

## Navigating Linguistic Diversity: Multilingual Students' Experiences of English-Medium Instruction at Universiti Malaysia Sabah

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how undergraduate students at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) navigate English-Medium Instruction (EMI) within a multilingual educational context. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 participants from diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds, the research identifies five key adaptation strategies: leveraging technology-enhanced learning, employing collaborative approaches, utilizing bilingual techniques, adopting proactive learning behaviors, and accessing institutional support. Grounded in an integrated theoretical framework combining Self-Regulated Learning Theory, Translanguaging Theory, and Communities of Practice Theory, the findings reveal that students actively and strategically utilize technological, social, linguistic, and cognitive resources to address EMI challenges while maintaining their multilingual identities. Rejecting deficit-based perspectives on multilingualism, the study highlights linguistic diversity as a strength rather than a barrier. The findings emphasize the importance of multilingual-inclusive EMI policies, language-responsive teaching practices, discipline-specific support, and the recognition of translanguaging as a legitimate pedagogical approach in linguistically diverse higher education environments.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study adds to EMI scholarship by: (1) presenting empirical evidence from the underexplored Malaysian multilingual higher education context; (2) promoting a strengths-based paradigm that reframes multilingualism as a

strategic resource rather than a deficit; (3) proposing a novel integrated theoretical framework combining Self-Regulated Learning, Translanguaging, and Communities of Practice theories; and (4) establishing technology-enhanced translanguaging as a modern adaptation method; and (5) generating actionable insights to construct multilingual-inclusive EMI policies and language-responsive pedagogies in linguistically diverse Southeast Asian universities.

## 1. Introduction

English-Medium Instruction (EMI) has become a pivotal element in higher education inside non-English-speaking countries, propelled by globalisation and the pre-eminence of English in research, innovation, and international cooperation (Macaro et al., 2018; Rahman et al., 2025). Malaysia illustrates this tendency, as the adoption of EMI signifies national ambitions to bolster global competitiveness, augment graduate employability, and conform to international academic norms (Rahman & Singh, 2022). Nonetheless, the application of EMI poses considerable problems, especially for students engaging with intricate academic material in a non-dominant language (Tajik et al., 2024; Ishino, 2022). The issues are exacerbated by differing levels of English proficiency among students, insufficient institutional assistance, and the cognitive demands of concurrently processing discipline information and language. Comprehending how students actively develop and utilise coping strategies to overcome these obstacles is crucial for enhancing EMI pedagogy and student achievement.

The implementation of EMI at UMS and other Malaysian public universities signifies a wider trend towards internationalisation and economic advancement; however, its irregular adoption and the challenges in execution underscore the necessity for more cohesive policies and support systems (Huiling & Ismaili, 2022; Rahman & Singh, 2022). A significant barrier to the successful implementation of English Medium Instruction (EMI) is the inadequate English proficiency of both educators and learners, which compromises the viability of English as the exclusive medium of instruction and compels frequent code-switching to Bahasa Melayu to facilitate understanding and regulate classroom dynamics (Sarkar et al., 2021; Azman et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2022). The practice of translanguaging—strategically employing multiple languages—has become prevalent in English Medium Instruction (EMI) contexts as educators and students address linguistic gaps to improve comprehension, illustrating the intricate multilingual dynamics present in Malaysian higher education (Boonsuk, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2022). Although these adaptive tactics illustrate the practical reality of EMI classrooms, they also highlight the conflict between policy ambitions and teaching practices. Despite increasing research on EMI implementation and teacher perspectives, student voices—those most immediately affected by these policies—remain markedly underexamined in academic discourse (Lo & Othman, 2023). Comprehending how students encounter, interpret, and tactically address EMI problems is essential for formulating more effective and contextually appropriate language policy in Malaysian higher education.

Students in EMI contexts encounter various challenges, including linguistic barriers and the difficulty of mastering complex academic terminology (Ahmed, 2025; Kaur, 2020). Psychological obstacles, such as anxiety about mispronunciation (Guan et al., 2025; Kaur, 2020), and pedagogical issues, like dependence on Western-authored textbooks that lack localized content (Elmotri, 2025), further complicate their learning experience. Despite these difficulties, students exhibit resilience through the use of metacognitive strategies

(Hung et al., 2025), translanguaging practices (Alanazi & Curle, 2025; Cui & Gardiner, 2025), and the support of peer networks (Hung et al., 2025). Nonetheless, there remains a significant gap in understanding students' lived experiences, particularly in linguistically diverse areas like Sabah, where indigenous languages intersect with Malay and English. These multilingual environments present unique challenges of linguistic negotiation often overlooked in traditional EMI research, which predominantly focuses on monolingual or bilingual contexts. Investigating how students navigate these sociolinguistic complexities could offer valuable insights into effective adaptation strategies and the development of support systems for successful EMI implementation in culturally diverse settings.

