inform learners' subsequent evaluations of its desirability, accessibility, and value.

Taken together, the literature suggests that learner perspectives towards EMI emerge from students' interpretation of the opportunities, demands, and meanings attached to English-medium education. Learners are more likely to evaluate EMI favourably when they perceive English-mediated study as academically manageable, relevant to their disciplinary needs, supportive of valued future opportunities, and compatible with their linguistic and cultural positioning. Conversely, perspectives may become less favourable when EMI produces persistent comprehension difficulties, inadequate pedagogical support, perceived exclusion, or tensions between institutional expectations and learners' available resources. Crucially for the present conceptual framework, these evaluations may not arise directly from exposure to EMI alone. Students interpret EMI through their developing understandings of themselves as language users, academic participants, multilingual individuals, and prospective professionals. Learner identity construction therefore provides a theoretically plausible mechanism through which similar EMI experiences may generate different evaluations among different students. Accordingly, learner perspectives towards EMI constitute the outcome construct in the proposed framework, while the subsequent analysis considers whether learner identity construction can explain how EMI experiences are translated into those perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a structured narrative review methodology to synthesise existing scholarship on English-medium instruction (EMI), learner identity construction, and learner perspectives in tertiary education. The review was designed to support the development of a conceptual framework rather than to estimate intervention effects or produce a statistically pooled synthesis. Accordingly, the methodology combined the interpretive flexibility of a narrative review with transparent procedures for literature identification, screening, data extraction, and thematic synthesis. This approach was appropriate because the literature relevant to the study spans several interrelated but theoretically diverse areas, including higher education, applied linguistics, second-language learning, multilingualism, learner identity, EMI, and educational attitudes. The review was therefore structured to identify recurring concepts, theoretical relationships, contextual differences, and areas of convergence or contradiction across the literature. The methodological process comprised the definition of the review scope and research question, literature retrieval through the Scopus database, screening against predetermined eligibility criteria, extraction of relevant information into a literature matrix, and synthesis of the selected studies through an integrative thematic approach. The resulting synthesis was subsequently used to inform the development of the proposed relationships among EMI, learner identity construction, and learner perspectives towards EMI.

Research Design: Structured Narrative Review

A structured narrative review was selected because the primary purpose of the study was to interpret and integrate conceptually diverse research rather than to answer a narrowly bounded effectiveness question or calculate an aggregate effect size. Narrative reviews are particularly useful for examining broad and theoretically complex topics because they allow researchers to compare findings across different methodological designs, geographical contexts, disciplinary traditions, and theoretical perspectives (Ferrari, 2015; Green et al., 2006). In the present study, the literature encompasses qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, conceptual, and review-based studies examining EMI, multilingual learner identities, investment in English-mediated education, student attitudes, and related educational experiences. Such methodological and conceptual heterogeneity makes an interpretive synthesis more suitable than procedures designed primarily for highly homogeneous empirical evidence. At the same time, narrative reviews may be vulnerable to selective interpretation when the procedures used to identify and synthesise literature are insufficiently transparent. For this reason, the present study incorporated structured searching, explicit eligibility criteria, documented screening procedures, and systematic data extraction to strengthen the transparency and credibility of the review (Snyder, 2019).

The review was guided by the central question: How does English-medium instruction influence learner identity construction and learner perspectives in tertiary education? Consistent with the revised conceptual framework, EMI was treated as the educational context in which academic content is taught through English, while learner identity construction refers to the dynamic process through which students negotiate their linguistic legitimacy, academic membership, multilingual positioning, and imagined future identities within English-mediated education. Learner perspectives towards EMI were conceptualised more narrowly as students' evaluative orientations towards English-medium education, including their attitudes, perceived value, perceived benefits and challenges, and willingness to participate in or continue EMI. It was important to establish these conceptual boundaries at the design stage because constructs such as self-efficacy, motivation, engagement and belonging are all closely related to identity and learner perspectives but are not considered as constituent dimensions of the dependent construct in the proposed framework.

This study was not designed or reported as a systematic review. Instead, it adopted selected procedural elements associated with systematic searching, including a documented database strategy, explicit eligibility criteria, and study screening. This is to reduce arbitrary selection while preserving the interpretive and theory-building orientation of a narrative review. This distinction is important because the purpose of the present paper is to explain how existing evidence can be integrated into a mediation framework rather than to claim exhaustive retrieval of every EMI publication. The review therefore prioritised conceptual relevance, theoretical explanatory value, and empirical evidence directly related to tertiary-level EMI, learner identity, and learner evaluations. The detailed search strategy, the relationship between the core analytic corpus and supplementary references, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the thematic synthesis procedures are described below.

Key Steps in Conducting the Structured Narrative Review

The structured narrative review was conducted in five interconnected stages which are, defining the review scope, identifying relevant literature, screening and selecting studies, extracting relevant information, and synthesising the collected evidence. These stages were adopted to provide a transparent and logically organised review process while retaining the interpretive orientation required for conceptual framework development. The procedure was informed by established guidance on rigorous narrative and literature-based reviews, which emphasises the importance of clearly defining the review purpose, documenting the literature-search process, evaluating the relevance of retrieved studies, and synthesising evidence in relation to the research question rather than merely presenting a descriptive summary of individual publications (Ferrari, 2015; Snyder, 2019).

