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**Incorporating Culture into English as a Medium of Instruction  
(EMI) Teaching:  
An Exploration of EMI Teachers in Chinese Higher Education**

A thesis  
submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of  
**Doctor of Philosophy in Education**  
at  
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by

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## **Abstract**

The increasing internationalisation of higher education in China has led to the widespread adoption of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) across various disciplines. However, the integration of cultural elements into EMI teaching remains underexplored, particularly in the Chinese context. This study investigates the perceptions and practices of EMI instructors in Chinese higher education regarding the incorporation of culture into their teaching. The research aims to address the following questions: (1) In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture? (2) What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI? and (3) To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their teaching practices?

The study uses a qualitative research design, involving online questionnaires completed by 56 EMI instructors from various disciplines, and in-depth data collection (semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and stimulated recall interviews) conducted with a subset of 10 instructors. Findings show that teachers view culture as being multifaceted, comprising material (language, artefacts) and nonmaterial (social norms, values, high culture) aspects. They also support different integration strategies: some favour embedding culture through interactive tasks like role-plays and cultural debates in a bid to foster intercultural communicative competence, while others endorse content-based integration on the basis of a lack of time and curriculum pressure. Their practice also mirrors such perceptions to some extent, as competency-oriented instructors actively engage with cultural narratives and guest speakers; however, time pressure demands superficiality, and instructors skirt culture with indirect exposure through textbooks.

The study also suggests some of the difficulties that teachers of EMI face, such as coping with various cultural expectations, linguistic differences, and the necessity of providing a broad curriculum content, while incorporating culture in their teaching. Despite these difficulties, teachers apply a number of strategies to incorporate cultural elements, such as role-plays, discussions of cultural festivals, and invitations to cultural experts to provide information. Such activities are aimed at developing intercultural communicative competence and providing students with proper preparation for international interactions.

The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on EMI and cultural integration with

practical recommendations for improving EMI practice in China and beyond. The study emphasises the critical need for a variety of professional development activities—beyond usual workshops—to give EMI instructors the capacity to incorporate elements of culture organically into instruction. This research effectively makes the case for an EMI model of change on the basis that by overcoming barriers in the shape of poor training, curricular constraints, and lack of university support, EMI programmes can actually equip students for competitiveness in the new globalising world—not just linguistic competence but also intercultural communicative competence.

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This thesis is as much a reflection of my own work as of the diligence and guidance of all the people referred to above. I have come to know from this research how elements of culture can be used in pedagogy, particularly in the context of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). I have been in a position to gain an understanding of the intricate interrelatedness of pedagogy, culture, and language and how they affect teaching and learning practices in today's globalising world. The exposure has also served to enhance my understanding of the significance of intercultural communicative competence in education and reinforced my conviction in the transformative power of education to transcend cultural differences. The challenges that have confronted me en route have ensured that I was strong, malleable, and grateful for disagreements. Generally, this study not only served to further my depth of knowledge as well as workplace capabilities, but also enabled me to meaningfully contribute toward language learning with more cultural sensitivity and awareness. Thank you for joining me on this tremendous journey.

## List of Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full Form</b>
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
CRP	Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
DELTA	Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults
DMIS	Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity ]
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELF	English as a Lingua Franca
ELT	English Language Teaching
EMEMUS	English-medium Education in Multilingual University Settings
EMI	English as a Medium of Instruction
ESL	English as a Second Language
GCSE	The General Certificate of Secondary Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
iCLT	Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching
IA	Intercultural Awareness
ICC	Intercultural Communicative Competence
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
MOE	Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

This chapter introduces the background of the research project, beginning with a concise description of my own practice as a student and teacher of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) history classes at a Chinese university (Section 1.1). These experiences have had a great impact on my interest in studying the incorporation of culture in EMI classrooms and its effect on teaching and learning practices. Next, the chapter presents an overview of EMI in the context of Chinese higher education (Section 1.2). This section covers an overview of the development of EMI in China and the growing trend to use English as the medium of instruction in various fields in Chinese universities. The research questions, explained in Section 1.3, make an attempt to bridge language pedagogy to intercultural sensibility by placing Chinese university teachers' perceptions and practices for integrating culture in EMI in a broader, holistic paradigm. The necessity for and aims of this study are set out in Section 1.4. Finally, the structure of this thesis is mentioned in Section 1.5.

### **1.1 Personal Background**

This study is strongly underpinned by my personal life experiences as an English learner and EMI history teacher at a Chinese university. These experiences have shaped my understanding of language, culture, and pedagogy and constituted the foundations of my exploration of the integration of cultural content in the EMI classroom.

During my secondary school years, my learning of the English language was largely confined to grammar and translation. Word-for-word translation and grammatical accuracy were stressed, but not cultural awareness and communicative ability. The approach used was predominantly didactic, with teachers guiding the students through the mechanics of language but without provoking a reflective awareness of the ways in which language and culture are inseparable. Although I was formally instructed in language skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking as part of a university requirement, it was always related to the mechanics of language. Culture-related courses, such as literature and cultural studies, were under general studies, but there was limited exposure to foreign lecturers at the university, and there was a lack of application of actual cultural experiences. Therefore, I had minimal opportunity to investigate the idea of culture in any meaningful way or consider its implications for language learning and teaching at secondary school and later at the university level. As part of my university studies, the question of how culture may be defined and how it impacts language

teaching was not explicitly answered.

As a novice EMI teacher at a Chinese university where I taught history in English, I found myself replicating the approach I had experienced as a student. The lack of cultural engagement in my own education had a significant impact on my early teaching practices. In my role, which was supposed to be both a language and content instructor, I focused heavily on delivering historical content through English, ensuring that students grasped key historical concepts and contextual knowledge. While I also clarified grammatical structures and translated terminology to support comprehension, my emphasis on content delivery often left limited space to explore the cultural dimensions that could have deepened students' engagement with the subject matter. Reference books and textbooks supplied the primary input of any culture presented in the class, and little effort was made to consciously include cultural considerations in the course learning. Despite the greater emphasis on the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in Chinese universities (Zou, 2025), I never realised the significance of including aspects of culture in the EMI classroom.

Over time, I observed changes in the learning environment. Developments in multimedia technology in teaching introduced new ways of enhancing the language learning experience, such as the use of videos, computer programmes, and websites in the classroom. My instruction previously relied on traditional materials, such as textbooks, printed texts, and classroom discussions, which, while effective in some ways, were, in my experience, less engaging and interactive than multimedia materials. To leverage the benefits of multimedia technology, Chinese universities began providing instructors with specialised facilities and training, including interactive language software, video exercises, and online discussions, all designed to help students develop more experiential communication skills through dynamic and interactive media. This revolution in technology was valuable as institutions themselves took extra steps to provide audio-visual facilities (language labs, instructional videos, and multimedia courses) to help teachers and students build more interactive and engaging lessons. However, with developments in multimedia technologies to optimise the presentation of content and language, it became challenging to put the tools towards optimising the presentation of the cultural content aspects within the EMI class, and thus, the scope remained unexploited while delivering content. My talks with instructors revealed the same lack of awareness of culture, and I began to realise that many instructors, such as myself, had never been taught to consider the presence of culture in teaching language and how to utilise it in the

classroom through impactful methods.

What had an effect on me was during my master's thesis, when I did a research project that explored using culture in the process of acquiring language. This was before becoming an EMI history teacher, and an early progression in my process of idea creation that had an effect on my own teaching practice later on. With reference to early work concerning culture and language teaching, such as Kramsch (1993), Byram's (1997) proposed model of intercultural communicative competence, and research into how English Language Teaching (ELT) treats integration of intercultural sensitivity, I examined how culture affects language acquisition, enables intercultural communication, and provides benefits and pitfalls in teaching implementation. The readings illustrated a complex and subtle intertwining of language and culture, and the way they are engaged in the construction of communication and meaning. This made me reflect on my own practice and the daily applications of such research in the world. I understood that culture is not an afterthought or accessory to be added to the teaching of language, but that it actually shapes the way language is learned, taught, and interpreted. This consciousness was also explored in the Discussion chapter of my PhD thesis.

This new consciousness made me reflect on my past EMI teaching habits, particularly the lack of cultural incorporation in my classroom. I asked myself how Chinese EMI teachers, like me, understood the culture and its role in the teaching process. How did we conceptualise culture when teaching English? How did we embed culture in our classes, if at all? These were the questions that formed the basis of my PhD research. The possibility of carrying out doctoral studies offered the potential for further exploring such concerns and examining Chinese EMI teachers' attitudes and practices towards incorporating culture into their teaching.

By conducting this exploratory research in my master's thesis, I hoped to gain a better understanding of the Chinese EMI teachers' attitudes toward culture and integration. Therefore, this PhD research seeks not only to examine the teachers' beliefs but also their everyday practices of integrating cultural content into their teaching. By making comments on these very important issues, I am endeavouring to stimulate a broader discourse on the value of cultural incorporation in EMI and offer pragmatic recommendations for ongoing language pedagogical practice.

The contributions of this PhD study will hopefully fill a key gap in the literature on Chinese

EMI, particularly in cultural integration content. While there is ample research being carried out concerning issues faced by teachers of EMI in non-English native-speaking countries, there has not been much effort toward explaining the incorporation of culture within EMI classes in China. This investigation aims to contribute an enhanced explanation of the issues related to the integration of culture in the case of EMI classrooms and make recommendations about improving teaching processes in such contexts.

Finally, my own personal experience of teaching and being taught has profoundly influenced the direction of this research. In my own teaching experience, the lack of exposure to cultural experience and, in my initial teaching experience, the comparatively narrow emphasis on culture, highlighted starkly a general lack of attention to EMI teaching that I have tried to address with this research. Through an emphasis on the cultural dimensions of teaching EMI in China, this research also aims to provide some insights into the broader conversation about how instructors could become better prepared to navigate the highly interconnected yet equally conflicting intersections of language, culture, and schooling within an increasingly globalised context.

## **1.2 EMI in the Chinese Context**

While Macaro et al. (2018) define EMI as the use of English to teach academic subjects in countries where the majority language is not English, others, such as Fenton-Smith et al. (2017), extend the term to include English-speaking countries with significant international student populations where subjects like science, engineering, and business are taught in English.

Although some of EMI's drawbacks include potential language barriers or unequal opportunities to access EMI materials, it also presents valuable opportunities for students and instructors. For students, EMI provides the possibility of learning the English language at the same time as acquiring academic content in their desired field. In higher education, EMI provides academics with access to international scholarship and greater exposure to international colleagues, and enables the internationalisation of their institutions. It also enhances the development of an internationalised academic community by strengthening the exchange of ideas beyond linguistic and cultural borders (Dearden, 2014). In the past several years, EMI has become a prominent characteristic of Chinese higher education. As higher education has developed and the internationalisation trend has intensified, EMI is now being

widely implemented in Chinese universities for the purposes of improving educational quality and international competitiveness. Section 1.2 provides an overview of the present state of EMI in China, situating its practice, challenges, and policies under which it has evolved in context.

According to the 2023 National Education Development Statistical Bulletin, 47.63 million students studied in China's higher education, an increase of 1.08 million from 2022, with a gross enrolment rate of 60.2% (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2024). This growth in student enrolments is part of a general expansion of China's higher education, propelled by government policy to significantly expand access to higher education in the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* and subsequent planning documents (MOE, 2010). With increasing student enrolments, Chinese universities face pressure to balance expanded access to higher education with maintaining high-quality education. This enrolment growth has underscored the importance of education quality, as emphasised in government reports and academic studies (Jin & Cortazzi, 2011). Universities are thus increasing their research outputs, academic staff qualifications, and international collaborations to make them more globally competitive. One of the most important global engagement approaches is embracing EMI, which supports aligning universities with worldwide academic standards and strengthening their internationalisation (Macaro et al., 2018).

China's globalisation of higher education also includes the recruitment of international students. According to the *Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad (2022)*, the number of international students studying in China has continued to rise, reflecting China's increasing appeal as a global academic destination and the importance of strengthening international collaborations (Wang & Miao, 2022). This increase in foreign students is a sign of China's dedication to becoming an international education centre and promoting greater academic exchange and cross-cultural interaction.

To keep up with the rising internationalisation of higher education, EMI is increasingly becoming a normal part of the curriculum of China's universities, with a growing number of programmes delivered in English, especially in business, science, and engineering. According to Gu and Lee (2018), many Chinese universities have introduced EMI courses as a means of enhancing their international competitiveness and meeting the growing demand for English language proficiency. This shift towards education through EMI is one of China's measures to

enhance its international academic status and draw more foreign students, helping them to become a major player in the global higher education sector.

Progressive policies have emerged to promote internationalisation in Chinese higher education, encouraging universities to incorporate EMI in their curricula. The Chinese Ministry of Education's (2010) *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* emphasises enhancing foreign language education, including English, and fostering international programmes to boost global competitiveness. The plan supports developing talent in fields like science, technology, and health, with initiatives to attract international students and improve educational quality, which may include EMI programmes. These efforts reflect a broader strategy to prepare Chinese graduates for the global workplace where English proficiency is increasingly important for career advancement in science, technology, and health (MOE, 2010).

The Chinese Ministry of Education (2010) has supported policies to promote EMI in higher education, including in clinical medicine programmes, to enhance internationalisation and attract international students. These efforts align with national strategies to strengthen global competitiveness as outlined in initiatives like the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)*. This policy is a reaction to the growing demand for English-medium programmes, particularly in fields such as medicine, where English is the global lingua franca of professional and scientific discourse. With EMI programmes, China seeks to coordinate its education system with international academic standards in order to increase global recognition of qualifications, enable greater collaboration in multinational research projects, and prepare graduates for an international healthcare career. This link with international standards is aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of Chinese universities in the global market for education, as well as Chinese graduates' employability in the globalising job market.

Universities, in implementing these national policies, have been devising strategies for the establishment of EMI, sometimes even starting with specific fields or subjects. English integration in these programmes is viewed as an attempt to not only enhance the language level of students but also equip them with the required skills to participate in international professional and academic circles. For example, the Ministry of Education encouraged the adoption of EMI among business, engineering, and medicine universities where international

communication and cooperation are essential (Jablonkai & Hou, 2021). However, considering the large number of EMI programmes, widespread variation in the way different universities adopt EMI still exists. There are institutions that are implementing EMI in full, but others are still committed to delivering most courses in Chinese.

Despite the enthusiasm towards EMI, its implementation in Chinese tertiary education is faced with several challenges. The most evident challenge is the language proficiency of teachers and students. Research has shown that a vast majority of EMI teachers in China find it hard to deliver content efficiently in English, particularly in technical fields that involve specialised vocabulary (Hu & Lei, 2014). Teachers in EMI programmes in Asian universities often face challenges in delivering content effectively in English, particularly for non-native English-speaking students, due to limited institutional support for developing teaching strategies suited to multilingual classroom contexts (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Beyond language proficiency, the pedagogical content knowledge to manage a bilingual classroom and present content in a way that is both comprehensible and engaging constitutes a significant barrier to successful EMI delivery. Scholarship has pointed out that even if most lecturers may be proficient in the language, they lack the competencies to adjust their teaching approaches to deal with the specific challenges posed by EMI (Hu, 2019; Macaro et al., 2018). This entails the capacity to scaffold content for students who are not fully English proficient, and the need to have strategies for teaching linguistically diverse students and to make challenging academic content accessible to everyone. Consequently, this disparity between language capacity and effective pedagogical strategies for EMI teaching can hamper the provision of effective English-medium instruction in Chinese universities.

However, issues regarding students' English proficiency in EMI courses are significant. Some students struggle to understand academic materials taught in English due to inadequate proficiency at university entry (Hu, 2019). Chinese universities require incoming students to achieve a minimum score on the English subtest of the National University Entrance Examination, but this threshold is below the level needed for EMI, such as comprehending complex academic content (Hu, 2019). As a result, many students face difficulties accessing content in-depth, leading to challenges in learning attainment and potential dissatisfaction as evidenced by increased anxiety and lack of positive attitudes toward English learning (Hu, 2019). Differences in English proficiency can also create inequalities in learning attainment, potentially impacting the success of EMI programmes as a whole (Rose & McKinley, 2017).

Hence, some institutions offer pre-sessional English courses to enhance students' academic English skills prior to beginning their degree courses (Kirkpatrick, 2014). There is also a recognised need for additional language support for EMI students, potentially involving English language specialists (Macaro et al., 2018). Moreover, institutions should provide professional development for EMI lecturers, including training in EMI teaching methodologies and strategies for supporting students' academic literacy (Muttaqin, 2022).

The use of EMI also raises concerns over cultural integration, such as adapting instructional materials for the purposes of supporting multiple views of culture, establishing vehicles for handling the threat of misunderstandings due to differing academic norms, and affording students and teachers the provision to discuss the interaction of host country and international educational practices. While language proficiency was a key focus of EMI programmes historically, current perspectives emphasise the integration of disciplinary knowledge and discipline-specific language skills to ensure successful EMI (Galloway & Rose, 2021). However, while EMI policies occasionally mention cultural goals, such as spreading local culture, these remain secondary, and efforts to embed cultural aspects in the curriculum are minimal (Dearden, 2014). Recent research indicates that cultural embedding in English-medium Education in Multilingual University Settings (EMEMUS) remains secondary, with progress in addressing disciplinary communication practices, intercultural differences in discourse, and cultural influences on knowledge construction (see, for example, Dafouz & Smit, 2020). According to some researchers, such as Byram (2008), the emphasis on disciplinary content and language study often neglects culture, which is essential for students' engagement in global academic and professional spaces, hindering intercultural communicative competence. This imbalance can hamper students' development of intercultural communicative competence (see definition in Subsection 2.6.1), a key component of education in today's globalised world. Studies have also emphasised the necessity of the integration of cultural content in EMI programmes because it enables students to develop intercultural communicative competence, one of the necessary competencies needed for effective functioning in globalised contexts (Macaro et al., 2018).

However, teachers often lack clear guidelines for effective EMI teaching, which may include challenges in addressing cultural aspects (Dearden, 2014). The culture in EMI is of a different kind than in other contexts of language teaching since it is not so much a matter of learning languages as of enhancing greater awareness of cultural contexts, values, and practices that

form part of the academic subjects to be taught. This shift in focus—from language learning to cultural integration—requires careful consideration of how culture may be integrated into language teaching with potential implications for EMI courses (Byram, 2008). Further, while EMI brings the possibility of greater international participation, it also risks exacerbating current educational inequalities. As per research conducted by Phan et al. (2024), EMI can reduce the English proficiency gap between non-English-proficient and English-proficient students, as less proficient students benefit more from EMI exposure, though socioeconomic barriers may limit access without institutional support. Weaker-capacity English-proficient learners have difficulty learning the curriculum because it largely reduces academic achievement, as well as alienates them. Rose and McKinley (2017) note that some Japanese students in EMI courses faced significant difficulties, sometimes leading to student course or university attrition, highlighting the need for adequate language support. Here, the lack of strong language support mechanisms and facilities also contributes to the challenge in the sense that students from multilingual backgrounds get excluded from an EMI classroom.

Overall, EMI in China has significantly advanced, driven by the push for internationalisation policies and supported by increasing student enrolment and global interactions. Its success is, however, tempered by reverses in language proficiency, pedagogical adjustment, and cultural integration. For the successful implementation of EMI, greater focus must be placed on incorporating cultural content into programmes. This would enable students to gain intercultural competencies to thrive in a globalised world, close learning outcomes disparities, and enhance the global competitiveness of Chinese higher education.

This research did not specifically track the demographic makeup of the students, but, understanding the internationalisation of higher education in China, it can be inferred that these EMI programmes are generally students of Chinese origin studying at home, with an increasing number of students coming from different countries. Such a diversity in composition is the main reason the participating teachers have to manage the educational issues and intercultural communication that they meet, because both local and international students are experiencing different languages and cultural changes.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

In researching the integration of culture in Chinese higher education EMI programmes, the

study explores the following specific research questions.

- 1) In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture?
- 2) What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI?
- 3) To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery?

These questions are designed to guide the inquiry into the perceptions of EMI teachers, their practices, and how much culture is integrated within EMI classrooms.

#### **1.4 Significance of the Research**

This research holds significance for both theoretical and practical reasons as it contributes to the expanding body of knowledge on EMI and cultural integration and may offer insights that could potentially inform efforts to enhance EMI practices in China and beyond. This research aims to contribute to the literature on EMI by focusing on cultural integration, a topic that has received less attention compared to the study of language proficiency or content delivery. Prior work on EMI has explored linguistic proficiency, pedagogical challenges, and stakeholder beliefs (Macaro et al., 2018), but the role of culture in shaping EMI classroom practices remains underexplored. By investigating how EMI instructors conceptualise and integrate culture into their teaching practices, this work aims to address a potentially significant gap within EMI research.

A key theoretical framework underpinning this study is intercultural communication theory, which emphasises the critical role of culture in learning and communication (Byram, 1997). Byram (1997) argues that cultural awareness is central to developing intercultural communicative competence, and integrating culture into language teaching is essential for enabling students to engage in intercultural communication. This present research examines how EMI instructors conceptualise culture and attempt to reveal the manner in which culture is integrated (or not integrated) into EMI courses. This contributes to the theoretical understanding of the connection between culture and language in EMI, particularly in non-Western settings like China, where cultural integration in EMI has received less focus.

In addition, the study is guided by Kramersch's (1993) concept of the third place, a hybrid space where learners negotiate multiple cultural identities, creating a new, in-between cultural space distinct from the target or source culture. Kramersch (1993) argues that this cultural mixing fosters a "symbolic competence" (p. 238), enabling learners to mediate between cultural contexts and represent them in multifaceted ways. This concept provides a theoretical framework for understanding how EMI teachers might facilitate cultural integration in classrooms with diverse student backgrounds. The present research investigates how students can engage with the subject matter as well as with the cultural components of the subjects they are studying. The theory provides an explanation for how cultural integration impacts intercultural communicative competence and the student learning experience.

Furthermore, the study can contribute to EMI theory in non-Western contexts. Whereas cultural integration in EMI has been studied in works by Kramersch (1993) and Byram (1997), who explore cultural negotiation and intercultural communicative competence, the specific challenges faced by Chinese teaching personnel are less thoroughly examined (Hu & Lei, 2014). For instance, Byram (1997) addresses the integration of intercultural competence into language education. In China, however, lecturers can easily find themselves at variance with each other when promoting English proficiency versus intercultural awareness. This is replicated in real dilemmas, such as overemphasising linguistic accuracy against discussing cultural nuances or using valuable class time for grammar practice rather than learning a range of alternative cultural perspectives. While Kramersch (1993) emphasises the importance of cultural negotiation in language teaching, Fang and Sah (2023) suggest that the emphasis on English-only policies in Chinese EMI courses may limit opportunities for cultural integration as teachers and students rely on translanguaging to address local cultural elements. This kind of disequilibrium can be confusing to instructors regarding how to apply the cultural dimension of EMI in an effective manner, thereby limiting the ability of students to achieve intercultural communicative competence. Additionally, in China, with language teaching often concentrating on vocabulary and grammar, adding culture to EMI programmes is a complex and sometimes controversial affair (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Hu and Lei (2014) suggest that the emphasis on English proficiency in Chinese EMI courses, coupled with compromised teaching practices, may limit opportunities for cultural integration. This problem is a result of entrenched habits of teaching and incompatible attitudes toward the role of culture in language education. Overall, although these are serious problems, the extent to which these problems systematically undermine integration is difficult to predict. This present study will investigate these categories, presenting

fresh evidence about determinants of EMI practice in China.

The acknowledgement of this study is that it deliberately depicts culture as a whole, an idea that corresponds with its preliminary aim, which is to reflect Chinese EMI instructors' genuine and varied ways of understanding and applying it in their practice. The main advantage of this approach is its capacity to chart the range of different understandings that arise from the participants' statements— from culture as “lived experience” to “academic disciplines”. Such a range was essential to not impose a narrowly defined, preconceived definition of culture, and at the same time to allow the instructors’ own multidimensional perspectives to be visible. Nevertheless, this decision, as to the methodology, also has an implication, as a possible disadvantage, the openness of the scope, which, by all means, limits the profundity of any single facet of culture. Future researchers can extend the groundwork of this study by conducting in-depth studies of the various cultural dimensions, focusing on the role of culture in a particular academic discipline and its impact on students' intercultural competence development.

## **1.5 Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is intended to respond systematically to the research questions and provide a critical examination of EMI teachers’ practices and attitudes towards cultural integration in Chinese higher education. Chapter 1 introduces the background of the research project and outlines the research questions, followed by a discussion of the significance of the research and the structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2 is an extensive literature review of EMI and culture integration. The chapter centres on the theoretical foundations of EMI with an emphasis on its application in higher education, particularly in Chinese universities. The chapter also evaluates previous research on EMI with overarching themes emanating from the literature, including language proficiency, content pedagogy, and culture depiction in the EMI curriculum. The chapter is critical of issues challenging EMI educators, both English language training and intercultural awareness. The literature review also identifies gaps in the research, especially regarding the integration of culture in EMI settings—that is, in non-Western societies like China. The chapter concludes with the presentation of research questions guiding this research.

Chapter 3 gives an account of the research methodology applied in this study. It explains and justifies the research paradigm, methodology, and design employed in this study. This comprises an elaboration of data collection instruments of research, such as interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations. The chapter provides details in relation to the participant selection procedure, the process of data collection, and data preparation and organisation for analysis. Additionally, the validity and reliability of the research tools and ethical concerns in the data collection process are discussed. This chapter provides transparency and establishes a foundation for understanding how the study was conducted.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study, systematically addressing the three research questions to provide a detailed analysis of EMI teachers' perceptions of and practices around cultural integration in Chinese higher education. Based on quantitative evidence from online questionnaires, stimulated recall interviews, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews, it answers the first research question (RQ1) in an exploration into how EMI teachers conceptualise culture, revealing diverse conceptions, such as culture as a multifaceted or subject-related concept. The chapter subsequently addresses the second research question (RQ2), looking at what roles teachers believe culture can play in their EMI practice, including encouraging intercultural competence and enriching subject knowledge, and suggesting ways of teaching, including role-plays and debates on culture. Finally, it speaks to the third research question (RQ3), exploring to what extent and in what manner such knowledge is expressed in their teaching practice—whether through implicit cues or overt lessons—while describing constraints as, for example, institutional forces, inadequate training, and student demands that restrict cultural integration. Through the combination of these areas in one chapter, Chapter 4 offers an overarching view of Chinese university EMI teachers' opinions, motivations, and actual practices of cultural integration in teaching.

Chapter 5 provides an in-depth discussion of the findings in reference to existing literature. The findings are compared with previous studies of EMI and cultural integration in order to shed light on how Chinese EMI teachers navigate the complexities of language ability with intercultural awareness. The chapter examines the use of cultural integration in developing students' intercultural communicative competence against the background of intercultural communication and symbolic competence theories. The chapter assesses the pedagogical implications of the results on EMI pedagogy and recommends how cultural integration can be strengthened in the curriculum. The chapter also identifies the professional development

requirements of EMI teachers and the institutional support required to aid cultural integration in EMI programmes.

Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter of the thesis that provides a summary of the research findings and implications. The chapter discusses the theoretical and practical meanings of the research and the importance of basing culture on EMI programmes, particularly in non-Western countries like China. It also acknowledges the limitations of the research and proposes further research areas, such as investigating students' attitudes and further exploring the cultural dimensions of EMI teaching in other non-Western contexts. In addition, the chapter provides advice on further improvement in EMI practice in universities, including strengthening more culturally sensitive pedagogy, but these are issued with caution to remain within the limits and parameters of the study.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

Chapter 2 attempts to chart the research literature on culture and EMI, interweaving five principal lines of inquiry: the nature of culture, the meeting of culture and language, the role of culture in language teaching, the nature of EMI, and EMI's development in Chinese higher education. Chapter 2 begins by examining the complex concept of culture, laying the foundation for subsequent discussions (Section 2.1). It then seeks to shed light on how scholars view the complex relationship between culture and language (Section 2.2), prior to considering pragmatic ways of incorporating cultural aspects into language acquisition (Section 2.3). The emphasis then broadens to include the place of EMI in the globalisation context of higher education (Section 2.4), going on to explore the specific context of EMI in Chinese universities (Section 2.5), with emphasis placed on the integration of culture within the institutions. Apart from these topics, the chapter also examines the role of teachers' intercultural awareness (Section 2.6) and EMI Pedagogical Practices (Section 2.7). Then, the institutional and policy contexts supportive of cultural integration are explored in Section 2.8, while Section 2.9 discusses the obstacles and challenges facing such initiatives in EMI contexts. With this literature review, the research gap is set at the end of the chapter, after which are listed the study objectives and questions.

### **2.1 The Concept of Culture**

The concept of culture lies at the heart of understanding how educational practices, such as EMI, can foster intercultural communicative competence in diverse settings like Chinese higher education. Culture, as a multifaceted and evolving construct, shapes not only individual and collective identities but also the pedagogical approaches that instructors adopt in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. This section, Section 2.1, explores the theoretical foundations of culture, tracing its definitional evolution and analytical perspectives to establish a robust framework for examining its role in EMI teaching. Beginning with historical definitions that highlight culture's complexity (Section 2.1.1), the discussion progresses to four distinct theoretical lenses—cognitive, structural, symbolic, and critical—that illuminate its ideational dimensions (Section 2.1.2). Finally, Section 2.1.3 looks at the relational and intercultural aspects of culture, emphasising its dynamic interplay with language and education in a globalised context. By unpacking these layers, this section sets the stage for investigating how EMI instructors perceive and integrate culture, addressing a critical yet underexplored dimension of language pedagogy.

