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"Returning" English-Medium Instruction Research to Practitioners: A Circular Applied Linguistics Inquiry with Physics Lecturers

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Abstract

Aim: This study examines how EMI lecturers interpret, validate, and contest research claims about English-medium instruction (EMI). Framed through circular applied linguistics, it explores what happens when EMI research claims are presented to practitioners for interpretation in relation to their teaching contexts.
Design: Using a collaborative qualitative design, five EMI physics lecturers at a Swedish technical university engaged in asynchronous online discussions structured around EMI research claims concerning language, multilingualism, pedagogy, English proficiency, and student challenges. Discussions were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.
Results: Rather than confirming or rejecting EMI research claims, participants tended to recontextualize them through the realities of physics teaching. Claims aligned with disciplinary communication and multilingual classroom practices resonated strongly, whereas claims foregrounding pedagogical deficit or language-related difficulty were frequently accepted with caveats or contested outright. Lecturers repeatedly shifted EMI explanations from generalized language framings toward the communicative and epistemic demands of physics practice.
Originality: The study demonstrates how circular applied linguistics can reposition EMI lecturers from research subjects to interpreters of EMI scholarship, contributing a dialogic and practitioner-oriented approach to EMI research relevance. Findings suggest that EMI support and research dissemination should emphasize structured dialogue with disciplinary lecturers about the communicative, epistemic, and multilingual realities of their teaching.

Keywords

1. English-medium instruction (EMI)

2. Language
3. Teachers
4. Circular applied linguistics
5. Disciplinary discourse

CRediT Statement

Hans Malmström: Conceptualization (equal); Methodology (equal); Investigation; Data curation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing (support); Ron Martinez: Conceptualization (equal); Methodology (equal); Writing – review and editing; Visualization.

AI Declaration

During the preparation of this manuscript, we, the authors, made occasional use of OpenAI's ChatGPT to support language editing and to ensure stylistic consistency across contributions from the two authors. All material was subsequently carefully reviewed by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the final article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Introduction

Research on English medium instruction (EMI) has been criticized for being "owned" by applied linguists and for failing to meaningfully engage key stakeholders, such as students and teachers directly involved in teaching and/or learning through English as a second or foreign language (Macaro & Aizawa, 2024). As far as teachers and teaching in EMI contexts is concerned, it is often argued that EMI research findings rarely influence pedagogical practice and policy in academic disciplines to the extent that they might; for instance, findings are frequently not communicated in ways that resonate with EMI teachers and are often "hidden" from practitioners in outlets (journals and conferences) associated solely with applied linguistics (Curle et al, 2024; Macaro & Aizawa, 2024).

In response to such issues, this study positions EMI teachers as active interlocutors in EMI scholarship and explores a research design explicitly intended to close the gap between research and practice. Drawing on recent calls to reconfigure applied linguistics as a more circular, inclusive, and practitioner-responsive enterprise (Hwang & Coss, 2025; Jenks, 2025), the study treats EMI lecturers' professional knowledge as a resource for assessing the relevance of influential claims in EMI research. In this paper, we use the notion of *returning* research as shorthand for bringing research claims back into dialogue with the practitioners whose work it concerns to create opportunities for those claims to be interpreted, challenged, and reformulated in relation to teaching practice. If EMI research claims are disseminated to lecturers without this kind of return, they may be perceived as generic advice, or as deficit-oriented judgments about disciplinary teaching. When such claims are discussed with lecturers, however, they can prompt more locally meaningful questions: What kinds of language actually matter in this discipline? When does English create difficulty, and when is it simply the accepted language of disciplinary practice? How do multilingual practices support or hinder inclusion? In this sense, circularity becomes both a methodological orientation and a practical mechanism for improving the relevance of EMI research, professional development, and institutional support.

In this study, practitioner judgement is thus foregrounded as a lens for examining how research claims are applied in practice. From a socio-constructivist perspective, this shift can be understood in terms of how lecturers position themselves in relation to the roles and responsibilities implied by EMI research claims (Kayi-Aydar & Steadman, 2021). By identifying areas of alignment as well as disagreement, the study provides insight into the extent to which EMI scholarship demonstrates what Hwang and Coss (2025) term *transformability*, that is, its capacity to be meaningfully taken up, adapted, or questioned in practice. The present study grounds itself in a specific context – EMI physics teaching in Sweden – where EMI has become normalized in disciplinary teaching. This allows for a close examination of how research-practice connections relate to one another in an established EMI setting and in an ongoing process of interpretation and evaluation.

Background

Concerns about the "ownership" of EMI research are often presented as specific to the EMI community yet reflect a broader challenge within applied linguistics – an alleged "relevance crisis" (Hwang & Coss, 2025) – in which research struggles to address the needs of practitioners and the communities it studies. Across applied linguistics more broadly, and within EMI research specifically, calls have intensified for scholarship to be more accessible, dialogic, and grounded in practice. Jenks' (2025) notion of circular applied linguistics responds to this need by proposing a closed-loop model in which knowledge returns to, and is jointly shaped within, the researched community. This shift offers a useful lens for re-examining longstanding issues in EMI and for considering how EMI scholarship might move toward stronger practitioner relevance.

