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The EMPOWER Framework: A Multi-Level Approach to Enhancing English Medium Education in Multilingual Higher Education Contexts

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Research Article

Keywords: EMI, EME, higher education, multilingualism, leadership, EMPOWER framework

Posted Date: July 3rd, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10219367/v1

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Additional Declarations: The authors declare no competing interests.

English Teaching & Learning

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--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	ETAL-D-26-00200
Full Title:	The EMPOWER Framework: A Multi-Level Approach to Enhancing English Medium Education in Multilingual Higher Education Contexts
Article Type:	Original Paper
Funding Information:	
Abstract:	This study proposes the EMPOWER Framework (English Medium Provision with Organizational, Workforce, and Educational Reform) to conceptualize the multi-level dynamics of English Medium Instruction (EMI) implementation in higher education. The framework was developed through a qualitative study exploring institutional leadership perspectives in Kazakhstan, where English Medium Education (EME) expansion forms part of the national trilingual education policy. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight senior leaders of state, private, and autonomous universities. Findings revealed three interrelated levels of EME operation: organizational, instructional, and student. Each level encompasses pillars - internationalisation, policy and strategy, institutional infrastructure, professional development, curriculum design and support, faculty language proficiency, student well-being, employability, and students' language proficiency. The EMPOWER conceptual framework illustrates how institutional, pedagogical, and learner-oriented dimensions of EME intersect within multilingual higher education contexts. It offers a structured lens for analysing EME provision and provides practical implications for leadership, capacity building, and sustainable EME policy development.
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Author Comments:	
Suggested Reviewers:	

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Manuscript information:

Title:

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Statements and Declarations

Disclosure of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Funding details

No funding source is reported for the present study.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, ST. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Authors' contributions

DG: conceptualization, supervision, data collection. ST: conceptualization, writing-original draft preparation, reviewing and editing. MB: conceptualization, methodology and writing - original draft preparation. AC: conceptualization, data collection.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Abstract

This study proposes the EMPOWER Framework (English Medium Provision with Organizational, Workforce, and Educational Reform) to conceptualize the multi-level dynamics of English Medium Instruction (EMI) implementation in higher education. The framework was developed through a qualitative study exploring institutional leadership perspectives in Kazakhstan, where English Medium Education (EME) expansion forms part of the national trilingual education policy. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight senior leaders of state, private, and autonomous universities. Findings revealed three interrelated levels of EME operation: organizational, instructional, and student. Each level encompasses pillars - internationalization, policy and strategy, institutional infrastructure, professional development, curriculum design and support, faculty language proficiency, student well-being, employability, and students' language proficiency. The EMPOWER conceptual framework illustrates how institutional, pedagogical, and learner-oriented dimensions of EME intersect within multilingual higher education contexts. It offers a structured lens for analyzing EME provision and provides practical implications for leadership, capacity building, and sustainable EME policy development.

Keywords: EMI, EME, higher education, multilingualism, leadership, EMPOWER framework

Introduction

The last decades have been marked by accelerated rates of developments in higher education. The ambitious goals of the governments to integrate with global economies necessitated the emergence of various reforms in the educational sphere. The adoption of the Bologna declaration after the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has led to a rapid internationalization of higher education in many countries (European Commission, 2024). Internationalization, in turn, has resulted in the implementation of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) as an instrument to meet the demands of the 21st century. EMI is believed to be a prerequisite for preparing highly qualified professionals possessing skills to enhance the development of the country (Tajik et al., 2024, p.250). Numerous countries of the Expanding Circle, (i.e., in national contexts that do not have a former Anglophone colonial link) (Kachru, 1985), including Kazakhstan, followed this global trend in pursuit of a brighter future for their younger generations.

EMI, a relatively new approach in the educational system, brought considerable changes to the countries where teaching and learning have historically been conducted through national or official languages, which have long constituted the status quo (Curle et al., 2024). In such contexts, EMI represents a shift away from established linguistic and pedagogical norms toward English as a new medium of academic delivery. As Curle et al. (2024) argue, EMI refers specifically to the teaching of academic content through English in settings where other languages have traditionally dominated as the medium of instruction, particularly in systems where EMI policies and practices are still emerging or under development. This framing is especially relevant for contexts like Kazakhstan, where EMI is being introduced within an already multilingual but historically non-Anglophone higher education system. EMI is commonly defined as the use of the English language to teach non-linguistic academic subjects (e.g., science, engineering, law, economics) in educational institutions where English is not the primary language of the surrounding society (Dearden, 2014). Unlike English language teaching (ELT), EMI focuses on content delivery rather than language acquisition, though language development often occurs incidentally. Dafouz and Smit (2016; 2020) introduced the alternative term EMEMUS (English Medium Education in Multilingual University Settings) that do not imply merely pedagogical approach but shows holistic nature of current multilingual education. Thus, following Dafouz and Smit (2016; 2020) and Goodman et al. (2024), in this paper further on we employ the term English Medium Education (EME) which is distinct from EMI by its scope. We assume EME as a broader concept pertaining to English medium documentation, English medium communication, English medium negotiations, etc. since English is not limited only to instruction in the classroom but also is integrated in the entire educational process involving all actors at the English-medium universities and programs.