### 2.1.1 Definitions of Culture

Different traditions of human action underpin different concepts of culture and conceptualisations of culture in educational contexts like EMI. The etymological and conceptual history of “culture” is here traced, mapping the changes in its meanings and sketching seminal scholarly definitions on which contemporary studies are based. It includes hard-core theories, such as Tylor's (1871) anthropological definition of culture as an organism and Kramsch's (1993) need to pair culture with language and pedagogy. To add even more richness to this debate, it also includes the “Big C” and “small c” dichotomy (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993), Hofstede's (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions, and Holliday's (1999, 2021) small cultures approach. Together, they offer a broad context in which to situate culture's wide-ranging contribution to pedagogy for EMI, setting the stage for discussions to come.

Tylor (1871) is credited with the first employment of “culture” in its contemporary sense, taken from the German *Kultur* (cultivated or cultured) to describe the social behaviour of specific groups. He described it as an elaborate totality of knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, traditions, and every other custom-acquired ability or aptitude of mankind in society (Tylor, 1871). He would, for example, include a society's judicial system or oral folklore tradition within its culture, underscoring the concept's inclusivist sense. This comprehensive approach set a foundational baseline for further anthropological and educational research.

On the basis of Tylor's (1871) conceptualisation of culture, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) conducted a systematic review of over 300 definitions of culture, condensing them to a master summary of their own. They characterised culture as consisting of overt and covert patterns of behaviour learned and transmitted through the use of symbols, such as tools, works of art, or written words, that form the characteristic products of human groups. At the root of these are traditional values and their understandings, as, for example, honour or communalism in a specific society (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). Respect for ancestor rituals, for instance, may be a value attributed to its culture and manifesting in both material and immaterial things.

Subsequent authors give more complex accounts. Balazs (1998) reformulated Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952) definition of a three-stage development process: stage one, an etymological phase in which culture is synonymous with cultivation (for example, skills acquired by an individual); stage two, a cultivation phase of individuals and society (for

example, schooling that shapes group membership); and stage three, a sociological focus on ways of living (for example, city versus rural living). This multi-strand strategy points to culture's evolution from development at the individual to communal level as relevant to how EMI teachers can foster cultural consciousness in multilingual classrooms.

Sociology of culture emerged during the late 1970s, applying sociological methods to research the production and circulation of cultural objects—music, painting, theatre, and literature (Sewell, 1999). Sewell (1999) further argues that in the 1980s, this interest had spread widely, dividing the study of culture into theoretical categories. He describes culture in two ways: as a system of thought in the abstract and as a tangible system of ideas and conduct, including learned behaviour (for example, manners), institutional sense-making (for example, schools' norms), creativity (for example, artistic innovation), symbolic systems (for example, language), and practice (for example, ordinary routines). In the context of an EMI, this would include considering why a textbook's content (symbols) or the manner in which it is taught in class (practice) is a representation of cultural influences.

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) utilised the “Big C” and “small c” contrast in order to differentiate factors of culture within teaching a language. “Big C” culture comprises officially visible, salient accomplishments, such as canonical literature like Shakespeare, historically significant milestones like the Industrial Revolution, or formal institutions like parliamentary systems in a society linked to its elites or national character. “Small c” culture, then, comprises general, abstract habits, such as greeting customs (for example, Chinese bowing), food habits (for example, tea drinking), or social expectations (for example, punctuality expectations). Tomalin and Stempleski asserted that both the “Big C” and “small c” are required in cultural knowledge in education. “Big C” may occur for EMI instructors in a lecture on British economic history, while “small c” may occur while discussing business negotiation tactics. Kramsch (1993) went on to explain that “Big C” formalises scholarly content while “small c” renders classroom talk real, such as students negotiating local means during a science discussion. Hinkel (1999) also theorised that “small c” culture provides the foundation for effective social conventions of functioning—such as tone perception in debate—required for effective EMI instruction among diverse student populations.

Hofstede's (1980, 2001) theory of cultural dimensions, developed in *Culture's Consequences*, provides a structural framework to explain the influence of culture on behaviour with

applications to EMI teaching. In the 1980 edition, Hofstede introduced four dimensions: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. The 2001 edition expanded to five dimensions, adding long-term vs. short-term orientation, while a sixth dimension, indulgence vs. restraint, was introduced later (Hofstede et al., 2010). For example, in high power distance cultures like China, EMI teachers may adopt teacher-centred approaches, demanding student obedience, while collectivism encourages collaborative tasks. Conversely, teachers from low power-distance, individualist societies, such as the Netherlands, may foster participative discussions. Hofstede's (2001) analysis of 50 countries, now integrated into tools like the Culture Factor's country comparison tool, equips EMI teachers to navigate cultural differences by tailoring content delivery to students' cultural norms.

Holliday's (1999, 2021) small cultures' idea shifts away from general, fixed national stereotypes to dynamic, emergent group subcultures. Different from Hofstede's (2021) macro-approach, Holliday has an idea of culture as co-construction work via interactions, such as the pedagogy of an EMI teacher, students' experience, and shared activities, bringing a specific classroom culture into existence. For instance, an engineering class will develop its own 'small culture' out of problem-solving practices with students that will differ from that of a business course's negotiation dynamic. Holliday (2021) resists essentialist constructions (for example, "Chinese culture" as homogeneous) that Hofstede's (2021) model might encourage and instead advocates adaptive, context-dependent cultures. In EMI, this requires teachers to attend to the micro-level cultural interactions—such as humour or groupings—that condition teaching and learning, and not rely on broad national generalisations.

These definitions, including Tylor's (1871) broad whole, Hofstede's (1980, 2001) formal dimensions, and Holliday's (1999, 2021) emergent subcultures, provide a profound, multidimensional perspective through which to consider culture in EMI classrooms. They span across the bases of history, symbolic meanings, educational applications, structural influences, and dynamic interactions, giving substance to examine how culture is realised in EMI classrooms in Chinese higher education.

### **2.1.2 Four Perspectives of Understanding Culture**

Cultural notions have also been examined based on various theoretical positions, which have helped to explain how culture is considered as an ideational system. For instance, Keesing

(1974) specifies four modes of thinking about culture: cognitive, structural, symbolic, and critical. Cognitive centres on mental activities, such as thinking, reasoning, or memory, and conceives culture as a bounded structure characterised by individual and collective cognition. These views provide a paradigm for the understanding of culture's influence in learning environments like EMI, with an offering of frames through which one can perceive its influence on teaching and learning. The structural perspective is concerned with how something is built or organised. A structural viewpoint is assumed when a family is described as a collection of people or when it is phrased that a single family has five members. In addition, the symbolic worldview is based on the symbolic meaning that people generate and build upon via social contact. For some young individuals, for example, the symbolic meaning of smoking, which promotes a favourable image, overrides the facts about smoking and its consequences. Finally, the critical viewpoint includes evaluations of something's good and bad attributes. According to Roberts et al. (2000), ethnographic approaches to culture, which integrate cognitive and symbolic perspectives, emphasise an active critical viewpoint, encouraging language learners to investigate how cultural practices came to be and persist through fieldwork and intercultural analysis.

Cognitive anthropology, emerging in the 1960s, emphasises culture as knowledge abstracted from behaviour and practice organised into structures that can be analysed as linked components in taxonomies and models (Keesing, 1974). In *Language Learners as Ethnographers*, Roberts et al. (2000) illustrate related ideas by encouraging language learners to explore cultural knowledge through ethnographic fieldwork, enabling them to understand and navigate cultural practices in context. This is strongly connected to Goodenough's (1964) viewpoint: culture is not a material phenomenon and does not consist of things, people, behaviour, or emotions; rather, it is an organisation of these things and the form of things people have in their minds—their models for perceiving and reacting to and interpreting them. A society's culture consists of anything one needs to know or believe in that functions in a way acceptable to its members (Goodenough, 1964). To put it another way, culture is a mental model in people's minds that allows them to perceive objects and others.

Lévi-Strauss (1971), in *Mythologiques: L'Homme Nu*, presents culture as a system of accumulative mental creations, rooted in his structuralist anthropology. He posits that human cognition universally organises cultural phenomena—particularly myths—into structured patterns reflecting binary oppositions (for example, nature vs. culture). In his final volume of

*Mythologiques: L'Homme Nu*, Lévi-Strauss analyses American Indian myths, tracing interconnected symbolic systems across societies to reveal underlying cognitive frameworks. He argues that myths are not isolated narratives but collective mental constructs, shaped by universal principles of thought, such as logical transformations and oppositions. Cultural practices, like rituals or kinship systems, serve as raw materials for these mental structures, which transcend specific societies. Lévi-Strauss's structural approach seeks to uncover the "grammar" of human cognition, prioritising universal patterns over contextual particulars. While *Mythologiques: L'Homme Nu* focuses on mythic thought rather than a broad theory of culture, it underscores his view that culture emerges from the mind's capacity to impose order on chaotic experiences. This perspective, emphasising cognitive universals, contrasts with ethnographic approaches valuing local specificity, cementing Lévi-Strauss's influence in cultural studies.

Sociologists Parsons (1951) and Ogburn (1964) analyse culture from a structural perspective, with Ogburn explicitly distinguishing material culture, like buildings and equipment, from nonmaterial culture, like language, customs, or values. In *On Culture and Social Change*, Ogburn (1964) describes material culture as physical objects and nonmaterial culture as the meanings and practices shaping them, noting that material culture influences behaviour through nonmaterial symbolic systems. Parsons's *The Social System* (1951) emphasises nonmaterial culture, such as norms and values, within social structures. In the second edition of his book, *Sociology*, Giddens (1993) defines culture as shared ways of life, encompassing routines like dressing, family practices, work, religious rituals, and leisure, as well as the artefacts produced within these practices.

From the symbolic perspective, culture is defined as "a system of public meanings" (Roberts et al., 2000, p. 51). Cultural meanings are shared among groups within a culture and appear publicly through symbols and behaviours rather than being hidden in people's minds. This strategy is commonly associated with Geertz's (1973) and Schneider's (1968) work. Geertz (1973) is a proponent of "thick description" (p. 5) as opposed to looking for universal laws as a way of unscrambling the richness of context in social life in order to extract meaning and interpret values and behaviour. The phrase "thick description" refers to an anthropological strategy in which researchers write while immersed in a particular culture's environment, making clear, comprehensive allusions to participants' social acts and behaviours. Schneider (1968) defines culture as a set of units and rules that control interactions and behavioural

patterns.

Cognitive, structural, and symbolic methodologies were extensively criticised in the 1980s and 1990s for depicting culture as unchanging, uniform, consistent, universal, and shared by all individuals within a society. Instead, a critical cultural viewpoint is now recognised under many different categories, such as practice, resistance, history, and politics (Sewell, 1999). The critical perspective has been added to anthropology and other disciplines' descriptive and interpretive approaches to culture. This debate revolves around problems of power and political accountability (Roberts et al., 2000). Culture is defined as a field of activity marked by conscious action, power dynamics, conflict, contradiction, and change (Sewell, 1999). This point of view is concerned with critically examining and comprehending how the ideological perspective of power relations originates, such as how dominant information and ideas get normalised and naturalised.

### **2.1.3 Culture and Interculture**

Culture shapes the meaning of the world and the norms of perception (Samovar et al., 2016). As discussed in Section 2.1.1, culture is made up of the knowledge, beliefs, and practices that an individual must internalise in order to function as a member of a social group. This aligns with Tylor's (1871) foundational view of culture as a complex whole and Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952) emphasis on symbolic patterns transmitted across generations. Culture is not, however, an isolated or static entity; it is the product of an interpersonal process of meaning-making through interaction with other individuals, as Kramsch (1998) argues. This dynamic process enhances the diversity within cultures, in which there are several voices and identities (Collier, 2002). Based on Section 2.1.2's four perspectives—cognitive, structural, symbolic, and critical— this section, Section 2.1.3, proceeds to the negotiated and relational nature of culture, outlining the “interculture” concept as being built upon these assumptions.

If culture is then a social construct, as it has been seen to be, according to the critical approach set out in Section 2.1.2 (Sewell, 1999), whereby people living in a society collectively create meaning, then knowledge of culture itself is necessarily intercultural. Byram (1997) characterises “intercultural” (p. 31) as an ability to make one's way and bridge opposing cultural viewpoints, a skill learned through encounters and negotiations of sense within or across societies. This theory deviates from a monolithic vision of culture as one unitary, consolidated system and presents instead a mosaic of intersecting meanings created by cross-

cultural fertilisation. Interculture, thereby, does not appear as a definable entity so much as it is the living experience of cultural knowing in the world today, where boundaries become indistinct and hybridity is the norm.

Cultural contact spans a broad continuum, from distant cultural exchanges to interactions within diverse cultural groups. Effective communication in such interactions relies on intercultural awareness, which Brown (1990) considers essential to prevent miscommunication and foster mutual understanding. Without this awareness, miscommunication can prevail, inhibiting effective interaction. Byram (1997) clarifies that intercultural awareness entails the ability to explore and decipher a variety of cultural systems to assist individuals in bridging gaps in values, behaviour, and communication styles. Individuals with such sensitivity, Brown (1990) contends, employ multicultural understanding to navigate and promote harmony, a skill increasingly required in pluralistic settings like EMI classrooms.

Interculture transcends contact to be a place where cultural identities intersect and change. Kramersch (1993) elaborates on the concept of the “third place” (p. 238), a hybrid space where individuals negotiate between their native cultural schemas and others to create a new, interstitial cultural identity. This “third place” is less a physical location than an engaged process of meaning-making that enhances symbolic competence—the ability to mediate and represent cultural spaces in subtle ways (Kramersch, 1993). This perspective is particularly applicable within the context of EMI as teachers and students are not only dealing with English as a language system but also as a medium bearing globally and locally specific cultural meanings. Existing literature attests to this stand: Baker (2015) argues that intercultural awareness in English as a lingua franca (ELF) context involves the recognition of culture as emergent and dynamic rather than built around set norms. This fluidity contradicts the categorical definitions of culture discussed in Section 2.1.1 and is in line with the symbolic and critical theories in Section 2.1.2, where culture is a system of public meaning or a site of struggle and transformation (Geertz, 1973; Sewell, 1999).

Interculture is also of practical relevance in education, particularly within globalised contexts. According to Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence—the ability to communicate adequately and appropriately across cultural boundaries—is not so much a matter of knowledge about other cultures as of openness, attitudes and adaptability. Such competence is not innate but cultivated via conscious exposure to different cultural perspectives, which may be

facilitated by EMI programmes. Recent studies, for instance, Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023), indicate a heightened emphasis on intercultural competencies in higher education since they are perceived to endow students with the capabilities to succeed in complex, networked professional environments. In the Chinese EMI context, where teachers and students experience the collision of Chinese cultural tradition and global standards of scholarship, intercultural communication becomes a necessary frame of reference for the application of integration of cultures towards enhancing learning achievements.

To contextualise this study, culture is defined as a complex network of relationships, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that consciously and unconsciously unite a society (Crawford & MacLaren, 1996). This definition echoes Tylor's (1871) comprehensiveness while summarising the interpersonal relationships that Kramsch (1998) emphasised. Culture is manifested in shared behavioural patterns, interactions, cognitive schemas, and affective knowledge, acquired through socialisation, that set one cultural community apart from another. However, influenced by the intercultural turn, this study adopts an intercultural perspective in understanding culture not as an essentialised given product but as a relational and negotiated construct. This is particularly apt in the setting of education today, which is globalised, where EMI is a place for cultural exchange with demands for sensitivity to both global and local cultural flows.

#### **2.1.4 Section Summary**

This section traced the tripartite analysis theory of culture, charting its complexity and application to teaching EMI. Section 2.1.1 monitored the etymological and academic journey of the term “culture,” from Tylor's (1871) anthropological definition of culture as a complicated whole through to Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952) symbolic integration and Sewell's (1999) pluralist account as an initial understanding of culture as material and immaterial. Section 2.1.2 built on this basis in describing four strategies—cognitive, structural, symbolic, and critical—embraced by Keesing (1974) and others that offer different points of reference by which culture can be guided into examination as a system of power, organisation, knowledge, and meaning. These strategies make the role of culture in schools, such as EMI, where cognitive models, symbolic meaning, and critical forces intersect, transparent. Section 2.1.3 transferred these ideas to intercultural theory as, for example, in Byram (1997), Kramsch (1993, 1998), and later writers like Baker (2015) and Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023) to think about culture as a negotiated relational construct in globalised contexts. This intercultural turn,

focusing on hybridity and competence, is compatible with the present study's emphasis on cultural integration in EMI, arguing that culture is not a passive background but an engaged element of teaching and learning. Together, these subsections represent a detailed theoretical framework for how culture influences EMI teachers' perceptions and practices, leading to the subsequent empirical investigation.

## **2.2 The Relationship between Culture and Language**

This section explores the connection between culture and language, following the previous broad introduction to the concept of culture. When considering how to integrate culture into the language classroom, the relationship between culture and language provides a valuable starting point. Scholarly interest in this relationship has deep historical roots with significant developments in the modern era as linguistic science applied language analysis methods to cultural studies, resulting in a rich and varied understanding of their interplay (Klein, 2004). Klein (2004) highlights how teachers' beliefs and practices in foreign language classrooms shape the integration of culture, emphasising the dynamic interplay between cultural and language contexts. This perspective is particularly relevant in contemporary language education, where cultural sensitivity is essential for effective teaching and learning.

Culture and language have always been intertwined to create an interweave that has been researched over centuries. Lévi-Strauss (1958) positions language as both a result of culture, a system of social customary behaviour; part of culture, one of the forms that it assumes; and a precursor to culture, in which a complex communal system can be established. Under this structuralist view, language is an underlying structure that keeps in check and governs the more complex systems of culture, such as kinship, myth, or rituals, that distinguish human societies. This process means that language is not merely reflecting cultural values but is part of creating the structures by which they are interpreted and passed on. Other than this, culture and language also developed jointly thousands of years ago from shared human activity, including telling stories, trading, and cohabiting. As Kramsch (1998) emphasises, this ongoing evolution unfolds through social interactions where culture and language continuously reshape each other, a process evident in diverse educational settings like EMI today.

As scholarly attention to the interplay between culture and language grew increasingly prominent in the 1990s, researchers began to examine this relationship with greater scrutiny.

Chomsky (1998) departs from a strictly structuralist perspective, arguing that human beliefs about the world and its behaviour are integral to judgments of meaning and reference, doubting that semantic representation can be fully separated from world knowledge and beliefs. Aside from him, the relationship between culture and language is also often emphasised in modern literature with the underlying premise that culture and language are interwoven (Samovar et al., 2016).

Risager (2006) provides a fresh perspective by situating the culture–language relationship within a global context, emphasising their inseparable link as shared human and societal phenomena. She argues that culture and language are deeply interlinked, with cultural conditions inherently tied to linguistic practices, while also distinct in their functions. In her framework, Risager (2006) analyses this relationship through linguistic practices, resources, and systems, adopting social, psychological, and systemic perspectives. Additionally, Risager (2007) extends this discussion to culture and language pedagogy, advocating a transnational approach to understanding their interplay.

Sociologically, culture and language are intertwined in the microcontext of specific communicative events, as Risager (2006) explains. However, she argues that in scenarios like migration, where individuals shift from a first to a second or foreign-language context, this connection may weaken at the macro context level where global and historical forces allow culture and language to diverge (Risager, 2006). In foreign language communication, speakers blend what Risager (2006) terms languaculture, the inseparable fusion of cultural and language meaning, by juxtaposing the languaculture of the target language with that of their native tongue. This interaction, Risager (2006) notes, enhances flexibility in semantics and pragmatics but may also introduce ambiguity. Díaz (2013) takes a similar trend when proposing that languaculture requires critical consciousness in order to broker such mixed meanings in academic environments like EMI that enhance intercultural communicative competence through defying ingrained cultural presumptions and inviting critical interaction. Díaz (2013) continues to explain how this critical approach is the bridge between theoretical ideals of intercultural graduates and effective pedagogy, employing case studies from tertiary education to show how such awareness can be embedded in language teaching to equip students for a culturally and linguistically diverse world.

Psychologically, culture and language are also deeply intertwined, as Risager (2006) argues,

with individuals' discursive and linguistic resources embedded in their everyday cultural practices. Systematically, Risager (2006) views language as a system shaped by political and ideological contexts where linguistic practices serve as a scaffold for cultural communities, fostering a sense of shared identity. Díaz (2013) applies this to pedagogy, prescribing critical languaculture practices that incorporate these systemic dimensions to help learners understand the cultural meanings of a community as expressed through language and rooted in historical and cultural foundations. Díaz (2013) further emphasises that language reflects a community's cultural practices, advocating practical pedagogies in EMI and beyond to equip students for a diverse world.

In addition, Gumperz (1996) argues that the traditional assumption of a direct, one-to-one link between culture and language oversimplifies their relationship as cultures are increasingly heterogeneous and language boundaries are more fluid. Consequently, speakers of the same language may experience cultural differences, while those speaking different languages may share cultural practices. Gumperz (1996) emphasises that culture and language are not co-extensive, and shared understandings in communication cannot be assumed, particularly in diverse social contexts.

Overall, scholars across anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and philosophy have long debated the relationship between culture and language, questioning their boundaries and interdependence. Traditionally, mastering a culture's language was seen as a prerequisite for understanding its culture. Barker and Galasiński (2001) argue that comprehending culture involves examining how meaning is symbolically constructed through language's signifying practices within social and institutional contexts. Similarly, Byram (1989) employs the metaphor of language as a "key" to culture, suggesting that language serves as a gateway to cultural understanding, though it also highlights their distinctiveness.

### **2.3 Culture and Language Teaching**

After exploring the relationship between culture and language, it appears that language teachers need to base their instruction on their understanding of the relationship between culture and language. According to Byram (1989), the assumption that cultural studies are integral to language teaching, due to the close relationship between culture and language, has long been recognised. However, there remains no consensus in language instruction on how to define

culture.

It is a general principle in foreign language teaching that determining the intrinsic relationship of culture with language and incorporating culture into the teaching process of languages is, even as a proven concept, still evolving. Lange et al. (1998) believe that culture lies at the centre of foreign language acquisition and learning, which has now been reaffirmed by numerous scholarly works examining its place in language learning in the foreign language classroom. For instance, recent work highlights the growing significance of culture, and authors like Kim (2020) assert that language teaching in a broad sense, beyond grammar and vocabulary, is not possible without incorporating cultural knowledge to acquire authentic communicative competence. Similarly, Baker (2015) emphasises that globalisation and the widespread use of ELF necessitate prioritising intercultural awareness over static cultural facts in language teaching. However, there is still disagreement regarding its definition and operational integration, even with this agreement on the value of culture. Byram (2021) defines culture as encompassing shared practices, values, and beliefs, advocating an intercultural approach that equips learners to negotiate diverse perspectives rather than memorising target-language cultural norms. Others, however, like Holliday (2010), advise against essentialising culture in the sense of eternally intrinsic features, such as British tea drinking and Japanese bowing, and recommend instead a dynamic, critical concept of culture that brings learners' and teachers' own cultures to the foreground.

In a practical sense, language learning focuses on visible cultural practices like holidays, welcoming ceremonies, or manners of the populations that use the target language. For example, Piller (2017) stresses the need to embrace linguistic and cultural diversity in intercultural communication, emphasising that monolingual and monocultural approaches can exclude or marginalise students from diverse backgrounds. Her work suggests that educational materials often fail to reflect students' cultural and linguistic identities, limiting engagement. To address this, educators could incorporate various digital resources, such as multilingual videos or databases, to create inclusive learning environments that connect coursework to students' real-world experiences. Nguyen and Cao (2020) suggest that EFL instruction can incorporate local and global cultural themes, such as Vietnamese family dynamics or Western cultural practices, to foster intercultural awareness. However, in the process, it will reduce culture to surface signs and ignore others like cognitive schemata or social values, which are recognised as such by preceding discussions on culture. Future study suggests moving past surface signs. This is

illustrated by Díaz (2013) in EMI case studies where teachers embed critical languaculture pedagogies, requesting students to analyse how language indexes power relations or cultural assumptions, as, for instance, English politeness norms vs. directness in other languages. Likewise, Alhabbash et al. (2021) demonstrate how texts embedded in culture—for example, texts infused into Arab learners' culture and Western narratives—facilitate EFL-speaking ability by situating language in learners' everyday lives in contrast to extrinsic measures. Such a scenario illustrates that in language learning, culture must transcend observable behaviours to create intercultural communicative competence, which means reading and negotiating meaning across contexts rather than observable practices alone. The transformation, as advocated by Kim (2020) and Baker (2015), aligns with modern EMI goals of preparing students for multilingual, globalised settings where cultural competence is as crucial as language skills.

Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of integrating culture into language teaching, the specific cultural elements relevant to different stages of language learning—such as primary, secondary, or post-secondary—remain underexplored. Kim (2020) argues that language pedagogy should engage students holistically by intertwining culture and language, using cultural-historical activity theory to foster dialogue and critical engagement, though she does not specifically address how cultural dimensions vary across learning stages. Similarly, Baker (2015) critiques the oversimplified assumptions in ELT that link language to fixed cultural identities, particularly in ELF contexts, advocating for a more fluid and complex understanding of culture in intercultural communication. Both scholars highlight the language classroom as a key site for fostering cultural interaction where students and teachers can practice intercultural communication. Understanding teachers' perspectives on culture is thus crucial as these views directly shape pedagogical practices and the development of students' intercultural competence.

If the inclusion of culture is viewed as fundamental to language teaching, the critical question is then how teachers can promote such inclusion. Phan et al. (2024) demonstrate that EMI in Vietnamese higher education significantly enhances students' English proficiency with qualitative findings, suggesting that EMI fosters opportunities for cross-cultural communication through academic and general language use. This aligns partially with Díaz (2013), who advocates for critical languaculture pedagogies in EMI contexts to promote students' critical awareness of culture and language interplay, encouraging teachers to design

activities that challenge cultural stereotypes and enhance intercultural competence. While Nguyen's study does not directly address teachers' cultural sensitivity or specific pedagogical practices, it supports the broader notion that EMI can facilitate intercultural learning, consistent with Díaz's emphasis on the cultural potential of EMI classrooms. For instance, teachers can enhance EFL students' oral communication by integrating culturally relevant texts, such as authentic materials on customs and traditions, and employing pedagogical strategies like timed speaking or retelling activities, tailored to learners' proficiency levels (Alhabbash et al., 2021). This highlights the fact that students' learning of culture is reliant upon the cultural sensitivity of teachers and how they translate it into the classroom. In effect, teachers must be culturally competent to guide students towards intercultural communicative competence, as required in multicultural learning environments today.

Language instructors should recognise how social practices shape academic identities to foster effective interactions in their fields. Participants in academic disciplines use distinct social languages to enact and recognise their identities and activities, signalling who they are and what they are doing. The dynamic use of English in global communication can be attributed to the fluid and complex nature of cultural identities. In such contexts, individuals often rely on ELF alongside multilingual resources to express their views and negotiate meanings (Baker et al., 2025). Therefore, fostering intercultural awareness and embracing ELF as a communicative tool is essential for language instructors to bridge academic divides and build meaningful scholarly connections.

## **2.4 English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)**

The notion of culture, the link between culture and language, and culture in language instruction have all been thoroughly examined in earlier sections. This section, Section 2.4, concentrates on English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). EMI is described as the use of English to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English (Dearden, 2014). Various EMI studies highlight the importance of English in today's globalised environment. Kirkpatrick (2014) points out that EMI policies in Asian higher education often overlook the multilingual realities of students and instructors, including the potential influence of instructors' cultural and linguistic backgrounds on effective language teaching and learning. In this section, the notion of EMI will be illustrated as well as its importance in the internationalisation of higher education. This section also goes

through several studies on EMI policies and their implementation in higher education.

Graddol (1997) examines the global spread of English, noting the role of EMI in education as a factor contributing to its influence, particularly in postcolonial countries like Malaysia. He also discusses the broader use of English in multilingual contexts, such as India, while highlighting the complex and potentially plural future of English as a global language. Tollefson and Tsui (2004) examine medium-of-instruction policies in bilingual education, analysing the tension between using national or indigenous languages and English as a global language. They argue that policy decisions shape EMI implementation, often prioritising political and economic agendas over educational ones, as seen in Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Africa, where such policies influence students' and teachers' social and economic opportunities across educational levels, including higher education. In this sense, English is one option for instructional media in higher education in a world of ethnolinguistic variety.

Altbach and Knight (2007) explain the global initiatives of higher education institutions (HEIs) and characterise EMI programmes in higher education as a collective response to internationalisation goals. EMI programmes, on the other hand, are frequently implemented regardless of whether English is deemed a second or foreign language in the nation. EMI is one method by which HEI leadership promotes global goals in this regard. Although EMI schools can socialise students in multicultural environments and intercultural communication, opponents of EMI argue that young students would be subjected to an education that devalues the role of their mother tongue relative to English. Fenton-Smith et al. (2017) examine the global rise of EMI in Asia–Pacific higher education, highlighting its benefits, such as enhanced global competitiveness, alongside unintended challenges. They note that the rapid adoption of EMI often outpaces teacher readiness, with many content instructors lacking training in bilingual methodologies or language-sensitive teaching, as seen in countries like China and Indonesia. This gap hinders students' ability to master content-heavy courses due to limited English proficiency, impacting both content learning and language development. Consequently, the authors advocate for enhanced professional development for EMI instructors to better integrate content and language instruction while promoting policies that support multilingualism to balance EMI's benefits with local linguistic diversity.

There is a lack of conceptual discussions on the social and linguistic issues of EMI in tertiary education because previous research has given precedence to institutional gains over

meaningful consideration of such issues (Macaro et al., 2018). EMI comes as a significant tool for improving academic achievement and increasing institutions' international ranking in the narrative of higher education internationalisation. However, bilingual and multilingual education research has been insufficient to describe the complete scope of the global diffusion of EMI in higher education and its many diverse local forms. For example, Galloway et al. (2020) note that while the global expansion of EMI is well documented, research often overlooks context-specific social dynamics, such as threats to cultural identity (for example, in Gulf countries reverting to Arabic-medium instruction) and language inequalities arising from students' varying English proficiency. They also highlight pedagogical challenges, such as insufficient teacher training for EMI, calling for a deeper analysis of these implications beyond policy adoption.