The EMI Ownership Debate and the Relevance Gap in EMI Research

The ownership debate is not only about who conducts EMI research; it is also about who gets to define the research questions, where those questions are addressed and whose expertise is considered legitimate and sufficiently competent to address them. Drawing on a large-scale review of EMI research publications and professional development providers, Macaro and Aizawa (2024) show that EMI scholarship is overwhelmingly produced by applied linguists, published primarily in applied linguistics journals, and disseminated through professional development programs led almost exclusively by language specialists, even though most EMI teaching is carried out by "disciplinary" academics. This concentration raises concerns about the limited involvement of academic subject specialists in shaping EMI research agendas and the risk that pedagogical recommendations are framed through assumptions that foreground language-related challenges while under-theorizing disciplinary knowledge, teaching traditions, and contextual specifics. Seen this way, "ownership" in EMI concerns whose judgments are taken as authoritative in discussions of EMI teaching and how research accounts of practice are grounded and framed.

Claims of ownership notwithstanding, collaboration between EMI researchers and EMI lecturers does occur and is reported in the literature. A clear example is provided by Hopkyns et al. (2025), whose collaborative autoethnographic study brings together faculty members from applied linguistics, education, and media studies to reflect on EMI across disciplines in a shared institutional context. By positioning EMI teachers simultaneously as researchers and participants, the study by Hopkyns et al. demonstrates how disciplinary perspectives influence understandings of language, pedagogy, assessment and student needs, while also revealing points of convergence across fields. Importantly, this work illustrates how structured, dialogic engagement can expose forms of practitioner knowledge that are often absent from EMI research framed solely through applied linguistic lenses, thereby offering a concrete model of interdisciplinary collaboration that responds directly to concerns raised in the ownership debate.

Another good example of teacher engagement is provided in a recent chapter by Lu et al. (2025), which brings together discipline-specific accounts of EMI teaching across history, physics, and science education. Rather than positioning EMI lecturers as respondents to externally defined research questions, the chapter foregrounds teachers' own accounts of teaching disciplinary content through English, and the challenges that arise

in that context. Across the three contributions, EMI is studied as a set of discipline-specific practices, affected by the nature of subject knowledge, students' prior educational experiences, and local curricular expectations. The chapter shows how EMI lecturers' professional judgements can inform more nuanced understandings of language, learning, and teaching across disciplines, but it also highlights commonalities that cut across disciplinary boundaries.

Concerns about ownership in EMI are best understood as a domain-specific manifestation of a broader relevance gap in applied linguistics. As Hwang and Coss (2025) argue, applied linguistics research has traditionally been evaluated primarily through researcher-centered criteria of rigor and, when appropriate, generalizability, with limited attention to whether findings inform practitioners' locally situated decision-making. In EMI, collaboration between researchers and teachers (Malmström & Zhou, 2026) can provide opportunities for practitioners to influence research priorities and contribute to decisions about how research knowledge is adopted. While recent collaborative and emic-oriented studies demonstrate important movement toward greater practitioner engagement, they also highlight the need for frameworks that conceptualize research-practice relations in non-linear ways. Addressing the relevance gap in EMI, therefore, requires approaches that explicitly foreground reciprocity, dialogue, and return flows of knowledge between research and practice. Put another way, we believe it is fair to ask whom the EMI research agenda currently serves?

Circular Applied Linguistics as a Framework for Practitioner-Centered EMI Research

Consider a situation in which a person asks for advice, receives it, and then discovers that the advice does not quite fit their circumstances. If the conversation ends there, the advice remains abstract and presumably only partially useful. If, however, the person giving the advice listens to how it was received, what worked, and what did not, the advice can be revised and made more appropriate. Meaningful guidance, in this sense, depends both on giving advice, and on allowing it to be fed back, tested, and reframed through dialogue.

In EMI, for example, a research-based claim such as "language is central in EMI" may be intended to sensitize lecturers to the linguistic dimensions of teaching. Yet a lecturer may interpret the same claim quite differently depending on whether "language" refers to grammar, technical terminology, student participation, or the ability to move between symbolic and verbal forms of representation. Circular inquiry allows such distinctions to emerge before research claims are translated into recommendations.

Many of the relevance and stakeholder-uptake challenges identified in applied linguistics research generally, and in EMI research specifically, resemble situations in which this *exchange* never occurs. As Jenks (2025, p. 422) argues, much applied linguistics research follows a model of "linear research," in which knowledge moves in one direction (conceptualizing, conducting, and communicating), with publication serving as the terminal point. Within such a model, what is communicated in empirical papers may not reflect the concerns of those whose practices are under investigation because, as Jenks (2025, p. 423) observes, researchers "conduct their investigations using theoretical frameworks that speak to the epistemologies of other academics." As a result, research-based guidance is offered, but rarely fed back for validation or revision involving the people who are ultimately affected by the recommendations.

