

RECONCEPTUALISING THE IBDP AND IAL AS ENGLISH-MEDIUM INSTRUCTION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF POLICY AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Ian Tay^a

University of Bath

Abstract: This paper offers a critical reconceptualisation of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) and International A-Levels (IAL) as forms of English-medium instruction (EMI). Despite their global implementation in international schools, these curricula are rarely analysed through an EMI lens, even though they serve increasingly linguistically diverse student populations for whom English is an additional language (LX). Drawing on a critical review of policy documents and literature, the paper examines how English is positioned, how language support is managed, and how assessment and pedagogy are framed. Informed by principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the paper critiques the limited and inconsistent guidance regarding support for LX learners. It argues that failing to conceptualise these curricula as EMI has led to gaps in teacher preparation, curriculum equity, and access. The paper concludes with recommendations for curriculum providers, policymakers, and international schools to better align educational practice with the multilingual realities of their student populations.

Keywords: English-medium instruction (EMI); international curriculum; IBDP; International A-Levels; multilingual learners.

Introduction

A proliferation of English-medium instruction (EMI) courses has warranted more research in this area of education. However, research on this has focused on EMI courses in Higher Education (HE). A quick search on Google Scholar using the term “English-medium Instruction” brings up a multitude of research on EMI courses in Higher Education and only on the third page was there a dedicated research paper on EMI in Secondary Education, which argued that EMI courses are offered for prestige (Paulsrud & Yoximer, 2016) not dissimilar to Dearden & Macaro’s (2016) observation on the reason why HE institutions offer EMI courses. Nevertheless, there is also research that takes a more pragmatic view towards the implementation of EMI in secondary schools, towards improving students’ English language skills to ensure that scientific and technological knowledge can be accessed (Hammou & Kesbi, 2023; Tan & Lan, 2011). These research, however, have been limited to EMI courses in the national education systems, with the most clearly defined being the EMI schools in Hong Kong (Tse, et al 2021). There still seems to be a lacuna in the current body of literature investigating EMI in the context of international schools and international curricula. In some ways, this is not that surprising, as international schools have traditionally been seen as schools catering to an expatriate community, where the education system in international schools follows the curriculum of the home country. However, a significant portion of international schools now enrol predominantly local students whose

^a Correspondence can be directed to: ityr20@bath.ac.uk

first language is not English, unlike traditionally international schools, which were serving expatriate communities and, by extension, native English speakers. Cambridge and Thompson (2004) categorise these schools as “Type-C” international schools - international schools that cater primarily to host-country nationals. These schools frequently offer curricula such as the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) or International A-Levels (IAL), which are two-year programmes recognised almost universally as a high school leaving certificate, most commonly used as an entry requirement to universities around the world. These programmes are assessed and delivered almost entirely in English. In these contexts, English functions as a gatekeeping academic language, even though students and teachers often operate in multiple languages. The assumption that English is a neutral medium of instruction no longer holds, and the challenges faced by English as an additional language (LX) students remain under-addressed. This paper, therefore, examines the development of EMI programmes and the evolution of the IBDP and IAL as dominant post-secondary curricula in international schools. It argues, first, that these qualifications should be explicitly recognised as EMI programmes and, second, that international schools must adopt more responsive pedagogical and institutional strategies to support student success in these linguistically demanding contexts.

Methodology

This paper adopts a critical review methodology, drawing on interdisciplinary literature in English-medium instruction (EMI), international education policy, and second language learning in globalised schooling contexts. The primary focus is secondary-level EMI in international schools, particularly in relation to the IBDP and IAL. Given the limited research directly addressing EMI at this level, studies from higher education are included where they provide relevant insights. For example, Dearden’s (2014) global survey highlights gaps in EMI teacher preparation, Macaro et al. (2018) provide a comprehensive framework for defining EMI, Humphreys (2017) illustrates challenges faced by international students in Anglophone higher education, and Kirkpatrick (2014) examines language policy tensions in multilingual Asian contexts. Together, these perspectives help frame the analysis of EMI provision in international secondary schools.