Language education discourses, particularly in ELT, recognise the increasing use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education as part of the broader globalisation of English. Crystal (2003) and Graddol (2006) highlight the growing role of English in non-English-speaking universities and its implications for English teaching, such as the demand for academic English support, though they do not specifically focus on EMI training or its commercial aspects. Some research has focused on bilingual education in relation to national policy. Tollefson and Tsui (2004) primarily analyse how national goals, such as economic development and globalisation, shape medium-of-instruction policies in primary and secondary education, though they also address the role of English in higher education, particularly its use to enhance global competitiveness. Similarly, Van der Walt (2013) highlights the limited research on multilingual higher education, noting that language policies, including legal frameworks, often prioritise English-medium instruction over multilingual practices, though she does not explicitly compare this with research on primary and secondary education.

EMI policies and practices at the tertiary level have been researched in Europe, Asia, and Africa extensively in the last two decades, and more recent research has provided scholars with a clearer understanding of how they have developed and what the implications are for pedagogy (Smit, 2023). Macaro et al. (2018) provide a comprehensive review of EMI in higher education, highlighting its rapid global expansion and the use of various ELT models, such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). However, they note that CLIL's application in tertiary settings often lacks evidence of intentional content–language integration, and EMI practices vary widely across disciplines due to inconsistent policies, teacher preparation, and

institutional priorities. In Europe, Lasagabaster (2022) examines teacher preparedness for EMI, highlighting that while internationalisation policies drive EMI adoption, teachers often lack adequate training to effectively integrate language and content, leading to challenges in classroom interaction and content delivery, particularly in contexts like Spanish universities. In Asia, Galloway et al. (2020) examine EMI's global and local dynamics, highlighting China's use of parallel English–Chinese courses. Content depth in these courses may vary due to students' English proficiency, leading to calls for tailored ELT approaches, such as scaffolded instruction, to support effective learning. At the same time, in Africa, Nel and Ssentanda (2023) report on the difficulties faced by EMI in Sub-Saharan contexts, including South Africa, where primary-to-tertiary transitions uncover mismatches between policy and linguistic realities, frequently requiring ad hoc multilingual approaches.

EMI is frequently discussed alongside CLIL, as both involve teaching academic content through a language that is not the primary language of the majority population. However, a key academic distinction exists between the two in terms of their core objectives and pedagogical focus (Dearden, 2014; Macaro, 2018). EMI is defined as the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in contexts where the first language of the majority is not English (Macaro, 2018). Its primary goal is the effective delivery and mastery of subject content knowledge. In this model, English serves strictly as a vehicular language and is not the object of instruction itself. Instructors are typically subject specialists rather than language educators, and thus, systematic language support for students is often minimal. Students are generally expected to possess a high level of cognitive academic language proficiency to succeed (Macaro et al., 2019). EMI is most commonly implemented at the tertiary level worldwide. In contrast, the objective of CLIL is the simultaneous integration of content learning and language acquisition, demanding a dual focus on both content and language (Coyle et al., 2010). The CLIL model emphasises systematically incorporating language scaffolding into the curriculum design to ensure that both content and linguistic goals are met. Due to this explicit emphasis on language support, CLIL is more frequently applied in primary and secondary educational settings or with groups of learners possessing lower language proficiency.

Beyond conventional CLIL, current studies point to novel multilingual practices transforming EMI classrooms. Paulsrud et al. (2021) document translanguaging where teachers and students fluidly alternate between two or more languages to enhance content comprehension in

European and Asian EMI settings, such as Scandinavian and Asian universities using English alongside local languages to clarify complex academic concepts. Similarly, Sahan (2021) describes code-switching in Turkish EMI engineering education, noting that deliberate switches to Turkish enhance content understanding and student engagement, though such flexibility may not align with the expectation of English-only instruction in institutional settings. Luckett and Hurst-Harosh (2021) advocate for translanguaging in South African humanities instruction where lecturers blend isiXhosa with English to overcome cultural and language barriers, contrary to monolingual English norms' hegemony. These emergent trends, and also Baker (2015), propose the shift towards the legitimization of ELF in multilingual contexts and pedagogies that encompass learners' full linguistic repertoires as opposed to subjecting them to English-only norms. This emergent scene clarifies that policies on EMI need to be locally responsive yet global in ambition, reconciling the tension between continents.

In addition, the implementation of EMI is shaped by disciplinary norms and academic practices, which influence pedagogical approaches and create distinct challenges across fields such as the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Disciplinary communities, as described by Becher and Trowler (2001), establish unique cultural and intellectual norms that define academic practices, affecting language use and teaching methods in disciplines like engineering or humanities. EMI requires tailored pedagogical approaches to accommodate differences in language policies and student proficiency, with Lasagabaster (2022) emphasising that teachers need professional development to address linguistic and intercultural challenges, enhancing their methodological and communicative skills. However, tensions between institutional language policies and classroom practices can complicate EMI implementation, as seen in Block and Khan's (2020) study, where students at two Catalan universities resisted English monolingual norms by using their L1. Thus, the successful implementation of EMI hinges on understanding and addressing the disciplinary norms, pedagogical needs, and linguistic challenges that vary across academic fields.

Such disciplinary cultures also affect the cultural orientation of educators and EMI instruction. Sahan and Rose (2021) argue that in English-medium instruction classrooms, teachers often engage in code-switching to support students' comprehension, especially when conveying complex content. While their work does not explicitly contrast disciplinary differences, it points to how teachers adapt linguistic strategies based on instructional needs. However, recent studies have begun to identify how these needs vary significantly across disciplines. For

instance, Handford et al. (2019) demonstrate that engineering educators, influenced by the norms of their field, typically prioritise technical content delivery and procedural clarity over the development of students' intercultural communicative competence. In contrast, humanities educators are more inclined to focus on the subtleties of language use, cultural perspectives, and discourse conventions, often viewing language not merely as a medium but as a subject of critical reflection. Sánchez-García (2018) further notes that code-switching in humanities EMI classrooms often serves not just comprehension but also rhetorical and relational functions, reflecting an orientation toward language as a cultural and interpretive practice. These disciplinary differences in EMI teaching highlight a notable research shortfall in how subject-specific pedagogical cultures shape both teachers' instructional decisions and students' opportunities to engage with diverse cultural frameworks through English. Further empirical inquiry is needed to understand how such differences impact students' cultural and linguistic development across disciplines.

In light of the above literature review and the general worldwide approach to characterising this phenomenon, in this study, the term EMI refers to the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries where the majority of the population does not speak English as a first language (Dearden, 2014). It should be noted that EMI is a very new teaching approach. When it comes to language behaviour in multilingual educational situations, EMI research follows diverse paths. This review of related scholarship reveals persistent gaps in understanding EMI within higher education, particularly from the perspective of instructors, thus opening numerous avenues for empirical research to enrich the field. Two examples of this potential include investigating instructors' opinions on culture generated in EMI domains and examining how culture is implicitly and explicitly incorporated into EMI instruction.

## **2.5 EMI in Chinese Higher Education**

EMI serves as a critical nexus for understanding the interplay between globalisation, language policy, and pedagogical innovation within Chinese higher education. As a state-driven strategy to enhance global academic competitiveness, EMI reflects China's ambition to align with international standards while navigating linguistic, cultural, and institutional complexities. Section 2.5 explores the multifaceted dynamics of EMI, tracing its policy-driven evolution and analysing its implementation challenges within the context of internationalisation. Beginning with an overview of the internationalisation of Chinese higher education (Section 2.5.1), the

discussion progresses to examine key dimensions of its practice—policy frameworks, classroom realities, student and teacher experiences, and disciplinary variations (Section 2.5.2). By unpacking these layers, this section establishes a comprehensive framework for investigating how EMI shapes teaching, learning, and knowledge production in Chinese universities, highlighting critical gaps in the literature and setting the stage for a deep analysis of its potential and limitations.

### **2.5.1 The Internationalisation of Chinese Higher Education**

The internationalisation of Chinese higher education represents a complex and dynamic process shaped by national policy, institutional strategies, and global engagement. Unlike Western models, which often emphasise global convergence (Lazari & Matsoukas, 2025), China's approach integrates national development, cultural projection, and modernisation goals, as defined by Guo and Guo (2016). This state-driven model, characterised by ideological underpinnings and strategic policymaking, seeks to enhance China's global influence while preserving its cultural identity, exemplified by initiatives like the Belt and Road. However, this process is not without challenges as tensions arise between ambitious policies and institutional capacities, the dominance of EMI, and the risk of Westernisation overshadowing local paradigms. The literature highlights a hybrid model that adapts global practices to a Chinese value system, discussing issues of equity, sustainability, and pedagogical innovation while responding to global and local demands.

Conceptual understanding is one of the first challenges in the literature. While internationalisation is often viewed through a Western perspective, Guo and Guo (2016) provide a context-specific definition for Chinese higher education. In China, internationalisation is driven by goals of national development, modernisation, and cultural promotion, prioritising these over uncritical alignment with Western standards. This Chinese model is characterised by state-directed policymaking and the invocation of ideology at its core and diverges from more state-overseen Western variants. This political–cultural aspect informs the path China has taken in engaging with global norms. Following this, Guo and Guo (2016) name the phenomenon of soft power with Chinese characteristics to theorise internationalisation as a strategy for promoting China's global strength without sacrificing its national identity. For the authors, China's internationalisation story is constructed from state agendas and history narratives, most significantly the Belt and Road Initiative. Its direction is one where they speak of a hybrid internationalisation model—one that takes global practices

but recontextualises them in a value matrix Chinese model.

A number of studies analyse the strategic frameworks and working mechanisms underlying internationalisation in Chinese higher education. Wu (2019) contends that there are three basic dimensions of China's "outward-oriented" strategy: cultural diplomacy, development assistance, and international student recruitment. The dimensions are tied to China's overall foreign policy goals of projecting a more positive international image and raising its geopolitical influence. Wu also perceives tensions between ambition and execution, with the policy momentum likely to outpace institutional capability, especially in regional and lower-tier institutions. Ngao and Sang (2023) report an in-depth summary of the main internationalisation strategies in China: recruiting high-quality international students, promoting study abroad to Chinese students, encouraging foreign university collaborations, and investing in international programmes. The several strands of strategy identify a strong desire to possess an education system that is competitive internationally, but pose questions regarding sustainability and equity. Among the lesser-known research is that by Zha et al. (2019), where case studies were employed to explore why Chinese universities internationalise. What they find through analysis is that institutional objectives are not invariably purely strategic or economic. Instead, universities are motivated by resource dependency and ethical internationalism—the presumption that interaction with the world is an ethical necessity in a society of a knowledge economy. Yet, such goals tend to be tempered by structural and policy barriers.

The most controversial aspects of internationalising Chinese higher education are English use and the process of Westernisation. Guo et al. (2021) describe how students and staff perceive the internationalisation agenda as linking the preference for English and the Western scholarly tradition. Their contribution identifies an ominous trend that internationalisation may unintentionally exclude the Chinese language and culture and thereby perpetuate linguistic and epistemological hierarchies. This is an extremely pertinent problem in elite universities where EMI has become widespread across the majority of fields. These are criticisms pointing to a broader problem: internationalisation is typically achieved through the process of imitating Western models, thereby doing harm to initiatives to develop a genuinely indigenous paradigm.

Institutional internationalisation behaviour is further shaped by policy structures and performance indicators. Li and Eryong (2021) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed

the context and highlighted internationalisation in China. Their systematic review suggests Chinese internationalisation can minimise cross-border mobility risks and bolster intercultural competence. Interventions include virtual exchanges, curriculum internationalisation, and bilingual education. These trends represent a more differentiated internationalisation pattern with less dependence on movement. A study by Xu (2024) also offers further insights into how policy indicators influence institutional choices. Using a regional university as an example, the author argues that internationalisation is triggered by the China University Subject Rankings, which have internationalisation metrics. Therefore, institutions would choose international collaborations or receive overseas students not due to strategic purposes but for the sake of accomplishing quantifiable goals. This ranking culture is a manifestation of the performative nature of internationalisation in China, where policy adherence competes with pedagogical innovation.

Although there has been rapid development in internationalisation, the literature abounds with cautionary warnings. The pursuit of international reputation and presence has led to what Wu (2019) calls goal-reality tensions. The majority of universities, particularly those far from city centres, lack the capacity and resources required to sustain international programmes. Added to this, overreliance on state finance and central planning may jeopardise institutional autonomy and innovation. However, there are also tremendous opportunities. Zhou and Clark (2011) suggest that internationalisation enables China's higher education to enter into the construction of knowledge all over the globe and enrich intercultural exchange. However, such an opportunity must be an even one—open to outside powers but anchored around Chinese realities. To this end, the literature is urged to redirect its focus: from Westernisation to localisation, from mobility to inclusion, and from policy compliance to strategic engagement. There is a need for a future for Chinese higher education that lies not in emulating alien models but in building an authentically Chinese model of internationalisation suited to national aspiration, regional differences, and global responsibilities.

In summary, the internationalisation of Chinese higher education is a dynamic and evolving process influenced by state policy, institutional reactions, and external forces. The literature presented in Subsection 2.5.2 indicates the definitions, mechanisms, contradictions, and challenges of the process. The most prominent themes are the dialectic of Westernisation and localisation, strategic use of internationalisation in soft-power tactics, language policy subtleties, and institutional pressures elicited by policy measures. A great deal has been

accomplished, but some issues remain, such as the need for greater inclusiveness, pedagogical innovation, and institutional autonomy. Subsequent research will need to continue to examine how Chinese universities juggle global reach within national policy limitations and local capability. Only through this type of critical research can the internationalisation of Chinese higher education proceed from intent to transformation.

### **2.5.2 Previous Studies on EMI in Chinese Higher Education**

In the last several years, EMI has expanded rapidly across Chinese universities, driven by the national internationalisation of higher education policies. The Chinese government views EMI as a strategic tool for enhancing global competitiveness, attracting international students, and promoting the worldwide dissemination of academic knowledge. Policy texts, such as the “*Outline of China's National Plan for Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)*,” actively encourage English-medium instruction for the teaching of key courses, especially in science and engineering. Empirical studies, however, reveal that EMI policy practice in China is complex and frequently marked by gaps between policy ambitions and daily classroom practice. While policymakers view EMI as a means to innovation and raise academic standards, on-the-ground circumstances too frequently reflect institutional, linguistic, and cultural limitations subverting such ambitions. The symbolic value of English as a marker of internationalisation can outweigh its instrumental pedagogical functions, thereby leading to superficial or uneven implementation across institution types.

At the policy level, EMI development in China is more top-down and government-driven rather than naturally developed based on the pedagogical needs of students and teachers. Hu and Lei (2014), in a multisite ethnographic case study, observed that EMI courses in the majority of Chinese universities are typically introduced to showcase institutional prestige rather than improve teaching quality or learning outcomes. For instance, in certain national flagship universities, English is strategically used in high-profile courses to showcase international alignment, especially when external review or international recruitment campaigns occur. Many EMI courses are only in name since lecturers have a tendency to fall back on Chinese in class, especially when covering complex theories or when there is poor comprehension among students. This code-switching is less a pedagogical weakness than a reflection of the disjuncture between policy-driven pressure for the use of English and classroom-based realities in which understanding and participation are normally premised on the use of Chinese. These practices highlight the performative nature of EMI in some contexts where its implementation

is less an educational model with internal coherence than an institutional branding strategy.

Student preparedness for EMI has been among the most significant concerns in the literature, especially in relation to English language proficiency, academic literacy, and critical thinking. Numerous studies have reported that, while Chinese students are often equipped with good reading and grammar skills due to their test-driven learning environments, they lack oral fluency and disciplinary literacy for effective participation in EMI settings. For example, McKinley and Rose (2022) argue that global EMI assumes a level of English proficiency that is unrealistic in most localised contexts, and such an assumption is particularly relevant to China, where English is still taught mainly as a foreign language.

Teacher beliefs and experiences are also at the centre of EMI practice since teachers are the direct agents responsible for enacting and interpreting EMI policies at the classroom level. Dang et al. (2023), using the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, reported on the contradictory and dynamic demands placed on EMI teachers in a Sino-foreign cooperative university. Their study showed that teaching is carried out in a multi-activity system of institutional requirements, students' needs, and their own professional identities. The majority of the teachers reported difficulty in conveying highly specialised material in English without compromising conceptual accuracy. They also felt responsible not only for teaching subject matter but also for helping students in their English development, although they had not received explicit training in teaching language. To address these challenges, educators frequently use adaptive pedagogical strategies, including translanguaging, scaffolded questioning, and simplified language. Chen et al. (2023), in their exploration of EMI teacher cognition, point out that teachers' language awareness—the ability to reflect on and adjust their own use of language—is one key variable in classroom effectiveness. Teachers who are more metalinguistically conscious develop more inclusive activities, such as group discussions and peer feedback sessions, that scaffold understanding and encourage participation. Institutional English-only policies can, however, constrain such adaptive practices, especially when quality assurance processes privilege linguistic purity over pedagogical inclusiveness.

Disciplinary difference also significantly influences the character of EMI teaching, including language use, teaching objectives, and classroom interaction. Huang and Fang (2022) conducted a comparative cross-disciplinary study and found that EMI humanities programmes have global and intercultural perspectives embedded in them, which push students towards

reflective thinking and critical discussion. In contrast, science and engineering courses are often preoccupied with the transmission of content with minimal space for students' discussion or interpretation. This contrast reflects broader epistemological differences: whereas the humanities value argumentation and pluralism, the sciences prefer precision and factual definiteness. Consequently, EMI in the sciences is also likely to involve more code-switching, formulaic teaching, and passive learning styles. Zhang and Pladevall-Ballester (2022) also reported that teachers of natural sciences in EMI use visual support and bilingual slides as a means of compensating for the students' low English proficiency, whereas social science teachers engage in extended English discourse and require students to manage academic reading and writing in English. These disciplinary tendencies underscore the need for context-responsive EMI design solutions rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.

International students' learning experiences in EMI classrooms are also deserving of critical exploration, particularly in terms of linguistic accessibility, classroom inclusion, and intercultural interaction. Han and Dong (2023), in a longitudinal investigation that employed survey data and follow-up interviews with international students at a Chinese university, discovered that numerous students felt marginalised in EMI classes. Although English was the official medium of instruction, some lecturers taught in heavy local accents or used much Chinese, which was difficult for non-Chinese students to understand. The lack of social interaction between foreign and local students also contributed to the sense of isolation. Similarly, Yuan and Li (2021) found that support services for international students, such as writing centres or academic advising, were underdeveloped or did not sufficiently address their linguistic and cultural necessities. This would mean that EMI, as far as it has international ambitions, does not create genuinely inclusive learning environments for international students, thus undermining the internationalisation goals.

Although research on EMI in China has grown in recent years, scholars such as Hu (2021) and Jablonkai and Hou (2021) point out that the field still suffers from several limitations. Much of the existing literature is dominated by small-scale case studies or institutional reports that lack theoretical development and generalisability. There is a need for more longitudinal, multisite, and interdisciplinary research that connects EMI practices with broader questions of identity, equity, and epistemology. Additionally, EMI research tends to focus on prestigious institutions in urban centres, such as Beijing and Shanghai, while EMI practices in regional, vocational, and less-resourced institutions remain largely invisible in the literature. Few studies

have systematically examined the experiences of marginalised groups within EMI, potentially overlooking variations in student demographics and institutional contexts. Addressing these gaps is essential for building a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of EMI in China.

In summary, EMI in Chinese universities reflects the broader national ambitions to align with international academic standards and increase global presence. However, EMI practice varies in its effectiveness and is often shaped by institutional pressures, language concerns, and social disparities. While EMI has the potential to promote international engagement and academic innovation, it also consolidates existing hierarchies in education and can exacerbate inequalities in access and outcomes. Future research needs to move beyond reductionist notions of teaching quality or English proficiency and instead monitor how EMI practices shape learning, teaching, and knowledge production in specific local and institutional contexts. An emphasis on multilingualism, cultural inclusivity, and pedagogical creativity will be important to creating more equitable and effective EMI environments in Chinese universities as well as to rethinking what internationalisation can do within the framework of post-monolingual, post-Western educational paradigms.

### **2.5.3 Section Summary**

This section investigated EMI as a pivotal element of Chinese higher education's internationalisation, reflecting the interplay of globalisation, national policy, and pedagogical challenges. Section 2.5.1 outlines China's distinctive approach to internationalisation, driven by state-led policies that integrate national development, cultural projection, and modernisation goals as seen in initiatives like the Belt and Road. Unlike Western models, which emphasise global convergence, China's hybrid internationalisation recontextualises global practices within a Chinese value system. EMI is central to this strategy, promoted through policies like the "*Outline of China's National Plan for Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)*" to enhance global competitiveness and attract international students. The growth of EMI courses, particularly in elite universities, and the rise in international student enrolment (MOE, 2019) underscore their strategic role. However, tensions between ambitious policies, institutional capacities, and the risk of Westernisation through EMI highlight challenges in equity and cultural preservation (Guo et al., 2021).

Section 2.5.2 examines the academic discourse on EMI implementation, revealing its dual

purpose of advancing subject knowledge and English proficiency while facing significant hurdles. Policy-driven EMI often prioritises institutional prestige over pedagogical efficacy, leading to performative practices and frequent code-switching to Chinese to ensure comprehension (Hu & Lei, 2014). Students struggle with inadequate oral fluency and disciplinary literacy, particularly in STEM, where cognitive overload and socioeconomic disparities exacerbate inequities (McKinley & Rose, 2022). Teachers navigate conflicting demands, lacking sufficient EMI training and employing adaptive strategies like translanguaging and simplified language, though restrictive English-only policies can limit flexibility (Chen et al., 2023; Dang et al., 2023). Disciplinary differences further shape EMI, with humanities encouraging critical engagement and sciences focusing on content delivery, often with passive learning styles (Huang & Fang, 2022). International students face linguistic and cultural barriers, such as local accents and limited support services, contributing to marginalisation (Yuan & Li, 2021). Research gaps include a focus on elite urban institutions, with regional and vocational contexts underexplored, and a lack of longitudinal, interdisciplinary studies addressing equity and identity (Hu, 2021; Jablonkai & Hou, 2021).

EMI's rapid expansion reflects China's ambition to align with global academic standards, yet its implementation reveals persistent challenges, including linguistic hierarchies, policy performativity, and unequal access. The literature highlights opportunities in practices like internationalisation at home, incorporating virtual exchanges and bilingual education to reduce mobility risks and enhance intercultural competence (Li & Eryong, 2021). Future EMI development requires context-responsive designs that prioritise multilingualism, cultural inclusivity, and pedagogical innovation. Research must expand to include diverse institutional contexts and marginalised groups, adopting longitudinal and interdisciplinary approaches to address how EMI shapes learning, teaching, and knowledge production. By balancing global engagement with local realities, EMI can move toward a more equitable, transformative model that supports China's internationalisation goals while fostering an authentically Chinese educational paradigm.

## **2.6 Teachers' Intercultural Awareness and Intercultural Communicative Competence**

The role of teacher beliefs in language teaching has been a subject of academic interest throughout the decades (Borg, 2017). Language teachers hold firm beliefs concerning

numerous aspects of their professional activity, including perceptions of educator and student roles, teaching methodology, and pedagogical content knowledge (Borg, 2017). Although such belief systems are not necessarily immediately visible in classroom practice—due to the complex interplay of contextual variables in schools—they continue to exert significant influence. Borg (2019) employs a powerful metaphor to explain this relationship: just as an iceberg has its visible tip hiding a massive, submerged structure, visible teaching behaviours are inherently shaped by a complex array of underlying cognitive and affective variables. With English continually asserting itself as a global lingua franca, teachers' beliefs in developing intercultural communicative competence in language teaching have become more prominent than ever before. In Chinese higher education contexts where English is employed as an EMI, teachers' Intercultural Awareness (IA) and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) are discovered to be the most significant constructs that shape pedagogical effectiveness and student achievements in multicultural learning environments (Ma, 2025). This section, Section 2.6, describes these definitions, placing them in the shifting context of research in language teaching, specifically in their relevance for teachers as a whole and, most specifically, EMI teachers in Chinese universities. Recent literature defines the theoretical and empirical strands on which the need for intercultural dimensions to teaching practices is based, but it needs to give consideration to their implementation in China's drive towards internationalisation.

### **2.6.1 Definitions of Intercultural Awareness and Intercultural Communicative Competence**

Intercultural awareness (IA) refers to the capacity to recognise, comprehend, and critically think about cultural diversity in learning contexts, a multifaceted ability that transcends superficial recognition to active engagement in cultural nuances (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). It involves attunement to the cultural underpinnings of language use—for instance, how idiomatic expressions like “kick the bucket” may challenge learners from collectivist cultures, such as those in East Asia, due to unfamiliar metaphorical connotations—coupled with a deep appreciation of students' diverse cultural backgrounds, ranging from collectivist traditions in East Asia to individualistic values in Western societies. This approach aligns with fostering intercultural communicative competence through educational practices that promote mutual understanding and respect (Byram, 2021). IA provides educators with the ability to adapt instruction interventions, such as question types—open for students in systems accustomed to learning through discussion vs. scripted questioning for students who originate from lecture-centred systems—aligning pedagogy with cultural variance. Rather than a simple

acknowledgement, IA is a thinking, active process: a teacher might notice a student's resistance to participating in class, trace it back to cultural values placing more emphasis on silence over assertiveness—such as in Confucian-influenced societies—and react by promoting incremental contribution through pair work rather than confrontation. Barany (2011) positions IA as a cornerstone of intercultural communication, emphasising its role in enabling learners to “decentre” from their own cultural assumptions—such as viewing punctuality universally as a sign of respect—to embrace alternative perspectives, like valuing flexibility as a marker of relational priority in other cultures. This perspective, grounded in Byram's (1997, 2002) frameworks, underscores IA's transformative potential where teachers foster a dynamic learning environment that encourages students to challenge ethnocentric assumptions and collaboratively construct knowledge across cultural boundaries.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC), a theoretical derivative of IA, operationalises this awareness into practical skills for effective cross-cultural communication, enabling teachers to navigate the complexities of multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Byram (2021) describes ICC as “the capacity to communicate in another language with other people” (p. 97), combining linguistic competence, such as the ability to master grammatical forms like conditionals; sociolinguistic flexibility, such as understanding when formal address, such as “nin” in Chinese, is culturally appropriate; and discourse competence, such as constructing coherent narratives across cultural registers, with a strong intercultural set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. His model names five *savoirs*: *savoir* involves awareness of one's own cultural rules (for example, a teacher's tendency to stress individual achievement) and other people's (for example, a student's preference for collaborative learning); *savoir comprendre* involves interpreting and connecting, as when a teacher translates a student's indirect refusal as politeness rather than defiance; *savoir apprendre/faire* promotes discovery and engagement, such as opening cultural understanding through student-led storytelling; *savoir être* entails relativising oneself—awareness of one's cultural perspective as one of several—and valuing others, such as acknowledging a student's heritage language use; and *savoir s'engager* demands critical cultural awareness, which prompts teachers to challenge stereotypes (for example, “all Chinese students are rote learners”) with evidence-based reflection. Chen and Starosta (1996) emphasise that ICC, comprising cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, is essential for effective interactions in diverse cultural settings. They argue that fostering such competence through education and training enhances individuals' ability to navigate cultural differences. In educational contexts, developing intercultural competence among teachers can improve their

effectiveness in multicultural classrooms. Deardorff (2019) builds on this by conceptualising ICC as a developmental path, underscoring adaptability, such as accommodating tone in a shy student; empathy, such as understanding a refugee student's shyness; and cultural humility, such as acknowledging a lack of knowledge regarding a student's Ramadan observances and seeking to learn. These abilities are non-negotiable in EMI situations where English is a mediating lever between incommensurate linguistic identities (for example, Mandarin and Arabic) and cultural systems (for example, hierarchical vs. egalitarian classroom norms), requiring teachers to broker tensions and establish intersubjectivity.

While IA lays the intellectual and attitudinal groundwork, it is proposed that ICC equips teachers with the functional capacity to enact culturally responsive pedagogy, forming a highly transferable couple that is very relevant to EMI contexts. According to Risager (2021), Byram (1997) conceptualises ICC as encompassing both intercultural competence and linguistic competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competences), aimed at fostering learners' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. IA, a core component of ICC, involves the ability to perceive and understand cultural differences, such as recognising a student's silence as a sign of cultural respect rather than disengagement (Risager, 2021). ICC translates this awareness into action, for instance, by using bilingual questions to facilitate understanding for non-native English speakers, thereby promoting effective communication in cross-cultural contexts (Risager, 2021). This competence integrates attitudes (openness and curiosity), knowledge (cultural self-awareness and understanding of other cultures), and skills (observing and analysing cultural differences) with critical cultural awareness at its core, guiding learners toward becoming independent citizens with a strong sense of values. In practice, a teacher might notice a South Asian student's reluctance to criticise others, attribute it to cultural harmony values (IA) and then facilitate a group discussion with structured roles to encourage participation (ICC). This dynamic is highly applicable in EMI where instructors have to balance twin imperatives: conveying subject matter as, for example, engineering principles in English, and fostering intercultural discussion among students of different backgrounds, as, for example, a Chinese student accustomed to memorisation, an Indian student comfortable with debate, and a European student expecting autonomy. The challenge becomes more formidable when English, often a second or third language, encounters local cultural expectations, such as respect for hierarchy in China, so that teachers must not only teach thermodynamics or literary criticism but also enable cross-cultural exchanges, perhaps by contrasting Confucian values of

collectivism with Western individualism during debriefing of a project so that learning transcends linguistic borders to engage cultural diversity.