Circular research, by contrast, seeks to close the researcher-researched loop by conceptualizing research-practice relations as an ongoing, dialogic process rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge from researcher to practitioner. Within such a model, knowledge *circulates* through sustained interaction, allowing research-based insights to be interpreted, tested, and refined in relation to the contexts and communities they are intended to inform. As Jenks (2025, p. 424) argues, "a model of circularity is needed to help applied linguistic scholarship pivot to more impactful, inclusive, and sustainable research." Central to circular research is therefore an explicit orientation toward (i) *change*, understood as the capacity of research to develop in response to practice within the social settings in which it is embedded, and (ii) *inclusiveness*. Inclusiveness, in this context, refers to the extent to which those whose practices are under investigation are positioned as actively involved participants in the research process rather than as passive sources of data and recipients of recommendations. For Jenks (2025), this entails conducting research with individuals and communities in ways that recognize their experiential knowledge and interests and enable mutual exchange throughout the research process. Importantly, however, circularity does not prescribe a single set of methods or forms of engagement. As Jenks notes, "there is no monolithic way of establishing circularity in research" (2025, p. 428), since the practical realization of dialogic and inclusive research must remain responsive to context. It is from this understanding of circularity as principled but flexible that the present study conducts its inquiry.

The Present Study

This study is motivated by an interest in seeing how established EMI research claims are interpreted and made sense of by EMI lecturers in their teaching practice. Typically, research findings are treated as conclusions to be disseminated; this study approaches them as starting points for engagement. Their meaning and relevance are explored in relation to EMI lecturers' teaching practice. In line with a circular research orientation, the focus is not on evaluating lecturers against *a priori* expectations, but on attending to how commonly cited EMI claims are understood and, where necessary, reinterpreted against a frame of practice. To this end, the study focuses on a small set of established findings drawn from EMI research that have been widely discussed in relation to language, pedagogy, and participant experiences. It is not our intention to offer a review of the literature here. Instead, these statements function as reference points around which dialogue with EMI lecturers can be organized. The selection of the statements reflects our experience and positionality as established applied linguistics scholars, specializing in EMI (research and practice), based in the Global North (Hans) and Global South (Ron).

Statement 1: Language is central in EMI.

> EMI teachers rarely see themselves as language teachers, yet language – specifically English – is an unavoidable dimension of EMI instruction and interaction (Abouzeid et al., 2024; Dafouz et al., 2016; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2021).

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Statement 2: EMI classrooms are multilingual spaces.

> EMI rarely involves *only* English; classroom interaction often includes other shared languages, and institutional language policies frequently diverge from practice (there is a policy–practice gap), even where institutional policies promote monolingual norms (Dafouz & Smit, 2016; Kuteeva & Airey, 2014).

Statement 3: English proficiency matters for EMI, but in context-specific ways.

> Both teachers' and students' English proficiency affect EMI effectiveness, but their relative importance – and emphasis – varies by discipline, institution, and context. (Lasagabaster, 2022; Macaro, 2018; McKinley, 2025; Vander Borght et al., 2026; Wang, 2021).

Statement 4: EMI places additional pedagogical demands on lecturers.

> EMI requires teaching adaptations, and some lecturers feel pedagogically underprepared; however, perceived challenges tend to decrease with experience. (Kling, 2013; Wang et al., 2025; Werther et al., 2014).

Statement 5: Students experience specific challenges in EMI.

> Some students struggle with comprehension, increased cognitive load, following lectures, and disciplinary vocabulary demands, though, as with teachers, these challenges seem to diminish over time. (Aizawa et al., 2023; Evans & Morrison, 2011; Shepard & Morrison, 2021; Shepard & Rose, 2023).

Collectively, these statements served as conceptual points of departure for the present study. The statements were selected because they reflect claims that explicitly or implicitly permeate research, and then often travel into professional development, policy documents, and academic conversations about EMI. The objective was to use them as points of entry for structured asynchronous conversations with EMI lecturers in order to examine how research-based claims resonate with or are problematized by EMI practitioners.

We acknowledge that the statements selected for discussion predominantly foreground language-related dimensions of EMI, which is partly influenced by our own research interests. Nonetheless, the statements also largely reflect the orientation of much established EMI scholarship, which has historically emerged from applied linguistics and consequently tended to prioritize questions of language, multilingualism, and teaching language proficiency. Clearly, if applied linguistics is to be validated as a relevant source of research for EMI teachers, then critical examination of how we apply linguistics is necessary. Our study does not assume that these dimensions fully represent EMI lecturers' professional realities. Rather, the discussions were designed to explore how lecturers engage with some of the most widely circulating claims within the existing literature on those topics. Importantly, the analysis also attends to how participants reframe, question, or shift the focus of these claims toward other concerns.

To guide the inquiry, the study used the following research questions as a basis:

1. How do EMI lecturers respond to widely circulating research-based claims about EMI teaching and learning?
2. How are these claims assessed in relation to lecturers' own teaching contexts?
3. What do these responses reveal about the relationship between EMI research and teaching practice?

The next section outlines the methodological approach through which this dialogic engagement was designed and conducted.

Methodology

Informed by Jenks' (2025) circular applied linguistics approach, this study adopted a collaborative, emic-oriented, practitioner-validated qualitative inquiry method to explore how EMI teachers engage with widely cited claims in EMI research. Data were collected through an asynchronous online discussion format in which five physics lecturers, involved in EMI to varying degrees, took part.

