

English-Medium Instruction in the Global South: A Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reflection from the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

English-medium instruction (EMI) is widely promoted in the Global South as an “inevitable” route to internationalisation and employability in the higher education agenda, yet in classrooms it often intensifies students’ challenges with following lectures, asking questions, and demonstrating disciplinary understanding in a second/foreign language. This reflective article adopts a lens of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) to move beyond polarised debates about EMI and focus instead on what counts as good teaching and fair learning when English is not students’ strongest shared language. Drawing on my personal experience, it examines how EMI can produce an “inequality of voice,” how disciplinary literacies become hidden language demands, how multilingual practices function as resources rather than failures, and how assessment may conflate content knowledge with English proficiency. The article argues that SoTL offers a practical set of ethics for EMI under constraint, turning student difficulties into investigable learning bottlenecks, and supporting evidence-informed redesign of participation structures, scaffolding, and assessment.

Introduction: Why I Turn to SoTL When EMI Becomes “Normal”

When I first began teaching and supporting EMI—broadly defined as using English to teach academic subjects in contexts where learners’ primary language is not English (Richards & Pun, 2022)—in Malaysia, a Global South setting, I noticed how quickly EMI came to be treated as a settled fact rather than a pedagogical question. In meetings, EMI was described as an “inevitable” route to internationalisation, graduate employability, and global visibility (Lasagabaster, 2022). In classrooms, however, the “inevitability” of EMI often translated into a felt difficulty for students who use English as a second/foreign language (L2): following rapid explanations, formulating questions in real time, and demonstrating disciplinary understanding through unfamiliar academic registers (Alkhateeb & Alhawsawi, 2023; Gülle, 2024). For many learners, the challenge was not simply vocabulary or grammar, but the risk of participating publicly in a language in which they could not yet sound precise. EMI thus became a daily set of micro-decisions—how long I waited after asking a question, whether I rephrased an explanation, when I allowed students to discuss in a shared language, and how I interpreted silence—because each decision could either lower or raise the linguistic threshold for learning. Over time, I became less interested in debating whether EMI should exist and more concerned with a different problem: what counts as good teaching and fair learning when English is the medium but not the shared strongest language?

This is where the SoTL has become, for me, not just a research orientation but a professional ethic. SoTL asks educators to investigate teaching and learning systematically, to base claims on evidence rather than assumption, and to make inquiry public so that it can be scrutinised and improved (Canning & Masika, 2020; Gansemer-Topf, Mc Cloud & Braxton, 2024). In EMI settings across the Global South, where students’ access to academic English often tracks social and educational inequality (Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2021), SoTL feels especially necessary. It helps me take students’ difficulties seriously without collapsing them into deficit labels, and it reframes “low participation” or “weak writing” as signals of misaligned demands rather than individual failure (Höfling & de Oliveira, 2024). Instead of assuming that more exposure to English will automatically produce better learning, SoTL pushes me to ask: What, precisely, are students struggling to do—track concepts, interpret disciplinary texts, argue with evidence, or meet genre expectations in assessment—and where do these struggles concentrate in the learning sequence? What instructional designs and assessment practices might reduce those bottlenecks without diluting disciplinary rigour? And how can I know, rather than simply believe, that the changes I make meaningfully expand students’ opportunities to learn in EMI?

In this reflection, I adopt a first-person stance because EMI is experienced personally even when it is analysed academically. Yet I aim to keep the tone scholarly: my point is not to present a memoir, but to show how a SoTL lens can turn the everyday tensions of EMI in the Global South into questions of evidence, design, and equity. I argue that EMI becomes educationally defensible when teachers and institutions treat it as an ongoing design-and-inquiry project—one that foregrounds learning mechanisms, equity of participation, and assessment validity, rather than treating English as a branding signal or a neutral conduit of content.

What I See in EMI Classrooms: Learning, Silence, and the Unequal Distribution of Voice

One scene repeats itself across many EMI contexts I have encountered. I ask a question that, in my mind, is straightforward: “What is the main implication of this finding?” I watch students’ eyes move between my face and their notes. A few students respond quickly—often those with higher confidence in English. Others remain silent. When I probe, some students later tell me, privately, that they understood the concept but were unsure how to phrase it in English without sounding “wrong.” This is not merely shyness. It is an interactional cost-benefit calculation shaped by language, identity, and perceived legitimacy (Sahan, 2024). EMI can quietly convert linguistic risk into academic risk, and academic risk into social risk (Han, 2022; Tien, 2023).

Over time, I started describing this as an “inequality of voice.” EMI classrooms can distribute speaking opportunities unevenly, not necessarily because some students know more, but because some students can more easily claim the floor in English. This matters because participation is not decorative in higher education (HE). In many disciplines, learning is mediated through talk: testing ideas publicly, receiving feedback, refining claims, and negotiating meanings (Syamsuddin & Rut, 2024). When EMI reduces participation, it can thin out the very processes through which disciplinary thinking becomes visible and improvable (Lasagabaster, 2022). The classroom might look efficient with smooth lecture delivery, neat slides, and minimal disruption, while conceptual misunderstanding remains hidden behind silence.