### 1.1. Research Objectives

Although there is increasing academic interest in English Medium Instruction (EMI) within Malaysian higher education, research has predominantly concentrated on regulatory frameworks and lecturer readiness, with insufficient emphasis on students' lived experiences and agency. There is a lack of comprehension regarding how students utilise multilingual resources in EMI within certain institutional and disciplinary contexts (Dafouz & Smit, 2020). This study investigates how undergraduate students at UMS interact with and engage in EMI within a linguistically varied institutional environment, emphasising the viewpoints of ethnolinguistically diverse learners, including speakers of indigenous languages. The study, informed by a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates Self-Regulated Learning Theory, Translanguaging Theory, and Communities of Practice Theory, examines the interplay of cognitive, linguistic, and social learning processes in students' experiences with EMI. Thus, the research question of the study is: *How do undergraduate students at Universiti Malaysia Sabah navigate and engage with EMI within the university's multilingual setting?*

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. EMI in Malaysian Higher Education

The adoption of EMI in Malaysian higher education signifies a strategic reaction to globalisation while addressing intricate linguistic policy conflicts. While *Bahasa Melayu* is the official language of instruction, the increasing significance of English underscores its vital contribution to Malaysia's global ambitions (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 underscores internationalisation, graduate employability, and the attraction of overseas students, hence mandating the integration of English Medium Instruction (EMI). The Ministry of Higher Education aspires for Malaysia to become a globally acknowledged educational centre by 2025, aiming for the enrolment of 250,000 overseas students (Rahman & Singh, 2022). Achieving these ambitious objectives necessitates not only policy directives but also a comprehensive understanding of how EMI is experienced by students and implemented educators, especially in tackling the linguistic and pedagogical challenges inherent in large-scale educational transformation.

The EMI environment in Malaysia reflects the nation's multilingual identity, postcolonial legacy, and progressive educational policies that balance global competitiveness with the preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity. The shift from prioritizing Bahasa Malaysia to reintroducing English Medium Instruction highlights the intricate interplay between national identity and the demands of globalization. This strategic language policy

adjustment underscores Malaysia's commitment to positioning itself as a key player in the global knowledge economy while safeguarding its linguistic heritage (Azman et al., 2024; Gill, 2014). The transition has sparked ongoing debates about the role of English in higher education and its implications for national unity and cultural identity. Policymakers continue to strive for a balanced approach that enhances English proficiency while maintaining native languages. However, the implementation process reveals significant challenges, including lecturer readiness, varying levels of student proficiency, and the need for changes in teaching methodologies (Gill, 2014; Rahman & Singh, 2022), exposing gaps between policy goals and classroom realities.

EMI has gained significant prominence in higher education institutions worldwide, driven by globalization and its perceived advantages in enhancing students' employability and international mobility (Lai & Idris, 2025). In Malaysia, this trend is evident but applied selectively, primarily in postgraduate programs where students often encounter notable language challenges. For instance, Chinese postgraduate students in Malaysian EMI institutions frequently face linguistic difficulties (Zhai & Razali, 2022). The EMI landscape in Malaysia is further shaped by the unique characteristics of Malaysian English, which includes distinct phonological, lexical, and syntactic features that influence classroom communication dynamics (Alafnan et al., 2025). Students show mixed reactions to instructional strategies like code-switching; while some regard it as helpful for grasping complex concepts, others see it as an obstacle to improving their English language proficiency (Kaur, 2020). Research highlights that the success of EMI depends not only on language proficiency but also on students' attitudes, motivation, and ability to effectively utilize multilingual resources (Lee et al., 2025). These factors emphasize the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of how students navigate the linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural complexities of EMI in multilingual settings.

Regional disparities intensify challenges related to English Medium Instruction (EMI), particularly in East Malaysia. Universities in Sabah and Sarawak face unique obstacles due to insufficient facilities, limited staffing, and the region's rich linguistic diversity. At Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), the state's vast linguistic landscape, including Malay, English, and indigenous languages such as Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, and Murut, poses distinct challenges for EMI implementation, markedly different from those in Peninsular Malaysia (Hashim, 2024; Rahman & Singh, 2022). In this multilingual context, students navigate EMI adeptly by blending multiple linguistic identities and employing sophisticated translanguaging strategies that go beyond the conventional Malay-English bilingual models often highlighted in EMI research (Lai & Idris, 2025). Understanding UMS students' perceptions, experiences, and strategies in adapting to EMI is essential for developing effective support systems and teaching approaches that reflect the sociolinguistic complexities of East Malaysia. This study, therefore, positions UMS as a critical case for examining EMI in linguistically diverse settings, with student insights offering pathways toward more inclusive and context-sensitive language-in-education policies.

## 2.2 Student Challenges in EMI Context

Students in EMI contexts have considerable linguistic obstacles, grappling with foreign academic lexicon and intricate terminology that hinder understanding and retention (Simbolon et al., 2025; Othman, 2024). In Malaysian multilingual classrooms, EMI might exacerbate comprehension disparities between pupils of varying competence levels (Akıncioğlu, 2021). Language constraints impose extra cognitive burdens, necessitating

that pupils engage with academic material while concurrently addressing linguistic obstacles (Macaro et al., 2018). This dual burden frequently leads to a diminished learning pace, decreased engagement in classroom discussions, and heightened concern around academic success. Students from linguistically diverse origins face exacerbated obstacles when their home languages and cultural perspectives are neither represented nor esteemed in the largely English-medium academic discourse.