Participant Recruitment

The participating EMI lecturers were senior academics (four professors and one associate professor) with extensive teaching experience working in a physics department at a technical university in Sweden. In this context, EMI is widely implemented across degree programs and forms a central part of disciplinary teaching; English is used in all master's programs and present also at the undergraduate level, not least through the reading assigned to students. Focusing on this setting enables the study to examine how EMI lecturers engage with research claims in a context where teaching through English is deeply embedded in everyday academic practice. This provides a good basis for analyzing how EMI claims are interpreted and negotiated within lecturers 'professional realities.

Participants were recruited through the first author's local professional network. The study thus relied on purposeful, network-based sampling, targeting physics lecturers who were involved in teaching through English. This recruitment strategy was consistent with the study's emic and dialogic orientation. While such recruitment entails the possibility of a selection bias – participants may be more (or less) pedagogically reflective or more positively (or negatively) disposed toward EMI than the wider population of physics lecturers – representativeness was never an objective of the study. The aim was to generate rich accounts of how established EMI claims are interpreted within professional EMI practice.

The study deliberately focused on physics only to reduce disciplinary variability as an explanatory factor. A substantial body of research on disciplinary differences in higher education has demonstrated that teaching practices, epistemological orientations, and assessment cultures vary systematically across fields (e.g., Neumann et al., 2002). By holding discipline constant, the study sought to examine how EMI research claims are interpreted within a relatively stable epistemic culture. Physics has traditionally been characterized as a "hard pure" discipline, marked by cumulative, hierarchical knowledge structures, quantitative emphasis, and strong paradigmatic coherence (Neumann et al., 2002). Such disciplines are often assumed to be less sensitive to linguistic aspects compared to "soft" fields, given their reliance on formal symbolism, mathematical modelling, and problem-

solving routines. Focusing on physics therefore allowed the study to interrogate a productive tension: EMI research frequently foregrounds language as central to teaching and learning, while physics is commonly perceived – by both insiders and outsiders – as the transmission of content that is less linguistically mediated. This made physics a good setting for examining how EMI lecturers position themselves in relation to claims about language responsibility, multilingual practice, language proficiency, and pedagogical adaptation – in effect, how linguistic matters apply to their reality.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were generated through an asynchronous online discussion format. Using *Canvas*, a web-based learning management system, participants were presented with the aforementioned five research-informed statements. For each, participants first posted an individual response and were then invited to read and respond to one another's contributions, for example, by agreeing, disputing, or extending each other's perspectives. This format was designed to support dialogic engagement and to surface how EMI claims are negotiated and made meaningful in a practical sense through professional peer interaction, rather than being elicited solely through individual interview accounts. The first author (Hans) acted as a facilitator and adopted a light-touch, non-directive role, posting occasional follow-up questions and summarizing emerging discussion threads to encourage clarification or deeper engagement with the prompts and responses from other participants. Once the online discussion was concluded, the EMI lecturers were invited to participate in a final individual reflection. Appendix 1 contains the full discussion and reflection protocol.

The discussion/reflection prompts were written in English. Participants were invited to contribute either in Swedish or in English. Three participants were first-language users of Swedish, while the remaining two participants were first-language users of German and French respectively, although both were highly proficient users of Swedish. Interestingly, all participants chose to write almost exclusively in English throughout the discussions. While no explicit explanation for this choice was elicited, it may reflect the normalization of English within their professional and disciplinary practices.

Prior to starting this study, all participants received written information about the study's purpose and procedures, provided their informed consent, and were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Contributions were pseudo-anonymized in subsequent analysis and reporting. Under Sweden's Ethical Review Act, review is required if the research involves, among other things, sensitive personal data or physical or psychological interventions or risks. This study, which involved adult academics discussing their professional practices in a secure digital environment, did not meet any of the statutory criteria requiring formal ethical review.

The data collection approach generated multiple types of qualitative data: teachers' individual reactions, peer-to-peer negotiations of meaning, and collective as well as individual reflections on consensus and contention. The subsequent analysis was conducted as a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). In line with most reflexive thematic analyses, the analysis adopted an interpretive and theoretically informed perspective, consistent with the study's research questions and the EMI literature informing the discussion prompts. In addition, recent theorizing on teacher positioning in EMI (e.g.,

Block & Moncada-Comas, 2022; Block, 2021; Kayi-Aydar & Steadman, 2021) was occasionally drawn upon. Following Braun and Clarke's recursive approach (2021, 2022), the analysis involved repeated familiarization with the data set, the generation of initial codes, the iterative development and refinement of themes, and the production of an interpretive analytic narrative. Particular attention was paid to how lecturers positioned themselves in relation to research-based EMI claims, disciplinary identities, language responsibilities, and pedagogical expectations.