The global rise in EME entailed in the impressive amount of research worldwide exploring its ownership and background (Macaro & Aizawa, 2022), language policies and management (Akincioglu, 2022; Byun et al., 2011; Mammadova, 2024), EMI teachers characteristics (Klaassen & De Graaff, 2001; Lasagabaster, 2022; Macaro & Han, 2019; Whitehead et al., 2025), implementation challenges (Mammadova et al., 2025; Zheng & Choi, 2024) the need for EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses in EME programs (Galloway et al., 2024) and many other aspects.

In Kazakhstan, the acceleration of EME started back in 2007 with the adoption of a country-wide trilingual policy where Kazakh is stated as the state language, Russian as the language of interethnic communication and English - the language of successful integration into the global economy. The trilingual education policy in Kazakhstan is a strategic initiative aimed at modernizing education and moving to a more Western-oriented system (Karabassova,

2021). Moreover, EME in Kazakhstan is a top-down initiative enabling higher education institutions (HEIs) to comply with international ESG-2015 standards (Analytical report, 2024).

Despite multiple efforts of the government and policy intentions, the local research reveals, various obstacles persist, impacting the smooth and effective enactment of EME policies (Gaipov et al., 2025; Kerimkulova et al., 2023; Tajik et al., 2023). Research on EME in Kazakhstan looks into the challenges of its implementation connected with the relatively low English proficiency of content lecturers (Oralova, 2012; Yessenbekova, 2022); lack of resources and pedagogical expertise in delivering English-medium classes (Seitzhanova et al., 2015), constraints in the adoption of EME-related country-wide national (Kerimkulova et al., 2023) and institutional policies (Gaipov et al., 2024), students and alumni's perceptions of EMI benefits for career opportunities and employability challenges (Goodman et al., 2024; Jonbekova et al., 2023), EME students' linguistic barriers (Goodman et al., 2022; Raikhanova et al., 2025) and cultural identities (Zhunussova et al., 2023). Considering the multilevel nature of these challenges, there is an urge for more sustained and structured decisions to address them. Prior research focused more on the analysis of EME-related policies at the macro level (national) and students' linguistic barriers and disciplinary lecturers' pedagogical experiences at the micro level, overlooking the perceptions from the managerial perspectives at the meso (university policymakers) level. Given that university Senior Leadership Teams (SLT), comprised of rectors, vice-rectors (provosts), and deans, are responsible for the quality implementation of educational reforms, their understanding of challenges, as well as the decisions taken to address them, could become the basis for a systematic multi-level conceptual framework. Such a framework would guide university administrators to develop context-specific decisions and thus, support efficient EME.

As such, this study aims to explore how university senior leaders ***conceptualize and implement English Medium Education*** within multilingual higher education contexts in Kazakhstan and to develop an integrative conceptual framework for its enhancement. The study is guided by the following research question:

How do senior leadership team (SLT) members in Kazakhstan's higher education institutions conceptualize and implement English Medium Education across organizational, instructional, and student levels?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that underpins our research is that of Dafouz and Smit (2016; 2020), known as ROAD- MAPPING (Figure 1 below). This is an acronym that stands for: Roles of English (RO), Academic Disciplines (AD), (language) Management (M), Agents (A), Practices and Processes (PP), Internationalization and Glocalization (ING), which altogether constitute a holistic approach to understanding the implementation and management of EME. The relevance of the ROAD-MAPPING framework within the current research is justified not only by its ability to explain the interrelationships and complexities of EMEMUS but also by its potential to analyze EME processes from various perspectives that enable to gain insights into the overall picture. First, in order to understand how the framework guides the current study, each component of the model should be described. To start with, the central category around which all other components are situated is *discourses*, implying the "discursive nature" of EME (Dafouz & Smit, 2016, p.7).

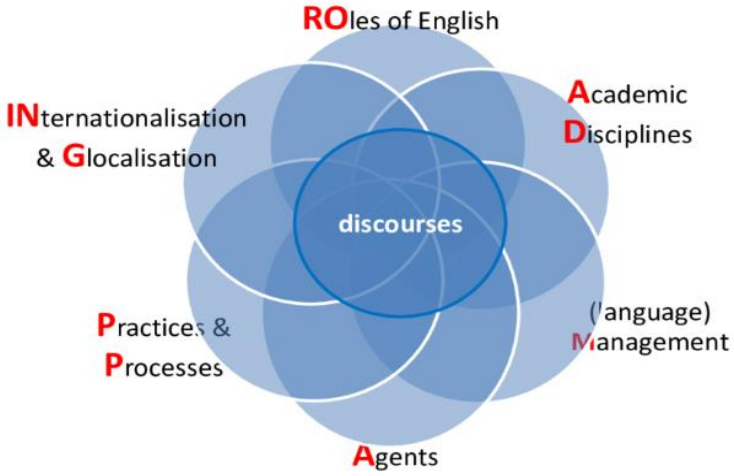


Figure 1. ROAD-MAPPING framework by Dafouz and Smith (2016)

This framework is interpreted in line with the present study's "specific research focus" (Dafouz & Smit, 2016), namely on SLT members and their conceptualizations of EME implementation and provision. Through this lens, the components of the ROADMAPPING framework are described with regard to managerial practices and

conceptualizations across three interrelated layers: organizational, instructional, and student. Below, these dimensions are scrutinized in more detail.

