

ENGLISH-MEDIUM INSTRUCTION IN ASIAN EFL HIGHER EDUCATION: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF POLICY TRENDS, IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES, AND ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of English Medium Instruction (EMI) across Asian higher education has intensified post-pandemic, yet a comprehensive understanding of its implementation landscape remains limited. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, this systematic review synthesizes 15 empirical studies (2015–2025) from four academic databases to explore implementation trends, stakeholder challenges, and adaptation strategies in Asian EFL contexts. Frequency analysis revealed that linguistic difficulties were a primary barrier in 87% of the studies, pedagogical inconsistency in 60%, and language anxiety affected 53% of the combined participants. Thematic synthesis identified three core dimensions: top-down policies generating macro-micro gaps and institutional stratification; multidimensional linguistic and psychological barriers impacting engagement; and emergent adaptive strategies, including translanguaging, bilingual professional learning communities, and learner metacognition. These findings highlight that EMI is a complex educational ecosystem rather than a mere linguistic shift. This review offers a structured, geographically scoped framework for policymakers, institutions, and future researchers to improve EMI quality and equity in the region.

Keywords: Asian EFL contexts; English Medium Instruction; EMI implementation; higher education; language policy; systematic review

ABSTRAK

Ekspansi English Medium Instruction (EMI) di pendidikan tinggi Asia meningkat pesat pascapandemi, namun pemahaman komprehensif mengenai lanskap implementasinya masih terbatas. Mengikuti pedoman PRISMA 2020, tinjauan sistematis ini menyintesis 15 studi empiris (2015–2025) dari empat basis data akademik untuk mengeksplorasi tren implementasi, tantangan pemangku kepentingan, dan strategi adaptasi dalam konteks EFL Asia. Analisis frekuensi menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan linguistik menjadi hambatan utama dalam 87% studi, ketidakkonsistenan pedagogis dalam 60%, dan kecemasan berbahasa memengaruhi 53% dari total partisipan. Sintesis tematik mengidentifikasi tiga dimensi inti: kebijakan top-down yang memicu kesenjangan makro-mikro dan stratifikasi institusional; hambatan linguistik serta psikologis multidimensional yang memengaruhi keterlibatan mahasiswa; serta strategi adaptif yang muncul, termasuk translanguaging, komunitas belajar profesional bilingual, dan metakognisi pembelajar. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa EMI merupakan ekosistem pendidikan yang kompleks, bukan sekadar peralihan bahasa. Tinjauan ini menawarkan kerangka kerja terstruktur bagi pembuat kebijakan dan institusi untuk meningkatkan kualitas dan kesetaraan EMI di kawasan tersebut.

Kata Kunci: konteks EFL Asia; English Medium Instruction (EMI); implementasi EMI; pendidikan tinggi; kebijakan bahasa; tinjauan sistematis

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of English Medium Instruction (EMI) across Asian higher education institutions over the past two decades reflects a broader global shift toward the internationalization of academic knowledge production. Driven by competitive pressures of globalization, universities across the region have increasingly adopted English as the primary language of instruction, not merely as a linguistic preference but as a strategic means to enhance institutional visibility, attract international students, and improve global university rankings (Galloway & Rose, 2018). In contexts where English functions primarily as a foreign language (EFL), this transition carries particular weight, as students and faculty must simultaneously navigate the demands of acquiring disciplinary knowledge and developing academic language. This dual burden distinguishes Asian EMI environments from those in English-dominant settings. Countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia have pursued EMI with varying degrees of institutional commitment and policy coherence, yielding a heterogeneous landscape of implementation outcomes that reflects the complex interplay between language policy ambitions and classroom realities (Peng & Xie, 2021).

Prior scholarship has examined EMI from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including applied linguistics, educational policy, and higher education studies. However, most existing research is country-specific or issue-focused, limiting the extent to which broader regional trends can be identified and theorized. Studies conducted within individual national contexts – while rich in contextual detail rarely enable comparative synthesis across the diverse institutional, linguistic, and policy environments that characterize Asian higher education (Macaro et al., 2018). The development of EMI policy frameworks across the region reflects a complex and often contradictory pattern, in which macro-level institutional mandates frequently diverge from the micro-level realities of classroom practice. Liao et al. (2025) document how policy decentralization in China since 2015 has generated a structural gap between governmental internationalization goals and the actual conditions of lecturer competence, resource availability, and student linguistic readiness, resulting in a bifurcated system in which tier-one and tier-two universities encounter fundamentally different implementation challenges. Similarly, Jinghui (2023) found that numerous EMI programs across East Asian institutions were established without clearly articulated language policies, with English adopted as an instrument of institutional prestige rather than as a pedagogically justified medium of instruction.

Linguistic challenges remain the most persistent and widely documented barrier to effective EMI implementation across the Asian EFL region. Even among learners at relatively high proficiency levels, language-related difficulties consistently impede content comprehension, academic participation, and overall performance (Rose et al., 2026). Sultana and Fang (2024) highlight the productive tension between monolingual EMI mandates and the multilingual practices that naturally emerge in linguistically diverse classrooms, suggesting that institutional policies often fail to reflect pedagogical realities on the ground. Cui and Gardiner (2025) further report that students enrolled in transnational EMI programs experience difficulties across all four academic language skills, with oral communication representing a particularly acute challenge. Critically, these linguistic barriers do not operate in isolation; they intersect with psychological variables such as academic self-efficacy and language anxiety, indirectly shaping students' academic confidence and classroom engagement (Alanazi & Curle, 2024). Professional development research reinforces these concerns, Dahmardeh and Mahdikhani (2025) identifying that successful EMI teacher preparation programs must address linguistic, pedagogical, cultural, and psychological dimensions simultaneously, underscoring the multidimensional nature of EMI challenges.

