

## Postgraduate Students' Perceptions of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI): Comprehension, Participation, and Language Development

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates postgraduate students' perceptions of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), focusing on comprehension, participation, and academic English development. Using a mixed-method approach, data were collected from eight postgraduate students through a structured questionnaire consisting of Likert-scale and open-ended items. The findings indicate that students generally prefer an English-dominant instructional approach, ranging from 70% to 95%, while still recognizing the importance of limited Indonesian use for clarification. English-medium instruction was found to enhance students' confidence and participation, although occasional use of Indonesian helped facilitate the expression of complex ideas. In terms of comprehension, students reported better understanding when English was used, supported by strategic code-switching. Furthermore, EMI significantly contributes to the development of academic English skills, including vocabulary, writing, and communication. Overall, a balanced and flexible approach to EMI is recommended to optimize both language development and learning effectiveness in postgraduate contexts.*

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### 1. Introduction

The increasing internationalization of higher education has led to the widespread adoption of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in universities worldwide. EMI refers to the use of English to teach academic subjects in contexts where English is not the first language of the majority of the population (Macaro, 2018). This shift reflects the growing importance of English as a global academic and professional lingua franca, particularly in postgraduate education, where students are expected to access international knowledge and conduct research in English (Dearden, 2015; Sukristiningsih et al., 2026; Prihandoko et al., 2019). In Indonesia, the implementation of EMI has become increasingly common, especially in postgraduate English language and literature programs. However, questions remain regarding its effectiveness in promoting comprehension, participation, and language development among students whose first language is not English (Said et al., 2021; Anggriyani et al., 2026; Adinda et al., 2025).

EMI is often associated with several academic benefits. It is believed to enhance students' comprehension of course materials, encourage active participation in classroom discussions, and support the development of academic English skills. From a language acquisition perspective, exposure to meaningful and comprehensible input plays a crucial role in language learning (Krashen, 1985). In EMI contexts, consistent use of English may provide opportunities for students to engage with authentic academic discourse, which can facilitate both content learning and language development (Macaro, 2018; Anggawirya et al., 2021; Andini et al., 2026). However, the effectiveness of EMI largely depends on how instructional language is implemented in actual classroom practices.

In practice, the use of EMI is often not strictly monolingual. Lecturers may use English, Indonesian, or a combination of both through code-switching. Previous studies have suggested that such flexibility can help clarify complex concepts and reduce cognitive load, particularly in contexts where students' English proficiency varies (Macaro et al., 2018; Björkman, 2011; Weda et al., 2022). At the same time, excessive reliance on the native language may limit students' exposure to English and potentially hinder their academic language development. This situation creates a pedagogical tension between maximizing English exposure and ensuring clarity of understanding.

In addition to its pedagogical implications, EMI is also closely linked to broader institutional goals, such as internationalization, competitiveness, and academic mobility. Universities adopting EMI aim to align their curricula with

global standards and enable students to participate in international academic communities. In postgraduate contexts, this expectation becomes even more demanding, as students are required not only to understand academic content in English but also to produce scholarly work, such as research papers and theses, in the same language (Ritonga et al., 2024; Puspita et al., 2026; Weda et al., 2021). Consequently, EMI functions not only as a teaching approach but also as a strategic academic framework that shapes students' academic trajectories.

Despite these advantages, the implementation of EMI in non-native English-speaking contexts raises important concerns. Students may struggle to fully comprehend complex subject matter when it is delivered in a second language, particularly when their English proficiency varies. This may lead to cognitive overload, where students must simultaneously process new content and manage linguistic challenges. As a result, the effectiveness of EMI cannot be assumed to be uniform across learners, making it essential to examine how students experience and perceive instructional language use in classroom settings.

Furthermore, classroom interaction is a crucial component of postgraduate education, where critical discussion, knowledge exchange, and active participation are highly emphasized. The use of English as the primary medium of communication may influence students' willingness to participate, express ideas, and engage in academic discourse. While some students may feel more confident using English, others may experience anxiety or hesitation due to limited vocabulary or fear of making mistakes (Hu & Lei, 2014). This variation highlights the importance of understanding how instructional language affects not only comprehension but also classroom dynamics.