Psychological barriers greatly influence student engagement. Pronunciation anxiety often deters participation, as students fear embarrassment or ridicule (Simbolon et al., 2025). Difficulties with vocabulary and grammar further hinder their ability to organize thoughts and express ideas effectively (Othman, 2024; Akhtar, 2021). These challenges are particularly evident during oral presentations, where performance pressure intensifies anxiety and undermines self-confidence (Akhtar, 2021). Negative experiences can trigger a cycle of avoidance, prompting students to withdraw from classroom interactions to shield themselves from perceived judgment. This self-imposed silence restricts their opportunities for linguistic development and diminishes their sense of belonging and academic identity within the EMI learning environment.

In addition to linguistic and psychological obstacles, students in EMI environments encounter substantial pedagogical difficulties arising from curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and institutional support systems. Pedagogical issues encompass an excessive dependence on Western-authored textbooks that lack local contextualisation, alongside a dearth of localised resources (Bradford, 2016; Galloway & Rose, 2021; Hu, 2023). Teaching methodologies differ significantly within fields, leading to confusion when EMI lacks clearly articulated language learning objectives (Galloway & Rose, 2021). Numerous EMI instructors, while they are academically competent, lack training in language pedagogy and do not perceive language support as their obligation (Airey, 2020), resulting in students facing challenges in obtaining sufficient linguistic aid. The systemic pedagogical deficiencies underscore the pressing necessity for institutional frameworks that incorporate language support into subject-specific instruction and equip educators with the requisite training to meet the combined challenges of content and language acquisition in EMI settings.

### **2.3. Student Coping Strategies in EMI**

Students employ several tactics that exhibit independence and flexibility. Metacognitive strategies such as comprehension monitoring, study planning, and identifying knowledge deficiencies, facilitate language acquisition and academic comprehension (Othman, 2024). Effective learners engage in advance preparation, compile glossaries, establish study groups, and utilise various resources (Simbolon et al., 2025). They demonstrate robust metacognitive abilities, consistently assessing comprehension and modifying methods (Zhou & Thompson, 2023; Çoban & Razi, 2022). Nonetheless, the efficacy of the technique is contingent upon prior English competence, familiarity with autonomous learning, availability of resources, and disciplinary requirements (Zhou et al., 2025; Guan et al., 2025; Chou, 2023; Zhou & Thompson, 2023). These findings emphasise that although student agency is vital for the success of EMI, institutions must not depend exclusively on individual adaptation; instead, they must establish equitable support systems that empower all students—irrespective of their linguistic backgrounds or previous educational experiences—to cultivate and implement effective learning strategies.

Collaborative learning and peer support play a transformative role in student learning. Study groups bring together learners of varying proficiency levels to engage with course content, prepare for assessments, and enhance overall learning outcomes (Wang et al., 2026; Pramela et al., 2016). Within these groups, students develop adaptive strategies such as code-switching, multilingual explanations, and collaborative translation (Huang, 2025; Rajendram, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Peer interaction is particularly critical in addressing challenges associated with EMI (Chen, 2025; Hermida et al., 2025; Sukkaew et al., 2025). These informal networks not only compensate for gaps in formal institutional support but also foster inclusive multilingual environments where students can draw on their full linguistic repertoires. This suggests that effective EMI pedagogy should actively promote and legitimise collaborative learning as a core component of classroom practice, rather than relegating it to extracurricular spaces.

Language support programs are vital; however, research highlights a gap between the assistance provided and the actual needs of students (Pham, 2025; Galloway et al., 2024; Galloway & Rose, 2021). Lin and Lei (2021) emphasize that effective support requires seamless integration into the curriculum, fostering continuous language development through discipline-specific instruction rather than generic English courses. Support should be tailored to specific fields and embedded within the curriculum to maximize students' linguistic capabilities (Airey, 2020; Deniz et al., 2025; Aizawa et al., 2025). Standalone language courses often fail to address specialized vocabulary, discourse conventions, and rhetorical patterns relevant to students' academic disciplines, limiting the practical application of language skills in their coursework. Furthermore, framing language support as remedial or supplementary rather than integral to academic learning risks stigmatizing students who seek help and reinforces the misconception that language development is separate from the creation of disciplinary knowledge.

## **2.4. Theoretical Framework**

The study synthesizes three interconnected frameworks: Self-Regulated Learning Theory, Translanguaging Theory, and Communities of Practice Theory, to thoroughly examine EMI experiences in multilingual settings.

### *2.4.1. Self-Regulated Learning Theory*

Zimmerman (2000) outlines how students actively manage learning through metacognition, strategic actions, and intrinsic motivation. It describes self-regulation as a cyclical process of forethought (planning), performance (monitoring), and self-reflection (evaluation), enabling learners to refine strategies for academic goals. Self-regulated learners set objectives, use effective strategies, and create supportive environments rather than relying solely on external instruction. Pintrich's (2004) model expands this by integrating motivational beliefs, contextual factors, and the regulation of cognition, motivation, behavior, and environment, crucial in EMI settings where linguistic and cognitive challenges require advanced metacognitive skills. At UMS, students must develop self-regulatory skills to manage higher education demands in a multilingual context. Linguistic diversity influences self-regulatory approaches, especially for indigenous students navigating multiple linguistic systems, requiring enhanced metacognitive awareness. Understanding these processes aids in designing strategies to help students overcome EMI challenges, optimize cognitive resources, and achieve academic success, offering insights into varying outcomes among ethnolinguistically diverse learners.