A notable paradigm shift in recent EMI scholarship concerns the growing legitimization of multilingual pedagogical practices. Rather than treating linguistic diversity as an obstacle to be minimized, an emerging body of research positions students' multilingual repertoires as a

resource to be leveraged within EMI environments. Boonsuk (2025) documents how multilingual students across seven ASEAN countries enrolled in Thai universities employed seven distinct translanguaging strategies as deliberate responses to institutional language policies, using these practices to support academic mastery, promote collaborative engagement, and compensate for proficiency gaps. The normalization of flexible language use within ostensibly English-only instructional settings reflects a broader pedagogical reconceptualization of EMI, one that privileges communicative effectiveness and inclusive learning over rigid linguistic conformity (Sahan et al., 2025). Lecturer professional development has correspondingly gained traction as a strategic lever for improving implementation quality. Wang et al. (2025) argue that effective EMI professional development must be understood as an individualized, longitudinal process in which contextually responsive instructional support catalyzes sustained pedagogical innovation. Hsueh and Lin (2025) demonstrate that bilingual professional learning communities create psychologically safe spaces in which faculty can acknowledge and address their linguistic limitations without professional stigma, thereby facilitating gradual yet meaningful improvements in EMI teaching practice.

To contextualize the scope and thematic landscape of current EMI research, this study employed VOSviewer bibliometric mapping software as a preliminary analytical tool before systematic article selection. Bibliometric data were retrieved from two databases, Google Scholar and Scopus, using the primary search terms "English Medium Instruction," "higher education," "Asian EFL contexts," and related keywords. The VOSviewer co-occurrence analysis generated keyword network visualizations (Figures 1 and 2) that identified dominant research clusters, including language policy, pedagogical practice, linguistic competence, and student challenges, as well as comparatively underexplored themes such as translanguaging and lecturer professional development. Crucially, this bibliometric mapping served a scoping function: it provided an evidence-based rationale for the systematic review's thematic boundaries. It confirmed that, despite the volume of EMI literature, no comprehensive synthesis covering the post-pandemic period across diverse Asian EFL contexts had yet been produced. The fifteen empirical studies selected through the PRISMA 2020 screening process subsequently underwent thematic analysis independently of the VOSviewer mapping; the bibliometric visualization informed the framing of the review rather than determining article inclusion. Figure 1. below illustrates the keyword co-occurrence network derived from Google Scholar, revealing tightly interconnected clusters around EMI policy, multilingualism, and student academic outcomes.

Figure 1. VosViewer from the Google Scholar databases

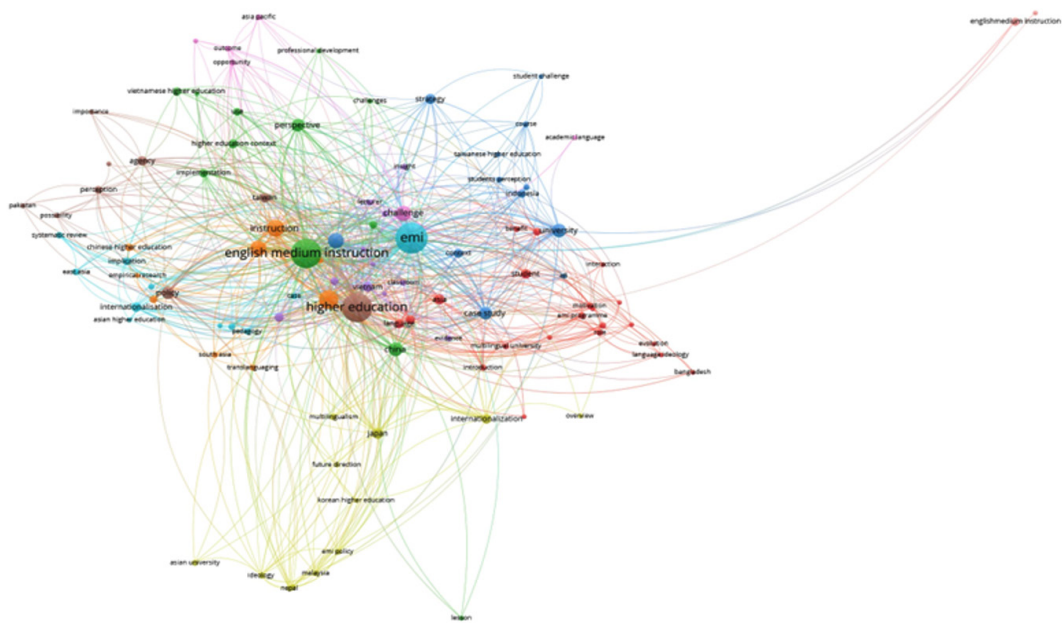
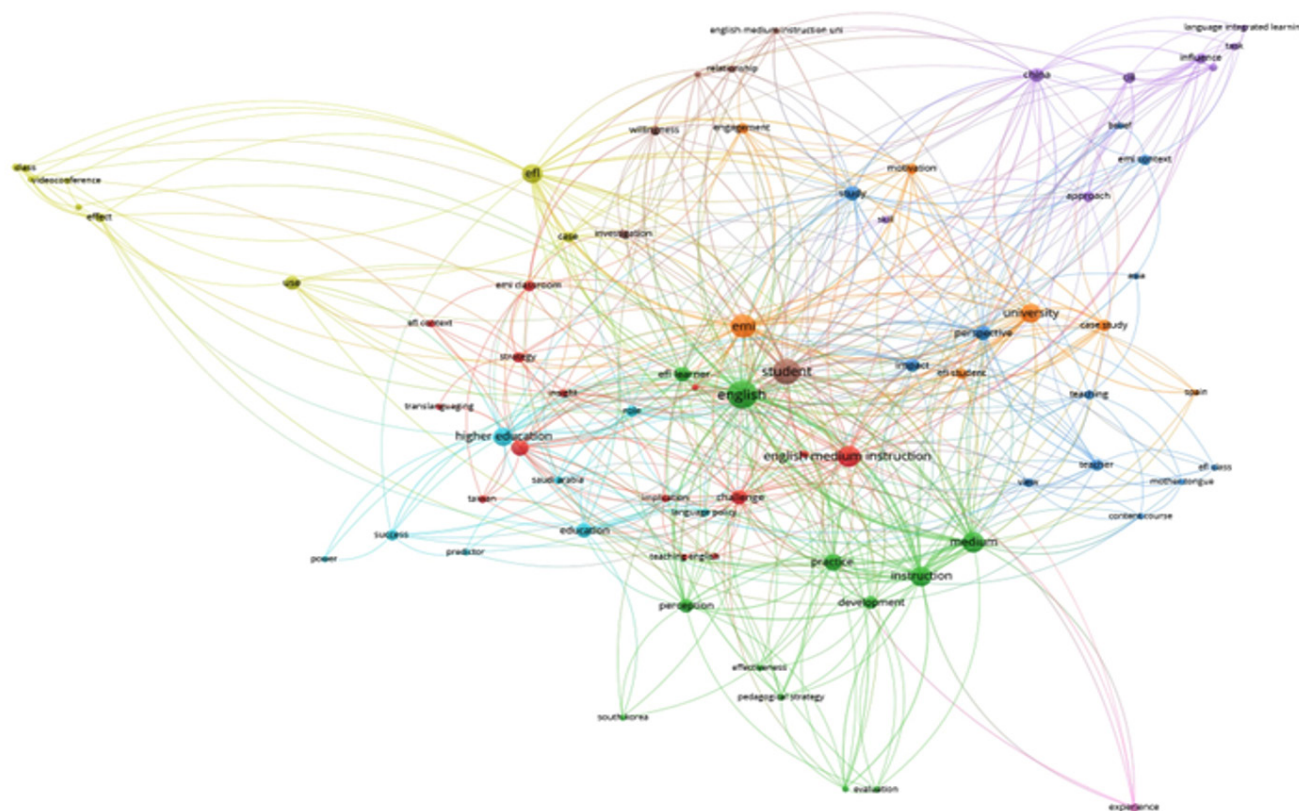