Another important dimension of EMI is its role in supporting academic English development. Continuous exposure to English in academic contexts may enhance students' ability to read scholarly texts, write academic papers, and communicate ideas effectively. However, the extent to which EMI facilitates such development depends on its implementation. Strict English-only policies may accelerate language acquisition for some students, but they may also reduce opportunities for clarification and deeper understanding for others. Therefore, the relationship between EMI and language development remains complex and requires further investigation.

Given these considerations, it is essential to explore EMI not only as an institutional policy but also as a lived classroom experience from the students' perspective. Although previous studies have examined EMI in various higher education contexts, limited attention has been given to postgraduate English programs, particularly in relation to students' perceptions of instructional language effectiveness. Students' perspectives are important because they reflect how instructional practices influence their learning experiences in terms of comprehension, participation, and academic language development.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate postgraduate students' perceptions of EMI in English classes, focusing on three key dimensions: comprehension of course materials, participation in classroom discussions, and the development of academic English skills. By examining these aspects, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how instructional language choices influence learning effectiveness and to offer insights that may inform more flexible and context-sensitive pedagogical practices in postgraduate EMI contexts.

## **2. Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data to investigate postgraduate students' perceptions of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). The participants consisted of eight postgraduate students enrolled in the English Language program at Universitas Sumatera Utara. All participants shared Indonesian as their first language and had varying levels of English proficiency, as well as diverse academic backgrounds. Although the sample size was relatively small, it was considered appropriate for capturing in-depth insights into students' perceptions within a specific postgraduate context.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed to examine students' perceptions of instructional language use in EMI classrooms. The instrument consisted of both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions, enabling the collection of both quantifiable data and detailed qualitative responses. This combination allowed the study to capture not only general trends in students' perceptions but also the reasoning and experiences underlying those perceptions.

The questionnaire was developed to explore several key dimensions related to EMI. First, it examined students' preferred proportion of English and Indonesian in classroom instruction. This aspect aimed to identify how students conceptualize the ideal balance between language exposure and clarity of understanding in postgraduate learning contexts. Second, the instrument investigated students' confidence in participating in classroom discussions when using

English compared to Indonesian. This dimension was included to understand how instructional language influences students' willingness to engage in academic interaction.

Third, the questionnaire addressed students' comprehension of course materials delivered in English versus Indonesian. This component focused on how language choice affects students' ability to understand academic content, particularly when dealing with complex or abstract topics. Fourth, the instrument explored students' perceptions of the impact of English-medium instruction on the development of their academic English skills. This included aspects such as vocabulary acquisition, academic writing ability, and oral communication in academic settings.

Finally, the questionnaire included items that examined students' views on the advantages and limitations of English-only instruction. This dimension aimed to capture students' evaluations of strict EMI implementation, including its perceived benefits for language development as well as its potential challenges for comprehension and participation.

The questionnaire was distributed online, allowing participants to complete it at their convenience. Responses to Likert-scale items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and frequency distributions, to identify overall patterns in students' perceptions. Meanwhile, responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to instructional language use, comprehension, participation, and language development.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of postgraduate students' perceptions of EMI. The quantitative analysis offers a general overview of trends, while the qualitative findings provide deeper insight into the factors influencing students' attitudes and experiences in EMI classrooms.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected from the questionnaire. The analysis focuses on students' perceptions of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in postgraduate classrooms, particularly in relation to comprehension, participation, and academic language development. The findings are organized into several key dimensions reflecting the main aspects explored in the questionnaire, including students' preferred language proportion, their confidence in participation, their comprehension of course materials, and their perceptions of academic English development. Each subsection integrates numerical data with qualitative responses to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences.

Table 3 presents a summary of the mean scores for all Likert-scale items in the questionnaire, providing an overview of the quantitative dimension of this mixed-method study. Scores were measured on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

**Table 1. Summary of Mean Scores for Likert-Scale Questionnaire Items (N = 8)**

No.	Questionnaire Item	Mean Score (1-5)
1	Confidence in participation when using English	4.00
2	Confidence in participation when using Indonesian	3.25
3	Comprehension of course materials in English	4.00
4	Comprehension of course materials in Indonesian	3.25
5	English-only instruction makes me less active in classroom discussions	2.00
6	English as the medium of instruction helps improve my academic English skills	4.63
7	Frequent use of Indonesian may limit my academic English development	4.13

#### 3.1 Ideal Proportion of English and Indonesian

Responses regarding the ideal proportion of English and Indonesian in postgraduate English classes revealed varied preferences, reflecting students' diverse learning needs, levels of confidence, and language proficiency. Most

participants recommended an English-dominant approach, typically ranging from 70% to 95% English, with Indonesian used selectively to support comprehension when necessary.

