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Reimagining EMI in Japan: Aligning policy and practice by developing students' global competencies

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Abstract

English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Japan exposes persistent tensions between the ambitions of internationalization policy and the realities of classroom implementation. While national frameworks promote global competencies, their emphasis on quantitative outcomes often constrains pedagogical imagination and overlooks the conditions required for meaningful learning. This study positions intercultural competence development as the foundation for achieving policy-driven global competencies, demonstrating how holistic student development can simultaneously serve students' personal growth and national internationalization goals. Drawing on collaborative action research (2020–2023), it addresses six recurring challenges: low self-efficacy, passive learning, collaboration difficulties, critical thinking limitations, research skill gaps, and cultural context influences. The resulting nine-component, student-centered framework integrates transformative learning, socio-cultural theory, communities of practice, and self-efficacy theory to show how content, language, and intercultural competence can develop concurrently. Grounded in teacher agency, the framework offers a flexible, adaptable model for EMI practitioners seeking to move beyond content-language dualism. The study seeks to stimulate dialogue on implementing EMI in more inclusive, reflective, and contextually responsive ways that align Japan's internationalization goals with holistic student development.

Introduction

Japan's internationalization of higher education seeks to maintain its international relevance amid demographic decline and the shift away from manufacturing (Yamanaka & Suzuki, 2020). A key strategy is developing "Global Human Resources" (gurobaru jinzai): graduates with foreign language proficiency, intercultural competence and workplace skills for global contexts (Yonezawa, 2014). With a lack of inbound and outbound students, many universities need to develop global competencies through internationalization at home (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020). Central to internationalization at home is the expansion of English Medium Instruction (EMI) classes, academic classes taught in English in non-English-speaking contexts (Macaro et al., 2018). In 2022, all-English degree programs were taught at 45 institutions (5.9%); 306 institutions (40.4%) taught some classes in English (MEXT, 2022). However, policy documents reveal seemingly irreconcilable contradictions and offer limited practical pedagogical guidance in EMI for developing global competencies. At the national level, internationalization simultaneously promotes cosmopolitan competencies and nationalist economic objectives (MEXT, 2023; Miyashita, 2017), creating tensions between cultivating critical global citizens and producing human capital for Japan's industry (Bosio, 2023). Institutionally, universities often adopt EMI for rankings and increased government funding, rather than as a way to foster meaningful educational transformation (Garner, 2024). At universities targeting domestic students, students often struggle with passive learning habits and linguistic anxiety (Kobayashi, 2021). Moreover, the focus on language and content neglects EMI's potential to develop the global competencies emphasized in policy documents (Dang et al., 2024; Ota, 2018).

In short, EMI teachers in Japan face multiple paradoxes: delivering complex disciplinary content in English, often without adequate support (Bradford, 2019); cultivating critical thinkers in a system that prioritizes rote memorization (Kobayashi, 2021); fostering international understanding while being evaluated by quantitative metrics (Hofmeyr, 2023); creating global mindsets while reinforcing national identity (Miyashita, 2017); and internationalizing students who have limited access to international peers (Garner, 2024). While extensive literature documents the challenges of EMI and developing global competencies, far less attention has been paid to practical, student-centered solutions (Ishikura, 2015). This study addresses this gap by exploring the following question: How can EMI teachers bridge the gap between Japan's instrumental "Global Human Resources" policy and genuine intercultural competence development through student-centered pedagogical approaches?

Throughout this paper, we distinguish intercultural competence (our pedagogical goal focused on transformative development) from global competencies (broader policy objectives), positioning the former as the foundation for achieving the latter. This distinction is elaborated in our conceptual framework.

While many studies focus on identifying tensions, this study aims to offer a hopeful, practical alternative. Our research uses active learning principles to turn implementation challenges in EMI classes into opportunities for cultivating the intercultural competence that are foundational for developing global competencies outlined in policy documents. To investigate these challenges and develop practical approaches to address them, we conducted collaborative action research over four years beginning in 2020 within an EMI course focused on Japan from international perspectives.

Research justification

This research addresses a gap in EMI scholarship: moving from identifying challenges to developing practical approaches to address them. While the extensive literature documents tensions between policy and classroom implementation (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020; Garner, 2024; Ishikura, 2015; Ito, 2017; Ota, 2018), few studies offer theoretically grounded frameworks that teachers can adapt to their specific contexts. The need is particularly acute for domestically oriented universities, where limited international peer presence restricts international engagement opportunities (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020; Shimauchi, 2017).

Our framework offers one approach to addressing this need, demonstrating how teacher agency, when combined with supportive institutional conditions, can develop pedagogy that facilitates intercultural competence development as a foundation for achieving broader policy-driven global competencies. Our four-year collaborative action research challenges the assumptions that intercultural equals international and that de-

-veloping intercultural competence requires international mobility or diverse classrooms, showing instead how it can also be cultivated through deliberate pedagogical design even in predominantly domestic contexts. This evidence-based, adaptable model serves educators seeking to align teaching practice with both student developmental needs and institutional policy objectives.