Findings and Discussion

In some cases, the lecturers simply validated or rejected the research-informed EMI claims presented in the discussion prompts. However, they also consistently recontextualized these claims through the disciplinary logic of physics and through their own teaching experiences. Repeatedly, the physics lecturers engaged with each other's arguments; this helped sharpen the discussion and enabled it to move beyond the prompts suggested by us as authors/researchers. A summary of the findings can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Findings

Original research claim	**How lecturers reinterpreted it**	**Practitioner-sensitive reformulation**
Language is central in EMI	Language mattered mainly as terminology, explanation, and disciplinary communication, not general English correction.	Language support in EMI should be framed as disciplinary communication rather than as turning lecturers into language teachers.
EMI classrooms are multilingual spaces	Multilingual practices were judged in relation to inclusion, participation, and fairness.	EMI language policy should allow situated decisions about when different languages support or hinder participation.
English proficiency matters	Proficiency mattered, but lecturers found it difficult to separate language from conceptual understanding and confidence.	EMI support should help lecturers diagnose difficulties without assuming they are primarily linguistic.
EMI places additional pedagogical demands	At advanced levels, English was often experienced as the standard language of physics.	EMI support should be discipline- and level-sensitive rather than based on generic assumptions.

Students experience EMI challenges	Challenges vary by level, task, confidence, and disciplinary complexity.	Student support should address disciplinary socialization, not only English proficiency.

The rest of this section is organized around four interrelated and prominent themes present in the data: (1) disciplinary responsibility without language-teacher identity, (2) EMI as disciplinary norm in advanced physics, (3) multilingualism and inclusion, and (4) resistance to language reductionism in EMI explanations. The data excerpts included are intended to be representative rather than exhaustive and have occasionally been shortened for reasons of space (they are otherwise unedited). To preserve the lecturers' anonymity, names have been replaced by codes (L1-L5).

Disciplinary Responsibility without Language-Teacher Identity

Across the discussions and reflections, participants consistently positioned themselves as responsible for students' disciplinary development, while simultaneously resisting a more explicit role in language pedagogy. Research-informed claims concerning the importance of interaction, communication, and disciplinary discourse in EMI generally resonated with participants' experiences. However, these claims were frequently reinterpreted through a distinction between supporting disciplinary communication and English language teaching in a more conventional pedagogical sense, as noted by this lecturer: "As a teacher, I do not feel responsible for supporting students' English, especially not with respect to grammar" (L1). Another lecturer said the following:

> Not only is it not our job to teach the students this [language], nor do we have the expertise but also there is a risk of decreasing the activity in the classroom if the students fear to be corrected for their level of English (L2).

Several lecturers emphasized that helping students participate in physics necessarily involved attention to terminology, ways of explaining concepts, and forms of scientific communication: "…if the students would use the wrong terminology for the content, then I would comment (such as saying force instead of energy, etc.)" (L2).

Yet, this was virtually never viewed by the lecturers as teaching with a language focus. Rather, language was consistently positioned as embedded within disciplinary meaning-making. Even the lecturer who most explicitly acknowledged a degree of responsibility for students English continued to subordinate this responsibility to the broader goals of disciplinary teaching:

> I see a responsibility in our teaching to help students improve their English, if necessary. However, in the regular course work, I cannot provide dedicated time for

improving language skills, since the focus is on the course subject. I can, however,

help students in discussions, e.g., in case they miss technical terms (L4).

Thus, participants appeared to accept responsibility for apprenticing students into the English-based communicative practices of physics, while resisting a broader English language teaching identity, similar to that discussed by Block and Moncada-Comas (2022). Attention to terminology, explanation, and participation in disciplinary discussion was frequently framed as part of helping students communicate within physics. As one lecturer explained, "I want students to be able to engage in disciplinary communication in English" (L2). In this sense, participants positioned themselves as disciplinary insiders supporting students in their development of disciplinary literacy, that is, their ability to participate in the communicative practices of the physics discipline (cf. Airey, 2020; Malmström & Pecorari, 2021). This positioning also resonates with recent scholarship describing EMI teaching as a "hybrid" and "contested" process involving negotiation between disciplinary, linguistic, and pedagogical domains (Wang et al., 2025, p. 164), where lecturers attempt to preserve disciplinary legitimacy while simultaneously supporting students' participation in disciplinary discourse.

This idea is far from unique to the present study. EMI research has long shown that content lecturers tend to acknowledge the centrality of English to disciplinary teaching and learning while resisting identification as English language teachers (e.g., Airey, 2012; Block & Moncada-Comas, 2022; though see Abouzeid et al., 2023 for a partly opposing view). The present discussions shed further light on how lecturers negotiate the boundaries of their pedagogical role in EMI by legitimizing *some* forms of language attention, particularly those tied to disciplinary communication, terminology, and participation, while also disavowing others as falling outside their professional responsibilities.

EMI as Disciplinary Norm in Advanced Physics

Claims concerning the additional pedagogical and linguistic demands of EMI were among the most openly questioned, and often outright rejected, in the discussions. While participants acknowledged that teaching through English could be demanding in some situations, several lecturers positioned physics as a domain in which English has become normalized to such an extent that EMI was not necessarily experienced as pedagogically exceptional, quite the opposite. One lecturer described English as "the standard language of all our science communication" (L3), while another remarked that "teaching physics in English feels very natural" (L4). Similarly, one participant characterized English as simply "the natural go-to language" (L5).