The scope of the review is international, with a particular emphasis on non-Anglophone contexts where international schools deliver curricula in English to linguistically diverse student populations. The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed studies and policy reports addressing EMI, international curricula (IBDP and IAL), multilingual pedagogies, and the linguistic challenges faced by LX (non-native) students. Research from higher education was included where it offered transferable insights into secondary-level challenges. Excluded were studies focused solely on monolingual Anglophone systems (e.g., UK/US domestic schooling), literature without substantive links to EMI or international curricula, and classroom-based interventions outside the scope of IBDP or IAL provision.

To complement this literature review, the paper also examines policy documents from the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) and IAL awarding bodies, focusing on curricular and language-in-education policies. These include IBO’s *Guidelines for Developing a School Language Policy* (2008a), *Learning in a Language Other than Mother Tongue in IB Programmes* (2008b), and *IB Language Policy* (2014, 2023a); Oxford AQA’s *Fair Assessment for International Schools* (2024); Pearson’s *Use of Languages in Qualifications Policy* (2023); and Cambridge Assessment International Education’s (CAIE) *Instructions for Setters of Questions* (2020) and *Cambridge Principles into Practice: Language Guides for Schools* (2021).

The analysis is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), used here as a sensitising framework rather than as a formal CDA study. CDA’s concern with how institutional discourses construct ideologies, power relations, and silences (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993) guided the reading of these texts. Specifically, attention was paid to how policy discourse frames learner success, defines language support, and positions teachers and students in relation to English and other languages. Equally important were omissions, such as explicit guidance on CALP development or multilingual pedagogy, which reveal underlying assumptions about language in international

education. Meanwhile, the thematic structure of the Discussion section covers student access, staffing, teaching and learning, instructional materials, and assessment, derived inductively from the recurring issues across both the literature and the policy texts. The analysis is further informed by Cummins' (1979) BICS/CALP framework, which highlights the distinction between conversational and academic English. This provides a useful lens for evaluating how policy documents and practices address (or neglect) the development of academic language.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The Literature Review situates the study within debates on EMI, language-in-education approaches, and the expansion of international schools. The Results section analyses how language policy is articulated in the IBDP and IAL, drawing attention to key discourses and omissions. The Discussion connects these findings to wider challenges in international schools, focusing on student access, staffing, teaching and learning, instructional materials, and assessment. Finally, the Conclusion synthesises the insights, sets out recommendations for policy and practice, and suggests avenues for future research.

Literature Review

Defining and Problematizing EMI in Global Contexts

English-medium instruction (EMI) has expanded rapidly across educational levels and global contexts, but its definitions remain contested. Macaro et al. (2018, p. 37) define EMI as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English”, while Dearden (2014) similarly defines it as subject instruction in jurisdictions where English is not the first language. These definitions primarily reflect non-Anglophone settings but risk oversimplifying complex linguistic realities. For example, Humphreys (2017) highlights how international students in Anglophone countries, such as Australia, may still face linguistic challenges akin to those in non-English-speaking contexts due to limited interaction with native speakers. The assumption that immersion with native English (L1) users is necessary for language development is increasingly questioned, especially given that most English interactions globally occur among non-native (LX) users. Consequently, EMI cannot be treated as a monolithic model - it varies by country, educational level, institution type, and linguistic context.

EMI's rapid expansion, particularly in the private sector, is driven by its perceived link to global mobility and academic opportunity (Dearden, 2014; Tan & Lan, 2011). Universities now pressure secondary schools to prepare students linguistically for EMI, extending their reach to younger learners (Macaro et al., 2019). However, this growth has outpaced the development of qualified teachers. Dearden (2014) notes that 83% of countries surveyed lack sufficient EMI-trained educators. Many teachers receive little pre- or in-service training, and some institutions favour L1 English speakers despite evidence that language background alone does not guarantee pedagogical effectiveness (Qiu & Fang, 2022). In reality, successful EMI often depends on the strategic use of students' full linguistic repertoires, including translanguaging and scaffolding academic language (Macaro et al., 2019; Alkhudair, 2019).

EMI also triggers social and political tensions. In Italy, a 2012 court ruling warned that English-only degrees could marginalise the national language (Civinini, 2018). Malaysia's PPSMI policy, which mandated the use of English for Science and Maths, was reversed due to concerns over language equity (Yunus, 2020). However, despite such setbacks, EMI persists through private-sector initiatives, often with little regulatory oversight. As Dearden (2014) notes, EMI is “in a state of flux”, always subject to changing national policies but increasingly entrenched in global education markets.

