

Students' Emotional Performance in English-Medium-of-Instruction Classes: A Literature Review Based on Different English Proficiency Levels

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Abstract

This literature review reports on the emotional performance of students with different English proficiency levels in English-medium-of-instruction (EMI) classrooms. First, there are different levels of impact on students' emotional states, such as anxiety, motivation, and engagement, in terms of different degrees of English mastery. Second, the factors influencing these emotional responses, including teaching methods, the classroom environment, and the relationship between students and teachers, should be studied in detail. The literature review also assesses whether the existing strategies work out in terms of reducing negative emotions and enhancing positive emotional experiences in EMI settings. In conclusion, the purpose of the literature review is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the emotional subjective initiative in EMI classrooms by dividing them into different English proficiency groups, offering insights and approaches for improving EMI teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

Keywords

English-medium-of-instruction (EMI), English proficiency, students' emotional performance, anxiety, motivation

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the global environment of education, English-medium instruction (EMI) has become increasingly common. And in EMI classroom, it is also common for some passive students as listeners (Anne & Lawrence, 2019). The EMI teaching mode involves both opportunities and challenges, especially for students with different English degrees of mastery. For students with a lower degree of English mastery, EMI may cause high anxiety levels at the beginning of the process. If students do not understand the course content, are unable to participate in class discussions, or make mistakes in English communication, they face anxiety (Chou, 2023). In addition to high motivation, students with higher English proficiency which can be seen as different angles (Karas & Faez, 2020) might experience potential boredom, meaning the person has no ability and interest to engage the external environmental activities and inner world in some situations (Cai, Zuo & Ge, 2025). For example, when they have an opportunity to enhance their language skills in an academic context, their motivation can increase. However, if they feel that the teaching pace is too slow or that the content is not challenging enough, they will experience potential boredom.

It is essential for educators to design effective teaching strategies by understanding these emotional differences according to English proficiency levels. EMI teachers need to be aware of how to create

a classroom environment that can support students with better practices to satisfy the emotional needs of all students. This literature review explores the existing research on students' emotional performance in EMI classrooms, categorizing the findings on the basis of different English mastery levels and identifying the key factors that shape these emotions.

2. Emotional Performance by English Proficiency Level

2.1 Low-Proficiency English Students

Low-proficiency English students in EMI classrooms often experience high levels of anxiety. Liu & Du (2024) said that anxiety is some distinct self-feelings related to in classroom learning within the unique language learning process. In terms of language anxiety, in an unfamiliar language medium, students may feel threatened by the demands of the degree of language mastery. In EMI classrooms, this anxiety can be reflected in various ways, including the unwillingness to speak in class, the avoidance of asking questions, and decreased concentration on the subject matter.

For example, in a case study of a group of freshmen with low English mastery levels, Li (2024) reported that almost all the students felt boredom during lectures. And more than half were admitted to not fully understanding the course content due to language barriers, leading to frustration and self-doubt.

2.1.1 Cultural and social background influences

Cultural norms significantly increase anxiety among low-proficiency students from various cultures, including China, Japan, and South Korea. In these cultures, avoiding language mistakes in public is a priority, such as mispronouncing words or using incorrect grammar during class discussions, which is considered a threat to personal and group dignity. This differentiated culture frequently mentioned further discourages low-proficiency students from actively participating, leading to a cycle of silence and deeper anxiety.

In the social environment, peer dynamics in EMI classrooms can worsen emotional stress. In top Chinese universities, low-proficiency students may face intangible social pressure from peers with higher proficiency. For example, in group activities, classmates may unintentionally compare themselves with somebody who has high proficiency, and the results always make them feel depressed. This phenomenon can lead low-proficiency students to feel marginalized. This social exclusion reduces their sense of belonging and motivation (Zhang & Liu, 2018).

In terms of the impact on motivation, low-proficiency English students may have high motivation to succeed in the first half of EMI courses, but understanding difficult language frequently can reduce motivation over time. They may start to see EMI as a burden rather than an opportunity or platform, which can further delay their learning.

2.2 Medium-Proficiency English Students

Medium-proficiency English students in EMI classrooms present more complex emotional performance. Some studies have shown that these individuals may experience anxiety and motivation at the same time. On the one hand, they have a basic understanding of English but may still struggle with languages with difficult academic levels, such as specialized vocabulary and complex sentence structures in their daily schedule. This can cause moderate levels of anxiety when dealing with difficult course materials.