### **2.6.2 IA and ICC in Language Education**

The international language learning panorama has increasingly focused on intercultural features, such as global business or academic mobility, spurred by globalisation and the need for learners to thrive in multilingual and multicultural environments. The communicative competence model was devised by Canale and Swain (1980), who were worried about linguistic and sociolinguistic skills and developed their model based on observations of second-language learners in Canadian bilingual schools where grammatical structures, such as French conjugation of verbs, and social adequacy, such as formal and informal greetings, had to be understood in a bid to communicate successfully. This model was succeeded by Byram's (1997) framework for ICC, which serves as a paradigm for integrating cultural competence into educational goals. Byram's research, grounded in the European foreign language teaching contexts (for example, British schools learning German), puts emphasis on the teachers facilitating the students to navigate through cultural misconceptions—like interpreting German frankness as insolence—more than language capability. This shift resonates with the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001, revised in 2020), which imagines “intercultural speakers” bridging gaps between cultures, a role created by its pan-European scope that involves educators and policymakers from 47 member states.

Barany (2011) takes this vision forward with suggestions for language teaching in his Iraqi EFL context at Duhok University for the construction of citizenship and democratic values, such as asking Kurdish students to debate global issues in English and fostering tolerance within regional diversity. Aguilar-Pérez (2021) investigated perceptions of EMI lecturers and students at a Spanish university regarding the enhancement of intercultural competence in multicultural classrooms. Through surveys and interviews, the study found that both lecturers and students recognised the potential of EMI to foster intercultural awareness, though gains varied based on personal factors and classroom dynamics. The research highlights the need to re-evaluate EMI objectives in European universities to better integrate intercultural dimensions, emphasising the importance of tailored pedagogical approaches to support internationalisation goals.

Recent research underscores the important contribution of IA and ICC to language teaching and learning, providing extensive descriptions of their practice. Planken et al. (2004), in their study of the International Business Communication (IBC) programme at Nijmegen University in the Netherlands, argue that foreign language courses can foster intercultural communicative competence by moving beyond utilitarian instruction—such as transactional phrases like “please acknowledge receipt”—through project-based tasks that explore sociocultural contexts. For example, students analyse authentic business communication scenarios, including negotiations involving diverse cultural participants, to understand variations in pragmatic expectations and discourse patterns, thereby enhancing their intercultural awareness. This aligns with Risager's (2021) ethical perspective in her review of Byram's (1997) updated work, where she critiques instrumental approaches to language teaching (for example, focusing solely on measurable skills and proficiency) and endorses Byram's (1997) emphasis on ethical practices that foster learners' development as critical, independent citizens. For instance, she highlights the importance of language education that encourages students to engage with cultural diversity and values, such as human rights and democracy, to promote personal growth and intercultural awareness. Deardorff (2019) presents a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)-piloted methodology to foster intercultural competence through storytelling in diverse formal and informal settings. The approach emphasises developing skills, attitudes, and behaviours for effective intercultural interactions by encouraging participants to share personal experiences and fostering mutual understanding and openness to cultural differences. Overall, these findings, drawn from diverse learner groups, point to a broader pedagogical agenda: language teaching must extend beyond linguistic proficiency—such as mastery of English tenses—to foster intercultural sensitivity, a practice Porto et al. (2017) reported being incorporated into Argentine preservice teacher training where modules now include role-plays simulating Argentine–Spanish cultural interactions to build ICC.

Yet, persistent challenges complicate this integration. Jackson (2022) highlights that IA and ICC are increasingly recognised in language education policies globally, including in East Asian contexts such as Japan and South Korea, with frameworks like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) emphasising their importance. However, their integration into curricula remains inconsistent, often overshadowed by a focus on linguistic proficiency due to standardised testing pressures. For instance, in some educational contexts, teachers prioritise grammar-focused tasks over ICC activities, such as cultural comparisons, to

meet examination requirements. This bias reflects a neoliberal undertone in language teaching, where quantifiable performance, such as test scores, often overshadows holistic, integrative development. Byram (2021) critiques educational systems that prioritise examination outcomes over fostering critical cultural reflection, limiting the development of intercultural communicative competence among diverse student populations. Barany (2011) also advocates for a culturally diverse, learner-centred approach in foreign language teaching, emphasising intercultural awareness and engagement to counter instrumentalist trends. He urges educators to prioritise cultural understanding and critical thinking over performance metrics focused on memorisation, even within systemic constraints.

In summary, the integration of IA and ICC into language education represents a pivotal shift toward preparing learners for globalised, multicultural contexts. Building on foundational frameworks like Byram's (1997) ICC model and the CEFR, contemporary approaches emphasise fostering critical cultural reflection, ethical engagement, and democratic values alongside linguistic proficiency. However, challenges persist as standardised testing and neoliberal educational priorities often overshadow these integrative efforts, favouring measurable linguistic skills over cultural competence. Scholars like Jackson (2022), Byram (1997, 2021), and Barany (2011) advocate for a learner-centred, culturally responsive pedagogy to counter these trends, urging educators to prioritise critical thinking and intercultural understanding to equip students as global citizens despite systemic constraints.

### **2.6.3 Teachers' IA and ICC**

Teachers' IA and ICC are the focal points of current scholarship because their influence extends beyond individual classrooms to shape broader educational settings, such as school-level policy and community outreach. Cross-national research stresses that while linguistic competence—syntax or vocabulary acquisition—is critical, it is the intercultural capacities of teachers that enable them to thrive in multicultural settings, such as refugee pupils or multilingual student populations. Maele and Jin (2022) explore intercultural teaching and learning in Chinese higher education through the RICH-Ed project, emphasising the integration of Chinese and Anglo-European perspectives to foster IA. Their findings highlight the importance of teacher training and critical reflection to enhance intercultural communicative competence among students and staff, addressing cultural diversity in Chinese tertiary education contexts. In addition, Sahan (2021) examined ELF interactions in EMI engineering classrooms at a Turkish public university, finding that teachers and students used code-

switching between English and Turkish to facilitate content learning, clarify concepts, and enhance communication efficiency. These findings suggest that an ELF-informed pedagogy could better prepare students for international contexts by embracing multilingual strategies.

Obstacles to developing IA and ICC in EFL classrooms include time constraints, as teachers face packed curricula with limited flexibility for cultural exploration, and rigid curricula that prioritise linguistic content over cultural integration. Additionally, challenges such as limited access to culturally relevant teaching materials hinder the effective incorporation of ICC, as identified in a meta-analysis of 10 global EFL studies by Nafisah et al. (2024). Yet, teacher agency offers a different perspective: Jackson's (2022) research suggests that engaged EFL teachers in Japan and South Korea used rich cultural texts, like Japanese folktales and British short stories, or role-plays simulating cross-cultural negotiations, like a Korean student negotiating with an American client, to enhance student intercultural engagement, indicating that individual initiative can mitigate systemic constraints to some extent.

In China's EFL context, where English is taught at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, research on teachers' IA and ICC shows accomplishments as well as enduring issues, now compounded by globalisation and economic pressures since the 2001 World Trade Organisation (WTO) accession. Hu and Lei (2014) examined an EMI Business Administration programme at a major Chinese university, finding that limited English proficiency among educators and students led to compromised teaching and learning practices, highlighting a misalignment between policy goals and classroom realities, which underscores the challenges of implementing ICC in such contexts.

Empirical research highlights a gap between teachers' perceptions and practices in integrating ICC in EFL settings. Batunan et al. (2023), interviewing six Indonesian EFL teachers in North Sulawesi, found that teachers prioritised linguistic goals (for example, pronunciation, vocabulary) using Anglophone materials (for example, American movies), with limited explicit ICC integration, often focusing on host culture politeness or Anglophone norms. Vo (2017) surveyed English lecturers in six southern Vietnamese tertiary institutions and reported overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward ICC, but also noted significant implementation challenges such as constraints in time, support and cultural content provision. Tajeddin and Rezanejad (2019), surveying 20 Iranian EFL teachers, found that 60% viewed culture teaching as equally important as language teaching, yet Intercultural Communicative Language

Teaching (iCLT) was rarely implemented due to time constraints (35%), institute regulations (25%), and learners' limited knowledge (30%). Similarly, Munandar and Newton (2021) find that Indonesian EFL teachers, influenced by national policies emphasising patriotism and religious values, such as the 2013 Curriculum, prioritise local cultural identity over explicit intercultural teaching, limiting their role as intercultural mediators.

Teacher training is also a reflection of these contradictions, as teacher training is the most important way to acquire these skills, but it often does not prepare teachers for this type of requirement. Porto et al. (2017) introduce intercultural citizenship education as a framework integrating foreign language teaching with citizenship education, emphasising criticality, transnational perspectives, and civic action. They highlight case studies from diverse global contexts, advocating for an ELF-informed pedagogy to prepare students for intercultural engagement and challenge nationalistic educational norms. Additionally, Czura (2016) surveyed 162 pre-service English teachers at the University of Wroclaw in Poland, finding that while they could define ICC relatively accurately, their understanding often emphasised knowledge-based cultural teaching over practical skills and attitudes. The study revealed that their major field of study influenced their perceptions, with history majors prioritising factual knowledge and English/German majors focusing on communicative and attitudinal aspects. Limited practical training in ICC implementation was noted, highlighting the need for explicit intercultural education in teacher training programmes. These findings mirror Barany's (2011) call based on his observations of Iraqi EFL teachers at Duhok University for Professional Development programmes that couple linguistic education with intercultural instruction to allow teachers to be transformative intellectuals (Pennycook, 1994, as cited in Barany, 2011)—for instance, to teach Kurdish teachers how to integrate English language teaching and local oral art traditions, raising students' critical cultural awareness.

In summary, teachers' IA and ICC are crucial for effective English teaching, shaping classroom practices and broader educational policies. While linguistic skills are vital, intercultural capacities enable teachers to engage diverse students and prepare them for global contexts. Challenges like time constraints, rigid curricula, and limited culturally relevant materials hinder ICC integration. Teacher agency, through creative methods like cultural texts or role-plays, helps bridge this gap. In China, globalisation exacerbates issues, with misalignments between internationalisation goals and classroom realities. Teacher training often lacks a practical ICC focus, emphasising knowledge over skills. Enhanced professional development is needed to

equip teachers to foster critical cultural awareness and global citizenship.

#### **2.6.4 Chinese EMI Teachers' IA and ICC**

Within Chinese higher education, where EMI is part of a common agenda of internationalisation, teachers' IA and ICC are both brought centre stage as important but pushed to the margins in practice. Huang and Fang (2022) found that EMI teachers with humanities and social sciences backgrounds at a Beijing university actively integrated cultural instruction, viewing culture as dynamic, while STEM teachers neglected it, focusing on disciplinary content. Similarly, Hu et al. (2014) revealed that at a southwestern Chinese university, limited English proficiency among teachers and students in an EMI Business Administration programme led to simplified content and code-switching, highlighting a misalignment between policy goals of internationalisation and classroom practices, which constrained intercultural learning outcomes.

Scholarship finds various ICC pedagogic practices in educational settings. Liao et al. (2025) indicate that EMI instructors in some Chinese public universities often adopt a teacher-fronted, lecture-focused pedagogy, which limits teacher-student interactions and student engagement. This approach, rooted in traditional Chinese teaching conventions, can result in reduced student participation and impair effective teaching, particularly for students accustomed to more interactive, participative practices, such as seminar discussions. Fang's (2017) research focuses on a Shanghai liberal arts university where humanities teachers engaged mixed-background students by incorporating cultural narratives, such as linking English poems to Confucian filial piety anecdotes. Zhang and Pladevall-Ballester (2022) found that students in three EMI courses at a Beijing university perceived EMI as enhancing English proficiency and global competitiveness, though they faced challenges due to limited English skills, with instructors occasionally using Mandarin to clarify complex concepts. Similarly, Galloway et al. (2020) reported that in Chinese universities, only half of the students noted frequent English use in EMI lectures while faculty often used Mandarin to support content delivery, which students viewed as a sign of limited English competence. This contrasts with Japan, where students reported higher English usage and stronger expectations for an English-only approach, highlighting contextual differences in EMI implementation (Galloway et al., 2020).

Unequal access exacerbates challenges in EMI implementation across Chinese higher education. Hu and Lei (2014) found that at a major Chinese university, EMI programmes, such

as the Business Administration programme, were accessible primarily to students with strong English proficiency, limiting opportunities for others and reinforcing educational inequalities. Similarly, elite institutions like Tsinghua, which enrolls diverse international students (Paulsrud et al., 2021), benefit from robust EMI resources while less-resourced universities struggle. Hu (2021) highlights that EMI teachers in less prestigious institutions often lack adequate training in intercultural approaches, relying instead on traditional pedagogical strategies, which hinders effective EMI delivery and student outcomes.

### **2.6.5 Section Summary**

Section 2.6 investigated the essential role of teachers' IA and ICC in language teaching with a focus on EMI in Chinese higher education. In Section 2.6.1, IA is defined as a teacher's ability to critically engage with cultural diversity, adapting pedagogy to cultural nuances, while ICC operationalises this awareness into practical skills for cross-cultural communication, encompassing Byram's (2021) five *savoirs*—cultural awareness, interpretation, discovery, relativisation, and critical reflection (Deardorff, 2019; Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). In Section 2.6.2, the global shift toward intercultural education is highlighted, moving beyond linguistic proficiency to foster critical citizenship, though standardised testing and neoliberal priorities often impede integration (Byram, 1997; Jackson, 2022). In Section 2.6.3, teachers' IA and ICC are shown to shape classroom practices and broader educational policies, yet challenges like time constraints, rigid curricula, and limited resources persist, particularly in China, where globalisation exacerbates misalignments in EMI programmes (Hu & Lei, 2014; Nafisah et al., 2024). Teacher agency and enhanced training are vital for progress. In Section 2.6.4, Chinese EMI contexts reveal inconsistent application of IA and ICC, with humanities teachers integrating culture more effectively than STEM teachers, and issues like limited English proficiency, traditional pedagogies, and unequal resource access hindering intercultural engagement (Huang & Fang, 2022). Overall, IA and ICC are crucial for preparing students for global contexts, but systemic barriers necessitate improved teacher training and culturally responsive pedagogy.

## **2.7 Teachers' EMI Pedagogical Practices**

It is the pedagogical practices of EMI teachers that are central to the effectiveness of EMI programmes, particularly because universities everywhere, including those in China, are increasingly utilising English in teaching academic material in the face of internationalisation

pressure (Hu, 2021). It is such pedagogical practices that include three-dimensional interaction between content presentation, language support, and, increasingly, more cultural integration—conditions that govern the student learning process in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Section 2.7 explores the evolving landscape of EMI pedagogy with a twofold objective: first, to provide an overview of international EMI classroom practice trends and, second, to map out the work of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) as a pedagogical strategy for integrating knowledge and cultural sensitivity into these practices. As this thesis asserts, cultural sensitivity lies at the core of CRP in such a way that teachers can engage students’ cultural selves and equip them for intercultural communication—a critical but ignored feature of EMI in Chinese higher education. This section situates these trends within broader EMI literature with the aid of the latest international research and pinpoints how they are relevant to the Chinese context, setting the stage for the investigation in this present study on teachers’ practices and attitudes.

### **2.7.1 EMI Pedagogical Practices: An Overview**

EMI pedagogy has been transformed dramatically with universities all over the world adopting English to convey scholarly material due to internationalisation and globalisation imperatives. Subsection 2.7.1 attempts to catch up with some current global trends in EMI pedagogy, inspired by recent research as well as landmark studies during the past two years, in order to reflect how teachers respond to the dual challenge of conveying content and linguistic support. These trends suggest a shift to more inclusive, technology-supported, and culturally sensitive practices that address diverse student groups and institutional contexts.

Pedagogical approaches to EMI differ quite significantly since they are conditioned by local education policy, teacher education, and students’ language profiles. An early systematic review by Macaro et al. (2018) found insufficient evidence to determine the specific teaching strategies, such as traditional lectures, group discussions, or problem-solving-based learning, employed by EMI teachers, due to limited studies focusing on classroom discourse and pedagogical practices. In recent years, however, more active and learner-centred approaches are the new trends. For instance, Rey-Paba et al. (2024) employed a convergent, parallel, mixed-methods design to investigate ICC development in EMI courses at two Colombian universities. The study involved seven teachers and 91 students across eight undergraduate EMI courses. Quantitative data from pre- and post-surveys showed statistically significant improvements in students’ ICC, particularly in effectiveness, willingness, and awareness. Qualitative findings from teachers’ interviews and student focus groups revealed that

pedagogical strategies, such as using international materials and virtual exchanges, and the international nature of the discipline, unintentionally fostered ICC, despite limited explicit focus on ICC by teachers. Saldo et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of 30 peer-reviewed articles from 2020 to 2024, analysing the implementation of EMI in Asian higher education institutions. Their findings suggest that pedagogical adaptations, such as flipped learning and translanguaging, enhance student engagement and comprehension, particularly for students with varying English proficiency levels. These strategies foster interactive learning environments with studies indicating improved participation and academic outcomes when teachers incorporate collaborative and scaffolded methods.

Specifically, in Sub-Saharan Africa, Nel and Ssentanda (2023) explored EMI practices through a multisite case study in selected countries. Their research highlights the challenges of implementing EMI due to limited teacher training and resources, with teachers often relying on strategies like code-switching to facilitate comprehension. The study underscores the need for enhanced preservice and in-service teacher training to support effective EMI delivery in resource-constrained environments, reflecting broader regional issues with language policy implementation. Moreover, according to Liao et al. (2025), emerging trends in EMI policy enactment in China suggest a shift towards more flexible and multilingual pedagogies. Their review highlights the rise of joint-venture universities, which implement full-EMI curricula and strategic translanguaging to support students' L2 proficiency and content learning. These institutions, such as Xi'an Jiaotong–Liverpool University, show improved L2 support and student engagement compared to conventional universities, indicating a potential direction for EMI development in China's higher education system by incorporating diverse linguistic practices.

Technology-based EMI implementation is an emerging trend in Europe, enhancing interactive learning in higher education. Morell et al. (2020) examined EMI practices at the University of Alicante, Spain, analysing eight video-recorded mini-lessons from the "AcqUA EMI microteaching corpus" delivered by lecturers trained in EMI workshops. Their findings show that lecturers used multimodal ensembles, combining verbal strategies (for example, elicitation, questions, and negotiation of meaning) with nonverbal resources (for example, gaze, gestures, and screen-based written materials) and interactive tools like Kahoot and Mentimeter. These strategies fostered student engagement and improved comprehension in EMI classrooms, particularly for non-native English speakers. This aligns with the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2025) *Trends Shaping Education 2025* report, which highlights the growing integration of artificial intelligence and virtual reality in education. The report notes that AI can enhance personalised learning experiences and automate administrative tasks, while virtual reality is increasingly used to teach technical skills and foster empathy. By 2040, the report envisions scenarios where AI-driven tools could further transform educational practices, supporting diverse learners and addressing challenges like mental health and inclusivity in classrooms.

Translanguaging is also emerging as a central pedagogical trend, particularly in multilingual classrooms. Tai and Wei (2023) observed EMI history lessons in a Hong Kong secondary school where they video-recorded eleven 30-minute lessons and conducted interviews with the participating teacher. The teacher employed translanguaging, strategically using English, Cantonese, and multimodal resources, to present complex historical concepts, such as social hierarchies in ancient Egypt and the concept of primary and secondary sources. This approach facilitated comprehension and created translanguaging subspaces where students negotiated meaning across languages and developed critical thinking skills. Similarly, Tekin (2024) conducted interviews with five teacher educators in a Turkish state university's EMI English department, exploring their translanguaging practices. The educators reported using translanguaging strategically to enhance students' comprehension, particularly in courses with technical content like sociolinguistics and syntax, by drawing on Turkish and English. Factors such as students' comprehension levels and course-specific challenges influenced their language choices, with some expressing guilt over L1 use while others valued its pedagogical benefits. Xiong et al. (2024) explored EMI teachers' agency in an international high school in Shenzhen, China, through qualitative interviews and classroom observations with five multilingual teachers. The study found that teachers exhibited moderately high agency by acting as translanguagers, juggling roles as content and L2 instructors, and negotiating cultural content to align with local mandates. For instance, teachers used Chinese alongside English to enhance comprehension and integrated Chinese cultural perspectives into the international curriculum to foster multicultural awareness. The research advocates reconceptualising EMI as a translanguaging space where teachers act as culturally responsive multilingual educators.

Overall, recent international research shows an active trend in EMI teaching practices, including tendencies towards flipped classrooms, the use of technology, translanguaging, and collaborative learning. These are directions towards the linguistic and cultural diversity of EMI

classrooms, but issues regarding teacher training and equitable application remain unresolved. This context serves as the backdrop for debate on how such international trends take shape in Chinese higher education, particularly in culturally responsive pedagogy, as discussed in Section 2.7.2.

### **2.7.2 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in EMI Contexts**

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), as described by Gay (2018), is a mode of teaching in which the cultures of students are made integral to pedagogy so as to maximise learning, promote inclusion, and allow learners to be empowered. In the case of EMI environments where English is used as the global language of academia, CRP provides a framework for addressing student cultural diversity and also for teaching them how to conduct successful intercultural interactions within today's globalising world. The international CRP trend parallels this thesis's focus on cultural knowledge and awareness as strong pillars for EMI teaching. Byram (1997) and Kramsch (1993) assume that cultural awareness equips teachers to mediate worlds, the cornerstone of CRP. This is a genuine practice that affirms students' cultural identity and prepares them to perform in the world. Based on the research, CRP promotes ICC, critical thinking, and equity results that are paramount to EMI students as they work in multicultural educational and professional environments. Section 2.7.2 addresses trends in global CRP research in the EMI context and how cultural knowledge and awareness underpin this pedagogy. Drawing on current research, it describes specific strategies, outcomes, and implications and situates these developments in the wider debate on EMI instruction and cultural integration.

Globally, the application of CRP to EMI has also gained popularity as educators recognise the need to move beyond language- and content-specific teaching to a more generalisable, culturally responsive pedagogy. Gay (2018) advocates for the implementation of practices such as incorporating culturally relevant examples, having class discussions on cultural diversity, and recontextualising texts to align with students' everyday lives. International insights now build on these suggestions, with greater emphasis on intercultural competence, fostering equity and empowering students in EMI classrooms.

A 2024 study by Rey-Paba et al. explored culturally responsive practices in EMI programmes at a Colombian university, focusing on fostering ICC. The mixed-methods research involved 15 teachers and 132 students from the computer science and law disciplines. Findings showed

that teachers who integrated local cultural content, such as Colombian cultural references, into EMI courses enhanced student motivation and comprehension compared to those using predominantly Western-centric materials. Students reported greater engagement when course content reflected their cultural backgrounds, as evidenced by qualitative feedback and survey data. The study underscores the importance of aligning EMI content with students' cultural knowledge to promote ICC and engagement, consistent with CRP principles (Rey-Paba et al., 2024).

Similarly, Eden et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of CRP in fostering inclusivity in educational settings. Their review highlights strategies, such as integrating culturally relevant content and employing diverse instructional methods to engage students from varied backgrounds. For instance, incorporating multicultural perspectives into curricula can validate students' identities and enhance classroom engagement. The authors advocate for ongoing professional development to equip educators with skills to address cultural diversity, aligning with global trends of enhancing teaching effectiveness through cultural sensitivity training. This approach supports creating inclusive environments where all students feel valued, particularly in diverse educational contexts (Eden et al., 2024).

In addition, Saldo et al. (2025) provide a comprehensive review of EMI practices in Asian higher education, analysing 30 studies from 2020–2024 across countries including China, Vietnam, and Thailand. Their findings highlight the use of translanguaging, where teachers incorporate students' native languages alongside English to enhance comprehension and engagement. For example, in Thailand, translanguaging fosters inclusive learning environments by supporting students' linguistic identities (Thongwichit & Ulla, 2024). The review underscores the need for pedagogical adaptations, such as interactive teaching methods and culturally sensitive materials, to address linguistic diversity and promote intercultural understanding in EMI classrooms. These strategies align with broader efforts to improve student outcomes and global competitiveness in Asian EMI programmes (Saldo et al., 2025).

CRP implementation in EMI teaching in the Chinese context has immense potential, but it must be tried proactively. Research, such as Chen et al. (2023), identifies a “caught-between” situation whereby EMI teachers oscillate between promoting English proficiency and preserving cultural identity, with the tendency to overlook systematic cultural inclusion for a lack of support. This tension is in line with the view that EMI can be considered a trajectory of

global competitiveness and not one of cultural enrichment (Guo et al., 2021). Yet, culturally responsive practices could close this gap by placing EMI in the students' cultural contexts in a "third place" (Kramsch, 1993) where Chinese and world cultures intersect and inform learning. For Chinese teachers of EMI, these international trends present potential strategies, like integrating Chinese cultural material (for example, traditional philosophies or historical contexts) into international content, although implementing these practices involves addressing local constraints like limited training and curriculum rigidity.

Overall, the modern international scholarship on CRP in EMI is revealed to show a tendency towards culturally responsive, inclusive pedagogy with vivid explanations of their effectiveness. These advances provide a comparative context in which to investigate Chinese EMI teachers' practice, and they point out how cultural responsiveness can transcend linguistic, disciplinary, and cultural constraints in higher education.

### **2.7.3 Section Summary**

Section 2.7 addressed the pedagogical practices of EMI instructors under two models: an overview of worldwide trends in EMI pedagogy (Subsection 2.7.1) and an in-depth examination of CRP in EMI classrooms (Subsection 2.7.2). Subsection 2.7.1 provided the dynamic update of EMI practices around the globe, with recent studies like Saldo et al. (2025) and Tekin (2024) emphasising the implementation of flipped classrooms, technology integration, translanguaging, and collaborative learning as solutions to linguistic diversity and student engagement.

Subsection 2.7.2 described CRP as the central model of EMI and particularly emphasised cultural awareness and knowledge as the most fundamental underpinnings of practice that legitimate students' identity and build ICC. Some recent studies are Rey-Paba et al. (2024) and Saldo et al. (2025), in which CRP impacts were achieved by intervention, such as role-play supported with culture-responsive measures. Restraints include inadequate training (Rey-Paba et al., 2024) and resistance in the institution. Chinese EMI research, like that of Chen et al. (2023), discovers a battle between English ability and cultural identity where CRP can work towards mediating the tension via opening up the potential for a "third place" (Kramsch, 1993) for both global and Chinese cultures to input into learning—a perhaps fruitful yet unexplored direction among such local conditions as a lack of support.

These sections illuminate EMI pedagogy as an arena wherein language, discipline, and culture need to intersect. The global pattern of culturally responsive practices provides a basis for comparison for Chinese EMI, in which the incorporation of CRP has the ability to enhance intercultural success and is congruent with the aims of the present research to meet an apparent research gap identified in Section 2.11. These ideals lay the groundwork for subsequent chapters and ultimate comparison with Chinese EMI teachers' practices and departure from them, offering tangible implications for teaching pedagogy on the intercultural needs of a world of globalisation.

## **2.8 Institutional and Policy Support for Cultural Integration in EMI**

Policy and institutional backing are also vital in the successful incorporation of culture into EMI settings since they provide the frameworks and support for students and teachers (Xu et al., 2021). Without adequate institutional support, problems that teachers face in incorporating culture into EMI classrooms can be escalated, putting the effectiveness of EMI programmes at risk. Section 2.8 captures the literature on institutional support and policy structures guiding the incorporation of culture into EMI practice, including teacher professional development programmes and how higher education institutions help develop culturally responsive contexts. It will also refer to empirical research, both Chinese and foreign, in order to place the teacher problems and the best ways through which institutions can provide cultural incorporation.

Institutionally, universities should foster a culturally diverse learning environment to enhance intercultural communication within EMI classrooms. Piller (2017) suggests that effective intercultural communication in multilingual settings requires institutional support through resources like professional development and policies promoting diversity and inclusion. To support this, institutions must provide infrastructure, such as training in intercultural competence, courses on intercultural communication, and policies that encourage linguistic and cultural diversity, ensuring a more inclusive and effective EMI learning environment.

Wilkinson and Gabriels (2021) highlight the importance of institutional policies and frameworks in supporting the Englishisation of European higher education, including the integration of EMI. Their study suggests that universities with robust language policies and support systems are better equipped to address the needs of international students. Initiatives like professional development workshops and training in intercultural communication can help

teachers adapt their teaching methods to accommodate cultural diversity. These efforts contribute to improving the effectiveness of EMI and fostering an inclusive learning environment where both domestic and international students feel supported.

Also, studies have shown that higher education institutions can foster ICC through various educational practices. According to Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023), a systematic review of literature from 2016 to 2021 suggested that intercultural communication, sensitivity, and responsibility are critical competencies analysed in higher education contexts. For instance, pedagogical approaches, such as case-based learning and telecollaborative projects, as identified in the review, enhance students' intercultural communication skills and sensitivity, particularly in language learning contexts like English as a foreign language. These practices support professional collaboration and internationalisation, preparing students for effective interaction in diverse cultural settings.

Effective institutional policies are important in providing clear direction as to how cultural integration is to be attained in EMI programmes. Policies have the potential to determine how EMI programmes are organised, how teachers are trained, and how cultural diversity is integrated into the curriculum. One study conducted by Piller and Cho (2013) examined the implementation of EMI in South Korean higher education, focusing on the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST). They argue that neoliberal economic restructuring following the 1997/98 Asian Financial Crisis promoted EMI as a covert language policy, driven by university rankings and the ideology of global competitiveness. The study highlights how policies prioritising English, such as 100% EMI at KAIST, exacerbate social inequalities, increase academic pressure, and suppress critical discourse, creating a challenging environment for students and instructors in multicultural academic settings.