Literature review

The EMI policy-practice gap

EMI programs have expanded globally, yet persistent tension remains and policy aspirations often clash with classroom realities (Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2022; Wu, 2023). Japan exemplifies these challenges, combining both ambitious policy frameworks with the implementation difficulties characteristic of EMI adoption in non-English-speaking contexts. Indeed, contradictions within policy frameworks create tensions that undermine the effectiveness of EMI. Japanese higher education reform explicitly targets the international competitiveness of universities (Yonezawa, 2023), but this goal produces a tension between nationalist economic imperatives and cosmopolitan aspirations (Miyashita, 2017). Students are simultaneously framed as future global citizens and domestic economic assets, resulting in curricular and pedagogical contradictions (Bosio, 2023). Although policymakers promote flexible, independent mindsets (Yamanaka & Suzuki, 2020), educational practice often treats students as human capital for global competitiveness (Yonezawa & Yonezawa, 2016), reflecting the influence of economic rationalism in higher education (Bamberger et al., 2019). This instrumental framing at the tertiary level contrasts with Japan's primary and secondary education policy where the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) curriculum guidelines emphasize "zest for life" (*ikiru chikara*), prioritizing holistic student development, well-being, and intrinsic motivation alongside academic achievement (MEXT, 2023). This philosophy centers on developing children for their own sake, fostering curiosity, resilience, and personal growth. However, these humanistic approaches rarely transfer to university-level internationalization policies where success is typically measured through narrow quantitative metrics such as language test scores and study abroad rates (Hofmeyr, 2023; MEXT, 2023). These contradictions ultimately create obstacles to global skill development despite it being a policy goal.

In contrast to the current quantitative and economic-based success criteria found in Japanese tertiary education policy, Bosio (2023) and Koukouraki (2020) advocate for a critical global citizenship framework grounded in caring ethics, eco-criticism and decolonial perspectives. Such an approach may help avoid binary nationalistic-cosmopolitan discourse, creating spaces for constructively engaging with complex historical narratives and fostering forward-looking approaches. Bickford (2007) and Agnew and Kahn (2014) further suggest that reflective practice can mediate the apparent conflict between national identity and cosmopolitanism. However, practical models for EMI implementation that navigate these tensions while centering student development as a means to acquiring global competencies are elusive.

Institutional implementation challenges

Challenges to the development of global competencies also occur at the institutional level in Japan; EMI frequently functions as a university marketing strategy, rather than as a driver of educational reform (Garner, 2024), and is often used primarily to boost institutional rankings (de Wit, 2020). Moreover, faculty attitudes towards EMI are mixed. Some view it as a form of linguistic imperialism threatening local traditions (Shimauchi, 2017); others see it as a constraint on academic freedom (Edwards & Ashida, 2021) or associate it with declining academic standards (Bradford, 2020). These institutional ambivalences and faculty resistance can result in poorly implemented programs that fail to meet their stated internationalization goals. Consequently, international students, whom the programs are ostensibly meant at least in part to provide a welcoming environment for (Rees, 2024), commonly report feelings of isolation and exclusion, highlighting failures to create genuinely inclusive learning environments (Rakhshandehroo, 2018). EMI programs thus fail on two fronts: developing global skills and creating inclusive learning environments.

Structural issues further compromise EMI sustainability. National-level, short-term funding discourages long-term planning (Toh, 2016). Furthermore, competitive funding initiatives primarily benefit elite universities (Shim-

-mi & Yonezawa, 2015) leaving universities outside the global elite universities understudied and under-resourced (Shimauchi, 2018). Successful program implementation is hindered by institutional hierarchies that marginalize teachers' voices (Morizumi, 2015) and reliance on limited-term contracts which limit systemic change (Whitsed & Wright, 2011). Top-down reforms also often overlook the crucial role of teachers in translating policy into practice (Ishikura, 2015). Hierarchy, funding-based competition, and lack of teacher agency thus offer significant challenges to EMI success.

EMI classroom realities

Practical classroom realities also offer roadblocks to EMI success. While EMI is meant to develop global human resources with multiple competencies (Hofmeyr, 2023), in practice, courses often struggle to balance basic content mastery and language development (Al Zumor, 2019). In classrooms, EMI courses are often reduced to a content-language binary (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020; Macaro et al., 2018), sidelining broader aims such as critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and collaboration (Aguilar, 2018; Dang et al., 2024). Students' cognitive resources are frequently redirected to processing language, limiting their ability to engage with complex concepts (Dang et al., 2024). Consequently, EMI instructors face difficult choices about how to prioritize academic content and language acquisition (Macaro et al., 2018). Translanguaging strategies (Tsou, 2021) can support content comprehension but risk isolating students with low proficiency in the dominant language (Ticheloven et al., 2019). Moreover, they may lead to missed opportunities to develop the global competencies necessary for international environments.

Compounding these challenges are mismatched stakeholder expectations and objectives. Instructors may treat EMI as advanced language education rather than transformative international learning (Bradford, 2019; Chapple, 2015). Content specialists often resist accommodating students' linguistic needs, sometimes reverting to the students' first language (Bradford, 2019; Chapple, 2015). Meanwhile, students frequently take EMI classes primarily to improve their English, rather than to engage with global perspectives (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020).

Student-centered active learning methodologies (Ito, 2017), while not designed for EMI specifically, offer promising potential pathways for addressing EMI implementation challenges. However, a holistic framework that integrates content, language, and intercultural competence remains elusive.

Teacher agency as a transformative force

To address these challenges, teacher agency, or educators' purposeful and constructive action can act to enhance professional growth and student learning (Priestley et al., 2015). Even within structural constraints, instructors can act creatively to support student growth (Farrell, 2020). Targeted pedagogical interventions have successfully developed intercultural competence alongside disciplinary knowledge (Vinagre, 2016) while systematic critical reflection helps navigate EMI challenges effectively (Farrell, 2020). These insights reinforce Leask's (2015) argument that internationalized curricula must be intentionally designed to develop students' international perspectives rather than assuming competencies will emerge naturally from English-medium study. EMI practitioners can build communities of practice to foster classroom innovation (Nkambule & Tang, 2024). While teacher agency is not a replacement for institutional support, it represents a critical, often underutilized, force for shaping EMI implementation. Teachers' insights and practices should not only respond to but also inform national and institutional policymaking.