### 2.4.2. *Translanguaging Theory*

García and Wei (2014) propose which perceives bilingualism as a cohesive linguistic repertoire instead of two distinct systems, allowing multilingual individuals to strategically utilise their language resources for efficient communication and meaning conveyance. García (2009) contends that translanguaging surpasses a simple pedagogical approach, embodying the inherent discursive behaviours of bilinguals who fluidly employ their complete linguistic repertoire as a cohesive communication framework. Wei (2018) further elucidates that it transcends artificial demarcations between separate languages, emphasising the innovative and analytical aspects of multilingual practices that enable learners to reconfigure their educational experiences. This framework offers significant insights into how multilingual students utilise their varied language resources to understand intricate academic concepts, acquire knowledge, and engage in disciplinary discourse, with research indicating that students adeptly employ their complete linguistic repertoire to improve comprehension, involvement, and academic achievement. In Sabah's linguistically diverse context, translanguaging practices are complex and multifaceted, incorporating Malay, English, and indigenous languages such as Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, and Murut, demonstrating natural adaptations to the linguistic challenges of English Medium Instruction rather than adhering to monolingual standards. For numerous UMS students, the effective use of their entire linguistic repertoire is crucial for grasping intricate academic concepts, participating in classroom discussions, and demonstrating their knowledge during evaluations. Educators who possess similar linguistic backgrounds to their students frequently employ translanguaging strategies deliberately to improve comprehension and promote inclusive learning environments. This theoretical perspective contests deficit-based views that regard language mixing as indicative of inadequate proficiency, instead framing multilingualism as a significant cognitive and social asset that can be strategically utilised to improve academic performance in linguistically challenging contexts, providing UMS students with a more inclusive and effective approach that appreciates their linguistic resources while promoting their academic development in English-medium settings.

### 2.4.3. *Communities of Practice Theory*

Wenger (1998) developed and based this theory on Lave and Wenger's (1991) research on situated learning, offers a framework for understanding EMI classrooms as social learning spaces. Here, students and instructors collaboratively construct meaning, share practices for conveying disciplinary knowledge in English, and develop strategies to enhance comprehension. Learning is viewed as a social process, emerging through participation in authentic activities where novices gain competence by engaging with experienced practitioners. The diverse, multinational UMS academic community enables cross-cultural exchange and collaborative problem-solving, fostering hybrid academic practices that merge global standards with local approaches. Faculty members play a key role in guiding students to meet linguistic and cultural demands, modeling effective language use, valuing diverse linguistic resources, and integrating students into discipline-specific discourse. This framework emphasizes the importance of supportive communities for co-creating knowledge and improving academic language skills. It highlights "third spaces," where academic knowledge and local linguistic practices merge, underscoring the role of collaborative learning and peer support in addressing EMI challenges.

This integrated concept acknowledges that EMI experiences involve complex connections among individual cognitive processes, multilingual practices, and social learning dynamics operating simultaneously within multilingual higher education contexts. It enables a nuanced comprehension by examining the dynamic interconnections between self-regulation, multilingual practices, and community-based learning, recognising both universal learning principles and the distinct contextual aspects of Sabah's linguistic environment.

### **3. Research Methods**

The study utilised a qualitative method, employing semi-structured interviews to capture the complex nature of students' lived experiences in EMI contexts. This methodology was chosen to enable in-depth study of adaption mechanisms, capture nuances in language practices, and provide participants with the freedom to describe their experiences in their own voices—insights that quantitative methods cannot effectively address. The research was performed at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), an educational institution located in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, East Malaysia. UMS is distinguished for its multilingual atmosphere, bringing together students from various ethnolinguistic backgrounds, including speakers of Sabah indigenous languages such as Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, and Murut, as well as Malay, Chinese, and other Malaysian languages. Its strategic position in Sabah, which is geographically and culturally distinct from Peninsular Malaysia, offers a unique environment for analysing EMI. UMS incorporates EMI across multiple disciplines, including science, engineering, business, education, and social sciences. The student body embodies Sabah's multicultural culture, with the majority demonstrating multilingual or plurilingual capabilities, resulting in intricate and dynamic learning environments that necessitate proficient management of linguistic resources when interacting with English-based academic content.

#### **3.1. Participants and Sampling**

The study involved ten undergraduate students selected using purposive maximum variation sampling to ensure a broad range of perspectives, encompassing diverse academic disciplines, linguistic backgrounds, and EMI experiences (Suri, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample size aligns with recent recommendations, which suggest that 9-15 participants are typically sufficient to achieve thematic saturation in thematic analysis (Wutich et al., 2024). Eligibility criteria required participants to have successfully completed at least one EMI course during the data collection period. Considering the unique influence of disciplinary cultures on teaching methods and experiences, participants were drawn from various faculties (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Airey, 2012). The linguistic diversity of UMS was represented by including students from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds, such as indigenous language speakers, Malay speakers, Chinese speakers, and bilingual individuals. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms (R1-R10) were assigned to all participants (Kaiser, 2009).