Internationalization and Glocalization

In Kazakhstan, internationalization resulted not only in attracting international students and faculty but also raising the university ranking and visibility in the international arena (Analytical report, 2024). At the organizational level, both global and local forces are involved to internationalize higher education, for example, by opening branch campuses of foreign universities that provide transnational education, introducing internationalized curricula, adopting the "best practices" of EME, recruiting international staff, and strengthening research collaborations. Altogether, internationalization is conceptualized as an institutional transformation requiring the adoption of relevant strategic initiatives and policies as well as enabling appropriate infrastructure. Recent research revealed that many Kazakhstan's HEIs show strong commitment for internationalization through publicly available strategic plans where internationalization-related activities are clearly displayed (Gaipov et al., 2024; Kerimkulova et al., 2023). However, one of the key findings showed that HEIs give more prominence to providing joint/dual degrees and internationally recognized programs rather than enabling academic staff mobility and professional development overseas. Thus, the enactment of internationalization objectives still has notable inconsistencies, showing uneven execution and insufficient attention to some significant aspects.

Roles of English

In HEIs English can perform distinct roles regarding the organizational, instructional, and learners' levels. As such, at English medium university English is not merely the language of instruction but the language of education and administration. At the organizational level, English functions as a language of rules, regulations, and policies as well as a working language for professional communication. The analysis of institutional policies in several Kazakhstani HEIs demonstrated the extensive use of English for internal strategic documents (Gaipov et al., 2024) along with Kazakh and Russian languages, which complies with the national trilingual policy. Using English for administrative purposes creates an environment that might facilitate the success of EME programs.

Moreover, it is believed that one of the main objectives of English-instructed programs is a consistent and abundant exposure of students to the target language, and thus, there is a prevalence of English-only belief among administration, disciplinary teachers, and EME students. However, at the instructional and student layers, considering the relatively low English proficiency of non-native content teachers and domestic students, there is a discrepancy between "English-only preference" and "English-only practice" (Jinghui, 2023). Despite being excellent experts in subject matter, the older generation of content lecturers "do not support the idea of using English" to teach academic disciplines due to their own language barriers (Oralova, 2012, p.7). Therefore, in reality, EME classes represent a multilingual environment where along with English, an equally important role belongs to the native or dominant languages.

Academic disciplines

Although EME-related discourse contains much about the development and improvement of both content teachers' and students' language proficiency, the primary purpose of nonlinguistic majors is the development of subject-related professional competence. As such, the lack of high-quality, field-specific and contextually appropriate materials in English to be used in teaching academic disciplines is a key challenge in EME settings. Many universities rely on translated textbooks or outdated sources, while instructors often lack access to authentic, discipline-specific content that aligns with EME standards. The deficiency of teaching resources and a lack of unified methodological support limit students' subject understanding and academic language development, and were defined by Seitzhanova et al. (2015) as one of the major challenges encountered in EME.

Another issue deals with curriculum and syllabus design for academic disciplines in EME programs. Curriculum design should involve strategies to support not only mastery of the content but also the development of language proficiency that requires careful scaffolding and integration of EAP/ESP courses. The recent research shows the efficiency of collaboratively designed activities by the content and EFL teachers (Raikhanova et al., 2025). Yet, this approach largely remains declarative in nature: it is formulated at the level of recommendations and regulatory documents, but is not properly implemented in practice.

Management

At the organisational level, the efficiency of EME mainly depends on the quality of management. In turn, managing English- medium HEIs and programs requires explicit and practice-wise policies for careful planning and coordination across departments, resource allocation, professional development, and alignment with institutional missions and quality assurance frameworks (Akıncıoglu, 2022). However, the analysis of institutional strategic documents publicly available on university websites of 11 Kazakhstani HEIs revealed the deficiency of clearly articulated institutional regulations regarding EME at a number of HEIs, with both full and partial EME (Gaipov et al., 2024). Moreover, many of the existing regulations and policies often remain aspirational and do not comply with micro-level preparedness (Tajik et al., 2024). Studies in an international context also highlight

the need for 'more structured mechanisms of institutional management' (Nguyen, 2018, p. 7), referring to inconsistent and insufficient enactment of EME policies. Management, as an operational tool of policy, has a crucial role in mediating the policy intentions and actual implementation in practice. Without adequate managerial support, as, for example, providing appropriate professional development (PD) for disciplinary faculty, EME policies often remain formal and symbolic.