In China, government policies have significantly driven the adoption of EMI in higher education to enhance global competitiveness and internationalise universities, but their implementation faces notable challenges. Since 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education has mandated that 5–10% of undergraduate courses be taught in English within three years, with a long-term goal of reaching 20% (Hu & McKay, 2012). Top-tier institutions like Fudan, Zhejiang, and Wuhan have rapidly expanded EMI offerings to meet these targets, aiming to elevate teaching quality and position English as symbolic capital (Hu & McKay, 2012). However, inconsistent policy implementation, insufficient teacher proficiency in spoken

English, and the absence of clear language prerequisites for EMI courses hinder effective delivery (Fang, 2017). Additionally, resource constraints and pedagogical inefficiencies raise concerns about social inequalities and the alignment of EMI with China's multilingual context. To address these issues, both Fang (2017) and Hu and McKay (2012) advocate for contextualised policies and an ecological approach to reform, integrating cultural elements and enhanced language support to ensure EMI practices are sustainable and equitable.

Besides policy support, institutional support can also be in the form of creating a culturally responsive curriculum that represents a variety of perspectives. For example, the curriculum of EMI programmes can be designed to include global and intercultural content, which will not only make the students more culturally aware but also render the teachers more culturally competent. This is also echoed by Richards and Pun (2022), who advocated for the implementation of an integrated curriculum approach with intercultural orientations at content and pedagogic practice levels by higher education institutions.

Professional development programmes are a key component of institutional support for EMI teachers, fostering a range of competencies to enhance teaching effectiveness. As highlighted by Wang et al. (2025), formal training initiatives, such as workshops and courses, play a critical role in developing EMI teachers' linguistic, pedagogical, and intercultural skills. For instance, some programmes focus on improving ICC, enabling teachers to navigate diverse classroom contexts (Maíz-Arévalo & Orduna-Nocito, 2021). These initiatives also address challenges like language proficiency and pedagogical adaptation, promoting reflective practices and collaborative strategies to create inclusive learning environments.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) 2022 report, "Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce: Final report for Indigenous cultural competency project," highlights the importance of professional development to enhance teachers' cultural responsiveness, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The report recommends developing tools, such as a self-reflection tool, an intercultural development continuum, and a capability framework, to support teachers in understanding their own cultural biases and engaging with diverse community contexts. These resources aim to foster culturally safe classrooms by encouraging critical reflection and authentic relationships with local communities, thereby improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

Chinese professional development for teachers in EMI is still in its early stages. Xiong et al. (2024) highlight the lack of professional training for EMI teachers in a Chinese international high school, noting that teachers are often left to navigate language and content challenges independently. The study emphasises teachers' agency in adopting translanguaging practices, juggling content and language instructor roles, and negotiating cultural differences to meet local and international educational demands. To support EMI implementation, there is a growing need for professional development programmes that address both linguistic and intercultural competencies, enabling teachers to effectively foster multilingual and culturally responsive classrooms. In a recent study, for example, Liao et al. (2025) point out that EMI teachers in China's conventional universities often lack adequate training, leading to challenges in achieving the dual goals of content and L2 teaching. The study notes that joint-venture universities provide more robust L2 support and teacher training, enabling more effective EMI implementation. To enhance classroom practices, the authors suggest providing EMI teachers with targeted L2 training and encouraging strategic translanguaging to support student engagement and learning outcomes.

In summary, policy and institutional support are required for embedding culture into EMI practice. International as well as Chinese studies highlight the key role played by institutions and policymakers in cultivating a culturally responsive learning environment. While remarkable accomplishment is achieved in other regions, deficiencies in carrying out uniform and persistent support for EMI teachers and students exist.

## **2.9 Challenges and Barriers to Cultural Integration in EMI**

The integration of cultural content into EMI practice has presented a critical challenge both to instructors and students, despite growing acknowledgement of the role played by culture in education. Challenges have arisen from a dynamic interaction of structural, institutional, and individual factors that oppose the free integration of cultural content into the EMI curriculum. Section 2.9 explains the principal barriers—shortage of training, lack of resources, lack of time, and resistance from students and institutions—based on detailed empirical information to identify gaps in EMI practice and recommend measures to close them.

One of the most pressing challenges for cultural integration in EMI is the absence of adequate

teacher training, both in ICC and in cultural content integration into curricula. For ICC—a skill for effective and suitable communication across cultures—EMI teachers are not well trained, irrespective of what subject they teach and how much English they speak. Eden et al. (2024) provide a comprehensive review of strategies for promoting cultural competence in educational settings, emphasising the creation of inclusive learning environments. The authors highlight the importance of ongoing professional development for educators to address cultural diversity and unconscious biases. They advocate for culturally responsive teaching practices, such as integrating diverse cultural content into curricula and employing varied instructional methods to engage students from different backgrounds. Additionally, the review underscores the role of institutional policies and leadership in embedding cultural competence alongside community partnerships and technology, such as virtual exchange programmes, to foster diversity awareness and equity in education. Similarly, Chen et al. (2023) note that EMI teachers in China face challenges in integrating content and language, with some EMI practitioners adapting flexibly to students' linguistic needs through bilingual practices. However, limited teacher training in multilingual pedagogies can hinder the development of engaging, contextually relevant instructional content, reducing opportunities for students to connect coursework with real-world applications. This underscores the need for enhanced professional development to support intercultural and multilingual capacities in EMI settings.

Insufficient resources and institutional support are other central barriers to cultural integration in EMI, which compromise teachers' capacity to manage multicultural classroom needs. Multicultural curriculum materials, intercultural communication professional development, and relevant policies are needed for effective integration, but these are often not provided. Fang (2017) highlights the need for more contextualised language policies for EMI instructors in Chinese universities, emphasising the importance of moving away from a monolingual, native-speaker ideology toward a multilingual ELF perspective. Wilkinson and Gabriels (2021) explore the Englishisation of higher education across various European contexts, highlighting diverse approaches to EMI policies. Their edited volume, with contributions from 15 European countries, addresses challenges, such as maintaining cultural identity and ensuring educational quality in EMI settings. The book notes that universities adopt EMI in unique ways, often shaped by local language policies and internationalisation goals. It emphasises the need for inclusive policies that address linguistic and cultural diversity to support equitable education.

Time constraints pose a significant challenge to cultural integration in EMI settings, limiting

teachers' opportunities to design and implement culturally responsive lessons within the demanding EMI framework. In their critical review of 30 empirical studies on EMI teacher development from 2018 to 2022, Wang et al. (2025) highlight that EMI teachers, particularly in non-English-speaking contexts, face challenges in addressing cultural diversity due to the intensive demands of teaching content through a second language. The review notes that institutional pressures and the need to focus on linguistic and pedagogical skills often leave limited time for incorporating cultural elements, impacting the ability to foster inclusive and culturally sensitive classroom environments. Syllabus pressures in EMI settings often prioritise content delivery over cultural integration, limiting opportunities for culturally responsive teaching. Jiang et al. (2019) indicate that EMI teachers in Chinese universities face challenges in balancing content and language instruction due to institutional demands and limited class time. For instance, teachers frequently adopt teacher-centred lecturing to cover extensive curricula, reducing time for interactive discussions that could incorporate cultural perspectives. This focus on content coverage, driven by the need to meet academic objectives within constrained schedules, often sidelines efforts to foster cultural awareness in EMI classrooms.

Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023) conducted a systematic review of 325 studies (2016–2021) on intercultural competencies in higher education, highlighting the importance of collaborative learning for cultural integration. The review found that pedagogical approaches, such as telecollaborative projects, often face challenges due to time constraints and institutional demands. For instance, studies noted tensions in international student exchanges where limited time for coordination hindered effective cross-cultural collaboration. This suggests that while collaborative strategies are vital for fostering intercultural competencies, practical implementation requires addressing logistical barriers to ensure sufficient time for planning and execution. Saldo et al. (2025) provide a 2025 Asian perspective on EMI, analysing 30 peer-reviewed articles from 2020–2024 across various Asian countries. The study identifies challenges, such as limited teacher training and time constraints, which often hinder the integration of cultural depth in EMI classrooms. For instance, heavy teaching loads and top-down policy implementation reduce opportunities for intercultural discussions, pushing pedagogical adaptations like translanguaging to the forefront to enhance student engagement and comprehension (Shao & Rose, 2024; Thongwichit & Ulla, 2024). These findings emphasise the need for institutional support and flexible teaching strategies to balance content delivery with cultural and linguistic inclusivity.

Student and institutional resistance are also complex challenges to cultural integration, articulated in multiple sets of priorities and perceptions within EMI programmes. Students always resist cultural content if they feel it is not core to their academic goals or if they are embarrassed to talk about topics unfamiliar to them. Chen et al. (2023) conducted a case study at a non-key Chinese university to explore EMI implementation using the ROAD-MAPPING framework. Data from eight policy and curricular documents, a focus group with senior managers, and semi-structured interviews with 10 EMI teachers, two senior managers, and one administrative staff member revealed misalignments between institutional policies and practitioner experiences. For instance, Type A EMI courses, intended for mixed home and international student cohorts, were taught to linguistically homogenous home students, leading to student disengagement due to the perceived irrelevance of English for learning Chinese culture. The study highlights the need for contextualised policymaking to address local student needs and linguistic readiness in EMI settings.

Overall, the integration of cultural content into EMI faces multifaceted challenges stemming from structural, institutional, and individual factors. The lack of adequate teacher training in ICC and culturally responsive pedagogies significantly hinders instructors' ability to create inclusive and engaging learning environments. Insufficient institutional support, including limited access to multicultural resources and supportive policies, further exacerbates these challenges, restricting opportunities for meaningful cultural integration. Time constraints, driven by demanding curricula and institutional pressures, often prioritise content delivery over fostering cultural awareness, limiting the use of interactive and culturally responsive teaching methods. Additionally, resistance from both students and institutions, often due to misaligned priorities or discomfort with unfamiliar cultural content, underscores the need for contextualised policymaking that addresses local linguistic and cultural needs. To overcome these barriers, enhanced professional development, flexible teaching strategies like translanguaging, and robust institutional support are essential to balance content delivery with cultural and linguistic inclusivity, ultimately fostering equitable and culturally sensitive EMI classrooms.

## **2.10 Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 has provided an extensive literature review of the role of culture in EMI, specifically addressing Chinese higher education's individual implications. It discussed the concept of

culture (Section 2.1), its definitions (Section 2.1.1), four theory-based approaches: cognitive, structural, symbolic, and critical (Section 2.1.2), and relational dynamics toward interculturality (Section 2.1.3). These sections place the nature of culture in conceptualising this entity as complex and dynamic, shaping identity, communication, and pedagogy and thus inciting critical thought as to its presence in EMI contexts. The relationship between culture and language was expanded on by the reliance and necessity of cultural awareness in order to use language appropriately (Section 2.2). Following that, the discussion of culture in language instruction was presented (Section 2.3). There, the critique highlighted how the integration of culture influences language teaching and sets the stage for its implementation in EMI.

The global phenomenon of EMI was investigated in Section 2.4, from an initial appearance as a vehicle for the internationalisation of higher education to a detailed focus on EMI in Chinese higher education (Section 2.5). This section covered internationalisation drivers (Section 2.5.1), including global competitiveness and national policy targets, and surveyed current literature on EMI in China (Section 2.5.2) with stress on content and linguistic transmission concerns instead of cultural ones. Teachers' IA and ICC (Section 2.6) as well as EMI pedagogical practices (Section 2.7) were then outlined, showing the pivotal role of instructors in incorporating culture into EMI but noting preparation and support deficiencies.

Institutional and policy support for cultural integration was evaluated in Section 2.8, where the policy context often gives more weight to language ability than cultural ability, leading to lowly developed cultural integration. With this background, the obstacles and problems with cultural integration in EMI were explored in Section 2.9: lack of time, restricted curricula, language differences, and low teacher training. The chapter ended with an integration of these findings in a summary (Section 2.10) and an identification of the research gap and objectives (Section 2.11). The research gap identified is the absence of focus on the cultural integration of EMI, particularly in non-Western settings like China, where internationalisation has preceded the development of culturally responsive pedagogies.

In general, the review indicates that while EMI research has worked to clarify linguistic and disciplinary matters, the cultural dimension—most important in facilitating ICC in the era of globalisation—is still less transparent. In China, this void is supplemented by institutional, pedagogic, and cultural details requiring more investigation. This chapter thus provides the theoretical and empirical foundation for this study, justifying the exploration of Chinese higher

education EMI teachers' conceptualisation of culture, their thoughts on how it should be integrated into their teaching, and how they enact these ideas in the classroom. In doing so, this thesis seeks to bridge the identified research gap, contributing findings that would be able to inform EMI pedagogy in China and elsewhere.

## **2.11 Research Gap and Aims**

The study aims to investigate culture in EMI higher education. The fundamental reason for this is that, despite general acceptance, the integration of culture in actual EMI classrooms has yet to be investigated. Moreover, there is little reference, much less direction, in Chinese higher education on whether and how to include culture in EMI classrooms. What has to be investigated are EMI educators' cultural perspectives and how these perspectives are reflected in how they use culture in their classroom teaching techniques. As a result, this thesis aims to learn about EMI educators' perspectives and practices of explicitly and implicitly integrating culture in their classrooms.

### **2.11.1 Research Objectives**

The goals of this study are to explore EMI instructors' perceptions and practices of integrating culture in Chinese higher education.

More specifically, the following are the concrete objectives:

- 1) To shed light on EMI instructors' understanding of what culture means in the context of EMI instruction.
- 2) To comprehend how EMI instructors see and define their culturally integrated activities, and
- 3) To investigate the extent to which current EMI teaching techniques include culture instruction.

### **2.11.2 Research Questions**

As stated in Section 1.3, the overarching research questions to be addressed in this thesis are:

- 1) In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture?
- 2) What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI?
- 3) To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices

in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery?

This chapter has provided a comprehensive literature review on the role of culture in EMI, with a specific focus on Chinese higher education. Through 11 subsections, it systematically explored the theoretical, conceptual, and practical dimensions of cultural integration in EMI. These findings underscore a critical research gap: the limited exploration of cultural integration in EMI, particularly in non-Western contexts like China, where internationalisation often overshadows culturally responsive pedagogies. By identifying this gap and outlining the research aims and questions, this chapter establishes the theoretical and empirical foundation for investigating EMI instructors' perceptions and practices of cultural integration in Chinese higher education.

The next chapter, Chapter 3, outlines the methodology employed to address the research questions. It details the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative research design, including participant recruitment, data collection through questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and thematic analysis for data interpretation. This methodological framework ensures a robust exploration of EMI instructors' understandings and practices of cultural integration, building on the foundation laid in this literature review.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

In the previous chapter, a comprehensive review of the relevant literature was conducted, establishing the theoretical foundation for this investigation. This chapter outlines the methodology that underpins this research, detailing the processes and approaches employed to address the research questions:

- 1) In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture?
- 2) What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI?
- 3) To what extent and in what ways are their understandings of culture reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery?

Specifically, the chapter begins with an exploration of the research framework (Section 3.1), providing the conceptual and theoretical structure guiding the study. This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and social constructive epistemology, emphasising that human knowledge is constructed through social interactions. Following this, the research design is explained (Section 3.2), including the rationale for conducting a qualitative study. The qualitative approach was chosen to deeply explore EMI instructors' perceptions and practices regarding cultural integration in their teaching. Subsequently, the recruitment of participants and the methods used for data collection and analysis are explained in detail. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on EMI teachers from various disciplines at Chinese universities. Data were collected using multiple methods: an online questionnaire completed by 56 participants, semi-structured interviews with 10 respondents, classroom observations of the same 10 participants, and stimulated recall interviews. The chapter then discusses data analysis methods, specifically thematic analysis and the constant comparative method. Ethical considerations are examined next (Section 3.3), including issues of consent, confidentiality, and the integrity of the research process. The study's validity and reliability measures are also discussed (Section 3.4), focusing on strategies to enhance trustworthiness. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the methodological aspects of the thesis (Section 3.5).

### **3.1 Research Framework**

Throughout the research process, a researcher's choice of inquiry paradigm will affect and shape how they think and behave. Thus, it is proposed that paradigms or worldviews that link

to or reflect a different ontological and epistemological perspective in terms of methodology guide the entire research process (Uzun, 2016).

This study takes an epistemological position grounded in social constructivism, where knowledge is not a universal fact but is constructed socially and learned through sociocultural contexts and human interactions (Blaikie, 2010; Bryman, 2019). “Human growth” in this context refers to the growth of knowledge and consciousness, which gets constructed as individuals interact within sociocultural contexts. In this regard, reality is not fixed but can be explored by examining the sociocultural factors that determine how participants and researchers come to know and comprehend it. The paradigm of this study is in line with interpretivism, which recognises that individuals actively construct their world and shape how knowledge regarding it is generated (Ritchie et al., 2013). Interpretivism is concerned with revealing the way people construct meaning from their everyday, routine lives and attribute meanings to them, and how those meanings are negotiated, dynamic, and situational (Crotty, 2005). Interpretivism acknowledges that those meanings are negotiated with other individuals surrounding them, including the researcher, whose presence and interpretation co-construct the research process (Shaw, 2010). Interpretivism values openness and transparency, and researchers are encouraged to make explicit their interpretive work, chronicling the research context, interactions with participants, and changing the construction of meaning. Such openness, Smith (2004) contends, enables others to trace how conclusions are being arrived at and to critically evaluate the findings. To effectively observe human behaviour, this approach employs exploration and immersion with the participants to enhance meaning-making through direct experience. By mediating between the meanings of the participants and the developing understanding of the researcher, the research retains the dynamic interrelation of human interaction and contextual elements, presenting a rich, textured picture of the phenomena under investigation.

The interpretivist paradigm contrasts with that of positivism, which suggests that the world is unaffected by the researcher because it exists independently, and the facts and values within it vary, allowing objectivity and value-free inquiry through direct observations and rule-based regularities (Ritchie et al., 2013). Instead, interpretivism is “a tradition within social science, composed of efforts to understand, to construct meaning, to tap into the subjective experiences that people have” (Goodsell, 2013, p. 3). For Schwandt (2007), interpretivists tend to conduct research by observing situations as they naturally unfold, striving to understand and interpret

events based on the meanings that people themselves assign to them. This means that interpretivists believe that their research of an object or a social reality should take place in its natural surroundings. According to Cohen et al. (2011), research should be carried out in natural, real-world environments with minimal interference from the researcher. They explain that reality stems from human interactions and is socially constructed, shaped by individuals' sentiments, opinions, viewpoints, and responses. This leads to multiple realities that interpretive researchers must explore and understand. The goal, as Cohen et al. (2011) note, is for researchers to provide accurate interpretations of these social realities within their natural or conventional contexts.

Therefore, as this study aims to explore the EMI teachers' perceptions and behaviours of culture, the interpretive paradigm, which places importance on subjective meanings and considers reality as socially created, can inform the philosophical assumptions of this study. In this present study, participants construct meaning through and about their EMI teaching and share their understanding of what culture means in EMI courses. It may be less likely to obtain adequate knowledge of their perspectives and how they integrate culture into their teaching if the research is not based on interpretivism. According to Walsham (1993), language is a key element within the interpretive paradigm, serving as a medium through which social constructions of reality are formed. In the context of educational settings, this refers to the interactions between teachers and students where shared meanings and understandings are developed through dialogue and communication. Gulzar et al. (2013) also state that classroom life is shaped by social interactions, which play a dominant role in all classroom activities and contribute to its socially constructed nature. Additionally, the adoption of a broad, open definition of culture was a deliberate methodological choice, aligning with the interpretivist approach to allow participants to articulate their own conceptualisations without researcher imposition. While this provided a rich, multifaceted view, the potential trade-off, acknowledged in the limitations, is that no single aspect of culture (e.g., 'Big C' or 'Little c') was explored to the greatest depth.

Overall, the interpretivist paradigm is the underlying philosophical concept that controls the whole research process. The interpretive and exploratory techniques employed in this social constructivist study aim to understand the meanings behind EMI teachers' views and behaviours.

## **3.2 Research Design**

Section 3.2 introduces the research design utilised in the solution of the study's research questions. It provides a description of the methodological framework, sampling of participants, data collection protocol, and data analytic strategy from 56 EMI teachers at Chinese universities. Four subsections present a general description of the research process. Section 3.2.1, *The Methodology Design*, establishes the qualitative, interpretivist research paradigm and elicitation of the subjective experience framework. Section 3.2.2, *Sampling and Participants*, addresses diversity within the EMI contexts, and Section 3.2.3, *Data Collection Methods*, lists the four methodologies—online questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and stimulated recall interviews—and presents details of sequential usage of the methodologies. Section 3.2.4, *Data Analysis Methods*, explains the process of thematic analysis with an integrated inductive–deductive approach. Section 3.2.5 summarises the section.

### **3.2.1 The Methodology Design**

The research design is of great importance as the credibility and usefulness of research depend on the design employed. Bickman and Rog (1997) describe research designs as the architectural blueprint of research, encompassing the research strategy, data collection, and analysis methods best suited for the study. Research designs connect data collection and analysis with the questions guiding the inquiry and ensure that all aspects of research will be covered (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this current research, I have adopted an interpretative research design within a qualitative framework. The reason behind adopting such a design is that this approach best suits the investigation of subjective insights and lived experiences of the research participants. Interpretivist research is focused on knowing how people make sense of their world by interpreting their perceptions, actions, and interactions in significant social and cultural contexts (Crotty, 2005; Ritchie et al., 2013). Unlike positivist approaches that aim to test hypotheses or uncover universal truths, interpretivism prioritises the co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants, emphasising the contextual, negotiated, and dynamic nature of knowledge (Schwandt, 2007). This design aligns with my aim to delve into EMI instructors' understandings and experiences of cultural integration, capturing the richness and complexity of their perspectives.

A qualitative approach was chosen with the purpose of addressing the research questions based

on the participants' perspectives and practices (Richards, 2003). I used qualitative data analysis to examine the perceptions and attitudes of culture among EMI teachers. This allowed me to interpret the comments made by individual EMI teachers regarding how they incorporate culture into teaching (Taylor et al., 2016). In EMI studies, qualitative research is a suitable method for investigating the intricacies of individuals in their natural context to capture patterns of behaviour and knowledge (Richards, 2005). That is, through careful observation of the particular situation, qualitative research is suitable for obtaining an overall understanding of participants' thoughts and reactions, decision-making and teaching routines, and contextual aspects and outcomes (Dörnyei, 2007).

In line with the epistemological and methodological considerations outlined above—such as the social constructivist stance and interpretivist approach—a qualitative study design has been employed. This design enables a close analysis of how Chinese higher education EMI teachers conceptualise and incorporate culture into their classroom practice. It also enables an analysis of how institutional context and language policy, among other factors, can shape their culture-integrating practices and, hence, a holistic understanding of the interaction between individual perceptions and systemic forces.

### **3.2.2 Sampling and Participants**

Qualitative research sampling is not statistically representative, but for recruiting people who can provide rich, context-based descriptions of the phenomenon in question (Cohen et al., 2011; Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is therefore widely used, allowing researchers to choose participants or cases depending on their relevance, expertise, or experience related to the research questions (Kelly, 2010). Such a targeted sampling method guarantees that limited resources are utilised to produce data which are rich and significant. Although fixed criteria might be utilised at the beginning, purposive sampling is often an iterative and adaptive one. Researchers might adjust their selection as data collection is underway, based on emerging findings and analysis needs (Dörnyei, 2007). The process is often continued until data begin to reflect recurring patterns and no new information is obtained that is notable. It is through this that researchers can be certain that the data are sufficient to address the research questions. Therefore, purposive sampling can be adopted in the present study to help enhance understanding of the research questions.

Purposive sampling techniques utilised here are criterion sampling to select the universities

covering a variety of EMI settings. “Settings” in this case refers to the various sites where EMI is applied, for instance, variations in the type of university (such as high-tier research universities and regional), geographic location (such as urban vs. rural), and field of discipline (such as science, business, or humanities). The aim of this study was not to generalise findings to the whole broader population to which the study population belongs, such as worldwide EMI education, but to present a description of the special features of participants’ (EMI teachers’) experience in Chinese higher education. Hence, selecting appropriate participants from a broad range of EMI disciplines in Chinese higher education was important in order to represent this variety.

Previous studies of EMI in Chinese higher education—for instance, Hu and Lei (2014)—generally recruited participants from a single university or course, a trend observed in other research (see, for example, Fang, 2017; Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022). While these studies offer valuable data regarding the status of EMI implementation at some institutions or in particular programmes, these samples—given their respective and institutional limits—cannot reflect the overall extent of EMI disciplines in China. In contrast, the present study had a more representative sample of EMI courses, which spanned a number of universities and disciplines, to illuminate the complexity and diversity of EMI education through empirical investigation.

On the basis of sampling criteria established in this study, the participants were 56 Chinese national EMI instructors employed at various universities across mainland China. In their institutions, teaching courses are fully or partially taught in English. These criteria are: (1) recent teaching experience at a Chinese university, (2) up-to-date practice in teaching EMI courses (partially or fully in English), and (3) the presence of a range of academic disciplines and types of institutions to ensure diversity of experience and perspective. To increase the diversity further, I sampled the respondents across a number of departments teaching various disciplines, such as engineering, business, and mathematics. That is, their subject expertise, professional education, and EMI experience vary, related to variations in the discipline demands, teaching styles, and institutional settings. To contextualise their EMI practice, it was likely that the participants’ classes consisted primarily of local Chinese students, with the proportion of international students varying, which influences the use of English and the handling of cultural content. This purposive sampling is also in line with the research purpose to unlock the richness and complexity of cultural integration in EMI teaching in Chinese higher

education, as grounded in the literature review.

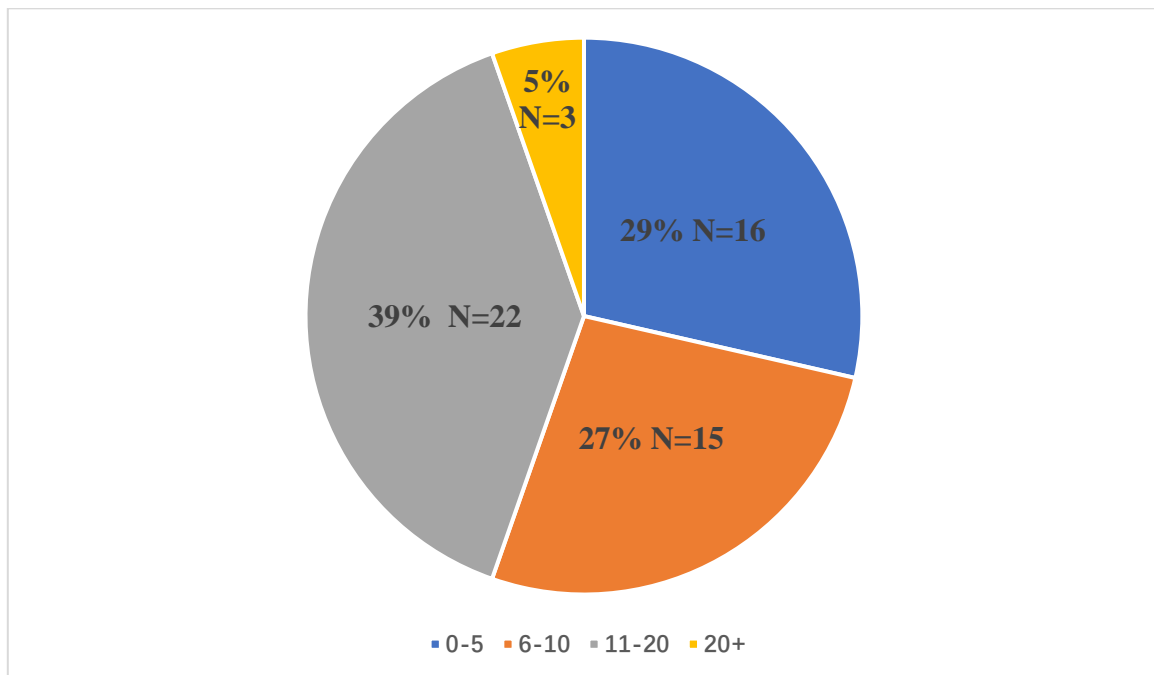
The questionnaire was distributed to EMI teachers in Chinese universities by email or social networking websites with the aim of selecting “information-rich situations for an in-depth analysis that is likely to shed light on the issues under review” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). In an attempt to maximise the number of questionnaire returns, I employed snowball sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Specifically, I asked the initial questionnaire respondents to recommend additional participants who met the sampling criteria—namely, being current EMI instructors at Chinese higher education institutions. This approach ensured that eligibility for participation was based on their existing professional role rather than on a transitional process of becoming an EMI instructor.

Even though snowball sampling, based on personal and professional networks to recruit participants, can create bias or limit representativeness, I see it as a limitation as well as a strength of this research. In Chinese society, where social relations are significant, applying personal introductions helps to gain trust and legitimacy among participants. This relational approach most likely improved the integrity and truthfulness of the information collected because the participants could have been more inclined to give honest feedback to a researcher who was connected through valued contacts.

In the end, the participant sample included 56 EMI teachers aged from 20 to 50+ years old. They all have experience teaching EMI to Chinese students. Seventy-one per cent of them have been EMI teachers for more than five years (see Figure 1). The subjects they teach are various, including international business, management, history, music, mathematics, and engineering. A comprehensive overview of the teachers’ demographics is available in Appendix A.

**Figure 1**

*EMI Instructors' Teaching Years*



Semi-structured in-depth interviews were scheduled as part of the data collection process to have a more detailed understanding of the experiences of EMI instructors. Of the 56 questionnaire respondents, more than 10 expressed their willingness to proceed with interviews by offering their names and email addresses at the end of the questionnaire. However, ten interviewees were selected from within this group on the basis of their stated interest and availability, rather than on a random basis, to produce a varied but manageable sample for closer examination. These interviewees were contacted by email from the contact details given and offered additional information regarding the interview process and arranging convenient times for the interviews. The details of the interviewees are summarised in Table 1. Following the interviews, I asked the respondents whether they consented to be willing for me to observe their EMI classes. Because instructors' perspectives on culture in EMI differ by discipline, the crucial sample condition for observations is to have as much topic variation as possible (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012). The ten interviewees all agreed to take part in the observations. Following each classroom observation, the EMI instructors who were observed then participated in a stimulated recollection interview. Essentially, the cognitive processes of EMI teachers were investigated by asking them to recall their thoughts during the observed classes (Lyle, 2003).