In the Global South, this inequality of voice is often intensified by structural conditions. Students’ prior English learning opportunities can vary sharply across schooling systems, regions, and socio-economic groups (Ndlangamandla & Chaka, 2022). English may be associated with private education, urban advantage, and prestige, while public systems may offer uneven exposure. In such contexts, EMI is not introduced onto a level field; it arrives as a high-stakes layer added to existing inequality (Giri, Padwad & Kabir, 2023). I have come to believe that if we evaluate EMI only by “coverage” (how much content

was delivered) or by “compliance” (how much English was used), we risk missing the central question: who had access to the learning conversation?

This is also the point where my teaching instincts sometimes conflicted with policy imaginaries. Policy documents often suggest that “full English immersion” will naturally improve proficiency and, by extension, academic performance (Ascher & Pichery, 2023; Nyoni, Ahmed, Philogene & Khaing, 2023). In practice, immersion without scaffolding can function as exclusion. Students do not automatically develop the ability to argue, justify, and interpret evidence in English simply by being surrounded by it. They develop it when pedagogy creates structured opportunities for them to use disciplinary English safely and meaningfully (Nguyen, Phuong & Ngo, 2024) through, for example, guided talk, model texts, sentence frames, and feedback that treats language as part of learning rather than as a precondition for it.

This recognition shifted my attention away from large claims, such as “EMI improves quality” or “EMI harms equity,” and towards mechanisms I could observe and influence: how tasks are designed, how talk is structured, how key concepts are revoiced, how technical terms are introduced, and how assessment criteria are communicated. That shift, in essence, is a SoTL move: it takes a complex policy phenomenon and turns it into a set of testable questions about teaching and learning.

SoTL as My Practical Lens: Turning EMI Problems into Investigable Learning Questions

I often tell colleagues that SoTL is the difference between having opinions about EMI and having defensible claims about EMI. Opinions are plentiful in EMI debates: some insist EMI is the only way to modernise; others see it as linguistic imperialism in disguise (Kling & Del Corona, 2020; Tejada-Sanchez & Molina-Naar, 2020). These perspectives are not irrelevant, but they can become paralysing if they remain at the level of ideology. SoTL gives me a pragmatic pathway: identify a recurring learning bottleneck, design a pedagogical response, gather evidence of learning, and refine.

In EMI, the bottlenecks that most consistently appear for me are not simply “students’ English is low.” They are more specific and therefore more teachable. Students struggle to explain causality (“X leads to Y because...”), to hedge claims appropriately (“This suggests...” rather than “This proves...”), to interpret data in words, or to engage with counterarguments in disciplinary genres. These are not generic language skills; they are disciplinary literacies (Galloway, Sahan & McKinley, 2024). If students do not learn them, they may appear weak in EMI assessments even when they understand the content conceptually (Hultgren, Owen, Shrestha, Kuteeva & Mezek, 2022).

SoTL pushes me to ask questions like these: When students fail a written examination in EMI, what exactly caused the failure—conceptual misunderstanding, genre unfamiliarity, or English-mediated expression difficulty? If I redesign a lesson to include structured peer explanation, does participation broaden beyond the usual confident speakers? If I provide a model paragraph that demonstrates the discipline’s preferred reasoning pattern, does students’ writing become more accurate conceptually, or merely more fluent? These questions are not about “liking” or “disliking” EMI. They are about instructional causality and assessment validity.

I have also found that SoTL helps me navigate the sensitive issue of multilingual practices in EMI. In many Global South classrooms, multilingualism is not a choice; it is the lived reality (Khana & Manivannan, 2024). Students naturally turn to shared languages to clarify concepts, translate technical terms, or co-construct understanding. Teachers, too, often shift languages to repair misunderstanding or maintain momentum. Yet EMI policies sometimes treat any non-English use as failure (Lin, 2021; Vural & Dinçer, 2022). My own experience suggests the opposite: strategic, purposeful multilingual talk can be a bridge into disciplinary English, not a departure from it. The SoTL question is therefore not “Should we allow other languages?” but “Under what conditions does multilingual interaction support subsequent performance in English-medium tasks?” Translanguaging scholarship provides a conceptual language for this (Yusri, Huzaimi & Sulaiman, 2022), but SoTL demands local evidence: what actually happens with my students, my tasks, and my assessments.

Importantly, SoTL also reframes what counts as “quality” in EMI. In institutional conversations, EMI quality is sometimes reduced to surface signals: English slides, English textbooks, English signage, English pronunciation (Ulfah & Basthomi, 2023; Kamal, Bhuiyan & Khatun, 2024). SoTL insists that quality must be traced through learning: conceptual mastery, ability to reason in disciplinary genres, and equitable access to participation (Swanson, 2024). This is especially important in the Global South, where the temptation to treat English as a shortcut to prestige is strong (Madany-Saá, 2025). English is visible and countable; learning is slower and harder to measure. SoTL gives learning back its authority.