Bridging the gap through student-centered frameworks

Despite extensive documentation of EMI's policy, institutional, and classroom tensions, few studies offer teachers practical frameworks for developing intercultural competence within their specific contexts (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020; Ishikura, 2015). Without such deliberate, agency-driven approaches, EMI risks becoming a compliance exercise rather than transformative education.

Our framework addresses this gap, leveraging teacher agency to transform structural challenges into pedagogical opportunities. By repositioning challenges as resources, teachers can transform constraints into opportunities. For example, the challenge of seemingly homogeneous classrooms can be reframed by recognizi-

-ng and surfacing the hidden diversity that exists within them (Minematsu & Morgan, 2023). Teachers' ability to "act on the demands of EMI teaching" can significantly reshape students' learning experiences (Dang et al., 2024, p. 1). Although developed in Japan, our framework offers adaptable principles that can be applied across diverse international contexts, providing a bottom-up alternative to top-down policies that often overlook classroom realities.

Conceptual framework and theoretical dimensions

Our framework is grounded in intercultural competence principles, which scholars have conceptualized in various ways emphasizing different aspects of effective communication such as attitudes (Deardorff, 2006), critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997), reflexivity (Dervin, 2023), and the ability to navigate difference (Fantini, 2009). Common across all of these approaches is that intercultural competence requires the development of open and curious attitudes, critical self-awareness, and reflexivity. Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence framework distinguishes between internal outcomes such as flexibility and empathy, and external outcomes which are the effects experienced by others such as appropriate communication and behavior in an intercultural situation.

Japan's Global Human Resources policy documents do not provide a single consistent formal definition of intercultural competence but tend towards externally observable outcomes aligned with Deardorff's framework. Policy priorities include language proficiency and communication ability; initiative, challenge spirit, and cooperativeness; and "understanding different cultures" while maintaining Japanese identity (Yonezawa, 2014). This instrumental framing focuses on skills and behaviors that can be observed and measured, understanding others to "take advantage of" cultural differences (Yonezawa, 2014, p. 39) privileging national and economic benefits over students' holistic development. While policy documents articulate explicit outcomes, they leave largely implicit the pedagogical process through which the internal dispositions that give these behaviors meaning are to be developed.

Our pedagogical framework responds to this gap by applying Deardorff's (2006) distinction between internal and external outcomes and positioning intercultural competence development as the foundation for achieving policy-driven global competencies. With a pedagogy that emphasizes self-efficacy, awareness of different perspectives, and openness to understanding others, students have the opportunity to develop internal qualities such as flexibility, empathy and openness to understanding others. These are not just personal attributes but the cognitive and affective foundations that enable authentic intercultural engagement.

Throughout this paper, we use intercultural competence to describe our pedagogical processes and global competencies when referencing policy objectives. Our framework bridges intercultural communication scholarship and education research: intercultural competence literature defines what authentic intercultural competence entails, while student-centered learning frameworks provide the pedagogical mechanisms for developing it.

Our framework draws on four interconnected theoretical traditions: transformative learning, sociocultural theory, communities of practice, and self-efficacy theory. Student-centered teaching forms the foundation, creating pathways for EMI practitioners to bridge policy aspirations and classroom realities and for students to achieve both personal and policy-related goals. Figure 1 illustrates how these four theoretical dimensions interact to create an integrated framework for EMI practice.

Transformative learning

Drawing on Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning, our framework creates opportunities for transformation that extend beyond content and language mastery. By engaging with course materials in English, often encountering international perspectives and opinions that vary from familiar national narratives, students develop the capacity to critically examine their assumptions about culture, identity and society. Students' understandings of their own society are often shaped by shared educational experiences and national narratives. These understandings shift when encountering familiar content from unfamiliar perspectives. Therefore, transformative learning occurs when students encounter "disorienting dilemmas" that cause them to "re-evaluate their perspectives and the underlying assumption" (Feng et al., 2025, p. 429). For example, in Japan, stu-