For instance, one participant (P1) suggested an 80:20 English-Indonesian balance, explaining that English should be used most of the time to support academic language development and increase confidence in communication. However, the participant also emphasized that Indonesian plays an important role in clarifying difficult or abstract concepts to ensure full understanding. Similarly, another participant (P2) recommended a 95% English approach, indicating that Indonesian should only be used in situations where concepts are particularly difficult to explain. In contrast, one participant (P3) preferred a more balanced approach (50:50), arguing that both language development and comprehension should be equally prioritized.

These responses indicate that students do not perceive EMI as a rigid English-only practice, but rather as a flexible instructional approach that should be adapted based on the complexity of the material and students' learning needs. The preference for English-dominant instruction reflects students' awareness of the importance of language exposure in developing academic competence. At the same time, their continued reliance on Indonesian for clarification highlights the practical challenges of processing complex academic content in a second language. This variation suggests that a uniform EMI policy may not effectively address the diverse needs of postgraduate learners.

### 3.2 Confidence and Participation

Students' confidence in participating in classroom discussions was found to be closely related to the language used during instruction. Overall, the quantitative data indicate that students tend to feel more confident when English is used as the primary medium of communication. As shown in Table 1, the mean confidence score for English (M = 4.0) is higher than that for Indonesian (M = 3.25), suggesting that English-dominant environments may encourage greater participation among students.

**Table 2. The Mean Confidence Score**

Language Used	Mean Confidence Score
English	4.0
Indonesian	3.25

Despite this general trend, qualitative responses reveal more nuanced perspectives. Some participants (e.g., P3) reported that occasional use of Indonesian helped them express ideas more clearly, particularly when dealing with complex or unfamiliar topics. Others (e.g., P1 and P4) indicated that consistent exposure to English increased their confidence over time, as it provided more opportunities to practice speaking and engage in academic discussions.

Interestingly, the data also suggest that English-only instruction may not always lead to increased participation. Some students reported feeling less active when discussions were conducted entirely in English, especially when they struggled with vocabulary or conceptual understanding. This is reflected in the relatively low mean score (M = 2.0) for the statement "English-only instruction makes me less active in classroom discussions," indicating that while students recognize certain challenges, they generally remain engaged.

These findings suggest that confidence in classroom participation is influenced not only by language use but also by students' proficiency levels and familiarity with academic discourse. While English-dominant instruction can enhance confidence for more proficient students, the strategic use of Indonesian may serve as a supportive tool for those who need additional linguistic scaffolding. Therefore, instructional language plays a critical role in shaping both participation and classroom interaction.

### 3.3 Comprehension of Course Materials

Students' comprehension of course materials was also influenced by the language of instruction. The quantitative data indicate that students generally reported better comprehension when English was used, as reflected in the mean score for English (M = 4.0), compared to Indonesian (M = 3.25), as presented in table below.

**Table.3 Mean Comprehension Score**

Language Used	Mean Comprehension Score
English	4.0

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**Indonesian**

3.25

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While English was preferred for most topics, students acknowledged that Indonesian could play an important supportive role in clarifying complex or abstract ideas. One participant (P1) explained that occasional use of Indonesian “ensures students fully understand the material,” emphasizing the importance of clarity in postgraduate learning contexts where theoretical content can be cognitively demanding.

This finding supports the argument that while EMI promotes linguistic immersion, the strategic use of the native language can facilitate more effective processing of complex academic content, particularly when students encounter unfamiliar terminology (Björkman, 2011). Several participants reported that brief shifts into Indonesian helped resolve ambiguity and prevent misinterpretation of key concepts, allowing them to follow the discussion more confidently.

In addition, some participants (e.g., P2 and P3) highlighted that bilingual explanations enabled them to connect new English terms with familiar conceptual frameworks. This process not only strengthened conceptual understanding but also supported vocabulary development. The availability of Indonesian also appeared to lower affective barriers, making students more willing to engage in classroom interaction without fear of misunderstanding.

From a pedagogical perspective, these responses suggest that instructional language does not function merely as a medium of delivery, but also as a cognitive and interactional resource. Rather than weakening EMI, the selective use of Indonesian complements English instruction by supporting meaning-making processes.