The first stage involved defining the scope and conceptual boundaries of the review. The review focused specifically on English-medium instruction in tertiary education and its relationship with learner identity

construction and learner perspectives towards EMI. The central question, "How does English-medium instruction influence learner identity construction and learner perspectives in tertiary education?" guided the identification and evaluation of relevant literature. Particular attention was given to studies examining university or tertiary-level EMI experiences, multilingual learner identities, investment in English-mediated education, attitudes towards EMI, and students' evaluations of its academic and professional value. Constructs such as self-efficacy, motivation, engagement, linguistic capital, and belonging were considered when they contributed to understanding the relationships among the three principal constructs, but they were not treated as constituent dimensions of learner perspectives.

The second stage was to identify potentially relevant literature through a systematic search of the Scopus database. Keywords and Boolean operators were developed to capture publications on EMI, higher education, identity, multilingual or second-language learning, and learner evaluations or outcomes. The detailed search string, search fields, database-search date, and filters applied are reported separately in Section 3.3. This separation prevents the general review procedure from getting mixed up with operational details of data collection.

The third stage involved screening and selecting the retrieved publications according to predetermined eligibility criteria. Initially, titles and abstracts were screened to determine whether a publication was relevant enough to the review question. Eligible publications that seemed relevant or for which eligibility could not be determined on the basis of the abstract alone were evaluated by full text. In the selection process, studies found in tertiary education and directly relevant to EMI, learner identity or learner perspectives were prioritised. The review excluded studies that were outside the level of education or conceptual scope. Section 3.3 outlines the detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria and the number of records retained at each stage.

In the fourth stage, information was systematically extracted from the selected publications and organised in a review matrix. Extracted information included bibliographic details, geographical and institutional context, research objectives, methodological approaches, participants, theoretical perspectives, main constructs and key findings. Particular emphasis was given to evidence about students' experiences of EMI, processes of identity negotiation, perceptions of linguistic legitimacy and academic participation, attitudes toward English-medium education, and evaluations of the opportunities and challenges associated with EMI. This organization of the literature allowed for comparison across studies from different national, disciplinary and methodological contexts.

The final and fifth stage was the integrative thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature. Instead of summarising the studies one by one, the analysis was centred on comparing recurring concepts, convergent findings, contradictory evidence, and theoretical explanations in the reviewed publications. The initial coding was deductively informed by the three main domains of the study that are EMI in tertiary education, learner identity construction and learner perspectives toward EMI. The other themes were allowed to emerge inductively from the literature. These were linguistic capital, academic legitimacy, multilingual positioning, disciplinary variation, institutional support, perceived opportunity and tensions of identity. The synthesis that resulted was used to identify relationships among the constructs and to provide the theoretical and empirical foundation for the proposed conceptual framework. This is consistent with the purpose of a narrative review, which is to integrate multiple fields of literature, elucidate conceptual relationships, and create theory-based interpretations, rather than simply summarising past research (Green et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019).

Data Collection and Review Strategy

Data for the review were collected from the Scopus database, which was selected because of its multidisciplinary coverage of peer-reviewed scholarship in higher education, applied linguistics, second-language learning, multilingualism, identity studies, and educational research. The database search was conducted on 29 July 2026. The search focused on publications addressing English-medium instruction (EMI), learner identity, multilingual and cultural experiences, and learner-related educational outcomes in tertiary contexts. To increase the topical relevance of the retrieved literature, the search was conducted using

the TITLE-ABS-KEY field, which restricted the search to terms appearing in publication titles, abstracts, and keyword fields. The principal search strategy was constructed using five groups of conceptually related terms connected through Boolean operators. The following search string was used:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (("English-Medium Instruction" OR "EMI" OR "English instruction" OR "language of instruction") AND ("learner identity" OR "student identity" OR "identity formation" OR "self-concept") AND ("bilingualism" OR "multilingualism" OR "language acquisition" OR "language learning") AND ("cultural identity" OR "cultural background" OR "cultural factors" OR "cultural influences") AND ("academic performance" OR "student engagement" OR "motivation" OR "learning outcomes"))

The search terms were organised into five concept clusters. The first captured English-medium or English-based instructional contexts; the second focused on learner identity and self-concept; the third represented multilingualism and language learning; the fourth addressed cultural dimensions of identity and experience; and the fifth captured educational and behavioural outcomes. Terms within each cluster were connected using OR, whereas the five clusters were connected using AND. This relatively restrictive structure was deliberate: because the aim was theory building at the intersection of EMI, identity, and learner evaluation rather than exhaustive mapping of the entire EMI field, the search prioritised conceptual specificity and reduced the number of tangential records. The trade-off is lower search sensitivity, because relevant studies using different terminology may have been missed. For that reason, the review is explicitly presented as a structured narrative review rather than a systematic review, and the limits of the Boolean strategy are treated as a methodological constraint rather than as evidence of comprehensiveness.