On the other hand, they also potentially influence growth. If the teaching methods are designed suitably, they can be motivated to improve their degree of English mastery while learning the subject content. For example, interactive teaching activities that encourage communication between peers in English can increase their confidence and motivation, proving the persistence of learning (Sokeng,

2025). In an EMI-taught business course, reported that medium-proficiency English students showed increased engagement when group projects appeared because it allowed them to practice English in a more confident and less complex environment with peer support.

2.2.1 Cultural and social background influences

In a cultural environment, medium-proficiency students from “high-context” cultures may experience unique anxiety related to indirect communication norms. Some people do not believe the person who has not the same custom and values with him (Li, 2024), leading the biases of English learning due to different ethnocentrism. In EMI classrooms where Western teaching styles often emphasize direct questioning and debate, these students may feel uncomfortable expressing their disagreements. For example, a medium-proficiency Thai student might hesitate to challenge a peer’s argument during a group discussion. This discomfort which can lead to negative emotion can mask their actual language ability and limit their emotional engagement, self-efficacy, and confidence (Shen &Li, 2024).

In the social environment, institutional support programs play a critical role in shaping motivation. In countries such as Malaysia, where EMI is widespread in higher education, universities often offer prerequisites specifically for medium-proficiency students. These programs not only improve language skills but also create a sense of community: students who participate in these workshops report greater motivation, as they feel that the institution acknowledges their needs and invests in their success. In contrast, medium-proficiency students in institutions without such support are more likely to experience anxiety, as they lack clear pathways to address their language gaps.

2.3 High-Proficiency English Students

High-proficiency English students in EMI classrooms also have different emotional experiences. They have more confidence in understanding the course content and participating in class discussions. This confidence can translate into higher levels of motivation, which can be defined as EMI being a platform to further enhance their academic English skills and gain a more international perspective.

For example, in a study of EMI courses at an admired international university, students with high-proficiency English levels were more active in initiating class debates, asking questions about something inspiring, and seeking additional reading materials in English to deepen their knowledge. They also reported feeling a sense of pride in their ability to handle academic content in English.

However, there are also potential challenges. Some high-proficiency English students may find EMI courses challenging enough in terms of language. This can lead to boredom and a sense of under stimulation. To address this, teachers need to provide advanced learning materials or optional challenges for high English degree mastery students within the EMI classroom.

3. Factors influencing emotional performance

The emotional performance of EMI students is shaped by multiple interconnected factors, including teaching methods, the classroom environment, and interactions between students and teachers. Each factor interacts with students’ proficiency levels to influence their anxiety, motivation, and engagement.

3.1 Teaching methods

Teaching methods have a profound impact on the emotional states of students across all proficiency levels. Game teaching methods can reduce students’ anxiety which is created by their

high expectation after experiencing the external pressure (Shu, 2024), such as only for getting good grades. Traditional lectures, which are dependent mainly on teaching, may suit high-proficiency students because they can follow complex English explanations, but they often overwhelm low-proficiency students, leaving them feeling lost and anxious.

In contrast, some assignments offer broader benefits, including presentations and group work. For low-proficiency students, group work with high-proficiency peers provides language support. For example, in a case study of an EMI philosophy course, low-proficiency students reported reduced anxiety when analyzing case studies in groups, as they could learn vocabulary and sentence structures from their peers while contributing their subject knowledge. For medium-proficiency students, a mix of lectures and interactive activities balances structure and engagement. For example, teachers can use lectures to introduce key concepts and then guide group discussions to help students practice academic English.

In addition to teaching methods, they also set the foundation for other emotional influences, such as the classroom environment and interactions between students and teachers.

3.2 Classroom environment

The classroom environment, including the physical space and the social-psychological atmosphere, also affects students' emotions. If the environment contains mutual respect, support, and inclusion, it can reduce anxiety for all students, especially those with a low degree of English mastery.

A nice teacher can play a crucial role in creating this environment. He/she encourages students to make mistakes without fear of judgment, provides beneficial feedback, and promotes a culture of collaboration; therefore, students' positive emotions are enhanced. For example, a teacher who regularly praises students because of the effort of English communication can increase students' self-esteem and motivation (Chou, 2023).

The physical classroom environment, such as seating arrangements, can be a useful and crucial method. Flexible seating that allows easy group formation can facilitate peer interactions, which is beneficial for students' emotional engagement, especially for medium-proficiency students, who can learn from both teachers and peers.