**Table 1***Interview and Observation Participant Demographic Information*

<b>No.</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>EMI teaching years</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Overseas Professional Development</b>
1	20–29	0–5	Engineering	No
2	20–29	0–5	English literature	PhD in the US
3	20–29	0–5	Business and management	PhD in Australia
4	30–39	11–20	Sociology	Exchange Programme in the UK
5	30–39	11–20	International Business	Professional training provided by a UK university
6	30–39	6–10	Mathematics	Teacher education courses before teaching EMI
7	40–49	11–20	World History	Master’s in Hong Kong
8	40–49	11–20	International relations	PhD in Hong Kong
9	40–49	11–20	Physics	Exchange Programme in the US
10	50+	11–20	Ancient Chinese literature	International Conference

For clarity and ease of reference throughout the thesis, an abbreviation system is used to identify participants according to the data collection method through which their responses were obtained. Questionnaire participants are labelled as QP, interview participants as IP, and observation participants as OP, each followed by their assigned number (for example, QP12, IP3 and OP5). This system allows the reader to easily distinguish the data source while maintaining the anonymity of participants. All identifiers are used consistently in the findings and discussion chapters.

Overall, the final N=56 for the questionnaire, though not a strictly determined number, was deemed sufficient for the initial, exploratory phase of this multi-stage, qualitative study. It provided a broad foundational dataset to inform the subsequent in-depth sampling of the 10

interview/observation participants, aligning with the thesis's overall interpretivist design. The main objective was, hence, not to statistically generalise but to reach the point of data saturation. Using information-rich cases as a focus fits with the purposive sampling approach used to collect deep, context-based insights, which, in turn, concurs with the study's interpretivist objectives of understanding the instructors' subjective experiences.

### 3.2.3 Data Collection Methods

In this study, data were gathered through an online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and stimulated recall interviews. This section begins with an overview of the data collection techniques and procedures, followed by explanations of why each is used. Basically, the data collection instruments, such as online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, had been designed with English as the language of communication. The decision was made to use English in line with the research focus on EMI, which facilitates the direct recording of participants' words and ideas in the language environment. It could be that the participants, being non-native English speakers, found it a bit difficult to express their complex or intricate cultural ideas when they responded. During the process of data analysis, the researcher was also aware that the respondents might have different intended meanings of their answers; hence, she interpreted the responses very carefully. Table 2 presents an overview of the specific data collection methods and procedures.

**Table 2**

*Overview of Data Collection Methods and Procedures*

<b>Methods</b>	<b>The number of participants</b>	<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Procedures</b>
Online questionnaire (20 mins)	56	1. In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture?	1. I searched EMI teachers' publicly available contact information on university websites, social media platforms, or networks. 2. I emailed them or sent them via WeChat the Qualtrics link to

			<p>the online questionnaire (see Appendix B) as well as the invitation letter (see Appendix C).</p> <p>3. I organised their replies via Qualtrics.</p>
<p>Semi-structured interviews (45–60 mins; one-on-one individual, in-depth interviews)</p>	10	<p>1. In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors’ understandings of culture?</p> <p>2. What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI?</p>	<p>1. I contacted the instructors who agreed to be interviewed and scheduled an interview with them according to their availability.</p> <p>2. Prior to the interviews, I provided them with the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix D).</p> <p>3. At the start of the interviews, I thoroughly explained the goal of the study and the degree of their engagement in the study and answered any questions they may have.</p> <p>4. I requested that they sign the Participant Consent Form (see Appendix E).</p> <p>5. All interviews were taped and transcribed.</p>
<p>Classroom observations (around two hours for each full lesson)</p>	10	<p>3. To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course</p>	<p>1. I contacted the instructors who have agreed to be observed and arranged for attendance in their classrooms to be accommodated on appropriate days and times.</p> <p>2. During the observations, I</p>

		delivery?	took notes and captured audio.
Stimulated recall interviews (45–60 mins)	10	3. To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery?	<p>1. In less than 48 hours since observation, I also spent around 45–60 minutes with the instructor using observation recordings, teachers’ notes, and PowerPoint slides to enable reflection on what happened in the lessons, the content, the activities, and the response of the students.</p> <p>2. All interviews were taped and transcribed.</p>

**Online Questionnaires**

Questionnaires are widely employed in education research to collect data (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The online questionnaire was chosen as the first research tool for this study. Questionnaires are suggested for collecting data on elusive phenomena, such as beliefs and attitudes (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). In this research, a questionnaire was used to gather an overall view of EMI instructors’ understanding and meanings of cultural themes. Questionnaires are most suitable for collecting an overview of trends and general patterns because they enable systematic data collection from a wide group of participants, which helps identify prevailing patterns and findings (Creswell, 2014). Through this method, I could collect diverse experiences and perceptions, and this provided me with a clear picture of the common practices and beliefs among EMI teachers. In addition, questionnaires can also be used to collect data from large groups of people in diverse situations. Questionnaires, as discussed by Mackey and Gass (2005), can be employed in various ways, with their design and administration influencing the nature and depth of the information collected from respondents. Since the data were collected from universities located across China, carrying out an online questionnaire was effective in transcending the geographical constraints. Unlike being bound by geographical distance across schools, the online platform permitted me to tap into EMI teachers from disparate locations—rural and urban—without enduring travel or site administration. Thus, the application of this strategy allowed the study to record varied

experiences and perceptions of EMI teachers from different regions and contribute to the diversity and richness of data obtained.

The questionnaire was designed to gather comprehensive data on EMI instructors' perspectives and practices related to integrating culture into their courses. It was structured into several sections, each addressing different themes. For the demographic information section, questions about age, teaching experience, department, and the specific EMI courses taught were asked. These are mostly open questions aimed at understanding the background and context of the participants. Then, there was a question about overseas professional development opportunities related to the English language or subject area. This was a yes/no question with an option to provide details if applicable. There were also open-ended questions, which aimed to ask participants to describe their goals for EMI courses and their perceptions of culture in these programmes. These can allow for detailed qualitative responses. Participants were also asked to rate the degree to which culture should be integrated into EMI courses (from "Definitely yes" to "Definitely not") and to specify which cultures they think should be integrated, with options provided and an open-text box for reasons. A question about the emphasis on culture in current EMI policies at their university was also included. At the end, there was an open-ended section for any further comments on integrating culture into EMI classes. Overall, the questionnaire used a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to capture a wide range of qualitative data. This design could facilitate a deep understanding of EMI instructors' views and practices regarding cultural integration in their teaching.

After the questionnaire was completely drafted (see Appendix B), to assess the viability of the questionnaire before distributing it, I asked a colleague to peer-check it to prevent asking leading questions. A preliminary version of the questionnaire was also distributed to ten of my colleagues for feedback. As they are also Chinese university EMI teachers, they helped me modify any unclear or difficult-to-understand wording.

Furthermore, there were both open-ended and closed-ended questions in the questionnaire. The inclusion of open questions in EMI programmes, such as how instructors understand the culture, can help respondents further express themselves. In addition, a blank space was provided at the conclusion for further remarks to overcome the limitations of questionnaire items in terms of the depth of data obtained. Respondents were asked to provide their thoughts about EMI in general. This method allowed me to gain extra ideas or concepts that were not

covered in prior queries.

The online questionnaire was used to collect qualitative data from 56 EMI teachers across mainland China. Most universities make contact information for instructors available to the public and offer part or all of their courses in English. The initial online questionnaire, which included factual and exploratory attitudinal questions, was intended to collect data to investigate the overall environment of EMI teaching in Chinese higher education. Questions regarding culture in EMI courses could provide information on the interview timeline and specific themes to be explored.

### *Semi-structured Interviews*

In qualitative research, interviews are also a frequent form of data collection (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), qualitative interviews try to comprehend the world from the participants' perspectives, demonstrate the importance of their experiences, and reveal their lived reality. Qualitative interviews allow researchers to understand people's beliefs. As opposed to questionnaires, they can give a more in-depth knowledge of participants' opinions, experiences, and perspectives. Interviews are often considered a core method in qualitative research, allowing researchers to explore people's experiences and views (Richards, 2009). Consequently, interviews have long been utilised in various fields of educational research, including EMI studies, to gain rich qualitative data.

One of the most common forms of qualitative interviews is the semi-structured interview. In these interviews, the interviewer and interviewee collaboratively generate information. Semi-structured interviews involve a set of predetermined questions but allow for flexibility in how questions are asked and answered, facilitating in-depth exploration of topics (Bryman, 2019). According to Dörnyei (2007), they provide the most latitude in following the topic in unanticipated paths. The goal is to establish a casual environment in which the responder can reveal more than they would in a formal setting, and the interviewer acts as a listener.

Semi-structured interviews have the additional benefit that they are extremely flexible. The interviewer has to explain what the interview is all about. The interviewer guides the conversation around the research topic or theme, encouraging respondents to elaborate on their opinions, experiences, and perspectives in their own words (Dörnyei, 2007). This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' thoughts and views. Consequently,

through semi-structured interviews, much information is gathered from the participants. Interviewees may also bring up issues arising during the interview, since both interviewees and the interviewer learn as they go about conducting interviews. Thus, knowledge arises due to the interaction of two people in an interview, which means the interviewer may learn new things and work with interviewees to develop new insights after every interview session.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were employed in order to collect rich descriptions of the respondents' everyday living experiences related to the research questions. To achieve in-depth insights and a general impression of the opinions of participants, the probable respondents were initially contacted with a questionnaire and asked if they would be willing to offer feedback via an offline or online interview. A total of ten interviews were eventually planned to obtain factual data regarding participants' experiences, thoughts, and feelings about EMI delivery. Interviews were recorded with a tape recorder and later transcribed to allow for proper analysis of the data collected.

To ensure that all significant issues were pertinent to participants, a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix F) was developed as a flexible framework, derived from lessons learned from questionnaire feedback. Interview questions were carefully designed to establish a non-threatening and informal atmosphere where rapport and participants' willingness to openly share their experiences could be established. In addition, nonverbal communication, such as body language, helped greatly in facilitating effective communication among the participants and the interviewer. Taking into account the geographical distribution of the participants across Chinese universities, both face-to-face interviews and online interviews were conducted in an effort to maintain flexibility in adapting to participants' locations and tendencies without undermining the depth of interaction needed for this qualitative study.

Personal interview modifications included adapting the course of specific questions to fit the real experiences or issues raised by participants in their answers to the questionnaire. For example, where a respondent highlighted some specific issues with cultural integration within the questionnaire, further questions within the interview were written to inquire about such specific issues. Similarly, the order of questions was sometimes changed to track the direction of the conversation so that the conversation would be more natural and participant-oriented. These modifications allowed for a more tailored and situation-specific approach to qualitative data collection.

Specifically, the interview was structured in a manner to reveal various aspects of EMI teachers' experience and attitudes towards cultural integration in the classroom. Background Questions were posed at the beginning of the interview to give the participants' professional context, where the participants provided information regarding their professional environment, such as department, years of teaching EMI courses, which courses they taught, what category of students they have, and whether they have overseas study or work experience. This section also examined the issues that arise in the education of EMI, why teachers instruct, and what they hope to achieve with their learners.

Additionally, having established the background information, the Theory Questions aimed to delve into the theoretical construct of culture for the participants when it comes to EMI. Teachers were prompted to explain the culture and its connection to EMI courses, elaborate on what sort of cultural awareness EMI students require, and outline their conception of incorporating culture into teaching. This part also addressed the background knowledge in relation to the measures and what informs them, such as theoretical understanding and curriculum demands. Participants were also asked about how familiar they are with the intercultural approach.

Following these questions, Practice Questions targeted the experiential aspects of culture integration. Teachers were asked to provide examples of how they integrate culture into their instruction, including learning objectives, activities, resources used, and challenges they face. This section also studied the support they receive concerning cultural integration, measured to what degree they address students' cultural learning needs, and investigated how their integration processes relate to students' lives at home and abroad.

Influence Questions were focused on examining the determinants of the instructors' culture integration practices. The participants accounted for factors like professional development opportunities, school policies, and interactions with colleagues. They were also asked whether they knew of EMI policies regarding culture in their schools and how the policies impacted their teaching practice. This part concluded by evaluating how their cultural integration practices had evolved over the years that they have been teaching.

Finally, the Implication Questions addressed overall concerns about EMI in Chinese higher

education. Teachers were invited to express their views concerning the application and influence of EMI and provided some suggestions as to how EMI should develop further. The teachers were also permitted to state anything they believed needed to be said or queried in concluding the interview. This comprehensive structure permitted a great deal of information relevant to the topic to be gathered, providing significant insights into the instructors' experiences and perceptions of cultural integration in EMI courses.

Furthermore, throughout the interview, complete examples and descriptions were worked through in order to have an accurate interpretation of what was meant by the participants. At the end of each interview, I spent around 15 minutes on the forms (see Appendix G), jotting down initial reactions, for instance, any relevant thoughts or questions that arose. Transcripts of the pre-observation interviews and notes were also sent to participants for review and editing. This step could guarantee that what participants mean is accurately represented.

### *Classroom Observations*

This subsection discusses the rationale behind choosing this method for data collection and the research challenges associated with classroom observations. Classroom observation refers to a systematic method of data collection in which researchers watch and record educational events as they occur in real-time classroom settings. It is designed to capture the dynamic interplay between teachers, students, and the instructional environment, offering direct access to linguistic behaviour, pedagogical practices, and contextual influences (Dörnyei, 2007). According to Paltridge and Phakiti (2015), direct knowledge of classroom events and the actuality of programme execution can be gained through observers. More importantly, observations can provide the opportunity to record and assess the behaviour and interactions as they occur inside a specific setting (Dörnyei, 2007). Rather than collecting second-hand descriptions, the researcher may obtain first-hand data from observation and acquire a deeper and more multilayered knowledge of participants and their situations (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Furthermore, through observation, researchers may find facts that people may be hesitant to reveal in an interview (Dörnyei, 2007). In other words, observations may show what individuals actually do rather than what they say in interviews. Some research has highlighted the risks of offering socially desired replies in interviews and questionnaires (Grimm, 2010). Thus, participants in the study do not always follow through on what they say in interviews or on the questionnaire for a number of reasons, some of which are outside of their control, such

as students, curriculum, resources, and assessment. In this sense, the social-desirability bias is another major rationale for using observation in the study (Silverman, 2014). As a consequence, while some teachers may employ model lectures, observations can be a good tool for researchers to study real-world practices because some scenarios cannot be foreseen ahead of time.

After completing the semi-structured interviews, I asked the interviewees if they were willing to participate in classroom observations as part of the study. Ten interviewees agreed to take part, and each was observed during one of their complete EMI classes, which typically lasted two hours. The primary goal of these classroom observations was to collect data that would help address the research question: To what extent and in what ways are the participants' understandings of culture reflected in their practices related to incorporating culture into their EMI course delivery? To obtain the most accurate and unbiased data, I conducted non-participant observations. This approach was chosen because it allowed me to observe the classroom dynamics and instructional methods without influencing the natural flow of the class. By adopting the nonparticipant observation method, I only sat quietly at the back of the classroom and refrained from any interaction, which could minimise the risk of altering the behaviour of the participants or students, thereby ensuring that the data collected reflected their genuine teaching practices and cultural integration strategies.

The overall goal of the classroom observations was to examine how EMI instructors incorporate culture into their teaching within Chinese higher education settings. By collecting actual classroom data, I sought to gain a clearer understanding of whether and how culture is being taught—either implicitly through contextual information or explicitly through deliberate activities—in EMI classrooms. In addition, informed by the literature review (see Sections 2.6 and 2.7), the observations endeavoured to find instances of IA and ICC (for example, encouraging sensitisation to difference) and culturally responsive pedagogy (for example, education to students' cultures), necessary to understanding larger cultural dynamics involved in EMI teaching. The observations were thus intended to supplement and augment data from previous approaches, such as questionnaires and interviews, by providing concrete illustrations of the real teaching activities of the participants.

During the class observations, an observation schedule (see Appendix G) was employed to document systematic notes of the key features of the EMI course teaching. The observation

schedule was designed to document various aspects of the teaching process, including instructions, activities, materials, strategies, interactions, and outcomes. The use of a structured approach guaranteed uniform and extensive documentation of observations across sessions so that all features relevant to the integration of culture in the classroom were documented. The use of an observation schedule is supported in research methodology literature, where it is recommended that structured observation is essential to ensure comparable and reliable data (Cohen et al., 2011). Employing this method, I was in a position to make a thorough record of each class observed, and this was then utilised to inform the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Overall, observation is seen as a valuable data collection method for gaining deep insights into real-world settings. The worth of observation lies in the researcher's ability to recognise and interpret events, behaviours, and experiences in their natural context (Cohen et al., 2011). Classroom observations in this study provided me with access to the EMI reality as I gained the opportunity to observe what the EMI instructors actually do in the classroom.

However, there are certain difficulties with the observation approach. The presence of an observer may influence the linguistic behaviour of participants, a phenomenon widely acknowledged in sociolinguistic and educational research. As Labov (1972) famously noted, individuals tend to adjust their speech when they are aware of being observed—a challenge known as the observer's paradox. Similarly, classroom observation may prompt teachers and students to modify their typical interactions, thus affecting the authenticity of the data collected (Bryman, 2016; Dörnyei, 2007). Those being observed may react unfavourably to the presence of the researcher, as they may alter their normal classroom behaviour to meet the expectations of people watching. For example, teachers may put on a model class if they are aware that they are being observed. To alleviate this fear, I decided to sit quietly at the rear of the class where my presence could be less noticeable. This action would greatly reduce the distraction to the students and the teacher. When there were discussion activities for students during the lecture, the focus of the data recording was on the teacher.

### ***Stimulated Recall Interviews***

Having observed each of the EMI teachers' lessons, I conducted a stimulated recall interview in which the participant was prompted to discuss their thoughts regarding various events in terms of integrating culture that had occurred in class. I then cross-referenced the results from

the observations with the teachers' interviews and questionnaire responses.

The stimulated recall interview method, as characterised by Gass and Mackey (2016), is an introspective method used to collect one's thinking and strategies after the completion of a task or activity. It has been widely used in educational and qualitative research to investigate and understand specific contexts, particularly teachers' cognitive processes and decision-making (Vesterinen et al., 2010). In-service and preservice teacher education is another area of study in education research where the stimulated recall interview is emerging as an essential data collection technique. Knowledge regarding participants' thought processes, otherwise not attainable through observation, has become possible through stimulated recall interviews (Denley & Bishop, 2010).

Other data types, such as audio or video recordings of the event in question, field notes, or transcription of conversations, can stimulate recall and remind participants of what they were thinking when doing tasks (Denley & Bishop, 2010). Adequate time for conducting stimulated recall interviews should also be taken into consideration because time may affect participants' memories of previous events. In order to avoid the consequences of memory loss, it is usually recommended that stimulated recall be conducted as soon as possible, but not more than 48 hours after the activity (Ryan & Gass, 2012). It is also advisable that participants in stimulated recall interviews be requested to provide feedback on what they were thinking while doing the activity and not on what they were thinking while being interviewed (Ryan & Gass, 2012).

Since stimulated recall interviews have the ability to analyse a participant's thinking, the stimulated recall interviews served as an addition to observation data for the last part of this study's data collection. The stimulated recall interviews were intended to determine the thinking and rationale behind the strategies used by the EMI teachers in classes. That is, they were employed to answer the third research question, which concerns how far and in what manner EMI teachers' beliefs regarding incorporating culture into their EMI course teaching are evident in their behaviours.

The time availability of instructors was a critical issue in the stimulated recall interview schedule. Before the interview, I went over the audio-recorded lessons and field notes and prepared key episodes and questions. To help participants remember their teaching skills, audio recordings and field notes from the observed EMI class were used. Before being questioned,

teachers were asked to self-reflect on their lessons. This could allow participants to reflect on their personal experiences as learners and instructors, integrating culture as well as the influence it has had on their teaching approaches. In general, I oversaw the replaying of audio recordings for comments and queries, focusing on critical occurrences. Participants, however, had the option of not listening to the tape or pausing it within the specified episodes if they wanted to clarify their behaviour.

In addition to questions concerning significant events from the audio recordings and field notes, material from the semi-structured interviews about the participants' experiences and opinions on effective cultural integration was also reviewed to determine how they connected to actual practices. The stimulated recall interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were conducted online or at the participants' universities. Following the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and summarised for the participants' review. Participants were given fourteen days from the receipt of the transcripts to review, withdraw, or alter any information. If they did not return their transcripts or communicate within this period, their permission for the information to be part of the data for analysis was assumed, as outlined in the participant information sheet and consent forms. The interview data were rigorously reviewed before being used in the research, and any identifiable names or locations revealed by participants were erased.

In order to explore the research questions exhaustively, a mixed-methods design with methodological triangulation as a feature was utilised (Denzin, 2012). It was deliberate that four kinds of data gathering tools, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and stimulated recall interviews, were chosen so that each method can not only complement the others but also enhance the validity and strength of the results. Most notably, the pairing of the classroom observation with the stimulated recall interviews was necessary. The observation of the class was very important in that it enabled the recording of the instructors' genuine behaviours in their usual teaching environments, thus providing first-hand information about what they do in practice and, at the same time, it lessens the chance of social desirability bias which may occur during the interviews. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the cognitive processes behind the actions, observation does not provide the necessary explanation. Hence, I aimed at understanding the rationale of the observed behaviours by conducting the stimulated recall interviews. The method of asking teachers to remember their quick decisions and thoughts during the lesson and thus exposing the reasons for these behaviours essentially overcomes the gap between the instructors' accounts, actions, and

thoughts; therefore, the whole chain of evidence is formed. This triangulation confirms that the findings of the study are based on a rich, multi-dimensional dataset.

### **3.2.4 Data Analysis Methods**

Thematic analysis is a widely used method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) define it, thematic analysis is a structured method used to detect, organise, and interpret recurring patterns of meaning within a dataset. This approach enables researchers to interpret various aspects of the research topic by coding and categorising data into meaningful themes. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for research exploring participants' experiences, beliefs, and perceptions, as it allows for both rich description and theoretical interpretation. Its flexibility across different theoretical frameworks and epistemologies makes it especially appropriate for studies situated within constructivist or interpretivist paradigms (Braun et al., 2016).

The data analysis process in the present study utilised thematic analysis to systematically search, organise, and interpret patterns for all data collected, such as questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and stimulated recall interviews. It was used due to its capacity to develop themes through iterative analysis, as well as themes that align with the research questions, and hence, offer a more in-depth understanding of the EMI instructors' cultural integration perceptions and practices. In line with recent scholarship that critiques the passive notion of themes simply "emerging" from data, this study conceptualises the analytical process as an "active, deliberate, and reflective" practice (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As Braun and Clarke (2021) assert, themes are not discovered but are "developed through situated analytic practice"; they are the output of the researcher's intensive engagement with the data. Analysis was therefore conducted iteratively and was both inductive (bottom-up) and deductive (top-down) in nature, and every effort was made to avert researcher bias and ensure results focused on participants' perceptions.

I first analysed questionnaires provided by 56 EMI teachers to search for overviews pertaining to the study's purposes, such as their general understanding of culture in EMI contexts. For example, responses tended to highlight the use of phrases such as "culture is hard to define" or "it's something that is held within the content," which reflected varying conceptualisations of culture. This initial coding, in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) first phases of familiarisation and coding, informed refinements to the semi-structured interview questions to

probe more deeply into these patterns (for example, “How do you think about culture in your teaching?”). These early findings provided a broad guideline for subsequent analyses, while I remained open to new insights to avoid introducing bias. This is consistent with Josselson (2013), who argues that researchers should approach data with openness, allowing participants’ narratives to guide the development of themes rather than imposing preconceived patterns; prior knowledge of a researcher should not dictate patterning development.

Thematic analysis was used on all four data collection tools; thus, there could be consistency and depth. Building on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage process of familiarisation, coding, generation of themes, review, definition, and reporting, I started with the questionnaire data and then extended the process to interview transcripts, field notes on observations, and stimulated recall reflection. To minimise bias and maintain an inductive approach, I avoided imposing a formal structure initially, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data (Brinkmann, 2013). For instance, during an interview, when a respondent said, “I don't think I teach culture, it just happens,” that resulted in the discovery of an embedded theme of cultural integration, validated afterwards against observational data for subtle cultural reference instances (for example, Chinese holidays spoken of within the business class). This bottom-up approach allowed for outputs of the participants’ experiential knowledge and not my own interpretation.

Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparative method was also iteratively applied to explicate themes through cross-comparison of new data with analysed data. For example, following the coding of the first interview, where an engineering instructor linked culture to “practical examples from industry,” I cross-compared this with later observation notes when a math teacher avoided cultural content, which verified disciplinary effects on cultural uptake. Data analysis began only after all data collection was completed, as Seidman (2006) suggests, to ensure that initial interpretations from early data do not influence subsequent data collection and analysis. This belated commencement permitted me to engage with the data without preconceived opinions.

During the close analysis stage, I coded data systematically by choosing keywords and phrases. From an interview transcript, quotations like “culture is a really big idea” and “it’s tied to the subject” were highlighted as significant, demonstrating diverse views and subject relevance. Observation notes, for instance, “instructor uses role-play of a British negotiation,” were coded

similarly, while a stimulated recall remark, “I didn’t plan that, it just fit,” signified implicit teaching patterns. These codes were inductively clustered into initial themes—for example, “Perceptions of Culture” and “Implicit Cultural Teaching”—and iteratively refined through repeated re-viewing of the data. Concurrently, a top-down approach was utilised to ensure conformance to research questions, such as “To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery?” Pre-formulated themes, like “Cultural Integration Practices in EMI Contexts,” were used to code data deductively. For instance, an interview response to using cultural arguments in a social science course was coded under this theme, specifically in accordance with addressing the research objectives.

This two-stranded strategy—inductive for emergent themes and deductive for research focus—sought to balance direction and flexibility, as recommended by Guest et al. (2012), who advocate combining analytical strategies to enhance rigour in thematic analysis. The constant comparative method enabled synthesis by integrating new data with already coded data. For example, some stimulated recall interview data were compared to earlier data on implicit teaching, creating a parallel theme of “Disciplinary Influence on Cultural Integration.”

Overall, this design focused on key trends, such as the prevalence of implicit over explicit culture instruction, and presented an open model for interpretation of the findings. This rigorous, multistep process generated rich data on EMI teachers’ conceptions of and integration of culture into instruction and directly addressed the research questions. Placing the analysis within participants’ voices, supported by sound literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Brinkmann, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guest et al., 2012; Josselson, 2013), ensured the depth and validity of understanding of the intricacy of the interplay of culture in EMI teaching.

### **3.2.5 Section Summary**

Section 3.2 presented the research design employed to investigate EMI teachers’ understandings, justifications, and practices of cultural inclusion in Chinese universities, providing a robust framework to address the three research questions of the study. The elements of the design—methodology, sampling, data collection, and analysis—operated in tandem to enable an exploratory, contextual investigation of respondents’ perceptions and classroom realities.

In Section 3.2.1, The Methodology Design, qualitative interpretivist methodology was appropriate to employ in order to get the subjective interpretation and lived experience of EMI teachers (N=56), preferring co-constructed meaning to universal truth (Crotty, 2005; Schwandt, 2007). This flexible framework evolved in an iterative manner to fit participants' stories (Patton, 1990) and their cultural integration experiences in EMI contexts. Section 3.2.2, Sampling and Participants, described the purposive sampling approach, enlisting 56 EMI teachers across disciplines (for example, engineering, business, and humanities) and institutional settings (for example, urban vs. rural universities) to garner diverse EMI experiences. Employing this approach, supplemented by snowball sampling, yielded rich, representative data without striving for broad generalisability (Dörnyei, 2007), in contrast to more targeted samples in previous studies (see, for example, Hu & Lei, 2014).

Section 3.2.3, Data Collection Methods, introduced the sequential use of four procedures: an online survey (N=56) for general impressions, semi-structured interviews (N=10) for depth, in-class observations (N=10) for practice in action, and stimulated recall interviews (N=10) for reflective insights. The multimethod design, ranging from email and WeChat surveys to in-class observations, encompassed a range of cultural integration aspects among instructors, and all research questions were addressed systematically. In addition, Section 3.2.4, Data Analysis Methods, details the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) applied to all data sources for identifying patterns inductively (for example, implicit culture teaching) and deductively (for example, alignment with the research questions). The constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) assisted in ensuring rigour, minimising bias, and accessing participants' voices.

Collectively, Section 3.2 represented a coherent, flexible framework that reacted to EMI cultural integration complexity, ranging from instructor conceptualisation to practice on the ground, constituting a solid basis for dealing with the findings in Chapter 4.

### **3.3 Ethical Issues**

Section 3.3 considers the ethical considerations addressed in this qualitative study of Chinese higher education EMI teachers' cultural integration practices with specific reference to the safeguarding of the rights of participants as well as research process integrity. It is divided into three subsections for purposes of clarification. Section 3.3.1, Ethical Overview, introduces the

ethical concerns emerging from the interpretive research approach and sensitive data in generic ethical terms. Section 3.3.2, Informed Consent, describes the processes utilised to secure participants' voluntary and informed consent, and Section 3.3.3, Anonymity and Confidentiality, outlines the measures adopted to protect participants' privacy. Together, these subtopics trace a holistic plan for ethical practice with a summary concluding the section.