From the Scopus searches, 18 records were exported to Microsoft Excel for organization, screening, deduplication, and data extraction. Three duplicate publications, Han (2023), Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2019), and Strotmann et al. (2026), were removed, resulting in 15 unique Scopus-indexed publications. These 15 publications constituted the core analytic corpus and are the studies represented in Table 1 and the thematic synthesis. The broader reference list serves a different function. Foundational works on identity and investment and the ROAD-MAPPING framework were used to develop the theoretical architecture; methodological sources were used to justify the review design and synthesis procedures; and selected recent or contextual publications were cited in the background discussion to situate the core corpus within the wider EMI literature. These supplementary sources were not coded as part of the 15-study corpus and did not contribute to the identification of the five review themes. The rationale for this designation is to achieve transparency on the evidential bases of the thematic synthesis, along with developing established theory and review methodology.

The publications were subsequently screened against predetermined eligibility criteria. Studies were considered relevant when they: (a) addressed EMI, English as a medium or language of instruction, or closely related English-mediated educational practices; (b) were situated within tertiary, university, or higher-education contexts; and (c) contributed empirical, theoretical, or conceptual evidence concerning learner identity construction, multilingual or cultural positioning, learner attitudes, perceived benefits and challenges of EMI, or related educational experiences. Peer-reviewed journal articles were the preferred choice, but review papers or academic book chapters were accepted when they made significant theoretical or conceptual contributions. Studies that focused solely on primary or secondary education, general English-language instruction without an EMI component, language testing, translation, or linguistic performance unrelated to the review question were excluded. Publications centred primarily on lecturers or institutional practices were treated as contextual evidence rather than as direct evidence of learner outcomes.

The screening process included a title and abstract review, followed by full-text assessment as needed. Publications that were clearly irrelevant (not relating to tertiary EMI, learner identity construction, or learner perspectives) were excluded at this first stage. Records for which relevance could not be established from title and abstract were examined more closely. The screening process also distinguished between studies providing direct evidence of learner experiences and those contributing broader contextual insights. Studies that focused primarily on teacher identity, policy processes at a local institutional level or internationalisation were only included where they were found to contribute to explaining the pedagogical or

institutional context in which learner perspectives and identities are constructed. These studies were explicitly flagged in the synthesis as contributing primarily context rather than direct evidence of learner outcomes.

These data were then used to develop a review matrix in Excel, extracting data systematically and allowing comparison of data across studies. For each publication, information was recorded on the authors, year of publication, country or geographical context, institutional setting, academic discipline, research objectives, participants, methodological approach, theoretical framework, principal constructs, and major findings. Particular attention was given to evidence concerning students' experiences of EMI, linguistic and academic identity negotiation, multilingual positioning, perceived legitimacy, attitudes towards EMI, perceptions of academic and professional value, and reported challenges associated with English-mediated learning. Other related constructs such as self-efficacy, motivation, engagement, linguistic capital, and academic belonging were also cited where they assisted in clarifying the relationships between EMI, learner identity construction, and learner perspectives.

The selected literature was analysed using an integrative thematic analysis approach. This was suitable as the review included methodologically diverse evidence from qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, conceptual, and review sources. The integrative synthesis enables comparison and synthesis of findings from different sources and exploration of clarification, relationships, and more generalised theoretical understandings (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). It combined deductive and inductive analysis methods. Deductively, evidence was initially organised around the three central domains of the study: EMI in tertiary education, learner identity construction in EMI, and learner perspectives towards EMI. Inductively, recurring concepts and patterns were identified across the reviewed literature, including linguistic legitimacy, multilingual positioning, cultural affiliation, academic adaptation, linguistic capital, disciplinary variation, perceived opportunity, institutional support, and imagined professional identity.

Finally, studies were compared to find convergence, contradiction, and contextual variation. Particular attention was given to evidence explaining why EMI may be experienced as enabling in some settings but demanding, exclusionary, or identity-threatening in others. Contradictory findings were not smoothed out as 'noise' but retained as evidence of the context-dependent nature of EMI. The adequacy of the 15-study corpus for the proposed framework rests on its coverage of the three focal relationships: EMI and learner evaluations, EMI and identity construction, and identity-related processes associated with learner responses.

The corpus also varies in terms of national, disciplinary, and educational (learner-related vs. context-centered) contexts, thus allowing the review to identify common mechanisms and boundary conditions. The resulting themes were then synthesised to assess whether the literature provides a solid theoretical foundation from which to propose learner identity construction as a mediating mechanism between EMI experiences and learner attitudes as to EMI. The current manuscript does not empirically validate the mediation, thus presenting the mechanism as a hypothesis for subsequent research rather than a confirmed causal relationship.

Key Findings from the Narrative Review

The integrative thematic synthesis identified five interrelated themes concerning the influence of English-medium instruction (EMI) on learner identity construction and learner perspectives in tertiary education. The reviewed literature revealed that EMI was not only a medium of instruction but also a context in which the participants negotiated disciplinary learning, linguistic legitimacy, multilingual positioning, and the value of English-mediated education.