Theoretical Perspectives on Language in Education

Several theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for examining the IBDP and IAL as EMI programmes. They help explain why students may struggle when language demands are overlooked

and why policies that neglect scaffolding, multilingual support, or explicit academic language development risk reinforcing inequities.

A central framework is Cummins' (1979) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). While many international school students achieve conversational fluency relatively quickly, the advanced academic language required for success in linguistically demanding subjects such as History, Economics, or Literature typically takes years to master. This distinction underscores the importance of embedding CALP development into subject teaching, rather than assuming conversational proficiency equates to readiness for academic study. Relatedly, Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development provides the theoretical foundation for scaffolding, whereby teachers and peers support learners until they can work independently. In EMI classrooms, this often involves modelling academic language, structuring tasks in stages, and making discourse patterns explicit.

Airey's (2016) work on translanguaging further highlights students' full linguistic repertoires as resources for learning, advocating flexible use of the L1 alongside English to support comprehension. Despite official English-only policies, research shows that both teachers and students frequently rely on translanguaging and code-switching to make meaning (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017). This aligns with Canagarajah's (2007) emphasis on English as a lingua franca (ELF), where preparing students to navigate multilingual communicative practices may be more relevant than privileging native-speaker norms.

Together, these perspectives indicate that effective EMI provision requires more than immersion in English. Instead, it depends on deliberate pedagogical strategies that develop CALP, scaffold content learning, and recognise multilingual resources as assets rather than deficits.

The Rise of International Schools

The definition of an international school is also contested, but Hayden and Thompson's (2013) typology of Type A (traditional expatriate-focused), Type B (ideologically driven), and Type C (serving host-country nationals) offers a useful lens. Of these, Type C schools have seen the most rapid growth, a trend Bunnell (2022) calls "phenomenal and largely unpredicted." These are typically for-profit institutions delivering curricula such as the IBDP or IAL to local, non-native English-speaking (LX) students. According to ISC Research (2024), the number of international schools has grown by 49% since 2014, with student enrolment up by 52%. For example, as of 2024, Egypt has 96 international schools, Malaysia 180, and Spain 300—most serving domestic populations through English-medium international curricula (International Schools Database, 2024).

This expansion is driven by similar motivations seen in EMI adoption. English proficiency is widely seen as essential for global mobility and socio-economic advancement, with fluency offering access to elite universities and international career paths (Sears, 2015; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017; Wan & Gao, 2021). Parents also value exposure to foreign teachers and curricula perceived as internationally prestigious, particularly those taught by L1 English speakers (Ignatius, 2022; Oxford Business Group, 2016). As of 2022, British and International A Levels were the most common qualifications among international schools (32%), followed closely by the IB Diploma (27%) (ISC Research, 2022).

The linguistic profile of international school students has also undergone a dramatic shift. While traditional schools catered to L1 English-speaking expatriates, today, only around 25% of students are native English speakers. Another 25% speak the host-country language, and 50% speak other languages (Carder, 2018). In 90% of these schools, English remains the main language of instruction, rendering native speakers a minority. Many international schools now operate outside Anglophone countries, delivering content exclusively in English, sometimes with limited engagement in broader international values (Bunnell, 2022). Even state schools, such as the over 200 public institutions in Ecuador, are adopting curricula like the IBDP (Ballantyne & Rivera, 2014; Bittencourt, 2020). These

trends affirm the need to view IAL and IBDP as de facto EMI programmes, given their increasing delivery to linguistically diverse student bodies in non-English-dominant contexts.

Yet this growth raises questions about equity. These private institutions are often financially exclusive, potentially reinforcing socio-economic divides and reproducing a “transnational capitalist class” (Brown & Lauder, 2011; Cambridge, 2011). English, too, is not class-neutral; it remains closely associated with the urban middle and upper classes (Chua, 2007, in Kenway & Koh, 2013). Critics argue that international education risks commodifying access to higher education, while others suggest it may democratise quality schooling through competition and integration into national systems (Bailey, 2021; Tay, 2024).