This "normalization" was particularly evident for master's-level teaching and research-oriented courses, where the lecturers noted that advanced physics discourse already operates predominantly in English. Indeed, several comments suggested that teaching advanced physics in Swedish could, in some respects, feel less natural than teaching in English. As one lecturer explained, because "the vast majority of the literature is in English, the challenge is more often to know the correct terminology in Swedish" (L4). Another participant similarly noted that, in the advanced master's course in string theory they taught, it was "easier to teach in English as many of the technical terms do not exist in Swedish" (L5).

However, the physics teachers did not present EMI as uniformly unproblematic. Rather, they repeatedly contextualized EMI demands through references to disciplinary level and proximity to research practice (largely conducted through English in much of the natural sciences, Kuteeva & Airey, 2014). One lecturer explicitly contrasted introductory with advanced teaching, arguing that "if it is close to the international research frontier I think English is easier overall," whereas "for an introductory mechanics class I think it would be more demanding to teach in English" (L5). Rather than treating EMI demands as fixed or universal, participants thus positioned them as contingent on students' degree of disciplinary socialization and familiarity with the communicative practices of physics.

This was also reflected in the lecturers' accounts of their own and students' English proficiency. One lecturer noted that, at advanced levels, "I am expecting students to be proficient in English" and he also claimed to have witnessed "very few occasions of content understanding limited by language barriers" (L1). Another participant dismissed the idea that EMI inherently imposed additional pedagogical demands, arguing that "Prompt #4 [EMI places additional pedagogical demands on lecturers] is a non-issue here" because "if you made it all the way to a faculty position [in physics], English is no longer a barrier" (L3). Students' engagement with English was typically positioned as developmental and closely tied to disciplinary socialization, with one participant observing that "students adapt rather quickly to reading and hearing English" (L5). Another lecturer acknowledged that "the spectrum of students' (English) knowledge and comprehension is very large in most courses" (L4), while nevertheless resisting generalized accounts of EMI (language) difficulty detached from disciplinary context (see below). The same lecturer also explicitly positioned responsibility for English proficiency with the students themselves, stating: "I expect from students who consciously decide to study at [University] also [to] take responsibility for achieving the necessary English skills" (L4). The tendency to reject generalized accounts of an EMI-related pedagogical burden echoes previous research showing that STEM lecturers tend to resist deficit-oriented framings of EMI and instead position English-medium teaching as compatible with established disciplinary identities and practices (Block, 2021; Block & Moncada-Comas, 2022).

Multilingualism and Inclusion

Research-informed claims concerning multilingual classroom interaction resonated strongly with the participants' experiences. However, multilingualism was rarely discussed as a "policy" issue or as evidence of a gap between institutional language ideals and classroom practice. Instead, participants repeatedly framed multilingual classroom interaction in relation to participation and inclusion, reflecting EMI scholarship that conceptualizes multilingual classroom practices as situated communicative responses shaped by local interactional needs and disciplinary contexts (Dafouz & Smit, 2016).

Lecturers described movement between English and Swedish as common across learning activities and environments. One participant observed that students seem to automatically switch between Swedish or English as their common language" (L4), while another noted the formation of "subgroups … between Swedish students, in which Swedish becomes the dominant communication language" (L1). Yet, these practices were evaluated ambivalently. On the one hand, Swedish was sometimes positioned as interactionally supportive. For example, one lecturer described how "many Swedish students ask their

questions in Swedish and I respond in Swedish" —notably, during breaks (L4). On the other hand, participants repeatedly acknowledged that shifts into Swedish could marginalize international students or disrupt shared classroom experiences. One lecturer explicitly noted that "hearing Swedish being spoken can still create a barrier to wanting to join in" (L2), while another encouraged students "to speak English during the breaks not to exclude the international students" (L5).

Although participants rarely framed multilingualism as a policy issue, institutional expectations still informed how language choices were managed. One lecturer, for example, explained that while English was maintained as "the standard language" in master's-level classroom teaching "in line with institutional policy," students were nevertheless allowed to ask individual questions outside formal classroom interaction in "English, Swedish, or German" (L4). The same lecturer further noted that Swedish was commonly used during breaks, whereas oral examinations were conducted exclusively in English "to create the same boundary conditions for every student." Elsewhere, lecturers described continuously negotiating language choice in relation to participation and inclusion. For example, one lecturer observed that Swedish-speaking students often reverted to Swedish among themselves but that "as soon as the Swedish students notice the presence of a non-Swedish speaking student, they switch back to English" (L1). In their discussions, the lecturers thus appear to position themselves less as enforcers of language policy than as negotiators of competing demands (involving e.g., participation, inclusion, and fairness). This suggests that the lecturers in this study may approach language choices pragmatically and relationally rather than ideologically.

Participants rarely framed multilingualism as undermining EMI itself. Instead, translanguaging practices were often treated as pragmatic responses to the communicative realities of physics teaching. However, these practices also exposed tensions between institutional internationalization discourses and interactional needs in the physics classroom. One lecturer, for example, commented that extracurricular activities organized by student groups were "primarily in Swedish. Not very inclusive..." while also describing the emergence of "subgroups … between Swedish students, in which Swedish becomes the dominant communication language" (L1). The same participant further explained that they sometimes intervened in group formation "to force the group to communicate in English." Participants overall appeared highly aware that language choices which facilitated participation for some students could simultaneously exclude others. Thus, multilingual classroom interaction was viewed as part of the everyday negotiation of inclusion within linguistically diverse physics teaching environments.