Figure 2. presents a density-based visualization from the Scopus dataset, confirming the centrality of these themes while highlighting the relatively sparse scholarly coverage of translanguageing practices and professional development in EMI contexts.

Figure 2. VosViewer from the Scopus databases



Despite the growing body of EMI research, significant knowledge gaps persist, motivating the present systematic review. First, while several systematic reviews have addressed EMI in higher education (Macaro et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2026), these either predate the critical 2015–2025 period or address EMI globally without foregrounding the distinctive characteristics of Asian EFL contexts specifically. The present review is therefore not simply additive but fills a geographically and temporally defined gap: it synthesizes empirical evidence exclusively from Asian EFL settings published between 2015 and 2025, capturing post-pandemic transformations, the digital turn in pedagogy, and the institutional stratification between tier-one and tier-two universities developments that no prior review has addressed in combination. Second, the dynamics of EMI implementation have undergone considerable reconfiguration in the post-COVID-19 landscape, shaped by the rapid integration of digital learning technologies, the normalization of hybrid instructional formats, and an accelerating shift toward multilingual pedagogical frameworks. A systematic synthesis of these converging developments remains notably absent from the literature. Third, the differential experiences of institutions operating across diverse structural conditions, including tier-one versus tier-two universities and secular versus religious higher education institutions, have not been consolidated into a coherent evidence base, leaving policymakers and practitioners without the comparative insight needed to design contextually appropriate interventions.

EMI implementation in this study is understood through three interrelated theoretical frameworks. Conceptually, EMI is defined as the use of English to deliver subject-matter content in non-English-dominant contexts, a practice that, unlike Content and Language Integrated

Learning (CLIL), typically proceeds without explicit language learning objectives or dedicated linguistic scaffolding. From a language policy perspective, EMI is most commonly introduced through top-down institutional mandates aimed at internationalization, which routinely generate policy-practice gaps as classroom realities diverge from institutional expectations. Sociocultural theory further enriches this framework by foregrounding the role of social interaction, contextual meaning-making, and linguistic identity in academic learning, providing theoretical grounding for translanguaging as a strategy that harnesses students' full multilingual competence rather than artificially constraining it. Together, these perspectives position EMI not as a straightforward language policy but as a complex, multidimensional educational ecosystem shaped by the recursive interaction of policy ambition, pedagogical capacity, and linguistic diversity.

The novelty of the present review resides not in the topic of EMI itself but in the specificity and comprehensiveness of its analytical lens. By restricting the review to empirical studies from Asian EFL contexts published between 2015 and 2025, this study captures a period of unprecedented change in EMI scholarship: the emergence of multilingual pedagogy as a legitimate instructional framework, the proliferation of institutional adaptation strategies, and the reconfiguration of implementation challenges within hybrid and digitally mediated learning environments. These developments have not been systematically documented in their totality, and the present review constitutes the first attempt to map this contemporary landscape in its full complexity. The primary objective is therefore to provide a comprehensive and evidence-based synthesis of the current EMI landscape in Asian higher education, specifically by: (1) identifying and categorizing dominant trends in EMI policy and practice across diverse Asian EFL countries; (2) critically analyzing the linguistic, pedagogical, and institutional challenges encountered by EMI stakeholders; and (3) synthesizing evidence-based strategies and actionable recommendations for policymakers and educational practitioners seeking to improve the quality and equity of EMI program delivery. Three overarching research questions guide this systematic inquiry. The first objective is to examine how English Medium Instruction (EMI) implementation trends in Asian EFL higher education have evolved between 2015 and 2025, with specific attention directed toward shifting policy frameworks, pedagogical practices, and innovative instructional models. Additionally, this review seeks to identify the most prominent linguistic, pedagogical, and institutional challenges and opportunities that characterize contemporary EMI contexts across the Asian EFL region, as evidenced by recent empirical research. Finally, the inquiry investigates how institutions and classroom practitioners across these contexts are currently adapting their EMI practices in response to identified barriers, highlighting specific strategies that have demonstrated tangible effectiveness in improving overall EMI implementation outcomes.