Results

Language Policy in the IBDP

The preamble to IB’s Language Policy states that:

The International Baccalaureate® (IB) is committed to supporting plurilingualism as fundamental to increasing intercultural understanding and international-mindedness, as well as to providing access to an IB education for students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. (IBO, 2023a)

To support plurilingualism, the IBO has designated English, Spanish, and French as its “External Working Languages” for high-level communication and the provision of services across all its programmes. Additionally, the IBO recognises Arabic, Chinese, German, Korean, Japanese, Indonesian, and Turkish as IB Access Languages. The IBO has published documents such as “Guidelines for Developing a School Language Policy” and “Learning in a Language Other Than Mother Tongue in IB Programmes,” emphasising the importance of maintaining mother tongue proficiency alongside learning new languages. For IBDP students, the IBO requires the study of two languages: one in which the student is already competent and another in a new or less familiar language (IBO, 2023b). As of 2023, 55 languages are available for study, and students can request to study their mother tongue as an IB subject if sufficient written literature exists (IBO, 2023b).

In addition, IBO also shows its commitment to plurilingualism by offering the Dual Language IB Diploma Programme (DLDP). A bilingual diploma is awarded to candidates who complete and receive a grade 3 or higher in two languages selected from the [IB]DP course studies in language and literature and a grade 3 or higher in an individuals and societies or science subject, completed in a different language (IBO, 2023c). In 2022 alone, more than a quarter of the diplomas awarded were bilingual diplomas (IBO, 2022).

Alongside the emphasis given on maintaining and developing mother tongue languages, the IB has also explicitly set out guidelines and principles on how to ensure students who are not learning in their mother tongue can get the most out of the IB programme. It was recommended that teachers should “explicitly activate learners’ prior understanding using the mother tongue if appropriate” (IBO 2008b, p. 9). This is in addition to making sure that tasks are differentiated and build upon further background knowledge (IBO, 2008b). It was also emphasised in this document that all IB teachers are also language teachers as “proficiency in cognitive academic language is inseparable from successful learning in school” (IBO 2008b, p. 9). This is easier said than done, but the same IB document also emphasises that there should be professional development in place for teachers and other support staff to ensure this can be effectively done to support students who are not learning in their L1 (IBO, 2008b). However, just like the IBO guidelines in other areas of education, the organisation is very clear on policy development but not policy implementation.

Language Policy in the IAL

Unlike the IBDP, the IAL is a heterogeneous international curriculum. There is not one awarding body offering the qualification called the “International A-Levels” but four. In addition to CAIE, which was the first to offer the IAL back in the 1950s, Pearson Edexcel, Oxford AQA, and the Learning Resource Network (LRN) have also started offering this qualification, with the latter being the most recent player in the game (Tay, 2023, pp. 95-96). Although each of these awarding body offer a slightly different suite of products, the general framework is the same. The typical student takes three different A-Level subjects in two years, and the grades from these three will be their main passport to get into university. There are no specifically prescribed subject groups or subjects that students must take, which provides schools the flexibility to offer only subjects that they see fit, and for students to only take subjects that they are interested in. Subject combinations, therefore, could be as narrow as Economics, Business, and Accounting or as diverse as Law, Biology, and French, for example. With regards to languages, although it is possible to take up an A-Level in a language, there is no emphasis on studying a mother tongue language or any languages during the course of a student’s time doing their IAL. A quick count of the language subjects (excluding English) offered by the various IAL awarding bodies reveals that CAIE has nine language subjects, Pearson has five, while Oxford AQA and LRN have none (CAIE, 2024; Pearson, 2024; OxfordAQA, 2024; LRN, 2019).

CAIE explicitly recognises that learners enrolled in an IAL programme may still be in the developmental stages of their English language acquisition and that learners may know and develop other languages besides English. Language learners are categorised into three main types by CAIE (2021, p. 19):

- A first language learner who speaks the language at home and possibly in the community and uses this language at school as the medium of instruction.
- A second language learner who speaks another language at home and often uses the second language at school as the medium of instruction.
- A foreign language learner who speaks another language at home and learns the foreign language at school in language classes.

For bilingual learners, CAIE does emphasise that languages are not separate but interdependent and that it is important to support the development of the first language for bilingual learners to enhance cognition and socialisation (CAIE, 2021). Therefore, many learners are likely to require targeted language support, especially those learning a foreign language. Therefore, all teachers are responsible for learners’ language development, and all teachers need to be ‘language aware’ and know how to deliver their subject to learners at different stages of acquiring academic English (CAIE, 2021, pp. 9-10). Teachers teaching non-native language speakers must possess a strong command of the language they are teaching, and this proficiency should encompass subject-specific terminology, pedagogical language essential for classroom management, and social language crucial for interacting with students and others (CAIE, 2021, p. 10). In cases where teachers instruct in a language other than their first language, it’s important to assess if they require professional development to enhance their language skills (CAIE 2021, p.12).