Practices and processes

From the organizational perspectives, processes and practices imply strategic moves towards creating efficient mechanisms that shape EME implementation. These mechanisms include, for example, defining English proficiency thresholds both for students and teachers. At the micro level, both content teachers and students should have a suitable command of English to cope with the complexities of academic subjects and develop productive skills in a chosen subject area (Curle, 2026). Yet, the examination of EME practices revealed that the level of English language proficiency among students and faculty is generally low (Goodman et al., 2022; Karabassova, 2021; Tajik et al., 2025; Zhunussova et al., 2023). This situation stems from a lack of standardized criteria for determining whether students are linguistically prepared for EME. It was found that only three relatively new EMI universities have "stringent admission criteria, including a 6.0 to 6.5 IELTS score for masters and 7.0 to 7.5 for PhD admissions" (Tajik et al., 2025, p.3), others use institution-specific placement tests or bypass testing altogether.

As for content teachers, along with linguistic barriers, previous research draws attention to their significant lack of pedagogical skills (Goodman et al., 2022; Seitzhanova et al., 2015). Thus, another mechanism should focus on hiring the academic staff possessing not only subject expertise but also EME pedagogy. Strikingly, as Lasagabaster (2022) puts it, there is no "widely recognized certification for EMI…..not only at the international level but also at the national level in the vast majority of countries" (p.7). So, the recruitment is mainly limited to the assessment of language proficiency overlooking other vital characteristics such as EME methodology. For example, such requirements differ across the contexts starting from blurring "ability to teach courses in English" (Byun et al., 2011) to hiring teachers that have an international certificate or a foreign diploma (Analytical report, 2024).

One more important mechanism to ensure the success of EME processes is to track the employment outcomes of alumni regarding how EME affected their employability (Goodman et al., 2024, Sahan & Şahan, 2024). Despite the positive perceptions of EME and its potential benefits for future career prospects, previous results indicate that employability is not contingent merely on EME background but rather on possessing individual language skills and specific job responsibilities (Sahan & Şahan, 2024).

Agents

In this study, HEI leadership teams act as major agents responsible for implementing macro-level policies and adjusting them to their institutional contexts. Yet, the complex nature of multilingual settings demands a multi-level approach and involvement of all stakeholders, including students, teachers, administrative staff, and even employers. As such, the sustained and productive EME heavily rests on systematic coordination and interaction among all three layers.

Methodology

Research design and sampling

A qualitative multi-site case study design was considered suitable for this research to explore the situated experiences and perceptions of EME among members of the Senior Leadership Teams of eight HEIs across Kazakhstan during the summer of 2024. The universities were purposefully selected to capture a range of institutional types, including state, private, and autonomous universities, thereby ensuring variation in governance models, policy approaches, and EME practices. This multi-site sampling strategy enabled the exploration of both shared and context-specific institutional strategies for EMI provision (Multi-site case study, 2010).

A total of eight (n=8) SLT members participated in the study, comprising rectors, vice-rectors, and deans with direct responsibility for institutional policy, curriculum, and language strategy. Their positions provided an informed overview of EME implementation.

Interviews were conducted in English, Russian and Kazakh via Zoom or face-to-face, depending on participants' availability, and each lasted 50-60 minutes on average. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. The Russian and Kazakh transcripts were translated into English by the researchers, who are fluent in all three languages. To ensure accuracy, the translations were checked by a professional interpreter, and any ambiguities were discussed and resolved collaboratively among the research team. To ensure anonymity, participants are identified using alphanumeric codes (SLT1-8 and University A-H). Table 1 in the Appendix A provides an overview of the participants' roles and institutional types.

Research tools and data analysis

The interview protocol was conceptually informed by prior large-scale investigations into internationalization and EME in higher education, specifically by Galloway et al. (2017), Sahan et al. (2020), and adapted according to the ROAD-MAPPING framework (Dafouz & Smit, 2016). The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The research team collaboratively coded the transcripts to ensure reliability and shared understanding of meaning. The analysis was conducted on the English versions of all transcripts to maintain consistency during coding. The analysis followed a three-stage iterative process involving open coding, axial refinement, and thematic labelling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, open coding identified recurring concepts directly from the data. Second, axial coding examined relationships among these codes, grouping them into broader categories (sub-themes). Finally, selective coding integrated these categories into a coherent explanatory structure (we called them pillars) that conceptualizes EME as a multi-level institutional reform process. Findings were organized across three interconnected levels, conceptualized in this study as Organizational, Instructional, and Student domains. Constant comparison and analytic memoing were used throughout to refine categories and ensure interpretive rigor. To enhance credibility, coding decisions were discussed among researchers, and representative quotations verbatim were selected to illustrate each analytical pillar. Although individual themes appeared across multiple domains, they were organized according to their primary institutional function. The overlap across levels further illustrates the systemic and interdependent nature of EME.