METHODS

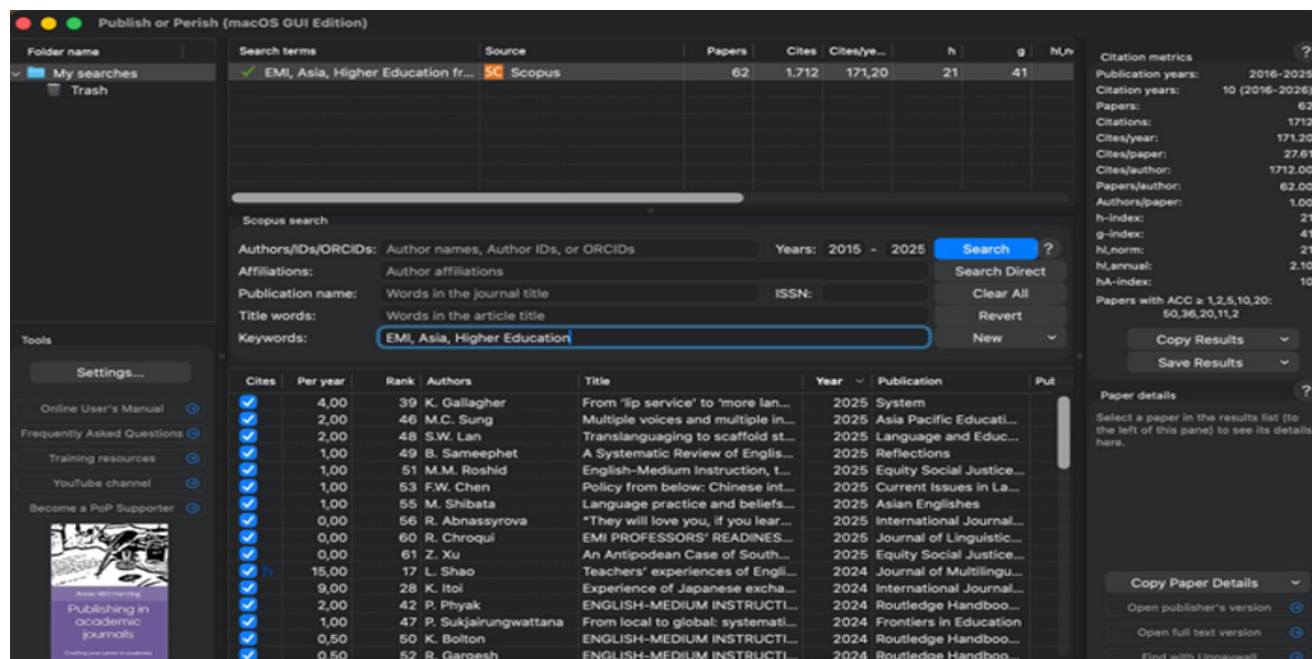
Research design

This study uses a systematic literature review, following the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, to ensure transparent and complete reporting. Page et al. (2021) PRISMA 2020 provides an evidence-based framework for conducting systematic reviews with rigorous methodological standards, comprising a 27-item checklist and a flowchart outlining the stages of study identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

Research site and participants

Literature searches were conducted across four academic databases, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and Google Scholar on January 15, 2026.

Figure 3. PoP's result from Scopus-indexed journals



The following Boolean search string was applied consistently across all databases: ("English Medium Instruction" OR "EMI") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "tertiary education") AND ("Asia" OR "Asian countries" OR "China" OR "Japan" OR "Indonesia" OR "Thailand" OR "Vietnam" OR "South Korea" OR "Taiwan") AND ("EFL" OR "English as a Foreign Language" OR "EFL context"). Three search limitations were applied: (1) publication period restricted to 2015–2025; (2) English-language articles only; and (3) peer-reviewed journal publications exclusively. This initial search yielded 309 articles across all four databases. VOSviewer bibliometric mapping software was used as a supplementary scoping tool, not as part of the systematic article selection process, to visualize keyword co-occurrence patterns across the broader EMI literature before screening. This preliminary mapping informed the thematic framing of the review. It confirmed the existence of underexplored research areas but did not influence inclusion or exclusion decisions, which were governed solely by the PRISMA 2020 criteria described below.

Article selection followed a structured set of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they: (1) empirically examined EMI implementation in higher education within Asian EFL country contexts; (2) employed quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods research designs; and (3) were published in reputable peer-reviewed journals. Studies were excluded if they: (1) focused on primary or secondary education levels; (2) were conducted in countries where English holds official or second-language status; (3) presented solely theoretical or conceptual arguments without empirical data; or (4) appeared in conference proceedings, dissertations, or non-peer-reviewed technical reports.

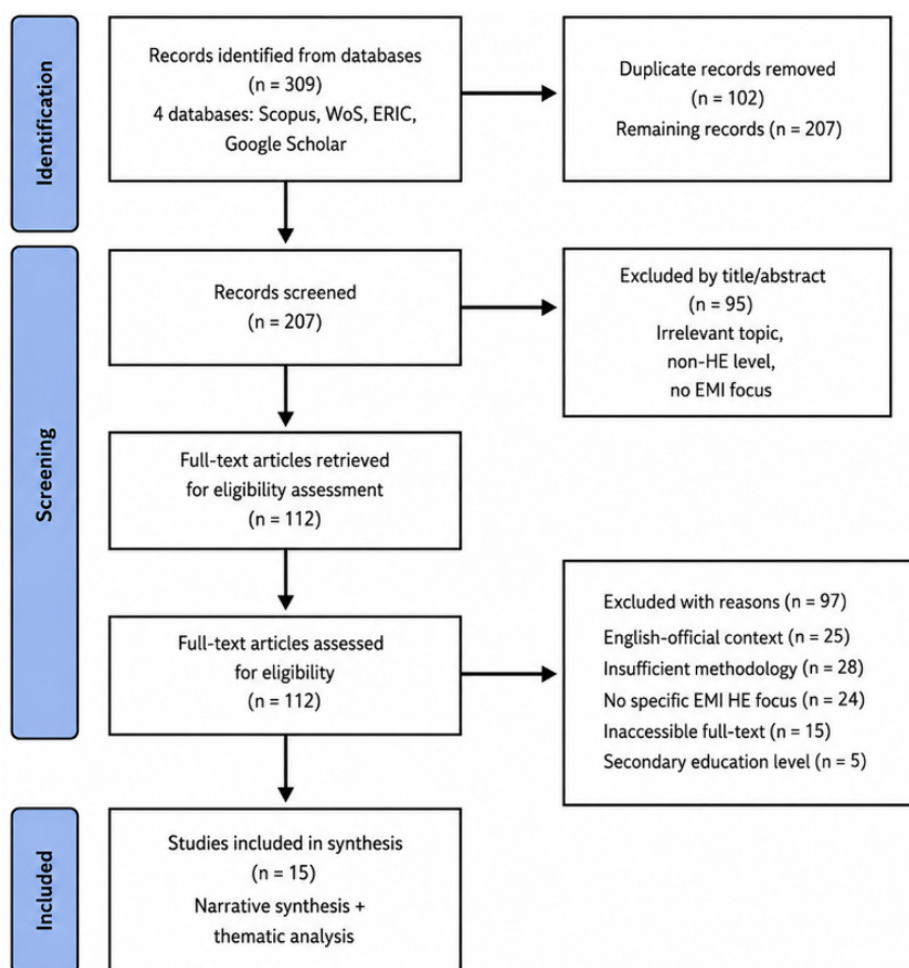
The selection process unfolded across four sequential PRISMA stages, each with a clear rationale for article reduction. At the identification stage, 309 articles were retrieved. During initial screening, 102 duplicate records were removed, yielding 207 unique articles. Title and abstract screening, conducted independently by two reviewers, resulted in the exclusion of 95 articles – 41 due to irrelevant geographic contexts (non-Asian or English-dominant settings), 32 due to a focus on non-higher-education levels, and 22 due to the absence of empirical data. This left 112 articles for full-text evaluation. At the eligibility assessment stage, 97 articles were excluded for the following specific reasons: 25 were conducted in contexts where English is an official language (e.g., Singapore, India) and therefore did not meet the EFL criterion; 28 lacked sufficient methodological rigor or presented incomplete data reporting; 24 focused on related but distinct