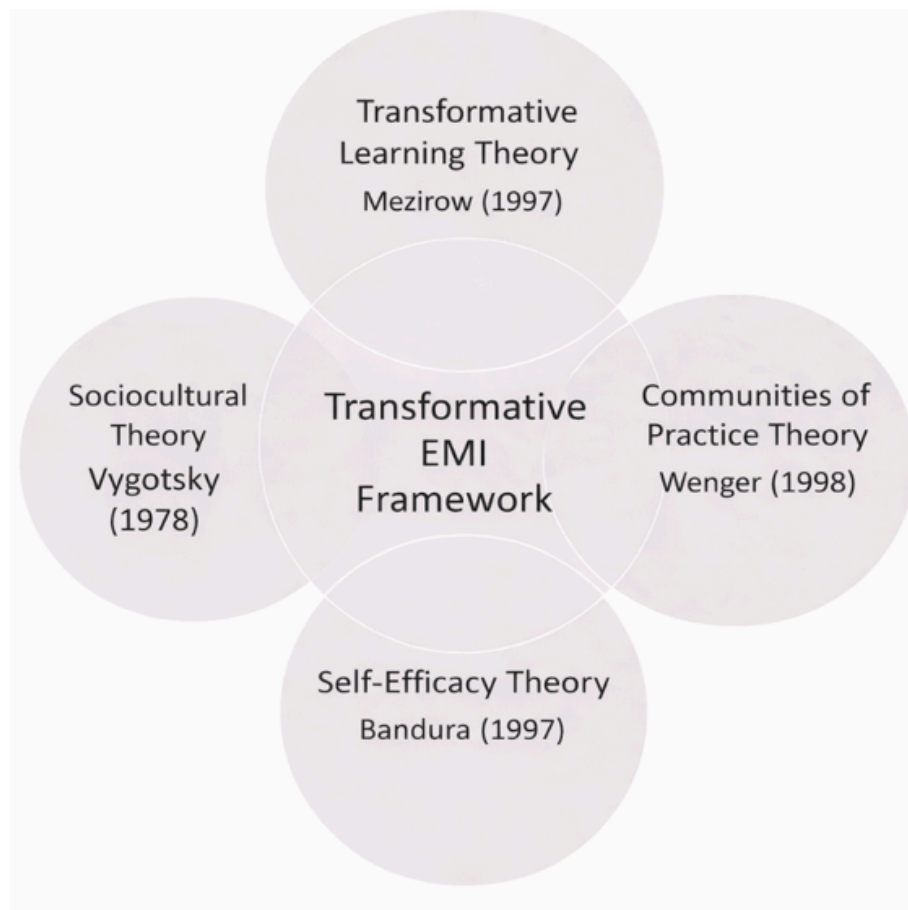


Figure 1. The Transformative EMI Framework integrating Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997), Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Communities of Practice Theory (Wenger, 1998), and Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997).

-dents typically accept the national narrative that Japanese people are inherently punctual. It is a narrative that fits with their experience and is confirmed by international media reports (e.g., Sese & Nishioka, 2019). As a result, when they read a historical article from 1900 criticizing Japan's late-running trains (Nakamura, 2002), they experience cognitive dissonance: the historical account contradicts both their own experience and their international recognition of Japanese punctuality. Students thus learn to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously: historical and contemporary, internal and external, individual and collective, all fundamental characteristics of intercultural competence. Furthermore, this dissonance helps them to recognize culture as dynamic and evolving rather than fixed, encouraging them to think about societal improvement and transformation.

Beyond examining historical shifts, structured discussions where classmates share diverse personal experiences and perspectives, gently encouraged rather than required, support students' recognition that diversity exists within their own classroom. Just as the train example challenges assumptions about cultural continuity, peer discussions challenge assumptions about cultural homogeneity, revealing that their own experience is not universal. This approach develops what intercultural scholars term critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997), or reflexivity (Dervin, 2023). In other words, the ability to question one's own cultural assumptions rather than viewing them as fixed truths. Importantly, such questioning does not require students to reject their values or identity; rather, it invites critical examination that creates space for perspective transformation and engagement with complex global issues.

Sociocultural theory

Utilizing principles of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, we center learning as a social process where interaction and scaffolding enable students to achieve beyond their individual capabilities. We use scaffolding a-

-pproaches such as Bloom's taxonomy to guide students from understanding to more complex thinking (Anderson, 2009). For instance, in a research project, students first choose a contemporary issue such as rural depopulation, identify stakeholders (remembering), investigate perspectives (understanding/applying), compare viewpoints (analyzing), evaluate evidence (evaluating), and propose mitigations (creating).

Preparation through homework assignments before each class serves as a linguistic scaffold that enables students of mixed language levels to focus on content rather than struggling to articulate their ideas. Assignments progress from comprehension to interpretation and personal application, using language to broaden perspectives rather than being an obstacle to learning. To address participation challenges, our model employs think-pair-share (prepare-pair-share) techniques that normalize active participation for all students.

Communities of practice

Our classrooms draw on Wenger's (1998) communities of practice, emphasizing learning through shared participation and early collaborative goal setting. Students build knowledge and efficacy through shared experiences and common goals. While communities of practice are typically voluntary, we adopt the model pragmatically for mixed compulsory and elective classes by emphasizing shared goals, particularly improvement in communication and English, values broadly shared among students who chose to enter an English department.

We foster intercultural awareness through activities that build trust and normalize different perspectives. As trust builds and shared practices emerge, we observe a shift from tentative and superficial participation to more confident and insightful contributions. This foundation carries over to elective classes where senior students support junior students, as well as creating a more inclusive atmosphere for exchange students. The community extends through dialogic feedback in exit cards, which we use as a scaffold to encourage, advise, and extend students as they navigate "disorienting dilemmas" and the different class norms of EMI. Drawing on Hattie's (2017) collective teacher efficacy, our model also benefits from the community of practice created by active teacher collaboration to improve students' growth.

Self-efficacy

We integrate the three preceding elements: transformative learning, sociocultural theory, and communities of practice to address students' reluctance to engage in English environments by centering the students and cultivating belief in their ability to succeed, a strategy modelled by Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory. Central to building this efficacy is encouraging students to reframe their self-talk from deficit to growth orientations. Linguistic shifts supported by Dweck's (2006) growth mindset framework help students recognize their potential for development rather than viewing their abilities as fixed. Through explicit instruction and consistent modeling in feedback, students begin to transform "I can't" into "I can't, yet" and "I'm not good at" into "I want to improve." Self-efficacy functions as both catalyst and outcome in this process. Students who initially doubt their ability to participate in EMI classes gradually develop confidence through structured preparation, collaborative activities, and reflective practices. Group work exposes students to diverse values and knowledge from peers, broadening perspectives, sharpening critical thinking, strengthening communication skills, enhancing language ability and motivating them through both inspiration (seeing classmates excel) and leadership (mentoring peers). Rooted in mutual respect and shared responsibility, this framework transforms limitations into opportunities, fostering global competencies for lifelong growth.

Through establishing learning communities, sharing goals and perspectives, and encouraging consistent feedback practices, we aim to create a positive environment where students can thrive and develop the self-efficacy to sustain growth beyond the classroom.

Methodology

Research approach and philosophical foundations

over four years (2020-2023) to address the gap between EMI policy ambitions and classroom realities (Fujishima & Johnson, 2023a). Grounded in a pragmatist critical realist approach, our methodology acknowledges both objective constraints (e.g., student proficiency levels, institutional structures) and the socially constructed nature of education, emphasizing actionable knowledge (Biesta, 2010). This aligns with our aim to develop practical solutions to EMI challenges within the course created in response to pressures and incentives to internationalize.