Findings

The analysis of the interview data generated nine interrelated themes (so-called pillars), which we organized into a three-level conceptual model - the EMPOWER Framework (English Medium Provision with Organizational, Workforce, and Educational Reform). This holistic data-driven conceptual framework captures how EME provision operates across institutional, instructional, and student dimensions in multilingual higher education settings (Figure 2 below). Each level is discussed below in detail:



Figure 2. The EMPOWER Conceptual Framework

Organizational level

Internationalization as a driver of quality education

All participating institutions view internationalization as a vehicle for global integration and institutional branding. SLT5 from the University E with partial EME referred to internationalization as part of a broader "international ambition," noting that "*this is a strategic policy for us… By 2030, at least 30 percent of programs should be in English*." Yet, this push for internationalization such as increasing the number of EMI programs, often rests on external partnerships and hiring international faculty rather than building internal linguistic capacity. As SLT2 summarized, "*because … (University B) has English medium instruction as a university, all our programs are in English… we are depending on expatriate faculty*." "*We give priority to those who studied abroad… because those*

educated only in Kazakhstan lack exposure to English academic standards." (SLT 4) Also, bringing international staff is seen as a mechanism to raise the overall quality of education. SLT 4 claims that:

"It's not the EMI which is a problem. EMI is a solution for the problem we have. Because the purpose is not just to teach subjects in English for the sake of teaching in English. I think the main goal of why we should introduce EMI is to increase quality of teaching and quality of research, but mainly quality of teaching... So, it's easier to bring international faculty and this is immediate improvement of the quality of teaching."

Despite the diversity of internationalization goals, in practice the most sustainable and functioning mechanisms remain student mobility and exchange programs, while other initiatives are often formal or declarative in nature. Some SLT members consider that the government should take the responsibility for attracting international students to the country:

"State bodies should promote the visibility of our universities abroad, so that international students would choose our universities to come and study" (SLT 6).

Hence, internationalization is mainly conceptualized by SLT as an instrument for setting the institutional reputation and is primarily confined to the recruitment of foreign faculty and attracting international students, student mobility and increasing the number of EME programs. According to university top management, these aspects became more prominent for having the capacity to raise the quality of education, promoting research collaborations, and thus preparing highly qualified specialists in various spheres. However, such significant aspects of internationalization as academic staff mobility, dual/joint degree programs, and professional and linguistic training abroad are given insufficient attention.

EME Policy and Strategy

Explicit EME policies and strategies are closely intertwined with internationalization processes and remain uneven across universities. For example, alongside fulfillment of internationalization goals and financial benefits for the HEIs, the presence of international students promotes the English-only policy by leaving no choice to the lecturers for using the local languages. This pressure for attracting international students is reflected in institutional KPIs:

"Hosting international exchange students is even more effective rather than providing incentives for EMI lecturers in terms of using English only policy". (SLT5)

SLT1 from the University A with partial EME admitted candidly:

"...I realized we don't have any regulations for EMI. There should be." She linked this absence of formal guidance to inconsistent practice: "*We have voluntary, free-of-charge training for teachers… but there's no formal requirement beyond IELTS."*

Unfortunately, we don't follow recommendations. This absolutely needs to be some kind of regulatory document, something we're obligated to create, like qualification requirements or licensing requirements (SLT 1).

By contrast, full EME Universities B and D exhibit stronger regulatory coherence. SLT2 described *"six quality assurance processes"* before a program is approved, whereas SLT4 emphasized that *"instruction has to be in English… and if faculty speak Russian or Kazakh in class, students can complain."*

Public universities, however, crave state-level mandates. This policy asymmetry produces institutional fragmentation: elite universities operate within self-governing EME systems, while regional institutions rely on ministerial prescriptions.

Institutional Infrastructure

Infrastructure emerged as a silent but powerful enabler of EME. Full EME universities with robust technological and library resources show stronger performance. SLT4 reported: *"We purchase all necessary materials, every semester. We have no issue with English textbooks."* Similarly, SLT 6 reported that the university leaders prioritize the provision of technological facilities to ensure smooth educational process: "*Our classrooms are very well-equipped with computers, projectors and the teachers have all necessary facilities they need for work."* On the contrary, although SLT5 acknowledges the value of authentic resources, she admits that they encounter challenges with providing specialized literature that leads to the use of translated materials from Kazakh and Russian languages:

I think this is a big mistake, especially for us, Kazakhstani teachers, who translate their Russian lectures into English and use them as lectures. This is a big mistake. In order to teach in English, English materials, new sources, textbooks must be in English. (SLT7).

Physical infrastructure also carries symbolic weight: SLT5 explained that *"student support, migration services, advising - all must be in English."* Her university E mandates that *"each department must have at least one manager who can communicate officially in English."*

However, regional institutions such as University E still operate in trilingual bureaucracies, struggling to reconcile parallel documentation in Kazakh, Russian, and English, thereby diluting operational consistency.

"...2-3 times a week, meetings are held in English...I think that our university can be an indicator that it is moving from a Russian-language university to a trilingual university from the very beginning. All documentation is still done in Kazakh" (SLT 5).