The studies reviewed also suggest that EMI does not produce uniform positive or negative learner outcomes. Instead, the students' experience differs in terms of language preparedness, disciplinary background, institutional support, and teaching practices, as well as interpretations of the meaning of English. The five themes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Key Findings from the Narrative Review

Key theme	Description	Interpretation and contextual qualification	Principal supporting evidence
1. EMI creates both academic opportunities and additional learning demands	EMI can broaden access to international academic resources, disciplinary knowledge, mobility, and English-mediated professional opportunities. At the same time, students may experience difficulties processing disciplinary content, participating in academic interaction, and adjusting to unfamiliar linguistic and pedagogical demands.	English exposure alone does not guarantee either language development or successful disciplinary learning. Outcomes depend on linguistic preparedness, teaching practices, disciplinary requirements, and institutional support.	Macaro et al. (2018); Evans and Morrison (2011); Airey and Linder (2006); Han (2023); Chapple (2015).
2. EMI contributes to learner identity construction and multilingual positioning	Participation in EMI can influence how students position themselves as English users, multilingual learners, disciplinary participants, and prospective members of international academic or professional communities. Existing linguistic and cultural identities are not necessarily replaced but may be extended, negotiated, or contested.	Identity construction is context dependent. EMI can support hybrid and multilingual identities but may also create tensions when English is institutionally privileged over local languages or when learners perceive themselves as linguistically inadequate.	Zhunussova et al. (2023); Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2019); Huang (2025).
3. Learner perspectives towards EMI are evaluative, mixed, and context sensitive	Students assess EMI in terms of its perceived academic usefulness, professional value, linguistic difficulty, and overall desirability. Positive evaluations may coexist with concerns about comprehension, language demands, or the effectiveness of EMI for disciplinary learning.	Learner perspectives should not be reduced to simple positive-versus-negative attitudes. They vary according to discipline, proficiency, prior experience, and the extent to which EMI is perceived as manageable and relevant.	Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2019); Han (2023); Van et al. (2023); Nguyen and Dang (2024).
4. Identity-related processes are closely connected with students' responses to EMI	Learners' perceptions of themselves as competent, legitimate, and recognised participants are associated with how they engage with and evaluate English-mediated education. Self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement are closely related to identity development, although these relationships may operate reciprocally rather than in a single causal direction.	Existing studies support a theoretical connection between EMI experience, identity, and learner evaluations, but they do not establish that identity has already been empirically proven as a mediator.	Huang (2025); Zhunussova et al. (2023); Nguyen and Dang (2024).
5. Institutional, cultural, and future-oriented contexts shape EMI experiences	Lecturer practices, institutional language expectations, multilingual policies, intercultural opportunities, and the perceived professional value of English influence how EMI is experienced and interpreted. English may function as linguistic capital associated with educational and occupational mobility.	Evidence concerning lecturers, faculty identities, or post-university careers provides contextual rather than direct evidence of learner perspectives. Such studies help explain the environment surrounding learner identity construction but should not be treated as student-outcome evidence.	Vu and Burns (2014); Reynolds (2019); Strotmann et al. (2026); Spero (2025); Khan and Jayaraj (2026).

Narrative Synthesis of the Findings

The first theme concerns the dual character of EMI as both an educational opportunity and an additional academic demand. The reviewed literature indicates that English-medium education can increase access to

international disciplinary resources and provide students with greater exposure to English in authentic academic contexts. However, learning disciplinary content through an additional language can also increase the linguistic and cognitive demands placed on students. To give an example, Evans and Morrison (2011) have documented substantial adjustment challenges among students entering English-medium higher education, while Airey and Linder (2006) showed that changing the language of university-level disciplinary learning can influence how students experience and process academic content. Macaro et al. (2018) similarly cautioned against assuming that EMI automatically produces English-language gains or uniformly beneficial disciplinary outcomes. These findings support the position that EMI should be conceptualised as an educational environment whose effects depend substantially on how English-mediated learning is implemented and experienced, rather than simply on the presence of English as the language of instruction in the setting. The relevant foundational EMI publications are represented in the verified Scopus export.

The second major theme is learner identity construction and multilingual positioning. Evidence from the multilingual EMI environments indicates that students do not simply move or change from their first-language identity towards an English-language identity. Instead, they negotiate multiple and sometimes competing linguistic, academic, cultural, and future-oriented identities. Zhunussova et al. (2023) found that EMI students in Kazakhstan have created fluid identities that incorporate different linguistic and cultural affiliations. Meanwhile, Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2019) identified tensions between the perceived value of English and concerns regarding Arabic and sociocultural identity. Both studies are represented in the verified Scopus corpus. These findings suggest that EMI can expand learners' identity repertoires, but such expansion is neither automatic nor free from tension. Learners' identities are shaped through their interaction with institutional language ideologies, existing linguistic resources, academic participation, and perceived opportunities associated with English.

The third theme is attitudes of learners to EMI. The above evidence indicates that learners do not often reveal entirely positive or negative attitudes. Instead, students seem to balance the advantages of EMI with the academic and linguistic challenges. For example, Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2019) found that participants acknowledged the advantages of EMI for employment and communication but were uncertain about comprehension of the subject matter. Han (2023) similarly found that factors such as language proficiency, personal motivation, teaching techniques, and academic adaption influenced students' perceptions of EMI. Van et al. (2023) further identified disciplinary differences in students' attitudes towards EMI, demonstrating that learners from different academic fields may evaluate English-medium education according to different linguistic and disciplinary expectations. These studies are all part of the verified Scopus source set. Therefore, rather than being a broad category that includes all psychological or behavioural outcomes related to English-mediated education, learner perspectives are best understood as context-sensitive evaluative orientations toward EMI.