Collaborative approach

Our collaboration represents a core methodological strength rather than a logistical convenience. While Wang et al. (2025) note that teacher collaboration in EMI contexts remains both unusual and challenging, our partnership exemplifies Gratton and Erickson's (2007) model of effective collaboration. Built on a shared goal of developing confident global citizens, our distinct research backgrounds facilitated symbiotic course development while respecting individual teaching styles. Collaboration provided natural triangulation of observations, enabled more robust pedagogical responses, and modeled the collaborative learning we sought to foster among students. For a detailed explanation, see Fujishima and Johnson (2023a). Following critical participatory action research (CPAR) principles, we positioned students as co-learners rather than research subjects (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis et al., 2014), reflecting pragmatism's focus on shared problem-solving and contextual knowledge construction (Pretorius, 2024).

Data collection included over 2,000 student weekly exit card reflections and end-of-term surveys collected between 2020-2023 and distributed through Google Classroom. Participants were undergraduate students at a small private women's university in Japan that is outside of the Top Global Universities program. Participants were enrolled in an English department that offers four elective courses: International Society and Culture (focusing on Japan in relation to the world and taught in English), American and British Literature, and Linguistics and Communication (predominantly taught in Japanese). These courses are multi-year programs of study comprising multiple semester-long classes. Students select their course at the end of their second year.

Our data includes reflections from multiple cohorts across all four years: first- and second-year students in required foundational classes (before course selection) and second, third and fourth years in the International Society and Culture course classes. The data is both longitudinal and cross-sectional as some students participated across multiple years as they progressed through the course to fourth year, while others contributed reflections from single semesters. Weekly reflections with individualized feedback created an ongoing dialogue that simultaneously enriched our understanding and supported student development. The exit card approach used in this study was developed and refined in our previous work (Fujishima & Johnson, 2023b).

Data analysis and iteration

Our inquiry employed a heuristic, inductive approach to knowledge generation. Triangulation across multiple cohorts over eight semesters provided both temporal validity and developmental insights, revealing persistent challenges and promising interventions that transcended individual cohorts, suggesting underlying structural issues in EMI implementation. Inductive data analysis allowed patterns and concepts to emerge organically, avoiding the limitations of pre-determined theoretical categories.

Initial open coding was refined to six primary categories: student self-efficacy challenges, passive learning tendencies, collaborative learning difficulties, critical thinking limitations, research skill gaps, and cultural context influences. These categories were validated through cross-referencing observations and consultation with students. These findings informed the development of our pedagogical framework.

Ethical considerations

Our dual roles as teachers and researchers required careful ethical reflection. Students' reflections operated at three levels simultaneously: as learning tools, assessment components, and research data. To mitigate inherent power imbalances, reflections were graded on completion rather than content, comprised a small percentage of the grade, and utilized prompts legitimizing critique both of the class and teaching style. Students were informed

that their reflections would support both their own learning and course improvement, with content (beyond requirements regarding word count and effort made to expand upon ideas) having no impact on their evaluation. This transparency embodied Fine and Torre's (2021) principle that participatory research should directly benefit knowledge creators.

Classroom prompts are designed to protect students' emotional boundaries and promote agency, inviting reflection without requiring personal disclosure (e.g., "What was something difficult for you today?" rather than "What problems did you have today?"). This approach fostered trust while enabling meaningful dialogue, aligning with Brydon-Miller and Maguire's (2009) position that action research ethics must go beyond procedural compliance by respecting participants' expertise about their own experiences. This approach to ethics not only protects students but also reinforces the trust-building that underpins transformative learning and community development.

Findings

Table 1 presents the six recurring challenges identified through our analysis, each illustrated with representative student examples. Some of these were stated explicitly in the data, while others were inferred. These challenges are presented in pedagogical sequence, from foundational to more complex.

In response to these recurring challenges, we developed a nine-part pedagogical framework grounded in theory and designed to address the specific obstacles students face in EMI classrooms.

A Pedagogical framework for EMI

The nine components of our framework operationalize active learning principles within EMI contexts.

Autonomy and self-efficacy

Our framework uses principles of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) which aims to help students transition from teacher-centered high school pedagogy to university self-direction, developing autonomy, or the "capacity to take charge of one's own learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 10). Students set personal goals, choose research topics of personal interest, and reflect on their learning through exit cards:

Through my life at [University], I strongly realized that speaking and acting on my own initiative and learning lead to my growth. Therefore, I think the spirit of challenge will lead to improvement. (Fourth Year, Week 30)

Flipped classrooms

Students encounter information before class, providing linguistic scaffolding and freeing class time for higher-order thinking (Harvard University Derek Bok Center, n.d.). This structure enables collaborative analysis and perspective exchange during class time: "Doing the homework made it easier to give opinions." (First Year, Week 2).

Group work

Structured group activities develop teamwork skills emphasized in Japanese workplace competencies (Yonezawa, 2014). Working with classmates within Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, where peer collaboration enables learning beyond individual capabilities, open-ended tasks encourage perspective sharing, while senpai-kōhai (traditional senior-junior) relationships are harnessed to cultivate leadership within supportive learning:

Our group was very aggressive to speak English so it was very fun today!!! N, R and M's English and communication skill is wonderful so I decided to study English harder. (First Year, Week 3)

Table 1. Six recurring challenges in EMI implementation.