#### **3.2. Data Collection**

Between May and July 2025, data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews, enabling an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, experiences, and EMI management strategies (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interview protocol, grounded in the theoretical framework and research objectives, focused on several key areas: linguistic backgrounds and prior English learning experiences; perceptions of

readiness for EMI; challenges in comprehending academic content and the strategies used to address them; difficulties in classroom participation and interaction; and issues related to assessment. Minimal revisions were made to the protocol following pilot testing with two students who were excluded from the final sample (Kim, 2011). Interviews were conducted individually via online platforms tailored to participants' preferences. Participants were given the option to conduct interviews in English, Malay, or both, ensuring authentic expression (Temple & Young, 2004; Holmes et al., 2013). Full consent was obtained to record all interviews.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis of interview data adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2021) six-phase Thematic Analysis framework: (1) familiarisation with data via transcription and iterative reading; (2) systematic generation of initial codes; (3) identification of themes through code classification; (4) evaluation of themes at both code and dataset levels; (5) definition and nomenclature of themes; and (6) compilation of the analytical report (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The study included inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) coding methodologies (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Swain, 2018), executed sequentially yet fluidly, facilitating iterative modifications as insights developed.

## 4. Results

The analysis revealed five principal themes that elucidate how undergraduate students at UMS adjust to English Medium Instruction (EMI) within the university's multilingual context, highlighting the various ways employed by students to understand academic material, using their multilingual abilities and accessible resources.

### 4.1. Theme 1: Strategies for Learning Enhanced by Technology

Students demonstrated considerable reliance on digital tools, including AI applications, language assistance software, and translation systems. R1 shared, "*Sometimes I use GPT for a faster fast respond,*" highlighting the appeal of instant solutions. Writing improvement tools were highly valued, with R3 noting, "*I use tools like Grammarly to improve my writing,*" while R2 added, "*I also use online dictionaries and tools like Grammarly and Quillbot.*" Translation technologies proved indispensable, as R4 explained, "*I use some translation tools such as keyboard to translate to understand.*" These technology-driven resources showcase a proactive adoption of digital solutions to overcome language barriers and improve engagement with English-language content.

### 4.2. Theme 2: Collaborative Learning Methodologies

The findings underscore the significant impact of peer learning and collaborative efforts. Students consistently highlighted the importance of social interaction and collective meaning-making. For example, R2 shared, "*Sometimes I also form study groups with my classmates to discuss topics in both English and Malay,*" illustrating how collaboration fosters dynamic and adaptable language-use environments. Similarly, R5 stated, "*We will play the roleplay games like I will be the lecturer,*" showcasing strategies that transform students from passive learners into active participants. Additionally, R6 remarked, "*I also participate in group discussion,*" emphasizing the widespread adoption of collaborative learning practices. These methods not only improved material understanding but also created spaces for negotiating meaning across languages.

### 4.3. Theme 3: Bilingual Learning Strategies

The extensive use of multilingual techniques was evident, including dual-language note-taking, strategic code-switching, and material translation. Students demonstrated advanced translanguaging strategies, effectively utilizing their full linguistic repertoire. For instance, R7 shared, "*When I'm taking notes I use both in English and Malay,*" while R3 noted, "*I try to take notes in both English and Malay.*" Some students engaged in comprehensive translation efforts, as R6 explained, "*I directly translate all the lecture notes to my mother language.*" Code-switching emerged as a natural communication approach, exemplified by R5's observation: "*Sometimes they speak in Malay and I speak in English,*" showcasing the dynamic language practices integral to multilingual educational settings. These bilingual strategies underscore students' autonomy in crafting personalized learning methods that honor their linguistic heritage while advancing their proficiency in English-medium education.

### 4.4. Theme 4: Proactive Learning Strategies

Students showcased remarkable initiative by adopting proactive learning methods, including pre-class preparation, independent vocabulary building, and utilizing supplementary materials. R8 highlighted, "*If I prepare before class, I can understand better and feel more confident to speak,*" underscoring the connection between preparation and both cognitive and emotional learning aspects. Similarly, R2 shared, "*I also tried to read the textbook in advance to prepare.*" Students also demonstrated dedication to vocabulary improvement, as R10 noted, "*When I encounter unfamiliar words in lectures or articles, I will take notes and look them up later.*" R9 added, "*I would watch English language media such as like documentary podcast.*" These self-regulated actions reflect strong metacognitive awareness and a determined effort to enhance linguistic and intellectual skills crucial for success in EMI.

### 4.5. Theme 5: Utilization of Institutional Support

The investigation highlighted varying levels of student engagement with institutional support services, including library resources, faculty consultations, and language assistance programs. Among these, direct interaction with instructors emerged as the most commonly utilized approach. For instance, R4 shared, "*I'm just asking to my lecturers... to check my assignment again,*" while R7 stated, "*I will ask my lecturer if I don't understand.*" References to library resources were brief, as noted by R4: "*I book books from libraries only from libraries.*" However, formal institutional support was mentioned less frequently compared to detailed accounts of self-initiated strategies. This suggests that students may predominantly rely on informal, self-directed methods. These findings underscore the importance of improving the accessibility and relevance of institutional resources to better align with students' practical approaches in navigating multilingual EMI contexts.