constructs such as CLIL or general language policy without specific EMI empirical focus; 15 were inaccessible through institutional subscriptions or open-access repositories; and 5 addressed EMI at the secondary education level despite tertiary-level keywords in titles. Consequently, 15 articles met all inclusion criteria and were retained for final synthesis. Disagreements between reviewers at any stage were resolved through structured consensus discussions; in cases of persistent disagreement, a third reviewer was consulted.

Data collection and analysis

Data were systematically extracted using a structured form including study characteristics (authors, year of publication, country, methodology design), research focus (topic, objectives, research questions), participant characteristics (number, type, level of education), key findings (EMI policy, pedagogical practices, challenges, strategies), and practical recommendations. Data were analyzed using narrative synthesis and thematic analysis with inductive coding to identify emerging patterns and themes, then grouped based on conceptual similarities. Methodological quality was assessed, including the clarity of the research objectives, the suitability of the method for the research question, the validity and reliability of the instrument, the transparency of the data analysis, and the strength of the argumentation.

Figure 4. PRISMA flowchart



To ensure the rigor and credibility of this systematic review, all included studies underwent a quality assessment based on key methodological criteria, including the clarity of research objectives, the appropriateness of the research design, the validity and reliability of data collection methods,

and the transparency of data analysis. Each study was carefully evaluated to identify potential biases and limitations, allowing for a more critical and balanced synthesis of findings. Studies demonstrating strong methodological consistency and analytical clarity were considered more reliable, while those with limited transparency were interpreted with caution. This process enhances the overall validity of the review by ensuring that the conclusions are drawn from credible, methodologically sound sources.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The systematic selection process yielded 15 empirical studies that met all inclusion criteria for this review. Participant numbers across the included studies ranged from 11 to 373, with an average of approximately 119 participants per study. Geographically, China contributed the highest number of studies (n = 5), followed by Indonesia and Taiwan (n = 2 each), while Saudi Arabia, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Hong Kong, Hungary, and Thailand each contributed 1 study. This distribution reflects the uneven concentration of EMI research across Asian EFL contexts, with East Asian countries—particularly China dominating the existing literature. A comprehensive summary of study characteristics is presented in Table 1, which provides an overview of each study's authorship, national context, methodological design, participant profile, and primary research focus.

Table 1. Summary of included studies (N = 15)

Authors (Year)	Country	Methodology	Participants	Key Focus
Ahmed (2025)	Saudi Arabia	Descriptive Qualitative	86 students	Challenges and opportunities
Aizawa et al. (2023).	Japan	Mixed Methods	373 students	Linguistic challenges vs. content achievement
Aizawa et al. (2025).	Japan	Quantitative	298 students	Academic English literacy
Alanazi & Curle (2024).	Saudi Arabia	Case Study	24 medical students	Language difficulties in medicine
Boonsuk (2025)	Thailand	Qualitative	47 students	Translanguaging practices
Cui, X., & Gardiner, I. A. (2025)	China	Mixed Methods	156 students	Self-efficacy and language challenges
Eusafzai (2022)	Kyrgyzstan	Case Study	11 students	Student transitions
Hsueh & Lin (2025).	Taiwan	Qualitative	8 lecturers	Professional learning communities
Huang (2024)	Taiwan	Mixed Methods	102 students	Self-efficacy interventions
Jinghui (2023)	Hong Kong	Policy Analysis	5 institutions	Language policy issues
Liao et al. (2025).	China	Policy Analysis	National scope	EMI policy implementation
Monica et al. (2025).	Indonesia	Qualitative	15 lecturers	Lecturer readiness in Islamic HE
Moorhouse & Wan (2023).	China	Qualitative	18 graduate students	Postgraduate challenges
Subandowo et al. (2025)	Hungary/Indonesia	Qualitative	20 students	Academic writing strategies
Zheng & Choi (2024).	China	Qualitative	12 instructors	Tier-2 university challenges

Methodologically, the reviewed studies employed a diverse range of research designs. Five studies adopted a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate lecturers' and students' lived experiences in EMI environments. Four studies utilized mixed-method designs integrating surveys with semi-structured interviews to generate more comprehensive insight into EMI practices and challenges. Two studies employed case study designs, two conducted institutional or national-level policy analyses, and two studies applied systematic review methodology. This methodological

diversity reflects the inherent complexity of EMI as a research object and underscores the necessity of examining it through multiple analytical lenses.

To ensure analytical transparency and methodological credibility, the present review operationalized its frequency-based claims through systematic counting across the fifteen included studies. Specifically, the figure of 87% (approximately 13 out of 15 studies) reflects the proportion of studies that explicitly reported students' linguistic difficulties as a primary or significant barrier to EMI participation. The figure of 60% (approximately 9 out of 15 studies) represents the proportion that documented inconsistent or inadequate pedagogical methodology as a contributing implementation challenge. The figure of 53% refers not to a proportion of studies but to a participant-level statistic: the percentage of participants across studies who reported language anxiety as a psychologically significant factor in their EMI experience. These calculations were derived from thematic frequency analysis conducted during the data extraction phase, in which each study was coded for whether it explicitly addressed each domain. Table 2 below presents the thematic coding matrix that served as the basis for these frequency estimates.