Regarding the examinations, which are ultimately the *raison d’être* of the IAL awarding bodies, both CAIE and Oxford AQA emphasise the importance of fair assessment for international students, particularly non-native English speakers. CAIE’s “Instructions for Setters of Questions” stresses that exam language should not create unnecessary difficulty and should be clear, with simple grammatical structures and frequently used words, referencing the Collins dictionary and CEFR to guide word choice (CAIE, 2020). Similarly, OxfordAQA (2024) advocates that paper setters use the Oxford 3000 word list when constructing exam papers to ensure accessible language. Their approach to fair assessment includes ensuring that exams measure only the intended subject knowledge, effectively differentiate student performance, and do not disadvantage non-native English speakers, providing all students with equal opportunities to achieve the appropriate grade (OxfordAQA, 2024).

Discussion

The analysis above shows that both the IBDP and IAL function as EMI programmes, albeit with different priorities. The IB articulates a clear language philosophy and promotes inclusive pedagogy, though it offers little on how to implement these principles. IAL awarding bodies, especially CAIE and OxfordAQA, focus pragmatically on ensuring fair assessment for LX learners, with less emphasis on broader curricular reform. Across both models, a common assumption is that students can thrive in English-dominant academic environments with minimal systemic adjustment. As international student demographics become increasingly linguistically diverse, this demands more pedagogically grounded and equitable responses.

There is also no doubt that a significant proportion of students undertaking the IBDP and IAL are LX English speakers, leading to unique challenges. These challenges are more pronounced in linguistically demanding subjects such as History, English Literature, and Economics, highlighting the need for a focused pedagogical approach to support language development. Using Cummins' (1979) framework, even if a student in an international school may be seen as being able to communicate in English, it may only be to a Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) instead of the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) level, which usually takes at least 5-7 years more to develop. The same "7 years" timeframe was stated in the context of the time needed for non-L1 learners to reach the same proficiency level in academic language as a person learning in their L1 (IBO 2008b, p. 5). Therefore, there is a pressing need for language development across the curriculum, as emphasised by Gibbons (2015), to ensure that LX speakers are not disadvantaged in their academic progress. This is despite the existence of policies addressing these issues, as there seems to be an inconsistency between policy and practice. In general, there is a pervasive lack of awareness of pedagogical strategies for LX English speakers among key stakeholders, including school management and teachers (Dearden, 2014). The absence of practical guidelines on how to deliver education to LX English speakers further complicates the situation, creating challenges for both teachers and students alike. Therefore, this section explores five key areas where policy and pedagogy require greater alignment: student access, staffing, teaching and learning, instructional materials, and assessment. Addressing these domains is essential to ensuring that international schools offering the IBDP and IAL can more effectively meet the needs of their linguistically diverse students.

Student Access

Currently, there is little evidence of an institutionalised access model for entry into IBDP and IAL programmes. Although the IB recommends schools consider language needs in their admissions policies (IBO, 2008b), decisions are often shaped by market forces rather than pedagogical considerations. Once enrolled, students typically face limited language screening beyond initial diagnostics. In some cases, students begin the programme while still developing basic English proficiency, forcing them to learn academic content and language simultaneously.

In response, some schools adopt "shock therapy" approaches, such as mandating English-only communication. At the British International School in China, for example, students are required to speak English from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., except during Chinese lessons, with penalties for non-compliance (Wan & Gao, 2021). These policies discourage code-mixing and can undermine both comprehension and the development of local languages (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Despite evidence that L1 use supports content learning (Alkhudair, 2019; Kim et al., 2017), stigma around its use persists. While English remains the medium of instruction, the national language should complement rather than compete with it, but further research is needed to determine the optimal balance (Kirkpatrick, 2014; Pun et al., 2022).

In the absence of a clear admissions or placement model, schools need more context-specific approaches to language support. One option is a preparatory year or "foundation" programme,

where students build general and academic English skills before entering the IBDP or IAL, similar to models used by British universities. Alternatively, a concurrent support model, where students receive targeted language instruction alongside academic study, may be sufficient in some cases. In more linguistically homogenous settings, a multilingual model that incorporates both English and students' L1 in early stages of instruction could aid CALP development and ease the transition to full EMI.