The five themes collectively highlight the diverse and dynamic strategies multilingual students at UMS use to navigate EMI. These students adopt proactive roles, utilizing technological tools, collaborative networks, multilingual resources, strategic methods, and institutional support to address linguistic and academic challenges. Their efforts demonstrate that successfully engaging with EMI requires the adept use of a wide range of resources and techniques in complex linguistic environments.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Self-Regulated Learning

UMS students exhibit notable self-regulatory behaviours consistent with Zimmerman's (2000, 2002) framework of self-regulated learning as cyclical processes encompassing planning, execution, and self-reflection. Proactive Learning Strategies illustrate preparatory phases, wherein students undertake intentional preparation prior to engaging with academic content. Pre-class practices demonstrate metacognitive awareness of linguistic constraints and intentional efforts to alleviate understanding challenges. As R8 observed, preparation improves both comprehension and self-assurance—essential for involvement in EMI environments where linguistic apprehension frequently obstructs participation (Akhtar, 2021; Simbolon et al., 2025). This corresponds with Pintrich's (2004) approach, which highlights the interaction between cognitive techniques and motivational beliefs.

However, the findings indicate differing levels of sophistication in self-regulation, especially regarding Technology-Enhanced Learning Strategies. While all participants engaged with digital tools, their usage varied from basic translation functions to more advanced AI technologies. This supports Evans and Morrison's (2011) assertion that the effectiveness of strategies is influenced by prior expertise, familiarity with independent learning, and specific disciplinary requirements. The UMS context imposes unique self-regulation challenges that surpass those in monolingual or bilingual settings. Students navigating multiple linguistic systems must cultivate advanced metacognitive awareness to effectively manage code-switching, translation, and meaning-making across various resources. Although many participants demonstrate adaptive self-regulation, increased institutional support could provide more structured instruction in metacognitive skills tailored to multilingual learning environments.

### 5.2. Translanguaging as Strategic Resource Mobilization

Bilingual Learning Techniques highlight the significant role of translanguaging practices at UMS, challenging the predominantly monolingual foundations of most EMI policies. Students actively engage in dual-language notetaking, accurate translation, and seamless code-switching, reflecting García and Wei's (2014) concept of translanguaging as the dynamic integration of linguistic resources. The widespread use of bilingual notetaking showcases advanced metacognitive strategies, allowing students to leverage their dominant languages to deepen comprehension while simultaneously developing English academic literacy. This aligns with Wei's (2018) view, which underscores the creative and critical aspects of translanguaging.

R6's innovative method of directly translating lecture notes, "*I directly translate all the lecture notes to my mother language*", showcases an advanced translanguaging strategy that prioritizes deep conceptual understanding over immediate English fluency. By leveraging translanguaging theory, this approach enables students to first solidify their grasp of concepts in their primary languages, creating a strong foundation before expressing their knowledge in English. This aligns seamlessly with García's (2009) view that translanguaging represents authentic bilingual practices rather than linguistic deficiencies. Similarly, R5's dynamic code-switching highlights the fluid, adaptable nature of multilingual interactions, echoing Ali (2013) insight that English Medium Instruction (EMI) rarely exists in a purely monolingual form. By embracing and normalizing

translanguaging practices, students actively challenge outdated deficit narratives that equate language mixing with academic underperformance.

The findings have significant implications for EMI policy and instruction at UMS and other similar multilingual campuses. The consistent and extensive use of translanguaging highlights the incompatibility of a monolingual English-only policy with authentic learning processes and cognitive needs. Rather than being perceived as temporary aid, translanguaging should be recognized as an essential, long-term strategy that enables students to harness their multilingual abilities as cognitive and communicative assets. This aligns with García and Wei's (2014) advocacy for a translanguaging pedagogy that fully integrates students' entire linguistic repertoires into teaching frameworks. Evidence of strategic dual-language note-taking, meticulous translation, and fluid code-switching reflects advanced metacognitive strategies that allow students to utilize dominant languages for enhanced comprehension while simultaneously fostering English academic literacy, encompassing both creative and critical dimensions as emphasized by Wei (2018). Students actively adopt and sustain translanguaging practices such as translating lecture notes to prioritize conceptual understanding over immediate English production, demonstrating that these are legitimate cognitive strategies representative of authentic bilingual practices, rather than deficiencies, as argued by García (2009). Therefore, universities must challenge deficit perspectives that portray language mixing as a compromise for struggling students. Instead, they should recognize that English Medium Instruction (EMI) is rarely implemented in a "pure" form but rather exists as a dynamic, negotiated multilingual space where students' full linguistic repertoires serve as indispensable cognitive and communicative tools.