Table 2. Thematic coding matrix of included studies (N = 15)

Authors (Year)	EMI Policy (Top-down)	Linguistic Challenges	Pedagogical Inconsistency	Language Anxiety	Translanguaging	Professional Development	Institutional Stratification
Ahmed (2025)	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Aizawa et al. (2023)		✓	✓	✓			✓
Aizawa et al. (2025)		✓		✓			
Alanazi & Curle (2024)	✓	✓		✓			
Boonsuk (2025)					✓		
Cui & Gardiner (2025)		✓	✓	✓			
Eusafzai (2022)		✓	✓				
Hsueh & Lin (2025)			✓			✓	✓
Huang (2024)		✓		✓			
Jinghui (2023)	✓		✓				✓
Liao et al. (2025)	✓		✓				✓
Monica et al. (2025)	✓		✓			✓	
Moorhouse & Wan (2023)		✓		✓			
Subandowo et al. (2025)	✓	✓			✓		
Zheng & Choi (2024)	✓	✓	✓				✓
Total (n)	8	13	9	8	2	2	5
Frequency (%)	53%	87%	60%	53%	13%	13%	33%

Table 2 serves as the primary analytical foundation for the frequency claims presented in this review. Each checkmark (✓) indicates that the study explicitly identified and discussed the corresponding thematic dimension in its findings. The thematic coding was conducted independently by two reviewers, with disagreements resolved through consensus discussion. As shown, linguistic challenges (87%) and pedagogical inconsistency (60%) emerge as the most pervasive themes, while translanguaging and professional development, though increasingly prominent in recent scholarship, remain underrepresented in the current evidence base, each

appearing in only 13% of the reviewed studies. To further synthesize the evidence base, Table 3 presents a cross-study evidence synthesis table that consolidates each study's primary findings, reported challenges, and adaptation strategies. This matrix enables systematic comparison across national contexts and research designs, providing a structured basis for the thematic interpretations developed in the Discussion section.

Table 3. Evidence synthesis table of key findings across included studies

Authors (Year)	Country	Primary Finding	Key Challenge Reported	Adaptation Strategy
Ahmed (2025)	Saudi Arabia	EMI creates both academic opportunities and significant linguistic barriers	Limited English proficiency among EFL students	Scaffolded content delivery; peer support
Aizawa et al. (2023).	Japan	Linguistic proficiency gaps affect content achievement across disciplines	Academic literacy deficits in English	No explicit strategy reported
Aizawa et al. (2025).	Japan	Academic English literacy partially mediates content learning outcomes	Vocabulary and academic discourse gaps	Targeted literacy development programs
Alanazi & Curle (2024).	Saudi Arabia	Medical EMI imposes significant cognitive and linguistic burden	Disciplinary terminology comprehension	Policy-practice alignment needed
Boonsuk (2025)	Thailand	ASEAN students use seven translanguaging strategies in EMI settings	Monolingual policy vs. multilingual practice	Translanguaging as legitimate pedagogy
Cui & Gardiner (2025).	China	Self-efficacy mediates language difficulty and academic performance	Language anxiety and confidence deficits	Peer collaboration; digital tools
Eusafzai (2022)	Kyrgyzstan	Students face prolonged adjustment periods in EMI transitions	Abrupt L1-to-EMI transition	Gradual transition support needed
Hsueh & Lin (2025).	Taiwan	Bilingual PLCs enhance lecturer pedagogical confidence	Lecturer linguistic insecurity	Bilingual professional learning communities
Huang (2024)	Taiwan	Self-efficacy interventions significantly improve EMI participation	Low academic self-efficacy	Targeted self-efficacy training
Jinghui (2023)	Hong Kong	EMI functions as an institutional commodity without adequate linguistic policy	Absence of explicit language policy	Context-sensitive policy development
Liao et al. (2025).	China	Policy decentralization creates a binary EMI system across university tiers.	Macro-micro implementation gap	Differentiated institutional support
Monica et al. (2025).	Indonesia	Islamic HEI lecturers acknowledge EMI importance but lack operational confidence.	Insufficient professional preparation	Continuous professional development
Moorhouse & Wan (2023).	China	Postgraduate students navigate EMI challenges through strategic self-regulation.	Content-language integration difficulty	Metacognitive and self-regulatory strategies
Subandowo et al. (2025)	Hungary/Indonesia	Indonesian graduate students deploy multiple writing strategies in EMI contexts.	Academic writing in English	AI-assisted drafting; peer review
Zheng & Choi (2024).	China	Tier-2 universities face structural disadvantages in EMI implementation	Resource scarcity; lecturer unpreparedness	Institutional-level capacity building

The overall findings from the fifteen reviewed studies converge on several recurring themes: the dominance of top-down EMI policy implementation, persistent linguistic and psychological barriers among students, lecturers' uneven readiness to deliver EMI, and an emergent repertoire of institutional and classroom-level adaptation strategies. Collectively, these themes demonstrate

that EMI in Asian higher education cannot be understood solely as a language policy initiative; it constitutes a multidimensional educational transformation with linguistic, institutional, and pedagogical dimensions that interact in complex and context-dependent ways.

Theme 1: Patterns of EMI policy implementation

A prominent finding across the reviewed studies is the dominance of top-down approaches to EMI policy adoption. Across multiple national contexts, EMI programs were initiated through institutional or governmental directives aligned with internationalization objectives rather than through bottom-up pedagogical reform (Jinghui, 2023; Liao et al., 2025). In China, Liao et al. (2025) and Zheng and Choi (2024) documented how national policies have driven universities to adopt EMI as part of broader competitiveness strategies, creating a structurally bifurcated system in which tier-one institutions with abundant resources operate under markedly different conditions from under-resourced tier-two counterparts. Policy dynamics in other contexts similarly reflect institutional rather than pedagogical motivations. Jinghui (2023) found that several Hong Kong institutions implemented EMI as a prestige mechanism without articulating explicit language support frameworks, effectively treating English as a commodity rather than a pedagogical medium. In Indonesian Islamic higher education, Monica et al. (2025) reported that institutional EMI mandates outpaced faculty professional readiness, reflecting a broader pattern of policy-practice misalignment across the regional literature.