Staffing

Unfortunately, the language-related challenges in EMI courses are not limited to students' proficiency but also extend to teachers (Galloway & Curle, 2022; Garner, 2024). In international schools delivering the IBDP and IAL, it is common to find subject teachers who lack certification in English, formal EMI training, or even confidence in their own language abilities. Studies from secondary and higher education suggest that many EMI teachers resort to coping strategies such as using a teacher-centred transmission approach, avoiding open-ended questions, and switching to their L1 when difficulties arise (Cheng, 2017, in Richards & Pun, 2023, p. 223). A key issue is that school leadership often treats language support as the domain of specialist staff, delegating responsibility to a small group of EAL or ESL teachers rather than upskilling the entire teaching body (Ballantyne & Rivera, 2014, p. 8).

One flawed solution to this has been the prioritisation of native English-speaking teachers. For example, some South Korean international schools explicitly hire only applicants from Anglophone countries, while a school in Vietnam requires teachers to have English as their first language above formal teaching qualifications (Carder, 2018; Sears, 2015). Yet this native-speaker bias is increasingly out of step with global linguistic realities: the majority of English users worldwide are now LX speakers (Hu & McKay, 2014, in Carder, 2018; Kirkpatrick, 2014). Surveys show that fewer than a quarter of IBDP teachers have relevant credentials or ongoing professional development to support LX learners (Siqueira et al., 2018; Ballantyne & Rivera, 2014). Moreover, privileging L1 speakers may exclude capable LX teachers who, having learned English themselves, are often better positioned to empathise with and support multilingual students (Porter, 2018). From a CDA perspective, such practices reflect institutional discourses that naturalise English as an unproblematic default medium while marginalising other languages and overlooking the development of CALP. There is also a deeper issue of linguistic ownership. The overemphasis on native-speaker English can reinforce the idea that English belongs only to inner-circle countries, potentially alienating students and failing to prepare them for communication with other LX English speakers (Matsuda, 2002). Supporting students effectively requires teachers, regardless of their L1 status, to be trained to teach CALP and become more ELF-aware (Sears, 2015; Sifakis, 2006; Koshy, 2021; Ng, 2019; Dang et al., 2013). Raising teachers' language awareness and confidence should be a core focus of school-wide professional development.

However, current training opportunities remain inadequate. IBDP teacher workshops tend to focus on the IB Learner Profile, while IAL training often centres on assessment requirements (Tay, 2023). Neither system offers systematic support for teaching in EMI contexts. Instead, professional development should focus on practical strategies such as translanguaging, code-switching, scaffolding academic literacy, and adapting language to suit multilingual classrooms (Airey, 2016). Teachers also need hands-on training in modelling, guiding, and supporting unfamiliar literacy activities, which are particularly important skills when working with older students in content-heavy courses like the IBDP and IAL (Sears, 2015, p. 270).

There are established training models available that could be adopted or adapted, such as the Cambridge Assessment Certificate in EMI Skills, the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), Teaching ESL Students in Mainstream Classrooms, and the International Teacher Certificate (Sears, 2015, p. 220). For greater impact, some scholars have advocated incorporating Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) into professional learning, as SFL equips teachers to scaffold instruction in ways that provide LX students with accessible academic input (Koshy, 2021, p. 67).

Teaching and Learning

Despite the IBO and CAIE's repeated assertion that "all teachers are responsible for language development" (IBO 2011, p. 14; CAIE 2021, p. 9), classroom practice often tells a different story. Teachers in international schools frequently view themselves as either content or language specialists, rarely both (Banegas, 2012). Content teachers, in particular, tend to see EMI courses as vehicles for knowledge transmission rather than opportunities for language development (Pun et al., 2022; Airey, 2016; Hammou & Kesbi, 2023). As a result, language-related challenges are commonly deferred to EAL departments or specialist staff (Dale & Mearns, 2023). This division is reinforced by a general lack of collaboration between subject and language teachers, as Richards and Pun (2023) observe.