### **3.4 Academic English Development**

Students overwhelmingly agreed that EMI supports academic English development. The mean score for “English as the medium of instruction helps improve my academic English skills” was 4.625, indicating strong perceived benefits. Participants emphasized that frequent English exposure in lectures, discussions, and reading assignments reinforced vocabulary acquisition, academic writing skills, and professional communication competence. However, some participants noted that frequent reliance on Indonesian could limit English development. The mean score for “Frequent use of Indonesian may limit my academic English development” was 4.125, reflecting that overuse of the native language can reduce opportunities.

### **3.5 Discussion**

The data collected from the questionnaire reveal a notably strong agreement among postgraduate students regarding the role of EMI in fostering academic English development, as reflected in a mean score of 4.625 out of 5.0 — one of the highest scores recorded across all items in the instrument. This figure points not merely to passive acceptance of English-medium instruction, but to an active recognition that sustained immersion in English-medium academic environments carries tangible linguistic benefits across multiple dimensions of competence.

Participants reported that regular engagement with English during lectures, discussions, and reading activities encouraged them to become more familiar with discipline-specific terminology and academic discourse conventions. This exposure enabled students to internalize language patterns commonly used in scholarly contexts, thereby improving their ability to articulate ideas more effectively. In addition, several participants noted that consistent use of English in classroom interaction gradually increased their confidence in expressing complex ideas, both orally and in written form.

However, the findings also indicate that the role of Indonesian cannot be entirely disregarded. While EMI was perceived as beneficial for language development, some participants expressed concern that frequent reliance on Indonesian might reduce opportunities for active use of English. This is reflected in the relatively high mean score ( $M = 4.125$ ) for the statement “Frequent use of Indonesian may limit my academic English development.” These responses suggest that excessive use of the native language may interrupt continuous exposure to English, which is essential for developing fluency and academic competence.

At the same time, this concern does not imply that Indonesian should be eliminated entirely from classroom instruction. Rather, the findings highlight the importance of maintaining a balance between maximizing English exposure and providing sufficient support for comprehension. Limited and purposeful use of Indonesian may still contribute positively to the learning process by ensuring that students fully understand complex material, without significantly diminishing opportunities for language practice.

Overall, the results indicate that EMI provides a valuable environment for academic English development, particularly when students are consistently engaged in English-medium activities. However, its effectiveness depends on

how instructional language is managed in the classroom. A balanced approach, in which English remains the dominant medium while Indonesian is used strategically, appears to support both language development and meaningful learning in postgraduate contexts.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study found that postgraduate students generally prefer English-dominant instruction, ranging from approximately 70% to 95%, while still valuing limited use of Indonesian for clarification. This reflects a pragmatic orientation toward language use: English is prioritized for academic development while Indonesian serves as a supportive tool for comprehension, particularly when dealing with complex or abstract material. Students' higher mean confidence scores in English-medium participation ( $M = 4.00$ ) compared to Indonesian ( $M = 3.25$ ) further indicate that EMI can foster greater engagement in formal academic discourse, provided that some flexibility in language use is maintained.

The study also demonstrates that EMI significantly supports academic English development. Students strongly agreed that English-medium instruction improved their academic skills ( $M = 4.63$ ), including vocabulary acquisition, academic writing, and oral communication. At the same time, the high mean score for the concern that excessive Indonesian use may limit English development ( $M = 4.13$ ) underscores the importance of maintaining consistent English exposure. These findings point to the value of a balanced approach: one in which English remains the dominant medium while Indonesian is used strategically — for clarifying difficult concepts or reducing cognitive overload — without undermining opportunities for language practice.

This study contributes to the existing body of EMI research by providing empirical evidence from a postgraduate Indonesian context. Unlike studies that focus on general EMI implementation or undergraduate settings, it highlights the interconnected roles of comprehension, participation, and language development at the postgraduate level and emphasizes the importance of flexible, context-sensitive instructional practices. Educators are encouraged to implement scaffolding strategies — such as bilingual explanation of key concepts and guided discussion prompts — that support both understanding and sustained English development.

This study is not without limitations. The small sample size and single institutional context may limit the generalizability of the findings, and the use of self-reported data may not fully capture actual classroom behaviors. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples and incorporate observational or longitudinal methods to examine how EMI influences academic performance over time. Comparative studies across disciplines or educational levels would further enrich understanding of EMI effectiveness in varied contexts.

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