### 5.3. Communities of Practice and Collaborative Meaning Construction

Collaborative Learning Approaches emphasize how UMS students create communities of practice that function as vital platforms for addressing EMI challenges collectively. These student-led learning communities align with Wenger's (1998) framework, characterized by mutual engagement, shared resources, and common goals. R2's account of forming study groups "*...to discuss topics in both English and Malay*" illustrates how these communities intentionally integrate multilingual resources, fostering "third spaces" where academic English intersects with native languages and culturally influenced communication methods. Such hybrid environments help students overcome linguistic obstacles, with proficient peers supporting less experienced ones through explanations, translations, and demonstrations of academic language use. For example, the novel approach to role-playing that R5 employs: "*We will play the roleplay games like I will be the lecturer*", highlights the students' agency in the process of creating learning experiences, thereby changing them from passive learners into active participants. This accomplishes a number of goals, including the provision of low-pressure venues for the practice of academic English, the rehearsal of disciplinary discourse, and the creation of safe places for linguistic faults that are not constrained by requirements of evaluation. Students are able to gradually acquire competence and confidence with the help of peers who are confronting similar issues when they participate in activities like these, which foster legitimate peripheral engagement from the perspective of Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The multiethnic and multinational composition of UMS provides distinct benefits for collaborative learning. Linguistic diversity enhances peer learning by introducing students to varied meaning-making processes and alternate approaches for

comprehending intricate subjects. Nonetheless, the data indicate some constraints. Peer-based communities may unintentionally sustain language inaccuracies if all members possess comparable inadequate skill. Effectiveness is contingent upon the presence of more knowledgeable persons. This underscores the significance of faculty engagement as active participants in modelling disciplinary discourse, delivering precise linguistic input, and affirming multilingual practices while steering students towards enhanced academic language competency.

#### 5.4. Technology as Mediating Tool

In multilingual learning environments, technology-enhanced learning strategies underscore the pivotal role digital technologies play as tools for mediation. The widespread use of artificial intelligence platforms, writing enhancement tools, translation programs, and online dictionaries highlights how technology effectively addresses the demands of language use. These tools serve as readily accessible frameworks, providing immediate support and bridging gaps that institutional services may not fully cover. For instance, "...GPT for a faster response" as mentioned by R1—"Sometimes I use GPT for a faster fast respond", exemplifies how artificial intelligence technologies deliver on-demand, personalized assistance tailored to students' workflows. This form of support, often referred to as "just-in-time" assistance, contrasts with traditional institutional support systems that operate on fixed schedules.

Nevertheless, dependence on technology raises important pedagogical considerations. While technological tools can enhance surface-level accuracy, relying on them solely as correction aids may not foster deeper linguistic proficiency or metalinguistic awareness. The distinction between using technology as a crutch versus a scaffold hinge on the level of engagement, whether students passively accept corrections or actively analyze concepts to understand underlying patterns. Effective use of technology requires metacognitive awareness and strategic involvement, key components of self-regulated learning. Students need to develop the ability to evaluate the appropriateness of resources, critically assess automated suggestions, and recognize when to seek human guidance.

In addition, the integration of technology highlights both opportunities and challenges, particularly the risk of widening inequities due to unequal access and varying levels of digital literacy. Students with stable internet connections, personal devices, and strong digital skills gain a clear edge over their peers. In Sabah, where urban and rural areas face significant infrastructure disparities (Noor Azam & Melor, 2010), technology-driven strategies could inadvertently deepen existing educational gaps. This underscores the urgent need for schools to prioritize access to technological resources and digital literacy training as core components of EMI support. By addressing these issues, we can ensure that the growing reliance on technology enhances rather than hinders educational equity.

#### 5.5. Bridging Institutional Support Gaps

Students actively participate in self-initiated initiatives; however, their engagement with official institutional support tends to be limited and superficial. This trend highlights a potential mismatch between the support provided and the actual needs of students, a gap often identified in EMI research (Zhou & Rose., 2022). The prevalent reliance on consultations with lecturers reflects a conventional, reactive approach to seeking assistance. However, studies suggest that language anxiety and the fear of appearing

incompetent often deter students from seeking help (Simbolon et al., 2025), leaving many to struggle in silence. As a result, institutions must revamp support systems to enhance accessibility, proactivity, and cultural sensitivity, addressing both practical and psychological barriers that hinder students from fully engaging with resources in EMI environments.

The limited focus on formal language support programs reveals several challenges, including underutilization due to a lack of awareness, perceptions of irrelevance to specific disciplines, scheduling conflicts, or the stigma tied to seeking remedial assistance. This aligns with research exploring whether generic English support adequately addresses the specialized linguistic needs of disciplinary studies (Lin & Lei, 2021; Zhou & Rose, 2022). This evident gap highlights the urgent need to redesign support systems to improve visibility, accessibility, discipline-specific relevance, and integration into authentic learning experiences. The findings stress the importance of offering integrated, discipline-specific language support rather than generic, supplementary programs. Students' heavy reliance on self-directed and peer-based solutions suggests that formal support either fails to address real challenges adequately or does not integrate effectively into academic contexts. Lin and Lei's (2021) suggestion to embed continuous language development within disciplinary curricula is particularly relevant. EMI courses should emphasize disciplinary discourse, promote academic language development, and incorporate scaffolding strategies to enhance material comprehension while gradually building linguistic proficiency.