Resistance to Language Reductionism in EMI Explanations

Across the discussions, even if lecturers acknowledged that English proficiency could affect participation and comprehension, they consistently resisted accounts in which classroom difficulties were interpreted as straightforwardly linguistic in origin. Instead, participants framed such difficulties as multidimensional, influenced by the interplay among conceptual understanding, disciplinary complexity, communicative confidence, student personality, and classroom participation norms.

This resistance to language-reductionist explanations was especially visible in discussions connected to Prompt #3 ("English proficiency matters, but in context-specific ways") and Prompt #5 ("Students experience specific challenges in EMI"). Several lecturers

explicitly emphasized the difficulty of isolating language as the principal source of misunderstanding or weak classroom performance. One lecturer observed that "it is difficult to judge if problems in comprehension are due to language barriers or due to other issues" (L4), while another reflected that it was "easy to automatically assume that it is the conceptual knowledge that is missing, when in reality it might just be a language issue" (L3). Importantly, however, the discussions rarely moved toward treating language as the dominant explanatory variable. Rather, participants repeatedly stressed the uncertainty involved in determining what exactly students were struggling with in advanced physics classrooms.

This uncertainty was particularly evident in relation to classroom participation involving oral interaction. One lecturer noted that students who struggled with oral interaction were likely to be "more silent in the lecture room" (L1), but also questioned whether such silence reflected language limitations, conceptual uncertainty, or personal disposition. Elsewhere, the same participant argued that "factors such as extrovert vs. introvert personalities during […] group discussions" could obscure "the real level of English for some students." In these discussions, classroom behavior was rarely treated as evidence of language proficiency.

Repeatedly, the lecturers attributed classroom difficulties to the epistemic demands of physics itself. Advanced physics learning was described as inherently difficult, making it problematic to separate linguistic from conceptual challenge. Here too, while participants did not deny that language mattered in EMI, they seemed eager to challenge explanations that treated classroom difficulties as *primarily* linguistic.

Concluding Reflections

This study set out not primarily to test the accuracy of established EMI research claims, but to see what happens when such claims are returned to EMI physics lecturers for interpretation, questioning, and discussion. Rather than accepting EMI claims as universally applicable, participants consistently evaluated them against their experiences of physics classroom teaching and learning. Research claims resonated most strongly when they aligned with participants' experiences of disciplinary communication, multilingual interaction, and research-oriented teaching practice, whereas claims foregrounding language difficulty or pedagogical deficit were more frequently contested, problematized or reframed.

While these findings are interesting, the more significant contribution of the study lies in what the circular orientation of the inquiry made visible. Rather than positioning EMI lecturers solely as respondents to externally defined questions (and answers), the study invited them to engage directly with EMI claims as knowledgeable interlocutors and evaluators of research itself. In practice, this meant that the discussions rarely produced straightforward validation of research claims; instead, participants problematized and redirected the claims they were presented with, shifting attention from generalized language-focused explanations toward the epistemic, interactional, and disciplinary conditions of physics teaching.

The discussions clearly exposed a degree of distance between how EMI phenomena are commonly framed in research and how they are experienced in disciplinary practice. Reflecting on the discussions, the participants reported becoming more aware of

assumptions underlying their own EMI practices and appreciated the opportunity to compare perspectives with colleagues facing similar teacher realities. The circular engagement with practitioners revealed which specific aspects of practice lecturers themselves perceive as oversimplified or underdeveloped in existing EMI discourse. The study thus illustrates how practitioner dialogue can be important for reshaping the categories and assumptions through which EMI itself is understood. This supports Jenks' (2025) central argument that research relevance should not be reduced to the communication of findings after publication; (applied) research becomes relevant through knowledge return, reinterpretation, and negotiation with those people whose practices it seeks to describe or inform.

The circular orientation of the study also affected us as researchers. As noted earlier, our backgrounds in applied linguistics and EMI influenced which claims we selected and how we initially framed them. However, the influence ran in the other direction as well; as the physics lecturers engaged with the claims, their responses fed back into our own thinking. We regard this reciprocal movement as a reflexive dimension of the study; researchers inevitably influence the research they conduct, but the research can also feed back into and alter their own understanding (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023; Consoli, 2026). Through these discussions, we became more aware of how easily familiar EMI "truths" can drift away from the realities through which disciplinary lecturers themselves understand teaching. Several claims that initially appeared relatively straightforward from within EMI scholarship became considerably less stable once discussed in relation to concrete teaching situations in physics. In particular, the discussions reinforced the importance of always approaching EMI through a disciplinary lens, in which language is understood as embedded within the communicative and epistemic practices of the discipline (whichever discipline that may be). For the second author (Ron) in particular, this reciprocal effect extended into professional practice. Having overseen and delivered professional development for EMI lecturers for several years, he observed how the research evoked critical reflection on that lecturer training. Underpinning the training are many of the same assumptions that the lecturers in this study problematized (Martinez & Fernandes, 2020). The current research experience suggests that member-checking of oft-repeated precepts could be incorporated in such training and, indeed, as part of post-training follow-up, in the circular fashion implemented here.