Code	Characteristics
1. Student Self-Efficacy Challenges	<p>Low confidence in English ability Difficulty participating without preparation Self-doubt about succeeding in EMI courses Unfavorable self-comparison with peers</p> <p>Example: "I always tend to speak Japanese in discussion this class, but gradually I become able to communicate in English. I want to be able to use no Japanese in this class" (First year, Week 3)</p>
2. Teacher-centered Learning and Lack of Autonomy	<p>Expectation of teacher-led instruction Limited initiative in seeking resources Reluctance to ask questions Undeveloped reflective practices Uncomfortable with speaking in front of others</p> <p>Example: "This week I didn't do my homework, so I couldn't speak well. I will definitely do it from now" (Second year, Week 3)</p>
3. Collaborative Learning Challenges	<p>Hesitation expressing different opinions Frustration with varying proficiency levels Inexperience with structured group work Difficulty providing analytical feedback</p> <p>Example: "It's easier for me to be in a group with my friends" (Second year, week 1)</p>
4. Critical Thinking Limitations	<p>Unfamiliarity with multiple perspectives Seeking singular "correct" answers Lack of questioning Lack of source evaluation skills</p> <p>Example: "I was very surprised to see there is such a big difference between different newspapers" (First year, Week 9)</p>
5. Research Skills Gaps	<p>Difficulty choosing topics and managing projects Limited ability finding and evaluating sources Referencing difficulties</p> <p>Example: "I never thought about how to make citations before" (First year, Week 12)</p>
6. Cultural Context Influences	<p>Uncritical acceptance of cultural norms Limited global awareness Idealized views of Japan's global position Hesitation engaging with international students</p> <p>Example: "I want to go on study abroad to share Japan's unique culture with the world" (First year, Week 6)</p>

Scaffolding

Through scaffolding, we approach students “not in terms of what they lack... but as capable learners who, with support, can achieve academically” (Gibbons, 2014, p. 3). Content, thinking skills, and language are scaffolded through visual organizers, exemplars, question frames, and explicit teaching of Bloom’s taxonomy. Giving effective peer-feedback is also taught explicitly.

I participated actively, and I tried to speak English more than last week. Thankfully, [teacher] wrote practical phrases that we can use in conversation in English, so it became easier to talk. (First Year, Week 5).

Values exploration and community

Course values are generated in students’ introductory seminar and become identifying features throughout the course. Students discuss what creates a comfortable learning environment, and this evolves into co-created classroom norms emphasizing mutual respect and openness to different perspectives. By comparing personal values with peers, students begin to recognize diversity within their own classroom:

The goals for English were all similar. For example, want to watch American movies without Japanese subtitle, want to talk with foreigners. However, about university life was very different and very interesting. (First Year, Week 2)

Skills awareness

Activities explicitly highlight skills development (communication, collaboration, research). Students regularly identify skills they are developing, reinforcing the relevance of their learning beyond the classroom. Connections are made to future professional contexts, including skills expected of graduates.

I could develop many kinds of skills ... I was able to have confidence in job interviews and group discussions even if I was nervous. In this course we discuss with classmates and do presentations. I think those things gave me confidence, and I could handle most things because I had confidence. (Fourth Year, Week 30)

Reflection

Weekly exit cards prompt students to reflect on successes, struggles, and improvements, developing awareness of their own learning practices (Di Stefano et al., 2014). This ongoing cycle models metacognitive practices applicable across contexts and becomes a template for improvement. Introducing the process in the introductory seminar helps students transition into higher-level EMI classes by providing structured opportunities to process their experiences:

It was very interesting to learn about the reasons for writing Exit Cards. Writing down what you learn and think is certainly important for self-organization. This makes it easier to take the next step. (First year, Week 3)

Dialogic feedback

Integrating communities of practice principles (Wenger, 1998), dialogic feedback extends reflection to build self-efficacy. Teachers respond to student reflections, providing guidance that functions as a “process rather than product” (Carless, 2013, p. 1). This responsive feedback helps students adjust to active learning norms while creating partnerships that enhance agency. For more detail on the process and results with examples, see Fujishima and Johnson (2021, 2023b).

Connection to society

Drawing on transformative learning principles (Mezirow, 1997), learning extends beyond the classroom through guest speakers, community projects, and field experiences. Students interview stakeholders, analyze real-world materials, and conduct surveys, applying concepts to authentic contexts. These experiences create “disorienting dilemmas” that challenge existing perspectives and foster perspective transformation:

I learned culture is changing forever, so I felt learning culture is very important. I think this thinking is very necessary in the future. I can know about “now” deeply and adapt to society well. (Third Year, Week 2)

The framework presented above integrates theory with practical application, addressing the specific challenges identified in our research. Flipped classrooms, group work, and societal engagement initiate active learning, while scaffolded materials, structured reflection, and dialogic feedback sustain it by supporting student autonomy, critical thinking, and personalized growth. By emphasizing learner autonomy and transferable skills, our framework positions active learning as a vehicle for transformative global competency development. The interconnected components each reinforce the others to create a comprehensive student-centered learning environment. This integration can transform EMI from a site of linguistic anxiety and policy compliance into an opportunity for genuine holistic competency development.

Evidence of success

Our pedagogical framework was devised through iterative cycles of feedback and adaptation. As we identified and responded to the recurring challenges outlined above, we observed gradual shifts in student engagement, confidence, and collaboration across multiple cohorts. Among students who chose the international course for their third and fourth years, there is a high level of self-reported satisfaction. In an optional, anonymous survey of graduating students in three consecutive years with a total response rate of 89%, 100% of respondents were glad they took the course, with 76% of those strongly agreeing. Student comments (optional) are included below:

- I learned so many things from each class, and I was able to think deeply and with critical thinking. So, I think that it was very good opportunity for me. (2022)
- Thank you for giving satisfying classes. I could learn searching skills, presentation skills and speaking out my opinion! (2022)
- In the course, I got a lot of skills and there are many serious, kind, and highly capable classmates, so I strongly think that joining this course is a very meaningful way to spend your school life. (2023)

Discussion

This study aimed to address how EMI teachers in Japan can align policy ambitions for global human resources with the complex realities of institutions and classrooms. While EMI research in China (Wang et al., 2025) and Vietnam (Dang et al., 2024) tends to be solution-oriented, Japanese scholarship has largely focused on challenges. Our research addresses this gap by developing a practical framework tailored to the Japanese context. Rather than treating policy challenges and classroom constraints as barriers, we reposition them as opportunities for meaningful pedagogical intervention. This approach reorients EMI beyond its traditional content-language dualism, and positions intercultural competence development and teacher agency as key links between content learning, language acquisition, and broader educational goals.