As such, the findings clearly demonstrate that university leaders understand the importance of providing adequate support for EME programs, including academic, technological, and institutional resources. However, the realization of this is inconsistent, leading to varied approaches towards management.

Instructional Level

Professional Development

Faculty professional growth represents both progress and pain. Across cases, short-term training and mentoring were common. SLT2 informed that they have *"a mentoring system where new faculty co-teach with senior faculty"* and gain experience through university committees. He expressed priorities to raise the English capacity of local staff by training them "in-house" or sending them abroad:

"I think for other institutions in Kazakhstan, my suggestion would be for the policy makers and for the government in the universities. And by EMI capacity, I mean you need to hire faculty who can teach in English, and you need to invest in the existing faculty members, send them abroad for maybe six months or three months to develop their English language proficiency, or have some kind of in-house courses for them you know, develop some kind of English language center at each university or maybe in each region where they can get help" (SLT 2).

Similarly, University C created internal Teacher Trainer (TT) roles to support content teachers:

"Each department now has two teacher-trainers; they receive KPIs to improve lesson delivery in English. We also have several English-language seminars related to STEM, CLIL… and we have this kind of support for improving their skills" (SLT 8)

However, as SLT 1 reported, the short-term domestic training does not seem sufficient to develop sustained competencies:

"I realized that, unfortunately, we don't provide training teachers for their entire teaching period. That is, we provide methodological assistance, but not in terms of specific courses. But these courses should be available throughout their entire teaching period. And we only train them before they start, well, when preparing the syllabus, before they even enter the classroom. In the summer, we prepare them for language courses and so on" (SLT 1).

The collective message: In the EMI context, the faculty professional development is often reactive, fragmented, and linguistically overloaded. The SLT quotes reflect their consistent concerns regarding raising English proficiency rather than improving EME pedagogies.

Curriculum Design and Support

Curriculum adaptation exhibited diverse institutional philosophies. At University B, EME courses undergo multi-stage review for quality assurance aligning "learning outcomes and assessments" with English-medium delivery.

"…we have quality assurance committee. It is debated there. Once it goes through all three processes, then it goes to the university level. Every program goes through and then it gets accepted. And they review everything, curriculum, purpose, learning outcome, assessment, and they see whether it's aligned with the EMI policy or not" (SLT 2).

By contrast, in the state university (A) middle management of subject specific modules and language modules cooperate on designing joint EME curricula.

"We parallel English syllabus topics with core subjects. For example, if they study Economics, English lessons align with macroeconomic vocabulary. Each faculty has its own language training department. And so, they develop joint programs. We even have two signatures on our curriculum: the signature of the head of the language department and the head of the graduate department. They integrated this program. So, it's a joint effort" (SLT 1).

Another approach is established at University C, where curriculum-level adjustments involved mixed language models: *"We opened separate Kazakh and English streams in Psychology and Pedagogy… but the Science department still struggles to split."* (SLT3). Such hybrid models illustrate a pragmatic translanguaging approach guided by content feasibility.

University D, being fully English-medium, offers less scaffolding and does not need collaboration between content and EFL teachers in designing curriculum and syllabi:

"I don't think…and also because our students, their language is very, very good. So, there is no much, that sort of collaboration is needed. We assume students and faculty are proficient… we teach the same way as in the US" (SLT 4).

Thus, university leaders demonstrate different positions regarding Curriculum Design and Support, depending on specific needs of EME departments. Whereas some SLT stress the necessity of collaboration activities among disciplinary and language departments, others rely upon rigorous quality assurance processes to ensure the relevance and quality of the EME curriculum.

Faculty Language Proficiency

Every university identified faculty language competence as a fundamental bottleneck. SLT1 summarized this imbalance: *"Their communicative skills are fine, but they don't have academic English."* She elaborated that "*..Our teachers, who can teach their courses well in English, don't possess the high level of subject matter expertise that older, more experienced teachers possess." (SLT 1).* Likewise, SLT3 and SLT6 both described a "paradox" where *"younger lecturers have better English but weaker content knowledge, while older professors have deep subject expertise but poor English."*

The institutional thresholds for the faculty vary widely: University E requires IELTS 6.0 and *"prefers those educated abroad",* while University A mandates a minimum IELTS 5.5. University D and C, by contrast, targets IELTS 7.0 or equivalent, though SLT4 noted it's *"often waived if you have a foreign PhD."* This uneven proficiency landscape fuels dependency on expatriates. SLT2 confirmed: *"We are depending on foreigners... hiring new faculty takes a lot of time."* Efforts to "develop local faculty" through postdoctoral pathways remain nascent but strategically promising.

Overall, EME at the instructional level emerges not as a standardized teaching approach, but as an adaptive practice, contingent on faculty capacity, disciplinary context, and institutional resources. This underscores that sustaining EME quality requires not only language-focused training, but a rethinking of pedagogy as inherently bilingual, developmental, and context-sensitive.