The fourth theme deals with relationships between identity processes and the response of students to EMI. Huang's (2025) longitudinal study provides particularly important evidence because it demonstrates significant relationships among self-identity, behavioural engagement, motivational intensity, and self-efficacy in an EMI setting. However, the implications of these relationships need to be carefully considered. Huang (2022) proposed that motivation, engagement, and general self-efficacy were the effects of identity development rather than the causes. Likewise, Nguyen & Dang (2024) observed negative changes in self-efficacy of learners, even in the EMI environment. These findings provide further justification for conceptions of EMI experiences as dynamic and reaffirm the rationale for excluding self-efficacy and engagement from the learner perspectives in the existing framework. Instead, they provide related evidence showing that students' psychological and behavioural experiences are intertwined with identity construction and their subsequent interpretations of EMI.

The fifth theme highlights the importance of the institutional, cultural, and future-oriented context

surrounding learner experience. Several studies within the review pool do not directly investigate learner perspectives but nevertheless illuminate the broader EMI ecology. Vu and Burns (2014) document pedagogical challenges experienced by tertiary lecturers, while Reynolds (2019) and Strotmann et al. (2026)

demonstrate that lecturers and faculty members themselves negotiate changing linguistic and multilingual identities within EMI environments. These studies should therefore be interpreted as contextual evidence concerning the institutional and pedagogical conditions within which students participate. Similarly, Spero (2025) provides a conceptual account of intercultural learning through EMI, while Khan and Jayaraj (2026) demonstrate the longer-term value associated with English linguistic capital and professional trajectories. Both are present in the verified Scopus export. These findings broaden the interpretation of EMI without requiring such constructs to be incorporated directly into the dependent variable.

A cross-contextual comparison makes the tensions in the evidence more visible. In Oman, EMI was valued for employment and international communication even as participants expressed concern about comprehension and the position of Arabic (Denman & Al-Mahrooqi, 2019). To compare, Nguyen and Dang (2024) study have reported declining in self-efficacy among some business students in Vietnam, while Van et al. (2023) showed that attitudes differed by disciplinary background. However, a study in Kazakhstan presents another pattern and that is EMI supported fluid multilingual identities but could also intensify the concern about the status of local and national languages (Zhunussova et al., 2023). In China, students' evaluations and investment depended heavily on linguistic preparedness, pedagogy, disciplinary priorities, and the perceived returns of participation (Han, 2023; Wang & Jiang, 2025). Supplementary evidence from Gulf universities further suggests that stronger English proficiency does not necessarily weaken cultural identification and may coexist with lower cultural anxiety (Aljehani & Modiano, 2026). These differences indicate that apparently contradictory findings are patterned by local language ecologies, disciplinary demands, institutional support, and the social value attached to English. The proposed model therefore treats such factors as boundary conditions that may alter the strength or direction of the focal relationships rather than as components of learner identity or learner perspectives themselves.

Taken together, the narrative review supports an integrated conceptual relationship among the three principal constructs. EMI provides the educational and sociolinguistic environment within which learner identity is negotiated, while learners' developing identities may help explain how they subsequently evaluate English-medium education. Importantly, the reviewed evidence does not empirically establish mediation. Rather, the convergence of findings concerning EMI experience, identity negotiation, linguistic legitimacy, and learner evaluation provides a theoretical basis for proposing learner identity construction as a potential mediating mechanism between EMI and learner perspectives towards EMI**.** This relationship is therefore developed conceptually in the subsequent theoretical framework and proposition sections and requires future empirical testing.

Development of the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is grounded primarily in Norton's theory of identity and investment and its extension in Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, while Dafouz and Smit's ROAD-MAPPING framework provides a complementary contextual lens for understanding EMI within internationalised higher education. Norton (2013) conceptualises identity as multiple, dynamic, and socially constructed, reflecting how learners understand their relationship with the social world and the possibilities available to them across time and context. Investment extends beyond motivation by explaining why learners may value English yet participate unevenly when access to recognition, resources, or legitimate membership is constrained. Darvin and Norton (2015) position investment at the intersection of identity, ideology, and capital, highlighting how participation is shaped by institutional norms, power relations, and access to valued linguistic and social resources. This perspective is particularly relevant to EMI because students must engage with disciplinary knowledge through English while negotiating whether they are recognised as legitimate language users and competent academic participants. The ROAD-MAPPING framework complements this learner-centred perspective by locating EMI within a wider institutional ecology involving the roles of English, academic disciplines, language management, institutional actors, educational practices, and internationalisation processes (Dafouz & Smit, 2016, 2020). It therefore functions here as a contextual framework rather than as a competing causal theory.

Building on these theoretical foundations and the findings of the narrative review, the proposed framework specifies three principal constructs, which are EMI in tertiary education as the antecedent construct, learner identity construction in EMI as the mediating construct, and learner perspectives towards EMI as the outcome construct. EMI provides the academic and sociolinguistic environment within which learners encounter English as a medium for disciplinary learning, interaction, and participation. These experiences may shape how students construct themselves as multilingual learners, legitimate English users, disciplinary participants, and prospective members of academic and professional communities. Evidence from EMI contexts supports the relevance of such identity processes. Furthermore, Zhunussova et al. (2023) show that students in multilingual EMI universities construct fluid and hybrid identities, rather than simply replacing their local linguistic identities with English-oriented identities, and Huang (2025) demonstrates that the self-identity of language is dynamically constructed along with behaviour and psychological experiences in EMI. Both studies are included in the Scopus evidence base used in the review. However, in the proposed framework learner identity is not equated with self-efficacy, motivation, engagement or general confidence. Instead, it refers specifically to the process through which students negotiate their linguistic legitimacy, academic membership, multilingual positioning and imagined future identities. This distinction maintains conceptual separation between the mediator and the outcome variable.