In addition to teaching methods and the classroom environment, interactions between students and teachers are also factors influencing emotional performance.

3.3 Interactions between Students and Teachers

Interactions between students and teachers are a key factor of emotional performance in EMI classrooms, directly influencing students' sense of support and challenge. Good emotional interaction can increase students' motivation and interest of learning English (Cheng, 2024). Taking low-proficiency students as an example, positive interactions can significantly reduce anxiety in several ways.

3.3.1 Language Adaptation

Teachers simplify explanations, such as using short sentences that avoid using idioms without compromising content. For example, when teaching "Metaphysics" to low-proficiency students, a teacher might say, "beyond nature" instead of "Metaphysic is the area philosophy concerned with fundamental questions about the nature of reality."

3.3.2 Extra Support

Providing helping sessions is an essential approach to address language gaps. The report shows that low-proficiency students who received regular helping sessions reported greater confidence in their ability to learn in EMI.

3.3.3 Encouragement

Acknowledging small wins is another useful way to build self-confidence. For example, if you actively participate in the EMI course, you will receive some bonus for your good participation.

Ineffective interactions, however, can harm emotional performance. For example, teachers who show impatience with low-proficiency students' mistakes increase their anxiety, whereas ignoring high-proficiency students' need for challenge leads to boredom. These interactions directly counteract the benefits of effective teaching methods and a supportive classroom environment.

4. Strategies to Improve Emotional Performance

To address the diverse emotional needs of EMI students, targeted strategies, including differentiated instruction, emotional support programs, and teacher training, are essential.

4.1 Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction shapes teaching to meet the needs of students with varying proficiency levels, reducing anxiety, increasing motivation which can be created a good relationship with emotional input (Zhou & Shi, 2019).

4.1.1 Low-Proficiency Students

Providing key terms with native-language translations before lectures can help the content be better understood for some students with low proficiency. For example, a teacher teaching an EMI economics course might share a list of terms one week before the lesson. This helps students prepare and reduces anxiety during class.

The simplified materials were used to prepare readings, such as a summary with 500 words of academic articles with highlighted key points. A study at a Chinese university reported that low-proficiency students who used simplified materials scored higher on engagement surveys than did those who used full articles.

4.1.2 High-Proficiency Students

Independent research projects: Allowing students to design and present research in English. For example, a high-proficiency student in an EMI environmental science course might conduct a study on "plastic pollution in coastal cities" and present their findings to the class.

Optional challenges: Offering extra assignments for students seeking more stimulation. A case study at a Singaporean university revealed that most of high-proficiency students who completed optional challenges reported increased motivation.

4.2 Emotional Support Programs

Emotional support programs complement academic instruction by addressing students' psychological needs.

4.2.1 Low-Proficiency Students

Students are paired with peer tutors, such as high-proficiency EMI students, for weekly 1-hour sessions. A study at a Korean university reported that low-proficiency students who received tutoring reported a 30% reduction in language anxiety.

4.3 Teacher training

Effective teacher training equips EMI teachers with the skills to address students' emotional needs, such as enhancing their writing skills (Zhang & Liu, 2025). However, in most EMI classroom, English is taught by non-native speakers who need to be trained, not native speakers with high English proficiency (An, 2021).

A successful example of teacher training is the EMI Teacher Certification Program at a Chinese university. Teachers who completed the 8-week program, including workshops on emotional support and differentiated instruction, reported a 40% increase in their ability to manage students' emotions. Students in their classes also reported higher motivation scores.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, students' emotional performance in EMI classrooms is reflected in different degrees of English mastery, also known as different English levels. In terms of proficiency, students who have a lower degree of English mastery easily experience high anxiety and potentially motivation reduction, students who have a medium degree of English mastery usually experience a mix of anxiety and motivation, and students who have a higher degree of English mastery may have high motivation, but boredom, as an element, cannot be ignored. Some approaches play crucial roles in changing the situation faced by students, including teaching methods, the classroom environment, and interactions between students and teachers. To improve the emotional performance of students in EMI classrooms, some strategies are necessary, including differentiated instruction, emotional support programs, and teacher training. By addressing the variable emotional needs of students with different degrees of English mastery, educators can create a learning environment that is more effective for EMI teaching, enhancing students' learning efficiency, outcomes, and overall experience in EMI courses. For students' academic and career development, new research can further explore the long-term impacts of these emotional factors and develop more targeted and innovative strategies to support students in EMI settings.

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