Student Level

Well-being Support

Wellbeing support for students refers to the wide range of services that universities put into practice in order to assist their students in attaining optimal wellbeing and enable them to succeed academically and personally. Student adaptation to EME environments varies across socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds. University A provides remedial *"intensive English courses"* in the first semester as *"not a foundation, but daily English lessons to raise them to B1."* University E similarly implements course-based integration: *"We introduced 'The Complete Human' program to teach critical thinking, essay writing, and academic writing in English."*

"If English is not good enough, students will have a hard time in the first semester, so we have a psychological support center, and we also have advisors from whom they can get support." (SLT 6)

"For example, even if the students' level of knowledge of English is not yet sufficient, we try to support such people. And in the second or third year, if they are not able to make progress, then we suggest moving to the Russian or Kazakh group. Because it will be a hindrance to other students. In the first year, yes, there is support." (SLT 5)

Yet, emotional and cognitive stress persists. SLT6 revealed that bilingual confusion manifests even during practicum*: "Our students said: we think in English but can't explain in Kazakh, or vice versa."* Faculty responses remain divergent - some perceive this as natural bilingual development, others as an EME dysfunction.

Overall, for most SLT members, students' well-being support means assistance in improving their linguistic capabilities, though some leaders report taking a more holistic and wider approach to ensuring that students are provided with all necessary support, including psychological, academic, and social. Nevertheless, across institutions, formal well-being mechanisms remain underdefined. Support is ad hoc, often mediated by tolerant faculty rather than structured counseling or peer systems.

Employment

Students' motivation for EME programs centers on employability and global mobility. SLT7 observed: *"They know it increases opportunities - academic mobility, wider job prospects, and prestige."* SLT5 clarified the segmentation: *"For tourism students, their goal is to work abroad; for MBA students, it's corporate promotion where English is the business language."* However, SLT2 questioned the domestic market's readiness: *"Our graduates ask - where can we work with degrees in English? Does the Kazakhstani job market absorb them?"*

As SLT 3 admitted, some mid-age lecturers express resistance to EME in general claiming that the number of EME students exceed the amount of international schools in the country. So, the vast majority of content pre-service teachers will teach in L1 eventually in mainstream schools in Kazakhstan:

"That is, we are still preparing for the realities of Kazakhstan, for example, if we take a math teacher, they say that only 10-15 percent of that group will go to international schools, the rest will go to secondary schools... It raises questions about how much they can use English when they go there." (SLT 6).

This tension exposes a limited link between EME programs and labor market policies. Without complementary industry alignment, EME risks functioning as an elitist rather than inclusive mobility mechanism.

Students' Language Proficiency

Language entry requirements constitute a key policy divergence. University D and University B maintain standardized IELTS thresholds (5.5–6.0), while state universities use internal placement tests. As SLT1 revealed, *"in*

reality, many students claim B1 or B2, but when they arrive, they don't have the language." To compensate, preparatory courses proliferate. SLT2 referenced University B's one-year "foundation school" designed for language bridging, while University C's faculty employs "corequisite support" during parallel subject teaching. Nonetheless, several respondents admitted gaps between stated competence and academic functioning. As SLT1 summarized, *"…they have terminology memorized, but they can't process full lectures in English"*. This misalignment underscores that linguistic thresholds alone cannot ensure cognitive readiness; content comprehension and academic literacy must co-evolve with language support.:

"*EMI students have to take language placement test, and underscored students will have co-requisite language courses" (SLT 8)*

The differences between declared and actual language proficiency reveal that entry thresholds alone are insufficient to ensure academic success. Consequently, EME in Kazakhstan at the student level reflects a layered challenge, where the development of language, content knowledge, and psychological adaptation must evolve simultaneously. Without more integrated and system-wide support structures, EME risks reinforcing inequalities rather than expanding access to global academic and professional pathways.

Conclusion and Discussion

The study findings demonstrate vividly that the way to conceptualize EME in Kazakhstan's higher education is as a complex and interdependent reform process rather than a singular pedagogical intervention. Even as the institutional discourse often casts EME as a signal of internationalization and educational quality, empirical evidence reveals an uneven, contested and deeply contextualized reality in which its implementation is inherently shaped by, and influenced by organizational, instructional, and student-level constraints. Organizationally, internationalization is the main impetus for EME. Thus, universities position English as a strategic tool for global competitiveness, rankings, and mobility. However, this outward orientation is not always supported by coherent internal principles. The results showed significant policy ambiguity and demonstrated that the current EME regulations are fragmented, inconsistently enforced or susceptible to external governmental pressure. This echoes previous studies that have accentuated the gap between policy aspirations and institutional enactment, but adds to these by revealing how university leadership perceive this misalignment (Mammadova et al., 2025). From the SLT perspectives, internationalization is mainly conceptualized as a pre-requisite to raise the institutional reputation and quality of education by harmonizing the local curricula with international ones, increasing the number of English-instructed programs, recruiting the faculty with foreign diploma, and attracting the international students to guarantee English-only policy. Although university top management recognizes the long-lasting positive effects of staff mobility and research collaborations, little is being undertaken to provide a PD overseas for the teaching faculty.