The framework further proposes that learner identity construction may help explain how EMI experiences become translated into learner perspectives towards EMI. When learners view EMI as enabling them to participate meaningfully, be academically recognised and gain access to valued future opportunities, they may be more likely to develop identities as legitimate and capable participants and consequently evaluate EMI more positively. By contrast, identity negotiations can lead to less favourable EMI evaluations when English-medium learning is linked to exclusion, insufficient support, linguistic marginalisation or threats to existing linguistic and cultural affiliations. Importantly, the framework does not assume EMI is either beneficial or detrimental, nor that identity has already been empirically established as a mediator. Rather, the narrative synthesis provides sufficient theoretical and empirical convergence to propose identity construction as a plausible mediating mechanism requiring subsequent empirical testing. Some factors that may impact the functioning of these relationships include prior English language skills, academic discipline, multilingual repertoire, institutional support and sociocultural context, but in the present framework they are considered contextual or boundary conditions rather than formal moderating variables. The resulting model therefore offers a parsimonious explanation in which EMI in tertiary education influences learner perspectives both directly and indirectly through learner identity construction, while preserving the contextual complexity recognised in the wider EMI literature.

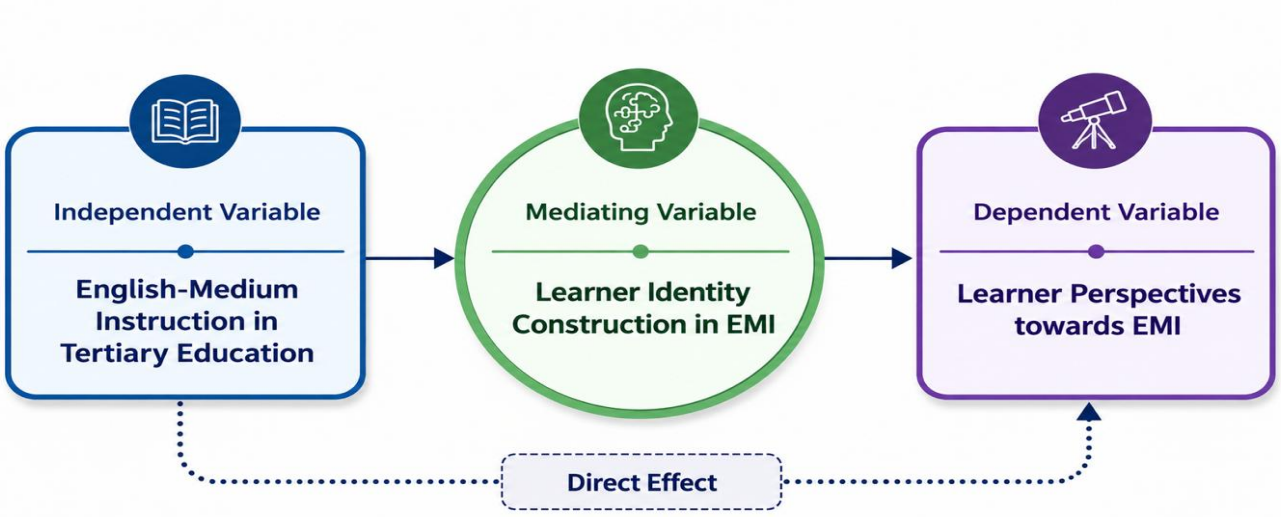

Figure 1 Proposed Conceptual Framework

Proposition Development

The propositions developed in this conceptual paper are grounded in the conceptual foundations and thematic synthesis provided in the preceding sections. The proposed model, mainly based on identity and investment theory (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013) and driven by the contextual perspective of the ROAD-MAPPING framework (Dafouz & Smit, 2016, 2020), offers a clarification of how English-medium instruction (EMI) in tertiary education can impact learners' evaluation of English-mediated education directly and indirectly through learner identity construction. The narrative review highlights the heterogeneity of EMI experiences. While students may associate English-medium education with access to disciplinary knowledge, international mobility and future professional opportunities, at the same time they may experience linguistic difficulty, academic pressure, cultural tension or exclusion. Thus, the proposed relationships should not be interpreted as suggesting that EMI has universally positive effects. Rather, they are theoretically motivated associations whose strength and direction can vary by educational and sociolinguistic context.

Four propositions are developed to describe the relationships within the conceptual framework. The first is the direct connection between EMI in tertiary education and learner perspectives toward EMI. The second suggests that EMI influences the construction of learner identity and the third links the construction of identity to learners' evaluations of EMI. Fourth, the relationship is integrate by suggesting that learner identity construction may serve as a mediating mechanism between EMI experiences and learner perspectives. These propositions are conceptual as opposed to being empirically tested in the current study and are thus meant to serve as a basis for future quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods research.