Empirical studies confirm that in many international school classrooms, content is prioritised over linguistic accuracy. Teachers often focus on delivering subject-specific vocabulary while being permissive about grammatical errors, so long as meaning is conveyed (Novotna & Dunkova, 2015). Teachers, nevertheless, cannot be fully blamed, for there is simply not enough time in subject classes to try to tackle both language and subject content. This approach is consistent across international schools and EMI courses (Dale & Mearns, 2023; Metli & Akis, 2022).

English classes in international schools also tend to operate in isolation from IBDP and IAL content courses. Language support departments themselves are frequently marginalised. In some cases, entire EAL programmes have been eliminated due to low enrolment or staff attrition (Carder, 2018). Only schools with what Koshy (2021) calls "enlightened leadership of principles" attempt to systematically link English instruction to the academic demands of these curricula. This siloed approach is problematic in single- or dual-medium schools, where cross-disciplinary collaboration is minimal. While Richards and Pun (2023) cite the Singapore model as an example of successful EMI implementation, the linguistic context in Singapore is vastly different: most students there use English regularly outside the classroom, which is not the case in many international schools offering the IBDP or IAL. Even CAIE acknowledges that many IAL students are "foreign language learners who speak another language at home and learn English as a foreign language at school" (CAIE, 2021, p. 19).

Yet where collaboration does occur, the benefits are clear. Joint efforts between subject and language teachers have been shown to enhance both comprehension and the quality of student work. Targeted initiatives, such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in areas like Biology or Statistics, can help develop the academic language students need to succeed. Thematic English classes, which incorporate a broad range of academic content or English for Academic Purposes (EAP), are another effective way to support CALP development. CAIE has encouraged schools to foster closer integration between language and subject instruction to meet the needs of LX learners better (CAIE, 2021). By embedding language support within the curriculum and aligning it with subject learning outcomes, schools can provide more equitable access to the IBDP and IAL for linguistically diverse students.

Instructional Materials

Instructional materials in EMI contexts should make academic content more accessible without overwhelming learners linguistically (Gray, 2013). Yet, numerous studies highlight a persistent lack of resources specifically designed for LX English speakers (Ballantyne & Rivera, 2014; Morton, 2013; Metli & Akis, 2022; Sears, 2015). For instance, a study in a Malaysian school offering both national and international curricula found a clear disparity in English writing resources: abundant for national exams but lacking for international ones (Huzaimi & Mohamad, 2024).

In the case of the IBDP, although commercially produced materials are widely available, particularly online, many fail to acknowledge that a large proportion of candidates are now LX English users. IB-approved textbooks are often lengthy and dense, resembling university-level texts, which may hinder accessibility and comprehension. Teachers frequently report that international textbooks are poorly aligned with students' linguistic and cultural contexts. To bridge this gap, many

teachers develop bespoke materials (Morton, 2013), but this raises concerns: untrained teachers may produce resources lacking pedagogical rigour, and the additional workload contributes to burnout.

In linguistically homogeneous schools, bilingual or multilingual resources can enhance comprehension and learner confidence. In more linguistically diverse environments, well-designed English-language materials with embedded language development strategies are essential (Richards & Pun, 2023). These should go beyond simplified vocabulary to explicitly support students' CALP development. The IB's Access Languages initiative has made some progress in this regard, offering materials in selected L1s. However, schools continue to request further multilingual support (Ballantyne & Rivera, 2014).

In contrast, IAL awarding bodies provide minimal top-down support in languages other than English. As a result, a bottom-up response has emerged: teachers and schools develop and share their own resources via platforms like TES, Facebook, and Telegram (Vo & Tran, 2025). While these grassroots efforts are promising, they remain uneven and often lack pedagogical coherence. A more structured and informed approach is urgently needed. Viewed through a CDA lens, this lack of structured support reflects a wider institutional discourse that assumes English to be universally accessible, leaving LX students to adapt to materials not designed with their needs in mind. This positions language as neutral while obscuring its role in shaping access to knowledge.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) offers a useful model for addressing some of these challenges. CLIL instructional materials are often more scaffolded, visually supported, and linguistically accessible (Morton, 2013). Sears (2015) also highlights the importance of explicitly teaching the language demands of subject-specific tasks—an approach still underdeveloped in many IBDP and IAL contexts. Moreover, EMI materials should foster students' sense of language ownership, encouraging them to view English as an international language rather than the exclusive domain of inner-circle English-speaking countries (Sifakis, 2006; Matsuda, 2003; Vo & Tran, 2025).