Simultaneously, institutional infrastructure appears as a critical but unevenly distributed enabler of EME. Some universities show very strong capacity through international resources and digital platforms, while others still use translated materials and limited technological provision. This finding corroborates the results of Sahan and Şahan (2024) that translated resources lose their original meaning and thus should not be used in English medium classrooms. The deficiency of resources for EME remains one of the persisting challenges since first reported a decade ago by Seitzhanova et al. (2015). In this respect, EME mirrors systemic inequity in higher education organizations.

At the instructional level, the study captures several challenges at the intersection of language proficiency and PD, including a persistent structural tension in the relationship between language proficiency and disciplinary expertise. Given that lecturing in English requires high linguistic competence, and considering that teachers are predominantly of non-Anglophone origin, it is natural that SLT gives priority attention to improving EME teachers' language skills. Accordingly, recruitment requirements also focused mainly on language proficiency. This also can be due to the lack of proper EME certification, which echoes the study by Lasagabaster (2022) who stresses the necessity of EME certification at the international and national levels.

The current study also emphasizes the ubiquitous "paradox" between younger, linguistically-qualified, but inexperienced faculty and older, content-expert but linguistically-poor academics as an illustration of a fundamental problem that simply cannot be addressed with language training. Moreover, professional development initiatives tend to be disjointed, short term and emphasize language enhancement rather than pedagogical transformation. This finding remains topical since 2012, when first reported by Oralova (2012).

In a similar vein, curriculum practices vary widely from institution to institution: from tightly structured integration of language and content to assumptions about full proficiency without scaffolding. While some HEIs established highly regulatory quality assurance instruments to ensure the alignment of course outcomes with EME objectives, others offer mixed-language models and joint EME curricula. Prior study also underscores that the effectiveness of collaborative activities depends on the institutional context and can serve as a supplementary scaffolding approach or an unnecessary, odd initiative (Raikhanova et al., 2025).

Last but not least, SLT is aware that EME for the students is seen as an opportunity but experienced as a burden. Although students are highly motivated by perceived benefits (employability, mobility, status, prestige), there are weaknesses in terms of language competence, academic readiness, and psychological assimilation in reality for students. The disparity between formal admission criteria and actual language skills reflects that the present admission conditions do not make up the complete knowledge base, and are not adequate predictors of academic advancement

or success in EME settings. These findings are in line with Goodman et al. (2024), who found that students with various initial proficiency levels report contradictory experiences during their learning. Furthermore, the fact that there is only a modestly narrow correspondence between EME programmes and the local labour market scenario raises serious questions on the socio-economic generalizability of EME for Kazakhstan as a whole. This corroborates the results of Sahan and Şahan (2024) and Goodman et al. (2024) that although EME background promises higher employability in preferred companies, it does not guarantee high retainment. So far, a prosperous career depends on individual characteristics of the graduates and their adaptability to the workplace. The concerns about underutilization of skills and weak support systems have also been reported earlier by Jonbekova et al. (2023). Overall, these findings strengthen the case that EME needs to be conceptualised as a complex, systemic change at all three levels. In light of this complex set of influences, the EMPOWER Framework developed in this study provides an actionable context-specific model for analysing and structuring EME in Kazakhstan. While using the ROAD-MAPPING framework as a starting theoretical point, we believe that EMPOWER as a conceptual framework extends EMI/EME scholarship by bridging the dots between macro-, micro-, meso-level practices. From a practical perspective, the study reveals the need for clearer, more contextually relevant university and government policies that move from declarative statements to actionable frameworks possible to enforce. With the suggested EMPOWER framework, we believe that policymakers can move beyond fragmented initiatives to the holistic, fully covered EME implementation.

Declarations

Compliance with ethical standards: Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the SDU University Research Ethics Committee (Minutes # 9, February 14, 2024), and all procedures complied with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Competing interests: The authors declare no competing interests.

Funding: No funding was received for conducting this study.

Data availability: The data are available from the corresponding author upon the reasonable request.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Participant information

Participant code	Gender	Role	University type	Mode of EMI provision	Region
SLT1	Female	Vice-rector	state (University A)	Partial EMI across selected faculties	Almaty
SLT2	Male	Vice dean	autonomous (University B)	Full EMI in core programs	Astana
SLT3	Female	Dean	private (University C)	Partial EMI across selected faculties	Almaty
SLT4	Female	Dean	private (University D)	Full EMI in core programs	Almaty
SLT5	Female	Rector	private (University E)	Partial EMI across selected faculties	Almaty
SLT6	Male	Vice-rector	Private (University F)	Partial EMI across selected faculties	Almaty
SLT7	Male	Vice-rector	Private (University G)	Full EMI in core programs	Astana
SLT8	Male	Rector	Private (University H)	Partial EMI across selected faculties	Almaty