English-Medium Instruction in Tertiary Education and Learner Perspectives towards EMI

English-medium instruction can influence how students evaluate the academic, linguistic, and future-oriented value of English-mediated education. EMI may provide access to disciplinary knowledge, international communication, and professional opportunities, but the value learners attach to these opportunities depends on their actual experience of language demands, pedagogy, and support. Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2019), for example, found that Omani students recognised the employment and communication value of EMI while also expressing concerns about comprehension and Arabic. Han (2023) similarly showed that evaluations of EMI in a Sino-foreign university were shaped by linguistic preparedness, motivation, pedagogy, and academic adaptation.

Accordingly, the relationship is expected to vary across contexts rather than remain uniformly positive. Learners may evaluate EMI more favourably when instructional demands are manageable, disciplinary learning is supported, and English provides access to valued opportunities; evaluations may become less favourable when comprehension difficulties, inadequate support, or limited participation persist. Disciplinary differences reported by Van et al. (2023) reinforce this contextual interpretation, while Macaro et al. (2018) caution against assuming uniform EMI benefits. The first proposition is therefore as proposed below.

P1: English-medium instruction in tertiary education influences learner perspectives towards EMI.

English-Medium Instruction in Tertiary Education and Learner Identity Construction in EMI

EMI is also an important context for learner identity construction because students must participate in disciplinary learning and assessment through English while also negotiating their positions as language users and members of the academic communities. Identity and investment theory suggests that such participation is connected to how learners understand themselves, how they are positioned by others, and what academic or professional possibilities they perceive as available (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013). EMI may therefore enable students to claim positions as multilingual learners, legitimate users of the English language, disciplinary participants, and future professionals, but it may also generate contested identities where monolingual norms or linguistic inadequacy restrict participation.

Empirical studies support this relationship without implying a uniformly positive direction. Zhunussova et al. (2023) found that students in Kazakhstan negotiated fluid and hybrid identities across linguistic and cultural affiliations, while Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2019) documented tensions involving English, Arabic, and sociocultural positioning. Huang (2025) further demonstrates that self-identity develops dynamically alongside behavioural and psychological experiences in EMI. These findings support the proposition that EMI can affirm, extend, challenge, or complicate learner identity depending on the context.

P2: English-medium instruction in tertiary education shapes learner identity construction in EMI.

Learner Identity Construction in EMI and Learner Perspectives towards EMI

Learner identity construction is expected to influence how students evaluate EMI because academic experiences are interpreted through learners' evolving understandings of themselves as language users, multilingual individuals, and members of disciplinary communities. From an investment perspective, students who can claim legitimate participation and access valued resources may be more likely to regard EMI as something that is manageable and worthwhile. On the other hand, learners who repeatedly positioned themselves as linguistically deficient or academically marginal may evaluate the same environment less favourably (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013).

Zhunussova et al. (2023) show how multilingual repertoires, language ideologies, and agency shape learners' positioning in EMI, and Huang (2025) identifies dynamic relationships among self-identity, engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy. However, these studies do not establish a simple causal sequence from identity to learner evaluation, but they support the theoretical expectation that learners' sense of linguistic legitimacy, academic membership, and future identity can influence how EMI is interpreted.

P3: Learner identity construction in EMI influences learner perspectives towards EMI.

The Mediating Role of Learner Identity Construction in the Relationship Between English-Medium Instruction and Learner Perspectives towards EMI

Learner identity construction is proposed to mediate the relationship between EMI and learner perspectives. This is because students do not evaluate English-mediated education solely on the basis of exposure to the English language. They interpret EMI through their evolving positions as the language users, multilingual learners, academic participants, and prospective professionals. Darvin and Norton's (2015) model have suggests that these interpretations are shaped by identity, ideology, and access to valued capital. EMI experiences that support legitimate participation and recognition may therefore be translated into a more favourable evaluations through identity construction. Whereas experiences of marginalisation or constrained participation may operate in the opposite direction.

The reviewed studies support the component relationships required by this mediation logic, but they do not test the indirect effect itself. Zhunussova et al. (2023) document identity negotiation in EMI, Huang (2025) shows dynamic associations between self-identity and related psychological and behavioural experiences, and Nguyen and Dang (2024) demonstrate that EMI participation does not automatically produce favourable self-evaluations. The mediation pathway is therefore advanced as a theoretically grounded and empirically testable proposition rather than as an established causal finding.

P4: Learner identity construction in EMI mediates the relationship between English-medium instruction in tertiary education and learner perspectives towards EMI.

Operationalising the Proposed Framework for Empirical Testing

To translate the conceptual model into an empirically testable framework, each construct and pathway can be operationalised in a way that preserves the conceptual distinctions developed in this paper. EMI may be measured through objective exposure indicators, perceived EMI learning conditions, or a combination of both; learner identity should be modelled as a distinct latent construct; and learner perspectives should

remain an evaluative outcome rather than absorb self-efficacy, motivation, or engagement. Table 2 summarises one feasible operationalisation strategy.