Reframing EMI for competency and agency

Our framework directly addresses the six challenges identified in our findings through specific interventions, as shown in Table 2. By integrating intercultural competence development into everyday classroom practices, we transform EMI from a site of language anxiety into a platform for transformative learning. For example, collaborative group work and values exploration reframe linguistic anxiety as a shared challenge, while dialogic feedback fosters confidence, problem-solving, and self-awareness, all of which are competencies emphasized in both intercultural communication and internationalization policy objectives.

This integration directly addresses the gap between Japan's instrumental policy framing (Yonezawa, 2014) and intercultural scholarship's emphasis on attitudinal and reflexive development (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Dervin, 2023). Through values exploration, reflection cycles, and perspective-sharing, students develop intercultural competence not as instrumental skills but as transformative capacity; they learn to engage across difference while recognizing their own assumptions and remaining open to change. This comprehensive approach builds on Aguilar (2018), who emphasizes skill development in EMI classes, and contrasts with EMI inte-

Table 2. Framework components addressing identified challenges.

Challenge	Intervention
Student self-efficacy	Reflection, dialogic feedback, scaffolded group work. (Fujishima & Johnson, 2021, 2023b)
Passive learning tendencies	Flipped classrooms
Collaborative learning difficulties	Structured group work; values exploration (Fujishima & Johnson, 2024)
Critical thinking limitations	Scaffolded materials; reflection cycles (Fujishima & Johnson, 2023b)
Research skill gaps	Scaffolded materials; autonomy (in topic choice); connection to society (Fujishima & Johnson, 2023b)
Cultural context influences	Values exploration; perspective-sharing. (Fujishima & Johnson, 2024)

-ventions that rely predominantly on linguistic strategies such as translanguaging (Tsou, 2021) or those that doubt the possibility of developing intercultural competence in contexts without international peers (Garner, 2024).

Cultivating global competencies in domestic classrooms

A further contribution of this study is raising understanding of hidden diversity in seemingly homogeneous classrooms. Despite limited interaction with international peers, students engaged in structured reflection and perspective-sharing activities to develop intercultural competence and global awareness. These experiences foster not only intercultural sensitivity but also self-awareness. As students encounter differences in values, goals and motivations, even among peers who share the same nationality, they begin to realize that diversity exists within, and not just between, cultures (Minematsu & Morgan, 2023).

This normalization of difference lays the foundation for a global mindset, helping students to understand that variation is not the exception but the norm. For instance, students often express surprise that although all group members want to improve their English, their reasons vary, such as for study abroad, career advancement, personal growth, social expansion, or cultural connection. These realizations, where similarity and difference coexist, encourage respect for differing worldviews and prompt reflection on students' own assumptions and aspirations. The use of "disorienting dilemmas" to challenge assumptions about cultural fixedness is less about critiquing the past and more about highlighting that culture is dynamic and evolving, encouraging students to see themselves as agents of change for its future rather than passive inheritors of tradition.

These pedagogical approaches extend beyond cultural awareness to policy tensions. Our classroom practices provide space for students to cultivate what Bickford (2007) describes as a “reflective national identity” alongside global perspectives. By examining events through multiple lenses: national, economic, regional, and gendered, students learn to recognize how standpoint influences interpretation (Saito & Wang, 2014). This multi-perspective approach helps students develop critical awareness of their own cultural positioning while building perspective-taking skills, transforming the nationalist-cosmopolitan paradox into a productive tension that enhances learning.

As students develop trust within the learning community and gain confidence navigating differences, we observe a shift in how they relate to international peers. Rather than perceiving exchange students as outsiders (Rakhshandehroo, 2018), domestic students begin to act as cultural bridges: offering support, initiating dialogue, and cultivating an inclusive classroom environment. In this way, fostering global competencies among domestic students contributes not only to their own development but also to creating more welcoming spaces for international classmates.

Reclaiming teacher agency in EMI

Our framework demonstrates how instructors can transform EMI implementation from problem documentation (Ishikura, 2015) to practical solutions. While internationalization policies often originate from government bodies with limited classroom awareness (Whitsed & Wright, 2011), our bottom-up approach shows how educators can navigate constraints creatively. Building on Dang et al. (2024), we illustrate specific ways the nine pedagogical components facilitate active learning environments where students develop language proficiency, content knowledge, and intercultural competence simultaneously.

Our collaborative partnership exemplifies how instructor collaboration strengthens pedagogical innovation. Working together enabled us to triangulate observations, refine interventions iteratively, and sustain motivation through shared problem-solving. This collaborative approach not only enhanced our individual practice but also cultivated collective teacher efficacy (Hattie, 2017), the shared belief that together we could positively impact student learning. Such collaborative structures, where teachers work together to implement and adapt the framework, multiply its potential impact while distributing the workload. However, teacher agency requires supportive conditions to be sustainable. Agency is not an individual quality; it is shaped by institutional culture, employment security, adequate resources and opportunities for collaboration. Recognizing these enabling conditions is essential for understanding how teacher-driven innovation can be supported and scaled.