Theme 2: Linguistic and pedagogical challenges

Linguistic difficulty constitutes the most consistently documented barrier across the reviewed literature, appearing explicitly in 13 of 15 studies (87%). Students across national contexts (Japan, Saudi Arabia, China, Indonesia, and Kyrgyzstan) reported challenges in comprehending discipline-specific content when delivered entirely in English, with academic vocabulary and complex discourse structures posing the greatest obstacles (Aizawa et al., 2023; Alanazi & Curle, 2024; Cui & Gardiner, 2025). A recurring sub-pattern concerns the uneven development of academic language skills: while receptive competencies such as reading and listening showed gradual gains with sustained EMI exposure, productive skills, most notably academic writing, remained persistently underdeveloped across study contexts (Aizawa et al., 2025; Subandowo et al., 2025). Pedagogical inconsistency was documented in 9 of 15 studies (60%), with lecturers frequently delivering discipline content without integrating adequate language scaffolding or adopting structured support mechanisms to address students' proficiency gaps (Hsueh & Lin, 2025; Monica et al., 2025; Zheng & Choi, 2024). Language anxiety, as a psychologically mediating factor, was reported as significant among participants in 8 of 15 studies, affecting approximately 53% of the combined participant pool. Rather than operating as a purely cognitive phenomenon, anxiety intersected with academic identity, participation behavior, and self-regulatory capacity (Cui & Gardiner, 2025; Huang, 2024; Moorhouse & Wan, 2023).

Theme 3: EMI adaptation strategies

Despite the persistence of these challenges, a notable subset of studies documented purposeful adaptation strategies emerging at both classroom and institutional levels. Translanguaging, the flexible deployment of students' entire multilingual repertoire within nominally English-only instructional settings, was documented as a constructive pedagogical practice in studies conducted in Thailand and Indonesia (Boonsuk, 2025; Subandowo et al., 2025). At the institutional level, bilingual professional learning communities were identified as an effective mechanism for supporting lecturers with limited English confidence, providing structured opportunities for reflective practice, peer observation, and feedback (Hsueh & Lin, 2025). At the learner level, students demonstrated strategic agency through peer collaboration, digital translation tools, AI-assisted academic drafting,

and metacognitive self-regulation (Cui & Gardiner, 2025; Moorhouse & Wan, 2023; Subandowo et al., 2025). These findings collectively indicate that EMI stakeholders are not passively receiving policy but actively negotiating its demands through contextually responsive practices.

Discussion

Trends in EMI implementation in Asian EFL higher education

The synthesis of findings across the fifteen included studies reveals a consistent and cross-nationally recurring trend: EMI adoption in Asian EFL higher education is predominantly policy-driven rather than pedagogically motivated, reflecting the strategic positioning of English as an instrument of institutional internationalization (Jinghui, 2023; Liao et al., 2025; Monica et al., 2025; Zheng & Choi, 2024). This orientation aligns with earlier observations in the broader EMI literature, particularly the findings of Macaro et al. (2018), who identified top-down policy directives as the primary mechanism through which EMI expands in non-English-dominant contexts. The present review's evidence base reinforces this pattern and extends it into the post-2018 period, demonstrating that the policy-practice gap documented in earlier scholarship has not been substantively resolved since.

A cross-study pattern that warrants particular attention is the structural stratification of EMI implementation along lines of institutional resources. Studies from China, Japan, Taiwan, and Indonesia consistently document a divergence between well-resourced, internationally oriented institutions, which demonstrate structured EMI programs, dedicated language support services, and systematic lecturer training, and resource-constrained institutions, which struggle with inadequate infrastructure, underprepared faculty, and insufficient academic support for students (Aizawa et al., 2023; Liao et al., 2025; Zheng & Choi, 2024). This stratification suggests that EMI expansion across Asia has proceeded unevenly, with institutional capacity functioning as a significant determinant of implementation quality.

Compared to earlier systematic reviews (Macaro et al., 2018; Peng & Xie, 2021), which primarily interrogated whether EMI enhances language proficiency without compromising content learning, the studies reviewed here reflect a discernible reorientation in research attention away from outcome measurement and toward questions of implementation complexity, policy equity, and contextual sustainability. However, it is important to note that this observed shift in research focus is based on the fifteen studies included in the present review and may not be representative of the full breadth of EMI scholarship published during 2015–2025. The present review does not claim to document a definitive paradigm shift; rather, it identifies a tentative trend in the current evidence base that warrants further investigation through larger, more geographically diverse systematic syntheses.

An additional notable development is the documented movement away from rigid English-only instructional orientations at the classroom level, even though institutional policy mandates monolingual delivery. Multiple studies in this review document the normalization of multilingual negotiation as an adaptive classroom practice (Boonsuk, 2025; Sahan et al., 2025; Subandowo et al., 2025), reflecting a growing pedagogical recognition that students' multilingual resources are assets rather than deficits.

Linguistic and pedagogical challenges in EMI contexts

The thematic coding and evidence synthesis presented in Tables 2 and 3 confirm that linguistic challenges constitute the most structurally pervasive barrier across the reviewed evidence base, appearing in 87% of included studies. This finding is consistent with established patterns in the EMI literature. Macaro et al. (2018) identified linguistic difficulty as a central concern in earlier systematic reviews, and the present synthesis indicates that this challenge remains unresolved despite a decade of subsequent research and policy attention. What the present review adds to this

picture is a more refined characterization of how linguistic difficulty operates: not as an isolated proficiency deficit but as a multidimensional barrier intersecting with cognitive load, academic identity, and psychological well-being (Cui & Gardiner, 2025; Huang, 2024).

The psychological dimension of EMI participation, specifically, language anxiety and academic self-efficacy, deserves particular analytical attention. Evidence from 8 of 15 studies suggests that students' confidence and sense of academic competence mediate the relationship between language proficiency and academic performance in ways that purely linguistic threshold models fail to capture (Macaro et al., 2018). Cui and Gardiner (2025) found that self-efficacy, rather than raw language proficiency, was a significant predictor of active participation and academic persistence in EMI programs, a finding corroborated by Huang (2024). This demonstrates that targeted self-efficacy interventions produced measurable improvements in EMI engagement among Taiwanese students. This evidence suggests that effective EMI support must address psychological readiness alongside linguistic competence, an implication that existing policy frameworks have yet to incorporate systematically.