Table 2: Suggested Operationalisation and Empirical Testing of the Proposed Framework

Construct / relationship	Suggested operationalisation	Recommended empirical approach
EMI in tertiary education	Objective exposure (e.g., proportion of disciplinary modules taught in English; duration of EMI participation) and/or perceived EMI conditions such as language demands, instructional support, multilingual flexibility, and assessment clarity.	Observed predictor and/or latent perceptual scale; report reliability and validity for any multi-item measure.
Learner identity construction in EMI	Items capturing linguistic legitimacy, academic membership, multilingual positioning, and imagined future identity. A 5 or 7 point response scale can be developed from the theoretical domains used in this paper.	Model as a latent mediator. Establish factor structure and discriminant validity through EFA/CFA before testing structural paths.
Learner perspectives towards EMI	Attitudes towards EMI, perceived academic/professional value, perceived benefits and challenges, and willingness to continue or choose EMI.	Model as a latent outcome. Keep items conceptually separate from self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement.
Mediation pathway	EMI - learner identity construction - learner perspectives, while retaining the direct EMI - learner perspectives path.	Use SEM or path analysis with bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effect. A three-wave design (EMI at T1, identity at T2, perspectives at T3) is preferable for stronger temporal inference.
Boundary conditions	English proficiency, academic discipline, multilingual repertoire, institutional support, and sociocultural context.	Treat as covariates, moderators, or grouping variables where theoretically justified; use multigroup analysis or robustness checks rather than folding them into the three focal constructs.

For a preliminary cross-sectional test, structural equation modelling could estimate the direct and indirect paths while controlling for relevant background variables. A stronger test would use longitudinal or multi-wave data so that EMI experience precedes identity measurement and identity precedes learner perspectives. Bootstrapped indirect-effect estimates should be reported rather than relying only on separate significant paths. Cross-national or cross-disciplinary replication would then allow the stability of the mediation model and its boundary conditions to be assessed.

Practical Implications for EMI Policy and Practice

Several implications have been revealed by the study's findings. Firstly, for university administrators, the findings suggested that expanding EMI provision should be accompanied by infrastructure that mitigates avoidable linguistic disadvantage. University-level academic language support could include discipline-specific academic language training, induction of students to EMI programs on entry to studies, and continuing professional development of lecturers at the intersection of multilingualism and inclusive pedagogy. Moreover, rather than using English proficiency only as an entry filter, universities should monitor patterns of participation, progression, and withdrawal across proficiency levels and disciplines so that support can be targeted where inequities emerge.

Additionally, instructors may employ students' entire linguistic repertoires when appropriate, explicitly teach disciplinary vocabulary and genres, provide structured opportunities for classroom participation, and provide formative feedback that separates conceptual misunderstanding from language-related difficulty in an effort to implement multilingual inclusion. Assessment also should reflect the learning outcome in which language is not an outcome and rubrics should not embed unnecessary language penalties that drown out disciplinary competence. When assessing English competence, the linguistic criteria should be explicit rather than implicitly embedded within the content marks.

Lastly, the findings advise policymakers not to use EMI as a stand-in for educational excellence or internationalisation. Policy frameworks can promote institutionally appropriate multilingualism, demand transparency in program language requirements, and mandate regular equity audits of assessment and progression outcomes. At system level, the key question is not simply how much English is used, but whether EMI policies provide a fair access to disciplinary learning while sustaining legitimate space for local and other languages. These recommendations directly follow the review's central finding that the meaning of EMI for learners depends on how institutional conditions shape participation, recognition, and identity.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper examined how English-medium instruction in tertiary education may shape learner perspectives towards EMI through learner identity construction. The systematic narrative literature review revealed that EMI was not merely replacing a language in the classroom but an academic environment in a sociolinguistic ecology. It is found that EMI was linked to both opportunity and constraint in the studies examined. EMI not only increase the access to disciplinary knowledge, international communication, mobility, and professional opportunities but also causing linguistic difficulties, cultural tensions, or exclusions. Such cross-context comparison also suggests that such outcomes are not uniform. Their meaning depends on local language ecologies, disciplinary demands, institutional support, and how learners are positioned within English-mediated education.

The paper's main theoretical contribution is to conceptualise the existing links between EMI, identity, and learner evaluations into a process model that can be empirically tested. Learner identity construction is treated as a possible mediating variable, rather than as a co-occurring outcome, and learner perspectives are conceptualised as evaluative orientations and distinguished from, for example, self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement. This results in an architecture with a direct EMI perspective path, an indirect one through identity construction, and learner context as boundary conditions. The proposed operationalisation shows how these relationships could be tested using latent-variable modelling, bootstrapped indirect effects, and preferably longitudinal designs. In a concluding section, the proposal emphasises different priorities for both practitioners and policymakers: language supports should be discipline-specific; multilingualism should be embraced; language expectations should be made explicit; and assessment practices should find a balance between disciplinary relevance and equity.

Nevertheless, there are several limitations that remains. The core analytic corpus was restricted to 15 unique Scopus-indexed publications identified through a deliberately specific Boolean strategy, so relevant studies using different terminology or indexed elsewhere may have been missed. The structured narrative design also involves interpretive judgement, and the present paper does not establish causality or empirical mediation. Future research should therefore test the model across different institutions, disciplines, linguistic settings, and national contexts. Longitudinal and multi-group studies would be particularly useful for determining whether identity construction actually carries the effect of EMI experience to learner perspectives and for identifying when proficiency, disciplinary demands, multilingual repertoire, institutional support, or sociocultural context strengthen or weaken that pathway.

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