What I Try to Change (and Study): Participation, Scaffolding, and Fair Assessment in EMI

If I had to name one principle that has reshaped my EMI teaching, it would be this: participation is not an outcome that “good students” naturally provide; it is an instructional condition that teachers can design. In EMI, the design burden is higher because the linguistic cost of participation is higher. When students must speak through English, many will choose silence unless the classroom makes risk manageable (Tien, 2023; Kamal *et al.*, 2024).

One change I have experimented with is shifting from open questions to structured talk routines. Instead of asking, “Any thoughts?”, I might ask students to first write one sentence using a specific frame (“The main implication is ___ because ___”), then discuss it in pairs, and only then share with the class. The difference is often striking: more students speak, and their contributions contain more reasoning rather than isolated vocabulary. From a SoTL perspective, this is not just a teaching trick; it is an intervention that can be examined (Bohndick & Kordts, 2025). I can compare participation patterns before and after, analyse the quality of student explanations, and ask students how the routine affected their willingness to speak. The goal is not to force talk, but to broaden access to the learning conversation.

Another change concerns the status of language support within content teaching. EMI often fails when language is treated as someone else’s responsibility—handled by an English unit or left to students’ self-study. Yet in EMI, language is not separate from content; it is the medium through which content is demonstrated and assessed (McKinley & Rose, 2022; Hu & Hashim, 2025). I therefore try to build “planned language moments” into content lessons: explicitly unpacking a technical term, modelling how to define it, showing how to compare concepts, or demonstrating how to write a cautious claim. I resist turning content classes into general English classes, but I treat disciplinary language as part of the discipline. When I do this, I am not only teaching; I am also building a SoTL logic: if I make the language demands visible, students should be able to perform the discipline more accurately in English.

Assessment is where EMI’s ethical stakes become sharpest. I have learned to be cautious about the hidden gatekeeping role of English. When students perform poorly on EMI assessments, the immediate interpretation is often “they do not understand the content.” But sometimes, students understand conceptually and fail because they cannot produce the expected genre in English under time pressure. This raises a validity question: what is the assessment actually measuring? If the intended construct is disciplinary knowledge, then language complexity should not become an unintended barrier (Pun, Curle & Sah, 2025). If the intended construct includes disciplinary communication in English, then students must have been taught how to communicate in that genre—not simply be expected to “pick it up” through exposure (Hultgren *et al.*, 2022).

In response, I have found it useful to separate content and language criteria more transparently. This does not mean ignoring language; it means being explicit about how language is weighted and why. In some tasks, language accuracy is secondary to conceptual reasoning; in others, discipline-specific communication is central. Making these distinctions explicit helps students target their efforts and

helps examiners avoid conflating fluency with intelligence (Calinao, 2023). Again, SoTL turns this into an inquiry problem: if I redesign rubrics to separate constructs, do examiner comments become more diagnostic? Do students' revisions improve conceptually rather than merely cosmetically? Do performance gaps narrow between students of different English backgrounds?

I also cannot ignore the institutional layer. In Global South contexts, teachers often face high teaching loads and limited time to redesign EMI courses (Alkhateeb & Alhawsawi, 2023; Khadka, 2025). If EMI relies on individual heroics—one teacher creating glossaries, building model answers, offering extra consultations—it will remain uneven and fragile. SoTL can help here, but only if institutions treat it as capacity-building rather than a personal hobby. When SoTL findings are shared through teaching communities, peer review, and institutional dialogue (Swanson, 2024), they can become leverage for structural support: writing centres, discipline-linked academic literacy programmes, professional development focused on pedagogy (not just “English proficiency”), and assessment policies that protect fairness. In my experience, administrators are more likely to listen when the argument is grounded in local learning evidence rather than in abstract debates about “Englishisation.”

Conclusion: Why “Reflective EMI” Is Not Enough Without SoTL

I still believe reflection is necessary in EMI, but I no longer believe reflection is sufficient. EMI in the Global South sits at the intersection of aspiration and inequality. It offers access to global academic and professional worlds, yet it can also reproduce local stratifications by making English the gatekeeper of disciplinary success. If we respond with slogans—either “EMI is modernisation” or “EMI is oppression”—we risk missing the practical work that determines what students actually learn.

What I find most compelling about SoTL is that it turns EMI into a professional responsibility that can be enacted under constraint. SoTL does not require perfect conditions; it requires clarity about learning, disciplined attention to evidence, and willingness to redesign. It asks me to treat student silence as data, not as apathy; to treat recurring writing problems as teachable disciplinary literacies, not as personal deficits; and to treat assessment fairness as a validity problem, not as a charitable concession. In the Global South, where institutional resources may be limited and policy pressures strong, this orientation is not a luxury. It is how EMI becomes educational rather than merely performative.

If EMI is going to remain a prominent feature of Global South HE, then the most defensible path forward is not blind expansion but evidence-driven improvement. For me, that improvement begins with a simple but demanding commitment: I should be able to explain, with local evidence, how my

EMI teaching choices enable learning for more than the most linguistically privileged students. That is the promise of SoTL in EMI—not an abstract ideal, but a practical ethics of teaching in unequal conditions.

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