### **3.3.1 Ethical Overview**

This qualitative study among individual EMI teachers within a range of higher education contexts faced numerous ethical issues in accordance with its interest in individual and, as such, possibly confidential information. The structure of the study was designed with a flexible structure to accommodate the variety and, at times, the messiness of information yielded by the participants based on the individual vulnerability of their pedagogy and worldviews. This adaptability, as much as it was wanted in capturing rich experience, was challenging in handling sensitive information, calling for rigorous conformity to ethical values to safeguard participants from harm and guarantee the integrity of the research.

Denzin (2012) posits that qualitative researchers are called upon to instil positive change in society by practising ethically, a call I conformed to in presenting the interpretivist approach's ethical responsibility. This perspective is also consistent with the research aim, not only to explore EMI teachers' cultural incorporation but also to enhance teaching pedagogy in Chinese higher education, thereby contributing toward increased intercultural awareness. Denzin's call for ethical participation is consistent with increasing participants' voices and responding to real-world concerns, constituting the ethical basis in this case. Prior to data collection, I covered the key ethical issues—preserving privacy (such as anonymising data), upholding autonomy (such as voluntary participation), and accurately interpreting data (such as verification by participants)—and sent a possible application to the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Ethics Committee. It was cleared on October 10, 2022 (Reference: FEDU060/22; see Appendix H), and no data was collected prior to clearance being granted.

Openness was similarly a guiding philosophy, vital in ensuring the validity of exploratory and interpretive design. Moravcsik (2019) argues that transparency in qualitative research, particularly in the application of methodologies, facilitates scrutiny of the research process. That is what I achieved by open recruitment of participants, building trust through being frank in informing them why the study aimed to recruit them, as explained in Sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3.

### **3.3.2 Informed Consent**

According to Daniels (2008), informed consent involves providing participants with comprehensive information about the research, including the nature of their participation and its implications. It requires researchers to provide participants with clear and comprehensible information about the research, ensuring they understand the nature, procedures, and potential consequences of their participation (Christians, 2011). Voluntary participation in the study was, therefore, facilitated, and the participants were notified that they were at liberty to refuse, withdraw, or decline to answer questions that were uncomfortable to them.

All participants were given a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix D), outlining the purpose of the study, potential responsibilities, and data handling and sharing. The form was attached to online questionnaires and emailed prior to interviews and classroom observations in order to give participants time to read it thoroughly. Participants were asked if they had any questions about the research at any time during the day of interviews or the day of observations in classrooms. A duplicate of the Participant Consent Form (see Appendix E) was then handed to the participants and requested to be signed and returned to me. To avoid deception, no covert activity was undertaken, and no misinformation was given to research participants.

### **3.3.3 Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality is a core principle of ethical qualitative research, especially when managing sensitive participant information during data collection, analysis, and reporting (Flick, 2014). The present study put these principles at the centre of all the phases to protect the identity of the participants and foster trust, as they were of utmost concern while protecting privacy and preventing potential harm. Anonymisation or pseudonymisation was applied equally across the stages of research from collection to communication, in an attempt to facilitate these ethical guidelines.

Participating individuals were encouraged to respond freely and were assured the privilege of declining publication of their responses in case they wished so in order to maintain their independence and convenience. In addition to concealing their identities further, pseudonyms rather than real names were used for all data, such as observation notes, transcripts, and documented findings. This was for participants' own personal privacy and in order to prevent any professional fallout, such as damaging their reputations within their academic communities,

from happening. Christians (2011) argues that protecting individual data through anonymity or pseudonymity is essential to prevent harm, such as unintended disclosure or unfair judgment that could result from identifiable data. Data anonymisation in this study ensured confidentiality since it minimised risks to participants' professional integrity, particularly because their responses to EMI teaching practices could have been controversial. In maintaining these moral standards, the study protected participants' privacy and security to enable them to contribute openly without fear of identification.

### **3.3.4 Section Summary**

Section 3.3 covered the ethical issues involved in this qualitative study, safeguarding participants and maintaining research integrity in its design and implementation. The findings demonstrate compliance with ethical standards modified to the interpretive nature of the study and confidential data.

Section 3.3.1, Ethical Overview, established the ethical stance, prioritising flexibility in working with personal data with rule following in avoidance of harm (Flick, 2014). It placed the ethical aim of the research—enhancement of teaching practice and public benefit (Denzin, 2012)—into perspective with openness (Moravcsik, 2019) as one of the underpinnings, undergirded by Ethics Committee approval (FEDU060/22). Next, Section 3.3.2, Informed Consent, established the process of acquiring voluntary participation through comprehensive Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms (see Appendices D and E) in a way that the participants were aware of the scope of the study and their rights to refuse or withdraw (Christians, 2011; Daniels, 2008). Autonomy and informed decisions were therefore preserved. Finally, Section 3.3.3, Anonymity and Confidentiality, offered robust protection—pseudonyms and anonymised Qualtrics identifiers—to maintain privacy and professional integrity (Christians, 2011). Confidentiality was also enhanced by participant control over the publication of responses.

In combination, these strategies balanced the study's investigative depth against ethical strength, protecting the identity of participants and establishing trust through transparency, while maintaining responsibly informed EMI practice.

### **3.4 Trustworthiness**

To enhance the validity of the study, I employed Guba's (1981) criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability, which align well with my emerging understanding of qualitative research. These criteria are central to ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative studies.

Credibility refers to confidence in the truth of the findings, ensuring that the study accurately reflects the participants' perspectives and the phenomenon under investigation (Guba, 1981). Methods utilised in the establishment of credibility include prolonged contact with the data, member checking, and triangulation. Prolonged contact allows for a comprehensive knowledge of the setting, while member checking involves returning to the participants to guarantee that the results capture the perceptions of the participants accurately. Triangulation is where multiple sources of data or methods are used to cross-check findings to enhance study validity. In addition, methods for ensuring dependability in this study involved maintaining a close audit trail of the research process, such as well-documented research decisions and any deviation from the research plan, and performing an external audit (Guba, 1981). The audit trail documents the significant steps, such as the modification of interview questions based on questionnaire findings, to ensure transparency and dependability. Finally, confirmability relates to the extent findings are shaped by the participants' responses and not by the researcher's bias. It concerns ensuring that outcomes are obtained from the data rather than from the researcher's subjective opinion (Guba, 1981). To enhance confirmability, there should be a clear record of how data are collected, analysed, and interpreted. In this sense, researchers could further utilise reflexivity in order to be aware of and correct their own preconceptions and biases.

Using these criteria, the study aimed to achieve a high level of trustworthiness, with the findings of the research being valid and reliable. Overall, Guba's (1981) model is an effective approach to evaluating qualitative research and reflects a commitment to rigorous and ethical research.

#### **3.4.1 Credibility**

To maximise the validity of the research, I employed various significant strategies. First, I had prolonged contact with the data. This involved multiple stages of data collection and analysis,

including multiple cycles of questionnaires, interviews, and observations. This prolonged contact facilitated a richer context and participants' interpretation comprehension, which resulted in a better representation of the study's phenomena. To mitigate potential biases arising from my preconceptions and prior knowledge, I invested considerable effort in building rapport with participants and emphasising their perspectives on culture and the cultural integration process. Second, I performed member checking by returning to some of the participants to verify the findings and interpretations. This participant feedback process ensured that the study findings were an accurate reflection of their views and experiences, thus enhancing the validity of the research. Third, I employed triangulation by employing several data sources and methods. Methodological triangulation involves the use of varied methods of collecting data to improve the validity of the research outcome. By interweaving data from online questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observations, stimulated recall interviews, and cross-comparing different participant responses, I was able to validate the findings and strengthen the credibility of the results. According to Creswell (2007), the use of multiple sources and methods for data collection can provide corroborative evidence to enhance understanding of the research questions. Thus, with the use of multiple data collection techniques, I aimed to further check findings and portray a clearer description of the research questions, eliminating personal bias effects and strengthening the validity of the study.

### **3.4.2 Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability are key criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research processes and outcomes, including data, findings, conclusions, and recommendations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability reflects the stability and consistency of the research process over time, building on its credibility, while confirmability ensures that findings are rooted in the data rather than the researcher's biases, akin to objectivity in positivist paradigms. These criteria differ from reliability, which is more suited to quantitative research; dependability emphasises process consistency rather than replicability, and confirmability focuses on the appropriateness of interpretations rather than the inherent "truth" of the design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To achieve optimum dependability, I maintained an extensive audit trail that transparently documented data collection and analysis, for instance, decisions on the development of interview questions from questionnaire trends and the iterative construction of themes (refer to Section 3.2.4). The audit trail provided a clear description of how results had been achieved,

with the potential for verifying the consistency of the research. Concurrent techniques, such as triangulation of questionnaires, interviews, observations, and stimulated recall interviews, ensured dependability by the similarity of findings between methods.

In addition, to ensure confirmability, having such diverse sources anchored the findings in the world of the participants instead of on my own assumptions, and interpretations were tested against raw data (for example, coding “culture is implicit” in interviews and cross-checking it against observation records). This multisite strategy enables the argument that what is reported by the study is the understanding of the culture and practice of a community of Chinese university EMI teachers, ensuring high confirmability of findings as depictions of their lived experience.

### **3.4.3 Section Summary**

Section 3.4 examined the trustworthiness of the qualitative study using Guba’s (1981) criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability to ensure rigorous and ethical research. Section 3.4.1 focused on credibility, achieved through prolonged engagement with data via multiple cycles of questionnaires, interviews, and observations, enabling a comprehensive understanding of participants’ perspectives. Member checking was conducted to verify findings with participants, ensuring an accurate representation of their views. Triangulation, utilising diverse data sources such as online questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observations, and stimulated recall interviews, cross-validated findings to enhance validity and reduce researcher bias, aligns with Creswell’s (2007) emphasis on corroborative evidence.

Section 3.4.2 examined dependability and confirmability. Dependability was ensured through a detailed audit trail documenting the research process, including decisions like adjusting interview questions based on questionnaire trends and promoting transparency and consistency. Triangulation across multiple methods reinforced dependability by confirming consistent findings. Confirmability was achieved by grounding findings in participant data, using diverse sources to mitigate researcher bias, and cross-checking interpretations (for example, coding “culture is implicit” against observation records). Reflexivity further addressed researchers’ preconceptions, ensuring findings reflected participants’ lived experiences.

### **3.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the research methodology of the study. It began by outlining the research framework, followed by an in-depth explanation of the methodological design, participant selection, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. It also addressed the ethical considerations involved in conducting this qualitative study, alongside a preliminary discussion of the study's validity and reliability. With these orderly steps, the methodology chapter paves the way for the interpretation and analysis of the research findings in the subsequent chapters.

Study participants were EMI lecturers working at Chinese universities with courses taught in English, either fully or partially. Purposive sampling was used to sample a good diversity of experiences and understandings, with a view to sampling teachers from different disciplines, such as engineering, business, and mathematics. This approach was designed to capture the multifaceted contexts and challenges of EMI teaching in Chinese higher education. Fifty-six respondents completed the online questionnaire. Ten of these were invited for semi-structured interviews and observations, and all 10 of these took part in stimulated recall interviews, providing a rich dataset for analysis.

Methods of data collection employed were online questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, class observations, and stimulated recall interviews. They were used to gain a sufficient understanding of the participants' experiences. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, and care was taken to capture patterns and emerging themes during the responses. The analyses were both top-down and bottom-up to enable the themes to emerge naturally, but still remain congruent with the research questions. A constant comparative approach was used for comparing new information with information already gathered in order to gain deeper insight into the study topic. This diverse collection and analysis of data sought to delve further into where culture is placed in EMI settings and answer the research questions of the study appropriately.

## Chapter 4 Findings

This chapter presents findings from the inquiry, answering three research questions about the role of culture for EMI in Chinese higher education:

- 1) In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture?
- 2) What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI?
- 3) To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery?

Drawing on qualitative research design, the analysis combines data from online questionnaires (N=56), semi-structured interviews (N=10), and class observations with stimulated recall interviews (N=10) across a variety of disciplines from business, literature, history, and engineering. It is crucial to note that when participants reflected on their own culture and potential teaching challenges, they were speaking from the perspective of Chinese nationals (L1 Chinese) teaching in a Chinese higher education context. For ease of reference, this chapter follows the participant identification system introduced in Subsection 3.2.2. Specifically, data sources are indicated as follows: QP for questionnaire participants, IP for interview participants, and OP for observation participants, each followed by their assigned number (for example, QP12, IP3 and OP5). This system enables transparent citation of qualitative data while preserving participant anonymity. Divided into three sections, this chapter addresses the research questions in a systematic way, with each subsection corresponding to a research question. Section 4.1 examines teachers' cultural understandings and how these relate to language, since these are the initial perceptions that shape their teaching practice. Section 4.2 explains their motivations for cultural inclusion, outlining the perceived importance and the specific cultural aspects they appreciate, and their views on university policy regarding cultural integration. Section 4.3 illustrates how these intentions and understandings find expression in teaching practice, outlining the approaches used and the concerns identified. Each section is followed by an overview that synthesises the key findings. Together, this chapter illuminates how Chinese higher education EMI teachers navigate the complex dynamic of pedagogy, language, and culture, leading to the discussion and implications in subsequent chapters.

A note on the presentational style of the observational data is warranted. When explaining classroom exchanges, the present chapter sometimes uses descriptive phrases which might be

considered as being slightly more vivid or picturesque than what is common with academic writing (for example, “his tone had a utilitarian edge” or “dramatically reading a line with great flair aloud”). This was indeed a deliberate stylistic decision made with the aim of providing a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the classroom environment. The idea is to allow the readers to have a more immersive experience of the “lived experience” of the teaching interactions, capturing the nuances of teacher demeanour and classroom atmosphere that are central to this study's interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises understanding the dynamic interrelation of human interaction and contextual elements.

## **4.1 EMI Instructors' Understandings of Culture**

This section responds to the first research question: In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture? It draws on data from online questionnaires (N=56) and semi-structured interviews (N=10) to determine how EMI instructors in Chinese higher education view culture and its relationship with language in their teaching environment. The analysis is presented in two subsections to provide a general picture of their view. Section 4.1.1 explores the different ways teachers define how they think about culture, thematising patterns that arise in what they have to say regarding its nature and relevance to EMI programmes. Section 4.1.2 looks at what teachers believe regarding the relationship of culture to language, one aspect of influence it has on pedagogy. These subsections together chart the range and depth of EMI teachers' cultural understandings, clearing the ground for the later investigations of their reasons and practices of cultural integration (Sections 4.2 and 4.3). A summary in Section 4.1.3 synthesises these findings, presenting a composite portrait of the teachers' conceptual maps.

### **4.1.1 Perceptions of Culture**

This subsection explores participants' conceptions of culture in EMI contexts in Chinese higher education, drawing on data from online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. All 56 questionnaire participants responded to the open question, “Please briefly describe how you perceive culture in EMI programmes?” (Question 8), and the interviewees were asked follow-up questions, such as “How would you define culture?” The composite responses were wide-ranging in the definition of culture, from broad, multidimensional characterisations to technical, subject-matter descriptions. To present a coherent picture of these observations, the 56 questionnaire responses and interview texts were subjected to thematic analysis and resulted in

five different yet interconnected understandings of culture: (1) Culture as Lived Experience, (2) Culture as Social Norms and Rituals, (3) Culture as National Identity and Shared Values, (4) Culture as a Constructed and Negotiated Space, and (5) Culture as Academic Disciplines. These categories encapsulate the diverse ways EMI instructors perceive culture, as detailed below with supporting quotes and examples from the data.

### ***Culture as Lived Experience***

This subtheme examines how participants experience culture as a concrete reality, brought within reach in instruction through understandable content and behavioural demonstration. Questionnaire participants often framed culture as a tangible, everyday phenomenon rooted in material and behavioural practices. For example, QP11 described it as a “way of thinking, way of life, attitude, food culture, everyday behaviour, and values,” presenting a broad view that encompasses both concrete elements like food and abstract attitudes. Interview participants expanded on this theme with personal and contextual depth. To illustrate, IP1 stated, “Culture is embedded deeply in our everyday life; it’s in what we wear, the food that we eat, and the houses we live in,” emphasising observable practices like clothing and cuisine as cultural markers, which they draw upon to make their lessons relatable. IP3 elaborated: “The way we prepare and serve food speaks volumes about the way we manage social relationships and carry cultural values. It’s how we transmit our cultural traditions and transmit to other individuals,” linking food preparation to social bonding and cultural transmission, a concept they integrate into teaching to illustrate cultural continuity. IP4 added, “In China, there is greater emphasis on long working hours and dedication to one’s vocation at the expense of personal time and leisure pursuits,” tying work-life balance to cultural experience, which shapes their pedagogical examples. These responses collectively portray culture as a palpable, routine-based reality.

### ***Culture as Social Norms and Rituals***

Considering the participants’ responses, culture could be viewed as a system of social rituals and norms, structuring behaviour through regular practice and tradition. This subtheme addresses how the participants perceive culture as a system of normative regulation and ritualistic practice within the organisation, affecting classroom interaction and teaching methods. QP13 defined culture as “a variety of social structures, systems, and customs,” suggesting a structured framework of norms and practices that regulate behaviour, a perspective that influences classroom interactions by providing a lens for understanding social expectations. Interview participants enriched this view with specific examples of rituals and

norms. IP9 explained: “Greetings are not a formality but a serious part of social interaction. The way we greet someone, with a handshake, a bow, or a kiss on the cheek, is a sign of respect and creates rapport,” emphasising greeting rituals as culturally significant acts that they model in higher education settings to build rapport. IP3 noted, “I have noticed that greeting one another is culturally specific. For instance, in my culture, one may greet an older individual with a title and bow as a sign of respect and deference,” highlighting how such practices reflect status, a norm they teach to foster respect among students. IP5 said, “To know greeting etiquette is to be able to negotiate social interaction well. In my culture, for instance, not greeting correctly is rude or disobedient, whereas in others, too formal a greeting will be regarded as insincere or pretentious,” illustrating the regulatory role of norms and their variability, which they address to enhance social harmony. IP1 observed, “I’ve noticed the importance of ritual in everyday life, like the tea ceremony and family reunions at festival times. These rituals seem to tie individuals together and impose cultural values,” connecting ceremonial practices to cohesion, a link they emphasise in student discussions. IP7 added, “Working with students in the classroom, I’ve noticed the emphasis on hierarchy and respect for authority. This hierarchical structure reflects larger cultural values and social norms, framing these as classroom norms that they navigate in their teaching. This subtheme depicts culture as a system of ritualistic practices guiding social conduct.

### ***Culture as National Identity and Shared Values***

Participants perceived culture to work as a binding force and how it is utilised to imbue instructional material with national values and heritage for teaching. QP2 described culture as “a collection of shared beliefs and practices common to a population of people,” emphasising its role in unifying a group, a view that shapes how they integrate cultural content in EMI. In response to Question 10, they added, “elements of Chinese cultural practices” aid historical context comprehension, linking national heritage to teaching historical material. QP42 noted “the need for respect of various religious cultures in education,” connecting culture to national identity aspects like religion, suggesting its relevance to inclusivity in their teaching.

Interview participants deepened this perspective with national value examples. IP2, using literature to teach cultural narratives, stated, “Classic literature offers a window into the soul of a society. It encapsulates the essence of a culture, its values, and its aspirations, making it a cornerstone of cultural identity”. IP5 explained, “In my experience, one of the biggest differences between Chinese and Western cultures is in how family life is organised.” She

further added, “While Western cultures value individual freedom and autonomy, Chinese culture values filial piety and respect for ancestors. This is reflected in all sorts of ways, including expecting to look after ageing parents and having to maintain family reunions and traditions,” highlighting national values like filial piety as teaching tools for social sciences. IP7 noted, “In Chinese culture, there’s very much a strong emphasis on hierarchy and respect for authority figures,” framing this as a shared value influencing classroom dynamics. These examples illustrate culture as a collective identity rooted in national values shaping instruction.

### *Culture as a Constructed and Negotiated Space*

According to the questionnaire and interview data, culture becomes a negotiated and constructed space, emergent in spatial relations, symbolic signs, and social interaction. This subtheme considers how learners and teachers collaboratively construct cultural meanings in learning and workspaces, which depicts culture as relational and emergent. QP3 viewed culture as “a spatial context negotiated within learning environments,” a perspective subtly suggesting its constructed nature. Interview participants elaborated on this with spatial and interactional examples. IP1 stated, “Spatial organisation and architecture reflect cultural norms and values. For instance, desk layouts in classrooms can express attitudes to interaction and hierarchy, and traditional Chinese pavilions are examples of architectural styles and philosophical ideals deeply embedded in cultural heritage, using spatial constructs to teach classroom dynamics. IP5 noted, “Some professions, such as those working in the media, are cultural symbols,” suggesting culture emerges from negotiated roles, relevant to communication studies. IP10 said, “Brand representations can be powerful cultural symbols, often encapsulating particular lifestyles or aspirations that have resonance in a cultural setting,” linking constructed symbols to tourism management lessons. IP8 portrayed the classroom as “a negotiated cultural space in mathematics instruction,” and IP6 reflected, “I was surprised at first by the direct communication nature of business meetings in the West”, and “The subtlety of Japanese communication was something that I found very hard to handle at first,” suggesting culture is negotiated through interaction styles. These insights depict culture as an emergent, relational construct.

### *Culture as Academic Disciplines*

Based on participants’ responses, culture was also considered a field of study that has a theoretical and empirical basis upon which to construct the integration of cultural consciousness within other areas of study, such as media studies, business studies, education,

and literature. This subtheme raises the question of how the participants conceptualise culture as a research instrument, and how it informs pedagogy and curriculum design. QP28 suggested “the application of examples of US popular culture to illustrate key media studies concepts,” while QP6 felt “cultural dimensions underlying business practices across countries” are vital for global business, tying culture to academic content. QP19 mentioned “market culture and organisational culture,” and QP37 noted “company culture,” aligning with business coursework. QP4 said, “how differently different cultural groups value in terms of money and how they make spending decisions,” and QP55 highlighted “how differently different countries educate according to their cultures,” framing culture as a scholarly lens for education and economics.

Interview participants reinforced this disciplinary view. IP3 asserted, “Great works of art and literature transcend time and space, connecting us to universal truths and human experiences,” enriching ancient literature classes. IP7 noted, “In referring to art and literature as ‘touchstones of culture,’ they both mirror and shape cultural values and understandings, shaping modern history instruction”. IP1 contrasted, “In the West, there’s more of a focus on getting students to question, analyse, and engage with the material critically, whereas in China, there’s often a focus on rote memorisation and content mastery,” and IP8 added, “Western education emphasises individuality and creativity ... In China, there is more emphasis on conformity and cooperation,” portraying pedagogical cultures as academic constructs in EMI strategies. This subtheme depicts culture as a formalised intellectual framework.

The findings in this section show that the participants’ definitions of culture differed, reflecting a broad spectrum of understandings that included material as well as intangible aspects. From material culture artefacts, such as food, dress, and architectural style, to high-culture products, such as literature and music, and communication style and social norms, culture is interpreted as a multifaceted concept rooted in all that is part of everyday life and curriculum content.

#### **4.1.2 Understanding of the Relationship between Culture and Language**

Whereas it is clear from Subsection 4.1.1 that questionnaire respondents and interviewees provided varied definitions and identified many facets of what culture entails, the majority upheld that culture and language could not be distinguished. The respondents as a whole are in agreement with the deep relationship between culture and language, seeing language not just as a communication tool but also as a vessel of cultural identity, values, and beliefs. According

to them, language is employed by human beings not just to deliver information but also to carry along cultural heritage, social norms, and perceptions of the world. Additionally, based on their responses, language is highlighted as a central vehicle for transferring cultural knowledge, myths, and shared experiences from one generation to the next.

QP16 emphasised, “Language is more than a system of communication; it has the very essence of our cultural existence. The words that we use, the idioms and phrases unique to our lexicon, everything sums up our values and cultural assumptions.” QP23 concurred, stating, “Language is the window into culture. In language, we are not simply conveying information, but culture, heritage, customs, as well as an interpretation of our way of living.” QP36 reinforced the proximity of language to culture: “Our lexicon informs the world around us, the manner in which we exist among others. Our language includes the social normativity, status, and memory characterising culture.” QP51 commented, “Language serves as the medium through which culture is transmitted across generations, encapsulating the legends, myths, and practices that define our identity as a people.” QP18 concurred: “Language stores collective knowledge, experience, as well as norms that are cultural in nature. Language is that channel through which our values, sentiments, as well as wishes, are conveyed.”

When asked the question, “How do you describe the relationship between culture and language?”, three of the interview participants (IP1, IP2, and IP5) asserted that language is most closely related to high-culture elements, such as literature, philosophy, and fine arts. IP2 asserted, “While language certainly encompasses everyday communication, it also encompasses literature, philosophy, and art. These words set the tone for our understanding of cultural heritage and identity.” IP1, however, was adamant that “Language is the major means by which cultural values and customs are passed on from generation to generation. It is through words that we preserve our culture and heritage.” IP5 asserted that “Language is not a vehicle of communication but a representation of the intellectual and artistic accomplishment of a people. It encompasses the body of literature, poetry, and writings of days gone by that is our own heritage.” By this, participants in the interview mean the inherent interconnectedness of culture and language with others, asserting that language entails not communication as such but high culture in the sense of performing the task of constructing cultural identity.

### **4.1.3 Section Summary**

Section 4.1 responded to the research question, “In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors’ understandings of culture?” by means of analysis of online questionnaire data (N=56) and semi-structured interview data (N=10). It discussed how EMI educators knew about culture and its interaction with language in their classrooms, with results described in two subsections.

Section 4.1.1 showed a rich, multivalent picture of culture for EMI teachers, which was captured in five interrelated themes: (1) Culture as Lived Experience, which was focused on tangible everyday routines like food and behaviour; (2) Culture as Social Norms and Rituals, which was focused on ritualised behaviours like greetings and hierarchical respect; (3) Culture as National Identity and Shared Values, which was focused on common beliefs like filial piety and national heritage; (4) Culture as a Constructed and Negotiated Space, which saw it as an emergent product of spatial and social interaction; and (5) Culture as Academic Disciplines, which traced it to scholarly domains like literature and business studies. These diverse responses reflected the widespread relevance of culture to EMI instruction.

In Section 4.1.2, participants’ reflections on the relationship between culture and language were presented. The participants perceived language as a medium of transmission of cultural content, such as values, heritage, and social norms, besides communication. Some emphasised its role as the transmitter of high culture (for example, literature and philosophy) while others noted its use in reproducing common habits and collective identity from one generation to another.

Collectively, these findings presented EMI instructors’ understandings of culture as having ranged from material practices to cognitive structures, embedded in language very profoundly. This complex understanding was a foundation for the presentation of their reasons and practices regarding cultural integration in the later sections (Sections 4.2 and 4.3), with insightful implications for how culture impacted EMI pedagogy in Chinese universities.

## **4.2 EMI Instructors’ Views on the Role of Culture in EMI**

This section addresses the second research question: What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI? It talks about participants’ views on the importance and specific features of cultural integration into Chinese higher education EMI programmes based on data gathered from online questionnaires (N=56) and semi-structured interviews (N=10). The analysis is split into two

subsections to provide an in-depth discussion of their views. Section 4.2.1 deconstructs the extent to which teachers feel that culture needs to be included and why they feel they are adding or subtracting it, and Section 4.2.2 identifies patterns of what cultural components precisely they feel need to be added and what their estimated value is. Additionally, insights from Section 4.2.3 reveal instructors' attitudes toward university policies on cultural integration, highlighting a spectrum of experiences—from policies explicitly promoting diversity and inclusion to those perceived as vague or under-publicised. In order to guide the reader through this argument, the section starts by setting out the results of the questionnaire returns, which take in the spectrum of opinions within the wider sample, before going on to report results from the interview responses, which add insight and substantiation to these themes. This scripted process concludes with a summary (Section 4.2.4) of how the instructors reflected on the need for and pragmatic application of culture in EMI and sets the foundation for examining their teaching practices in subsequent sections.

#### **4.2.1 The Importance of Culture in EMI Programmes**

The responses to the online questionnaire (Question 9) indicate a range of opinions regarding the extent to which culture should be covered in content courses taught in English. A majority of respondents believe that the integration of cultural knowledge within such courses is important. For example, in response to Question 9, “To what degree do you think culture should be covered when teaching content courses in English?”, those who answered “Definitely yes” represented 59% (N=33) of the surveyed population. In justifying this opinion, this group argued that understanding culture is integral to understanding language and context. For example: “Learning about cultures can help students grasp the subtleties of language usage and enhance their ability to communicate effectively in real-world situations. For instance, cultural idiomatic expressions greatly improve language use and understanding” (QP15).

Participants highlighted the diverse benefits of intercultural awareness and knowledge, emphasising their critical role in equipping students to navigate the complexities of a globalised world. A number of these participants emphasised the importance of promoting intercultural communication and awareness. QP1 testified that “facilitating intercultural awareness is imperative in equipping students to study in the globalised academic environment. By exposing students to various cultural viewpoints, students can develop empathy, tolerance, and good communication skills that are extremely vital in the interdependent world today.”

Other benefits that are included as reasons for selecting the “Definitely yes” option are “greater global employability” (QP29) and “tolerance of diversity” (QP42). Ten respondents (18%) noted that having cultural awareness eases problems working with multicultural teams and results in “fewer misunderstandings” (QP27). Also, QP9 acknowledged that an internationalised approach to problems can render students “problem-solvers and change-makers” as it can enhance “critical thinking and problem-solving skills.” In this regard, cultural integration became realised as enabling “responsible global citizens” (QP19).