## 6. Conclusion

This research explores the strategies employed by undergraduate students at UMS to navigate EMI within multilingual academic contexts. A qualitative analysis of interviews with ten participants from diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds reveals that engaging with EMI is a dynamic and multifaceted process, demanding strategic resourcefulness, multilingual adaptability, and collaborative meaning-making. Five interconnected themes emerged: technology-driven learning strategies involving the use of AI tools, writing software, and translation platforms; collaborative learning practices fostering peer support networks; bilingual approaches such as dual-language notetaking, code-switching, and translanguaging; proactive learning strategies emphasizing thorough preparation and vocabulary development; and institutional support systems, which are often underutilized compared to self-directed methods. These findings highlight UMS students as proactive and resourceful individuals who effectively leverage technical, social, linguistic, cognitive, and institutional resources to address EMI challenges while maintaining their multilingual identities.

The study offers profound theoretical insights by integrating Self-Regulated Learning Theory, Translanguaging Theory, and Communities of Practice Theory to examine EMI experiences in complex multilingual settings. Self-Regulated Learning Theory highlights the cognitive and metacognitive processes that enable students to effectively plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, showcasing strategic competence that transcends basic language proficiency. Translanguaging Theory reframes multilingual behaviors as advanced cognitive strategies, emphasizing how students draw upon their entire linguistic repertoires rather than relegating local languages to the margins. The Theory of Communities of Practice underscores the social aspects of learning, illustrating how peer collaboration promotes shared meaning-making and addresses gaps in formal education. This multi-theoretical approach offers a comprehensive understanding of navigating EMI,

acknowledging the interdependence of cognitive, linguistic, and social processes, which cannot be fully grasped in isolation.

From practical perspectives, the findings challenge the deficit-based views that categorize multilingual children as linguistically disadvantaged, instead emphasizing multilingualism as a valuable asset for academic achievement. Students have developed practical, informal, and self-directed strategies to adapt effectively to multilingual environments. However, these efforts often go unnoticed and unsupported by institutions, presenting both obstacles and opportunities. Existing policies may unintentionally obstruct natural learning processes, but institutions have the chance to leverage students' inherent skills. The study indicates that UMS could enhance its EMI strategies by embracing Sabah's linguistic diversity as a strength rather than a limitation. By encouraging translanguaging practices, building collaborative learning communities, ensuring fair access to technology, offering discipline-specific language support, and training faculty in language-responsive teaching methods, UMS has the potential to become a leading example of multilingual higher education. This strategy would respect regional linguistic diversity while equipping students for global participation.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for EMI policies and practices at UMS and similar multilingual universities, requiring coordinated efforts across institutional policies, educational strategies, and support systems. At the institutional level, EMI policies should move beyond a sole focus on English, explicitly recognizing translanguaging as a legitimate educational approach. Frameworks must be established to help educators strategically incorporate native languages while balancing English proficiency, emphasizing that multilingual skills are valuable assets. Educators need professional development in language-responsive teaching to identify linguistic challenges, apply scaffolding techniques, and embrace their roles as facilitators of language socialization. Curriculum design should integrate collaborative learning models, provide scaffolded language support, include training in metacognitive strategies, and create structured opportunities to practice academic language in low-pressure settings. Institutions should offer discipline-specific language support, focusing on proactive and integrated assistance, with an emphasis on early interventions through writing consultants, peer tutoring, and workshops tailored to specific genres. Additionally, institutions must ensure equitable access to technology and provide digital literacy training that promotes critical evaluation of technology-generated content. Effective EMI implementation calls for a fundamental reimagining of multilingual higher education frameworks, grounded in respect for students' multilingual identities. Ongoing communication among stakeholders is essential to develop contextually relevant, evidence-based strategies that honor local linguistic diversity while preparing students for global engagement.

While this study provides valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size—just ten participants from a single institution—limits the diversity of perspectives captured. Qualitative research prioritizes depth and transferability over broad generalizability, but this narrow scope may still leave gaps in understanding. Relying solely on self-reported data could also lead to discrepancies between reported and actual classroom practices. Moreover, the absence of faculty perspectives, institutional policies, and broader organizational contexts restricts a comprehensive view of how student strategies, instructor behaviors, and structural factors interact. To address these gaps, future research should explore longitudinal studies on strategy development, cross-disciplinary comparisons, the role of indigenous languages in translanguaging, and

faculty perspectives on teaching methods. Intervention studies that evaluate support strategies for EMI programs in multilingual settings would also provide critical insights.

In summary, managing EMI in multilingual higher education entails complex interactions among cognitive strategies, linguistic resources, social practices, technical tools, and institutional structures. UMS students have devised innovative and flexible approaches to address EMI challenges, leveraging their multilingual skills, collaborative networks, digital resources, and self-regulation abilities to foster meaningful learning in linguistically diverse environments. Nonetheless, these efforts often remain informal and unacknowledged within institutional frameworks. Effective EMI implementation requires transcending English-centric ideologies and deficit-based views, adopting approaches that value students' multilingual identities, recognize linguistic diversity as cognitive and communicative strengths, and integrate support across institutional, pedagogical, and student-centered dimensions. The ultimate goal is to cultivate educational environments where multilingual learners excel, utilizing linguistic diversity as an asset while strengthening English proficiency and subject knowledge. Achieving this necessitates a deep institutional commitment that surpasses superficial adjustments, embracing a transformative rethinking of the design and execution of multilingual higher education.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

Formal ethical approval was not sought for the study as the research grant was awarded by the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), and the participants were also students of PPIB. However, the researchers obtained verbal consent from the participants prior to conducting the study.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declared that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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