Assessments

Policy statements from the awarding bodies assert that assessments should not measure language proficiency unless explicitly intended to do so. It is clear that content mastery takes precedence over language development. The removal of "Quality of Written Communication" (QWC) as an assessment criterion in the UK A-Levels, for example, reflects efforts to avoid disadvantaging LX English speakers. Nonetheless, even with adjustments to exam wording and question structure, the heavy reliance on English can still pose challenges for students with developing academic language proficiency. To address this, assessment practices in EMI programmes such as the IBDP and IAL must do more than simply simplify language. There is a pressing need to develop assessment models that support the progression from Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) without compromising academic rigour. One way forward is through formative assessment practices that offer feedback on both language and content. These can play a dual role: reinforcing subject understanding while fostering the language skills necessary for academic success.

Models such as CLIL and SIOP provide examples of how formative assessments can balance content knowledge with language support. In these contexts, assessments are designed to integrate both language and content objectives, ensuring that students build their CALP alongside disciplinary knowledge. Such models demonstrate that attention to language in assessment need not come at the expense of rigour but rather can enhance access and long-term achievement. Adopting similar approaches in IBDP and IAL contexts would represent a meaningful step toward closing the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom practice. As EMI continues to expand, assessment models must evolve to reflect the linguistic realities of increasingly diverse student cohorts. Ensuring that LX students are fairly assessed, not just in terms of what they know, but also in how they demonstrate that knowledge, should be a central concern for schools, teachers, and awarding bodies alike.

Conclusion

The demographic profile of IAL and IBDP learners clearly reflects broader trends of globalisation and marketisation in international education, with most students now from linguistically diverse backgrounds. Despite curricular differences, both programmes operate as de facto EMI models, consistent with Macaró et al.'s (2018) definition of EMI as the use of English to teach academic content where it is not the dominant language. A CDA-informed reading of policies and practices shows how English is positioned as neutral and universally accessible, while other languages are marginalised and CALP development overlooked.

This paper has identified four interlinked challenges:

- weak integration between language and content teaching,
- the privileging of L1 English teachers,
- a scarcity of appropriate materials, and
- restrictive English-only policies.

These are ideological rather than inevitable constraints. Research on content-based instruction, translanguaging, and bilingual pedagogies demonstrates how schools can support both language development and academic achievement (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Canagarajah, 2007).

Therefore, based on the evidence discussed, several interrelated recommendations emerge for international schools offering the IBDP and IAL. First, teacher training and professional development should be enhanced by embedding CALP-focused content and incorporating EMI-specific programmes to better prepare staff for linguistically diverse classrooms. Equally important is fostering collaboration between content and language teachers through joint planning and co-teaching, ensuring that academic language development is systematically integrated within subject instruction. Schools should also establish robust language support models, including preparatory language programmes, concurrent support structures, and, where possible, bilingual or multilingual instructional pathways. At the same time, assessment practices also require careful revision to incorporate formative approaches and ensure alignment between content and language objectives, thereby providing a fairer reflection of student achievement. Similarly, instructional materials should be developed or adapted to include scaffolding, explicit integration of language learning, and, when appropriate, the use of bilingual or multilingual resources. At the institutional level, admissions and access policies should adopt clear language proficiency benchmarks while also considering multilingual models that reflect the realities of international student populations. Finally, schools must cultivate a language-aware culture that promotes critical engagement with English as a lingua franca and recognises the value of students' wider linguistic repertoires. There is no doubt that some schools have begun to adopt such approaches, but provision remains uneven and often ad hoc. Moving beyond this 'wild west' stage will require clearer, top-down frameworks from awarding bodies and school leaders that reflect the realities of linguistically diverse populations.

This study nevertheless has limitations. As a critical review, it synthesises scholarship and policy documents rather than drawing on empirical classroom data. The evidence base for EMI in secondary international schools, particularly for IAL programmes, remains underdeveloped. Future research should include classroom-based investigations, evaluations of EMI-specific teacher training, and comparative analyses of IB and IAL frameworks to build a stronger empirical foundation.

Ultimately, while challenges remain formidable, they are not insurmountable. With deliberate reform and greater coherence between policy and practice, international schools can move beyond treating English as a neutral medium and instead embrace linguistically responsive pedagogies—better preparing students not only to succeed academically but to thrive as multilingual, globally competent citizens.

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