A customizable framework

Our framework offers a practical, flexible tool for EMI instructors seeking to move beyond content transmission and language acquisition; it is not a panacea, but a starting point and a hopeful alternative approach to deficit narratives of EMI. Its component-based design allows teachers to emphasize different elements based on specific student needs, institutional constraints, and cohort characteristics. If the pedagogical approach were adopted at the department or institutional level, the workload involved could be distributed or reimaged. Even partial adoption, such as implementing occasional exit cards, can offer potential benefit.

This flexibility aligns with and extends Japan's broader educational reform agenda by reconceptualizing active learning as a comprehensive methodology rather than a collection of isolated activities (Ito, 2017). Where previous approaches often treated active learning techniques as supplementary additions to traditional instruction, our framework integrates them into a coherent pedagogical system as recommended by Ito. When implemented systematically, active learning can function not merely as a classroom technique but as a transformative pedagogical philosophy that supports the holistic development of global citizens.

At the policy and institutional level, our research challenges traditional measures of EMI success such as extensive foreign student populations, study abroad numbers, and standardized test scores. While valuable, these metrics are not guarantees of developing the capacity to engage constructively with people internationally. True success lies in qualitative transformation: how students understand themselves, engage with others, and

participate in the world in ways that demonstrate active engagement and the ability to deal constructively with difference.

Researcher positionality and reflection

As practitioner-researchers, we must acknowledge that our ability to conduct this four-year collaborative study depended on institutional conditions increasingly rare in Japanese higher education: permanent employment, shared departmental space, coordinated schedules, and institutional tolerance for pedagogical experimentation. These conditions are privileges, not norms; many EMI teachers work on short-term contracts, in isolation, without time or space for sustained collaboration.

We propose viewing these not as "limitations" that restrict our findings' relevance, but as necessary professional conditions for quality development of education. The framework we developed is not for "privileged contexts" but for contexts committed to genuine student development. Our research demonstrates what becomes possible when institutions invest in teachers as professionals; it simultaneously reveals what is lost when such investment is withheld. We share this work in hope that it contributes to reimagining not just EMI pedagogy but the professional conditions that enable transformative teaching.

Limitations and future research

Our framework was developed within a specific institutional and disciplinary context that shaped its design and implementation. Several contextual factors merit consideration when adapting this approach to other settings. First, our students had actively chosen to study in English, making English language improvement an easily established shared goal. Courses where students have not voluntarily enrolled may require different strategies for building community and shared goals.

Second, we taught students across multiple classes of extended periods, typically three to four years, with sufficient contact hours to develop sustained pedagogical relationships. We could negotiate with students, implement tailored scaffolding through dialogic feedback, and track development longitudinally. Single-course implementations or contexts with limited class time may need to adapt relationship-building strategies, prioritize certain framework components, or develop alternative delivery mechanisms. An institutional approach would help with this.

Third, our framework specifically addressed the low self-efficacy characteristic of our student population. While we believe building student confidence has universal value, contexts where students enter with high self-efficacy may benefit from emphasizing different framework components.

Fourth, the flexibility of our course content (examining Japan from international perspectives) allowed us to embed transformative learning experiences and disorienting dilemmas relatively easily. Disciplines with rigid content requirements - particularly STEM fields - may encounter additional challenges in finding opportunities to integrate global competencies naturally, though we believe creative adaptation remains possible.

Finally, commercial textbooks typically lack the flexibility needed to personalize learning experiences, but designing scaffolded, learner-centered materials is time and labor-intensive. Institutional support, time, and opportunities for collaboration are critical for sustaining such efforts.

Future research should explore how the framework might be scaled at the departmental or institutional level, supporting a broader integration of competencies, content, and language. Longitudinal studies tracking graduates' trajectories would deepen understanding of the framework's long-term impacts. Additional directions of inquiry for extending this work include development of holistic, quantitative assessment tools for global competencies (Liu et al., 2020); adapting to contexts with greater international diversity; and investigation of methods for fostering sustainable communities of practice across diverse institutional settings. Understanding how teachers exercise agency, build inclusive learning environments, and foster global competencies within diverse institutional and disciplinary constraints would provide valuable insights.

Conclusion

Our framework addresses an important gap in EMI implementation: the disconnect between policy aspirations for global competencies and the foundational role of intercultural competence to achieve these goals. Japan's Global Human Resources policy emphasizes instrumentalist objectives aimed at developing the country: language proficiency, workplace skills and international mobility (Yonezawa, 2014). However, these skills risk superficiality without the foundational attitudes that intercultural scholars identify: curiosity, openness, critical self-awareness, and the ability to see perspectives beyond one's own standpoint (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Dervin, 2023).

In contrast to EMI scholarship emphasizing barriers, our study offers a constructive framework for transforming EMI classrooms into spaces for cultivating intercultural competence, even within linguistically homogeneous contexts. Grounded in transformative learning, sociocultural theory, communities of practice, and self-efficacy theory, our learner-centered model addresses recurring challenges through practical, scalable strategies. By integrating scaffolded materials, structured reflection, dialogic feedback, and collaborative learning, we show that content knowledge, language proficiency and intercultural competence can be developed simultaneously, supporting the development of global human resources and Japan's broader internationalization goals.

Ultimately, this reimagines EMI not as a site of national or institutional policy compliance, but as a platform for transformative learning, where teachers and students co-create inclusive, forward-looking learning environments. This reimagining requires students and teachers to embrace student-centered learning, institutions to have courage to move beyond fulfilling quantitative metrics, and policymakers to have faith in developing students holistically as individuals, not only as instrumental economic resources. Moving forward, we invite further research and collaboration among EMI practitioners to expand, adapt, and reimagine this work across diverse educational contexts, building a future where EMI fulfills its potential to develop students' intercultural competence and the broader global competencies needed to collaborate, communicate, and build community across cultural contexts.

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