Pedagogical inconsistency, documented in 60% of the included studies, represents a second major challenge that is structurally connected to, but analytically distinct from, linguistic barriers. In many of the contexts reviewed, EMI policies were introduced before robust professional development systems were established, leaving lecturers to navigate the dual demands of content delivery and language facilitation without adequate preparation or ongoing support (Monica et al., 2025; Zheng & Choi, 2024). This sequence policy, which precedes capacity, constitutes a recurring structural vulnerability in Asian EMI implementation, one that Peng and Xie (2021) identified as a significant impediment to program sustainability. The evidence in the present review confirms that this vulnerability persists and has become more pronounced as EMI programs have expanded into less well-resourced institutional contexts.

Adaptation and coping strategies in EMI implementation

Notwithstanding the significant challenges documented above, the reviewed studies collectively reveal an emerging repertoire of adaptive practices that are reshaping EMI implementation at the classroom, professional, and institutional levels. Translanguaging, while present in only 2 of 15 studies as an explicit primary focus, emerged as a recurring secondary theme across several studies, reflecting a broader discursive shift in the field toward recognizing flexible multilingual practices as pedagogically legitimate rather than policy-deviant (Boonsuk, 2025; Subandowo et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with recent arguments in the applied linguistics literature that multilingualism should be understood as a resource to be strategically deployed rather than an obstacle to be overcome (Sahan et al., 2025).

Professional development initiatives, particularly bilingual professional learning communities, represent a promising institutional response to lecturer preparedness gaps. However, these too appeared in only 2 of 15 studies, indicating that such initiatives remain the exception rather than the norm across the reviewed contexts (Hsueh & Lin, 2025; Wang et al., 2025). The evidence from these studies suggests that when professional development is longitudinal, collaborative, and contextually embedded, it produces meaningful improvements in lecturers' pedagogical confidence and language-aware teaching practices. The present review, therefore, concurs with, rather than supersedes, the conclusions of Peng and Xie (2021). Macaro et al. (2018) Regarding the importance of sustained institutional support, the current evidence base provides a more granular picture of the specific mechanisms by which community-based learning, reflective practice, and peer observation produce pedagogical change.

At the learner level, the reviewed studies document meaningful strategic agency among EMI students, who employ diverse coping mechanisms, including peer collaboration, code-switching, AI-assisted academic drafting, and metacognitive self-regulation, to manage the linguistic and

academic demands of their programs (Cui & Gardiner, 2025; Moorhouse & Wan, 2023; Subandowo et al., 2025). This evidence reframes EMI learners as active agents rather than passive recipients of institutional policy, a perspective that enriches earlier frameworks focused predominantly on deficits and barriers. However, this reframing should be interpreted with caution: the studies reporting learner agency are concentrated in graduate-level and well-resourced institutional contexts, and the extent to which such strategies are accessible to students in less-supported settings remains an empirical question that the current evidence base cannot definitively resolve.

The findings of this review carry practical implications for multiple stakeholder groups. At the policy level, the evidence supports a recalibration away from one-size-fits-all internationalization mandates toward differentiated, context-sensitive frameworks that account for institutional resource variation and the linguistic realities of diverse student populations. Institutions should invest in sustained language support infrastructure, including writing centers, academic language coaching, and structured lecturer development programs, rather than treating EMI as a policy achievement in itself. For classroom practitioners, the evidence endorses translanguaging and scaffolded content delivery as effective responses to the persistent linguistic challenges documented across the reviewed contexts. Taken together, the present findings suggest that the path toward more equitable and effective EMI implementation in Asian EFL higher education lies not in the expansion of English-only instruction per se, but in the development of institutional ecosystems capable of supporting the full complexity of multilingual academic learning, a conclusion grounded in the available evidence while acknowledging the significant research gaps that remain.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This review directly addresses the three research questions guiding the study. Regarding the evolution of implementation trends, the fifteen reviewed studies collectively indicate that EMI implementation across Asian EFL higher education between 2015 and 2025 has been predominantly shaped by top-down institutional and governmental policy directives oriented toward internationalization, rather than by pedagogically motivated reform. A structurally significant pattern emerging from this evidence base is the bifurcation of implementation quality along resource lines, with well-resourced tier-one institutions demonstrating more structured and sustainable EMI programs compared to their under-resourced counterparts. Furthermore, concerning the prominent linguistic, pedagogical, and institutional challenges, linguistic difficulty, documented in 87% of included studies, is the most persistently reported barrier, compounded by pedagogical inconsistency (60% of studies) and language anxiety affecting a substantial proportion of participants. These challenges operate not in isolation but as an interconnected system in which linguistic barriers interact with psychological variables, institutional capacity, and pedagogical preparedness. In terms of the adaptation and coping strategies, the reviewed studies document an emergent repertoire of adaptive responses, including translanguaging practices, bilingual professional learning communities, and learner-level metacognitive strategies, which demonstrate meaningful potential to improve EMI outcomes across diverse Asian EFL institutional contexts.

The scientific contribution of this review is grounded specifically in its evidence base of fifteen empirical studies and should be understood within those boundaries. Rather than claiming a definitive paradigm shift in the field, this review offers a structured and transparent synthesis of post-2018 EMI research in Asian EFL contexts, a period and regional scope not comprehensively addressed by prior systematic reviews. The thematic coding matrix and evidence synthesis tables developed in this review provide an analytical framework that future researchers can extend and refine as the evidence base grows. This study acknowledges several limitations. The review is restricted to four English-language databases, which may exclude relevant studies published in regional languages. The geographical distribution of included studies skews heavily toward East Asia, particularly China, meaning that conclusions drawn here cannot be generalized uniformly

across the full diversity of Asian EFL higher education contexts. Additionally, the relatively small number of included studies (n=15) constrains the strength of cross-contextual claims. It reinforces the need for continued primary research, particularly in underrepresented regions such as Southeast and South Asia. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to examine the long-term trajectories of EMI outcomes, comparative studies across institutional tiers and national policy frameworks, and investigations into the role of emerging technologies, including AI-assisted language tools, in supporting multilingual academic learning within EMI environments. Expanding research coverage to underrepresented regional contexts will be essential for developing a genuinely comprehensive and equitable understanding of EMI implementation across the Asian EFL higher education landscape.

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