The study has some obvious limitations. The lecturers participating in the study were highly experienced academics working in a context where EMI is deeply normalized, and their responses were inevitably influenced by the disciplinary culture of physics and the institutional environment in which they worked. Moreover, although the study sought to create more circular forms of dialogue between the physicists and us, the discussions remained structured around the prompts we selected. The inquiry therefore remained fundamentally researcher-led, meaning that the conceptual agenda of the study was not fully co-constructed with participants and that the form of circularity achieved here is best described as partial. Future research in this tradition could explore more open-ended or co-designed approaches in which lecturers participate more directly in defining the EMI questions and problems to be investigated.

Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that relatively small methodological shifts can alter the relationship between EMI research and practice by repositioning practitioners as interpreters of the research that, potentially, affects them. Circular components, such as structured opportunities for practitioners to interpret, validate, question, or contest research-informed claims, could be more integrated into conventional research designs in

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ways that strengthen practitioner relevance and expose assumptions that might otherwise remain unchallenged. In a field where questions of ownership and relevance remain central concerns such approaches may contribute to more contextually grounded understandings of EMI and a more dialogic and reflexive applied linguistics research culture.

For EMI researchers, this suggests that practitioner engagement should not be limited to recruitment, data collection, or post-publication dissemination. Research claims themselves can be treated as objects for practitioner interpretation. *For EMI lecturers*, the study suggests that their disciplinary judgments are not peripheral to EMI research but central to evaluating its relevance. *For EMI institutions*, the findings suggest that EMI support initiatives should begin with structured conversations about lecturers' teaching realities before translating research claims into training, policy, or guidance.

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Appendix: Research instrument/protocol

Validating EMI research insights: EMI lecturers' perspectives

This online discussion explores EMI physics lecturers' perspectives on widely cited claims in EMI research. Our goal is to understand how these claims resonate with or diverge from your own teaching realities.

Over the coming two weeks, you will be presented with a small number of prompts, each based on a key insight from EMI research. For each prompt, you are invited to:

- Share your own perspective and examples from your teaching.
- Read what other EMI teachers have written and respond if something resonates, challenges your thinking, or sparks new ideas.
- Importantly, there are no right or wrong answers; we are interested in your experiences, views, and professional judgments.

Once all prompts have been discussed, you will be invited to reflect individually on some closing questions. As facilitators, we may occasionally pose follow-up probes to deepen discussion.

Prompt 1: Language is central in EMI: EMI lecturers rarely see themselves as language teachers, yet language – specifically English – is an unavoidable dimension of EMI instruction and interaction.

- How does this claim resonate (or not) with your own teaching?
- Do you see yourself as responsible (also) for supporting students' English? Why/Why not?
- Can you recall a moment when language considerations affected your teaching?

Prompt 2: EMI classrooms are multilingual spaces: EMI rarely involves *only* English; classroom interaction often includes other shared languages and institutional language policies frequently diverge from practice (there is a "policy–practice gap"), even where institutional policies promote monolingual norms.

- How does this reflect what happens in your classroom? Do you hear/see multiple languages being used in your classroom?
- How do students manage multiple languages during group work?
- Have you ever had to make choices between (language) policy and (classroom) practicality when it comes to language use?

Prompt 3: English proficiency matters, but in context-specific ways: Both teachers' and students' English proficiency affect EMI effectiveness, but their relative importance – and emphasis – varies by discipline, institution, and context.

- In your view, how important is teachers' and students' English proficiency for successful EMI teaching and learning?
- Which aspects of English are most critical in your discipline (e.g., explaining concepts, technical vocabulary, interaction)?

- Have you seen content understanding limited by language barriers, either your own or students'?

Prompt 4: EMI places additional pedagogical demands on lecturers: EMI requires teaching adaptations, and some lecturers feel underprepared for this task; however, perceived challenges tend to decrease with experience.

- What teaching adaptations have you made because you teach in English?
- Where/when have you felt least prepared, and how have you coped?
- What types of institutional or peer support have helped – or would have helped – most?

Prompt 5: Students experience specific challenges in EMI: Some students struggle with comprehension, increased cognitive load, following lectures, and disciplinary vocabulary demands, though, as for teachers, these challenges seem to diminish over time.

- What kinds of comprehension challenges, if any, have you observed among your students?
- How do you detect misunderstandings or hidden struggles?
- What strategies have you tried to support comprehension, and how well have they worked?

Closing questions for individual reflection (your comments will not be shared with the other EMI lecturers):

1. Which research claim(s) felt most accurate for your context, and why?
2. Which claims felt less relevant or even misleading?
3. If you were to rewrite one of the claims based on your own experience, what would you change?
4. What do you think *EMI researchers* most need to understand about *EMI lecturers'* teaching reality?
5. What do you think should be the focus of EMI research going forward?