In addition, 16 (28%) respondents answered Question 9 (To what degree do you think culture should be covered when teaching content courses in English?) with “Probably yes,” and they explained that an adequate level of integration of cultures can serve to make students aware of diversity and global competence without confusing them with too much cultural information. One of the teachers explained:

In my opinion, a moderate degree of cultural integration strikes a balance. It allows students to appreciate the richness of diversity without overwhelming them with excessive cultural details. This approach can foster a more inclusive learning environment and help students develop an understanding of various cultures, preparing them for a globalised and interconnected future. (QP17)

While the integration of cultural knowledge is often highlighted for its benefits, some participants perceive it as less critical in certain educational contexts. Five participants (9%) answered that culture “Might or might not” need to be integrated into EMI courses; they acknowledged that cultural integration could be beneficial depending on the course content and objectives, but they did not see it as essential. QP44 expressed that they would “consider cultural integration if it would serve the individual goals of the course.” To the extent possible, this participant admitted its probable utility but only if the focus language skills encompassed by the curriculum and their deployment towards the involved course-specific objectives are taken into account. For instance, the respondent described how in a more specialised field—a science (for example, engineering vocabulary) or business (for example, writing financial reports) course—integration of culture would be less relevant because it would likely have less to do with good, discipline-based vocabulary than the general-level cultural background. QP14, who taught German, directly stated that they would “prioritise German language skills over cultural integration.” Their reason for this is that “In certain contexts, such as grammar-focused courses, cultural content might not contribute significantly to achieving the course objectives.”

However, they would “consider including cultural aspects if they directly enhance language learning without detracting from the core language skills.”

Finally, only 4% (N=2) of respondents felt that cultural integration should either be minimised or avoided altogether in favour of focusing primarily on content knowledge. For example, QP6 stated the belief is that “a strong foundation in content knowledge should be the primary focus, and excessive cultural content might distract students from mastering the essential content knowledge needed for academic progression.” In addition, QP23 stated that they would “minimise cultural integration to concentrate on knowledge proficiency.”

As a conclusion, the results of the questionnaire illustrate diversity in views regarding cultural integration in EMI courses. While the majority support full cultural integration, citing its necessity in language understanding and intercultural understanding, others think moderation is necessary. There are those who view cultural integration as optional based on course content, with specific contexts potentially dictating whether or not it is applicable. On the other hand, there is a small minority that promotes reducing or omitting cultural aspects in favour of core language proficiency and content knowledge. Such varying opinions highlight the considerations needed when determining the level of cultural integration in EMI courses.

In line with the responses to the online questionnaire, most interviewees (N=7) held the opinion that cultural integration is important for EMI courses. IP1 emphasised that “in EMI, language and the cultural context in which it is used cannot be separated, and the understanding of the latter is included in language proficiency attainment.” Another participant also highlighted that “culture integration is imperative in building global competence and enabling EMI students to operate in multicultural environments” (IP3). Most importantly, interviewees also perceived culture integration as “an opportunity to cultivate empathy and effective communication” since it can promote “respect and inclusivity in the classroom” (IP6).

Nevertheless, there were also three interviewees who expressed caution over extensive cultural integration in EMI programmes. One interview participant explained how “bombarding students with too much cultural information can detract from linguistic progress” (IP2). Another interview participant explained how “while cultural insights are valuable, the priority must always be language skills” (IP8). These interview participants advocate for a “balanced approach” (IP10) to cultural integration with an emphasis on knowledge proficiency and an

acknowledgement of the importance of cultural insights.

For the most part, these interview responses also express differing opinions on the amount of culture to be introduced into EMI courses. Whereas most interview participants recognise the importance of cultural information, there are some who rank content knowledge first over everything else.

#### **4.2.2 Elements of Cultural Integration in EMI Programmes**

Subsection 4.2.2 first offers evidence from questionnaire returns, showing the cultural factors that were valued by participants and what was viewed to be the advantages of these. The subsection then considers interview responses, analysing and proving these themes in greater depth. This organisation demonstrates the range of cultural elements that were considered worthwhile and thus, potentially, how they could be of pedagogic worth within the subsection summary.

The online questionnaire responses exhibit a variety of opinions about what aspects of culture are worth incorporating into EMI programmes (Question 10: What culture(s) or aspects of culture do you think can/should be integrated into EMI programmes?). The first area of emphasis was incorporating “holidays, festivals, and ceremonies in the curriculum” (QP10) was considered a good means of learning “cultural celebrations and traditions” by a world history course teacher. Art, music, and literature were also recommended as ways to appreciate cultural creativity in the respondents’ teaching-related fields. For students preparing for international careers, incorporating aspects of “business etiquette,” “negotiation styles,” and “corporate culture” was seen as essential by the business course teachers (QP36, QP37, and QP39). One of them pointed out that “understanding professional communication norms is crucial for students’ success in a global workplace” (QP36).

A second key area of focus identified by respondents was the importance of incorporating aspects of language and communication unique to specific cultures. According to one response, “Integrating language and communication styles specific to culture can improve language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence. Teaching cultural variations in nonverbal communication, such as body language and gestures, is also seen as crucial for effective intercultural interaction” (QP20). Another participant focused on “language etiquette, formalities, and polite expressions prevalent in different cultures” (QP11).

The third area of emphasis was the importance of incorporating sociocultural norms in EMI programmes. As noted by one respondent, “Topics such as gender roles, family dynamics, and social hierarchies are essential components of cultural learning” (QP35). Additionally, teaching “cultural taboos and sensitivities” was seen as necessary to ensure “respectful communication in the academic setting” (QP17). Exposure to various sociocultural norms, according to a higher education course teacher, can “broaden students’ horizons and make education more engaging and relevant to their lives” (QP30).

In addition, respondents who were mainly teaching students aiming to study overseas stressed the importance of assisting students in building trust and rapport with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Specifically, “discussing global concerns and issues from a variety of cultural perspectives” was considered worthwhile by QP50, who proceeded to elaborate that “discussing global issues, such as climate change or socioeconomic disparities, can promote empathy and enable discussion of intercultural solutions to global problems.” Another participant also advocated “critical thinking regarding global interdependence” (QP51). Since “it is in line with the concepts of holistic education and global citizenship education,” a participant noted that the approach can “create a sense of belonging to an international community and make the classroom more inclusive where all students feel valued” (QP55).

In summary, the questionnaire illustrates a variety of views on the cultural aspects that participants felt should be incorporated into EMI programmes. Respondents bring to light several areas, such as content-knowledge-related cultural problems, pragmatics, and sociocultural norms. The findings of the study regarding the effect of culture on international careers, workplace communication, and social knowledge bring forth their multilateral importance. Participants provide support for an integrated approach, covering holidays, festivals, and business etiquette, with the end objective being the development of students’ intercultural communicative competence. Furthermore, placing a premium on language appropriateness and sociocultural norms manifests an intention to facilitate successful intercultural communication. Finally, asking participants to view global issues from the point of view of other cultures is a critical component of building empathy, critical thinking, and global citizenship.

With regard to semi-structured interviews, all the teachers pointed out that they stressed the

importance of students being well-prepared with a general idea of cultural diversity. IP1 further clarified, “EMI students ought to be taught global cultural practices, especially teamwork and problem-solving, since they will likely work with professionals with different backgrounds.” IP6 also reiterated in the same context, “It is imperative that students learn different business etiquette practices and varying negotiation styles when entering global markets.” Sensitivity to communication and language was also stressed by others. IP2 continued to elaborate, “Students should be taught culture-specific language use, for example, politeness strategies, indirect speech, and context-dependent expressions.” IP7 added, “Even in mathematics, students should learn about how other cultures have evolved mathematical developments and terms.” This participant’s assertion underscores the potential for cultural integration in non-language-specific disciplines. This practice moves beyond simple cultural facts and transforms the subject itself into a site for intercultural literacy.

Sociocultural norms also surfaced as a recurring theme. IP5 shared, “Students should be familiar with societal norms, gender roles, and ethical concerns within cultures in order to navigate professionally and academically.” Similarly, IP3 noted, “Knowing historical cultural contexts allows students to better appreciate literature and philosophy.” In addition, some of the teachers highlighted global citizenship and intercultural communicative competence. IP4 raised: “EMI students should learn to study global issues from multiple cultural viewpoints, cultivating empathy and critical thinking.” IP9 suggested: “Courses should encourage students to engage with multiple perspectives to prepare them for cross-cultural collaboration in a more globalised world.”

#### **4.2.3 Institutional Support for Cultural Integration in EMI**

This subsection discusses EMI instructors’ perspectives on cultural integration practices within their respective university environments based on online questionnaires and semi-structured interview data. Fifty-six participants provided responses to Question 11 in the questionnaire: To what degree do you think the current EMI policies at your university highlight the significance of culture? Of the participants surveyed, 28 respondents (50%) chose “Definitely yes,” which indicated that their universities attached importance to culture in their EMI policies with the policy texts mentioning expressions such as “promoting diversity and inclusion” (QP5), “demonstrating a strong commitment to intercultural awareness” (QP17), and “actively promoting cultural understanding” (QP29). One respondent also noted that “cultural elements were well-integrated into the curriculum, and the cultural appreciation is evident in the

university policy” (QP28). In contrast, 30% (N=17) of respondents chose “Probably yes,” indicating that the emphasis on culture in EMI policies varied across departments and programmes, with some noting “a moderate focus on culture” (QP33) while others stated that “more specific cultural programmes were needed” (QP44).

Finally, eleven of the respondents (20%) reported that culture was not adequately highlighted in EMI policies by choosing “Probably not,” and they suggested the need for more research and scholarship focused on culture, more cultural sensitivity training, and more input from cultural experts and scholars. For instance, an EMI instructor noted that “the university tends to downplay the importance of cultural aspects in the EMI course” (QP32). Accordingly, they suggested that “there is a need for all-round research and scholarship to cater to this lack, and that cultural integration must be given due attention” (QP25). Another questionnaire participant also indicated that “cultural sensitivity training for EMI teachers could help them to engage with multicultural classrooms better and provide an even more diverse learning environment” (QP43). Another EMI teacher also added that “culture is a very significant aspect that is yet under-represented in EMI policy” (QP55). To bridge this deficit, they proposed that “additional input from cultural experts and scholars is necessary” and “incorporating their insights can enhance language instruction by providing a more balanced understanding of language in culture.” Their reason for this belief is that “This, in turn, enhances the overall quality of education for students in an EMI setting” (QP55).

In the interviews, when asked how they became aware of EMI policies related to culture at their universities, responses varied. Some instructors indicated that cultural aspects of EMI policies were explicitly communicated, while others noted that they had to seek out this information independently. IP1 remarked, “I first learned about cultural aspects of EMI policies through faculty meetings and official documents. However, these policies are often broad and not very detailed.” Similarly, IP4 noted, “The university does mention cultural integration, but it’s mostly in general terms. If you want to know more specifics, you have to dig into different departmental policies.”

Some other participants noted that cultural integration policies were invoked mostly in training workshops. For instance, IP7 shared, “We did have a workshop on EMI policy, and then cultural integration was referred to briefly. It was general diversity principles and not really guidelines on how to do it.” However, IP2 continued, “There are some places where

intercultural awareness gets mentioned in the policy documents, but they don't get that much advertising done. You really have to make an effort to find them out.”

Some of the instructors were unsure about the EMI policy and culture. IP9 admitted, “To be honest, I don't know that much about them. If they exist, they're not highly publicised among faculty.” IP10 also agreed: “I have not seen a policy that explicitly discusses cultural integration. It's more of an understood expectation rather than a systematic process.”

In addition, interview participants also differed in their experiences with EMI policies impacting cultural integration in their classrooms. Some teachers have benefited from the policies, but others have noted that they are nonexistent or are enforced spasmodically. IP5 stated, “The policies have encouraged me to include more cultural discussions in my courses. They value diversity and inclusion, which makes me work between different cultural perspectives.” Similarly, IP3 admitted, “EMI policy intercultural awareness focus has influenced my practice. I now attempt to incorporate cultural content into my teaching.”

A few of the teachers, however, found the policies unrealistic. IP6 opined: “The policies all speak of cultural integration, yet there is insufficient support in how to implement it for our classes. It is left up to each individual teacher.” IP8 further added, “Although intercultural awareness is spoken of, there are no visible strategies or resources. It would be better if there were programmatic activities or training.” Some teachers provided recommendations as well. IP10 said, “It would be helpful if the university collaborated with cultural experts to create resources for EMI teachers. Then we would not have to reinvent the wheel.” IP2 recommended: “More workshops on cultural sensitivity would be helpful. A lot of teachers want to integrate culture, but they need guidance.”

Generally, the findings show that while EMI policies recognise the importance of cultural integration, their practicability and availability vary across fields. The majority of lecturers are of the opinion that greater support, training, and facilities would enhance their ability to succeed in integrating cultural aspects in EMI environments.

#### **4.2.4 Section Summary**

This section addressed the second research question by weaving together EMI teachers' views on why and how culture has to be embedded in their EMI teaching, depicting a variety of

perspectives representing its great value. The results, collected through questionnaires and interviews, indicate both the perceived importance of cultural integration and the specific facets teachers call attention to in a good balance between educational intention and actual use.

In Section 4.2.1, questionnaires showed high agreement with cultural integration, where 59% (N=33) chose “Definitely yes” and 28% (N=16) “Probably yes” to its significance, citing benefits such as enhanced language understanding, intercultural sensitivity, employability worldwide, and awareness (for example, QP5: “facilitating intercultural awareness is important”). A 9% (N=5) minority placed it as context-dependent (for example, QP22: “only if in line with course aims”), and 4% (N=2) would save it for knowledge of content. Interviewees mostly said this, seven of whom highlighted its use in global competency and good communication (for example, IP1: “Language and cultural context cannot be separated”), though three warned against excessive application so as not to overshadow the development of linguistics (for example, IP2: “too much cultural information can detract”).

Section 4.2.2 drew three wide categories from questionnaires: items on content knowledge (for example, business protocol, holidays), language and communication style (for example, politeness, nonverbal conduct), and sociocultural norms (for example, taboos, and gender roles). Additional pressure on international mindedness (for example, QP28: “discussing global issues”) valued empathy and critical thinking. Interview participants were in agreement with these, valuing practicalities like working together and employing negotiation skills (IP6), culturally specific vocabulary (IP2), and social norms (IP5), though global citizenship was mentioned by some (IP4).

Section 4.2.3 disclosed a variety of attitudes towards institutional support for cultural integration. Fifty per cent of the sample from the questionnaire (N=28) stated that culture was given precedence in university policy with examples including “encouraging diversity and inclusion” (QP5), while 30% (N=17) cited inconsistency across departments and 20% (N=11) perceived culture as underemphasised and requiring more training and cultural expert input (for example, QP55: “more input from cultural experts is needed”). Experiences of participants were mixed: some utilised policies encouraging cultural exchange (for example, IP5) while others believed that they were not specific enough or supported (for example, IP6: “not enough support on how to do it”), reinforcing the necessity for more detailed instructions and assistance. Combined, these findings suggest consensus on prioritising culture in language learning,

diversity, and global readiness, moderated by awareness of striking a balance between linguistic and content objectives and the need for extensive institutional backing.

### **4.3 EMI Instructors' Culture-Incorporating Practices**

This section answers the third research question: To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery? It explains how EMI teachers convert their assumptions and justifications—explained in Sections 4.1 and 4.2—into pedagogical strategies and the issues involved. Grounded in observations of 10 sessions representing a variety of disciplines (for example, business, history, literature, and engineering) and followed by stimulated recall interviews, the analysis is presented in two subsections. The classroom observation findings were presented in a predominantly descriptive style to provide rich, in situ detail of practice and maintain a close connection between the observed events and the subsequent stimulated recall, which is consistent with the interpretivist focus of this study on teacher agency. While the in-depth, two-hour observation yielded rich data, it is important to acknowledge that it represents a snapshot of teaching practice and may not capture the full range of a teacher's practices over an entire semester. The stimulated recall interviews were conducted using specific moments, direct quotes, and actions captured during the classroom observation and audio recording as the primary stimuli, ensuring the reflections were grounded in specific practice. Section 4.3.1 outlines the variety of strategies employed by instructors—interactive, content-based, theoretical, and intercultural—and illustrates how they integrate cultural dimensions (for example, tangible/intangible aspects) and progress toward goals such as global competence and subject relevance. Section 4.3.2 addresses issues teachers face, such as balancing numerous students' expectations, overcoming linguistic deficits, and combining cultural content with pedagogic aims in time-sensitive settings. Section 4.3.2 begins by setting out practice as observed in relation to how it aligns with instructors' self-reported purposes, then acknowledges the complexity and constraints within which their practice is located. This dual focus offers a close-up view of how cultural integration is being realised through EMI teaching and the business dynamics influencing its delivery.

#### **4.3.1 Strategies Adopted by EMI Instructors in Their Culture-Incorporating Practices**

Based on the observations of 10 classes and corresponding stimulated recall interviews, this subsection documents a variety of approaches adopted by EMI instructors across the subjects

(for example, business, mathematics, and history). All observed practices relevant to culture were included, ensuring a comprehensive representation of strategies. Illustrative examples were selected to display the diversity of approaches and to capture instructors' intentions of cultural sensitivity and use of skills. The findings are organised under four subheadings: interactive and experiential strategies, content-based and multimedia strategies, theoretical and reflective strategies, and intercultural approach strategies.

### *Interactive and Experiential Strategies*

Interactive and experiential practices in EMI contexts comprise the direct participation of learners in activities like role-plays and group discussions so that they experience and rehearse cultural knowledge and skills directly. For instance, OP6, a business instructor, orchestrated an intricate role-play activity observed during a two-hour session to simulate an intercultural negotiation with a Japanese business team. He meticulously arranged the classroom into clusters of six desks, distributing laminated role cards designating negotiators, advisors, and observers, and projected a briefing slide outlining a contract negotiation with a Japanese firm. To initiate the activity, he asked, "Suppose you're negotiating with Japanese counterparts, what would cultural differences do to your style?" With a hesitant tone, he posed this question to encourage thoughtful student responses. Moving between groups, OP6 posed targeted questions like, "How does hierarchy influence your tone here?" or "What is the rate of decision-making here?" to guide discussions. His hands waved gently to emphasise points, and he noted the occasional note or two on a clipboard. In the stimulated recall interview, he elaborated, "This role-play could not only give students practical experience in dealing with intercultural negotiations but also prompt an active discussion on the broader implications of cultural differences in international business." He further clarified, "I'm aiming for them to grasp awareness and flexibility—key in a connected world. The setup mirrors real negotiations I've seen in my own career, where Japanese partners value patience over haste." This reflects his intent to bridge theory and practice, rooted in personal experience.

Transitioning to a different discipline, OP4, a history instructor, conducted an observed in-class simulation of a Qing dynasty court debate in a standard lecture room. He set up desks in a half-circle to mimic an assembly of courts, distributing hand-written role cards (for example, advisor, emperor) and showing a picture of an actual historical edict. With a measured tone, he introduced the task: "Imagine you're advising on a policy—how would cultural norms guide your argument?" He stood in the centre, sometimes tapping on the projector screen to

emphasise such important terms as “filial piety” and shifted his stance to address varying groups, connecting with them. In the stimulated recall interview, he stated, “By designing experiential learning activities, I attempt to bridge past and present so students can make personal and cultural connections,” and further noted, “I’ve taught this period of time for decades—it’s not dated; it’s how values affected choices. This format enables me to illustrate that, compared to just reading it.” This approach reflects his intention to integrate cultural context into historical facts.

OP1, an engineering professor, conducted a supervised lab exercise in class, setting up stations with string and bamboo rods to construct small Chinese-type bridges. He circulated, pointing to a projected image of a classical arched bridge and asking, “How do cultural concerns influence engineering solutions?” His tone had a utilitarian edge as he demonstrated how to knot, breaking off to refashion the array of a group. In a stimulated recall interview, he explained, “By placing engineering ideas in historical and cultural context, I aim to add depth to students’ understanding of how cultural considerations drive design choice and technological innovation.” He continued, “I’ve seen these bridges out in rural areas in China—function and beauty combine. I would like them to feel it, not just calculate it.” This approach underscores his intent to integrate instructional goals with personal insights from cultural experiences.

### ***Content-Based and Multimedia Strategies***

Content-based and multimedia methods in EMI settings integrate cultural content into subject matter knowledge via media, such as podcasts, videos, and texts, and lead to an increased appreciation for theoretical as well as practical knowledge. EMI instructors used multimedia to link cultural narratives with topic-specific information and engage students in authentic learning activities. For instance, OP10, a tourism management instructor, incorporated a podcast into an observed session, setting up speakers around the classroom to play interviews with Xi’an locals discussing the Terracotta Warriors. He adjusted the volume with a remote, pacing slowly as he introduced the task: “How do these narratives shape tourist experiences?” Stopping the tape at strategic points, he wrote down notes on a whiteboard—buzzwords such as “heritage” and “storytelling”—and circled them for emphasis. During the stimulated recall interview, he said, “I was observing how the cultural context would affect the uptake of tourism theory by the students. It’s fascinating.” He went on, “I have worked in tourism—people don’t go to places; they pursue stories. This brings that alive, tying theory to what I’ve seen out there.” This approach reflects his goal of integrating cultural narratives with professional relevance in

tourism management.

In an ancient Chinese literature class, OP3 employed multimedia by projecting Tang dynasty paintings onto a large screen during an observed session. She adjusted the projector's focus, pointing with a laser to intricate brushstrokes, and asked, "What norms birthed this poem?" Turning away from the screen, she placed the translations of the verses on her desk, reading a line with dramatic flair aloud. In her stimulated recall interview, she explained, "Through the study of ancient China's cultural background, I hope to empower students to comprehend classical literature more deeply and to apply it to contemporary society." She went on, "I've spent decades learning these works—art and language aren't distinct; they're cultural twins. This strategy illustrates that connection, not lecture." This approach reflects her goal of enhancing text comprehension by integrating cultural context.

OP7, a modern Chinese history teacher, used multimedia and content in a field observation lesson by showing a documentary film on the Cultural Revolution on the class television. He paused the movie at decisive points—marching soldiers, displaced families—tapping the screen with a ruler, posing the question, "How did culture flex under this pressure?" Then he greeted a guest speaker via laptop, adjusting the microphone as the retired administrator discussed policy impacts. In the stimulated recall interview, he said, "Placing historical accounts within larger cultural contexts, I attempt to engage students' critical thinking and historical empathy." He added, "I lived through some of this—culture didn't change; it fractured and rebuilt, illustrating how rawness connects them to it."

OP5, a teacher of social sciences, used case studies projected on a smartboard in an observed lesson on rural Chinese and urban UK family life. She walked across the room, clicking on the board to point out words like "collectivism," and asked, "What norms clash here?" Slides moving in sequence with a clicker, she paused at an image of a multigeneration family, her voice interrogative. In the stimulated recall interview, she stated, "Through the social sciences approach to cultural diversity studies, I want to give the students a critical vision and eyes to live in a multicultural society." She continued, "I've learned these patterns—culture's not static; it's alive. This puts that dynamism centre stage." This approach reflects her goal of honing analytical skills by contrasting cultural dynamics.

### ***Theoretical and Reflective Strategies***

Theoretical and reflective approaches in EMI contexts are interested in blending cultural theories and engaging critical reflection of self in order to ensure subject matter is comprehended in terms of cultures' perspectives. For example, OP2, a teacher of English literature, conducted a guided discussion on cultural identity, projecting excerpts from Orwell and Mo Yan onto a screen. She highlighted key phrases with a marker— “control,” “community”—and asked, “How do cultural viewpoints shape these stories?” Moving between rows, she stopped to reword questions, ensuring they were understood. At the time she was interviewed for a stimulated recall interview, she said, “Cultural integration makes it possible for students of literature to understand communication details ... makes possible better understanding from its cultural backgrounds.” She went on, “Training years ago hammered this into me—texts aren't words; they're cultural artefacts. I use that for all my classes.” This approach reflects her goal of using cultural theory to enhance literary comprehension.

In addition, challenging the notion of mathematics as a culture-free discipline, OP8 incorporated historical cultural references into an observed lesson on numerical systems. He drew on the whiteboard alongside a diagram of a Chinese abacus, the Babylonian cuneiform numerals for the base-60 system, visually juxtaposing two entirely different cultural approaches to calculation. While explaining the abstract principles, he stopped for a moment and asked, “Why would one culture come up with a system based on 60 and the other develop a physical tool like this?” This question helped to place mathematical history not as one continuous line but as a series of different people's innovations, each of them being culturally situated. In the stimulated recall interview, he revealed his purpose: “Maths itself is universal, but the way, the language, and the tools are not. Showing it through different cultures helps students see that maths has a cultural side, which is a mystery that gets solved when they finally realise that maths is not totally objective.”

Moreover, OP9, a lecturer of East Asian studies, structured one of her classes in a manner intended to foster intercultural sensitivity by having a guest speaker visit her class to conduct a discussion on the cultural impact of globalisation in one of her classes. She prepared the lesson beforehand by writing down cue questions like “How did trade reform?” in her notebook to provoke an argument and connect the lecture to cultural theory. The study obtained consent from all involved, including the guest lecturer. In the stimulated recall interview, she explained, “Effectively applying related culture integration theories enriches understanding,” and further noted, “I've read stacks of EMI research—culture's not static; it shifts. Bringing in an expert

shows that life, not just on paper.” This approach reflects her aim to connect cultural theory with real-world expertise. She incorporated video interviews with alumni currently working in international roles in Shanghai and Shenzhen. These alumni shared their "on-the-ground" expertise regarding negotiating business etiquette and managing multicultural teams, contrasting their practical experiences with the theoretical models presented in class. This hands-on application ensures that the discussion of culture is not confined to an academic vacuum but is directly linked to the development of real-world professional expertise and intercultural competency required for global employment.

OP7 paused his own lecture on 1980s reforms, delivered using slides, to reflect, stepping back from the podium to ask, “What assumptions might I’ve skipped?” He adjusted his slides during the session, adding a cultural comment after noticing student disengagement. In the stimulated recall interview, he stated, “A culturally balanced environment is a result of consideration—I catch my biases like that,” and further noted, “Teaching’s taught me this—culture’s not content; it’s how I present it. Reflection makes it fair.” This approach underscores his commitment to fostering inclusivity through reflective teaching.

### ***Intercultural Strategies***

Intercultural strategies in EMI contexts focus on students’ ability to respect cultural differences and bridge various cultures through activities like intercultural dialogues, role-plays, and expert perspectives. For instance, OP9 began a witnessed East Asian studies discussion regarding celebrations—Obon vs. Qingming—casting images onto a screen. She circulated, pointing to photographs, and asked, “What values come through these?” Altering her tone in order to get individuals to listen, she jotted down key terms (for example, “duty”) on a whiteboard. In the stimulated recall interview, she thought, “Inviting them to unpack their own perspectives with respect for others creates actual intercultural abilities.” She went on, “I’ve experienced these festivals—Obon’s lanterns, Qingming’s quiet. It’s personal, and I’d like them to sense that for themselves.” This approach reflects her aim to connect personal cultural experiences with intercultural learning.

OP5 initiated a dialogue on climate policy, clicking at a pace with a clicker to advance policy statistics slides. “How do people perceive this differently?” she asked, crisp in tone as she circled on the board highlights of points of note. She paused to rephrase, keeping everyone sharp. In the stimulated recall interview, she said, “It’s not just awareness—I’m after

competence, the ability to act across cultures.” She elaborated, “I’ve studied policy clashes—West versus East—it’s messy. This forces them to wrestle with that, not just nod.” OP5’s strategic intervention served as more than a discussion prompt; it was a calibrated effort to move students from cognitive awareness to behavioural competence in ICC. Her self-stated aim was to foster “the ability to act across cultures” by forcing students to “wrestle” with the complexities of policy clashes, rather than merely engaging in passive cultural consumption. This practice is critical because it embeds the assessment of ICC directly into the content lesson, transforming the “messy” reality of policy debates into a pedagogical tool.

OP3 staged a Tang dynasty court role-play in an observed literature class, arranging desks in a U-shape and distributing role cards. “How’d you convince the emperor?” she asked, her tone melodramatic as she straightened a student’s card position. She wandered around, making wide gestures to generate atmosphere. During the stimulated recall interview, she spoke of, “Dialogue fills gaps here. They rethink assumptions through play—it’s subtle but deep.” She continued, “I’ve taught Tang texts forever—the court’s all about nuance. This brings that out, makes it real.” This method highlights her goal of deepening cultural understanding through interactive dialogue.

OP10 hosted a virtual guest lecture in an observed tourism class, fiddling with Zoom settings as a Korean official spoke on hospitality norms. “How do norms mould this?” he asked, pacing to check the audio, his brow furrowed in focus. In the stimulated recall interview, he noted, “Pushing multiple angles preps them for global teamwork—it’s messy but worth it.” He added, “I’ve seen Korean hotels—bowing’s everything.” This approach reflects his aim to prepare students for global teamwork through diverse cultural perspectives.

#### **4.3.2 Challenges Encountered by EMI Instructors in Their Culture-Incorporating Practices**

To make clear the challenges EMI teachers face in integrating aspects of culture into teaching, this section considers some aspects of these challenges from teachers’ own perceptions, interpreted through classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews.

##### ***Balancing Diverse Cultural Expectations***

The teachers were largely finding it difficult to balance such perceived expectations and maintain the facilitative learning environment. During a witnessed engineering class, OP1

facilitated a class discussion of the group project and moved from the front row to encourage student interaction with students from different backgrounds. In his subsequent stimulated recall interview, he said, “My students from certain backgrounds were very reserved, while those from other backgrounds were significantly more outspoken. It is challenging to find a balance where all students feel comfortable.” He elaborated that this stemmed from his perception of cultural differences in student confidence, noting, “I’ve taught here long enough to see some groups hold back—it’s cultural, not just personality.”

Similarly, OP4, a history instructor, adjusted the discussion and pacing in an observed session to accommodate varying interaction styles. Later, he commented in the stimulated recall interview, “Students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds interact differently, and it might be challenging to manage during the classroom discussion.” He explained, “Some come from rural areas where speaking up isn’t the norm—I sense that hesitation.” OP5, teaching social sciences, shifted between lecturing and interactive segments in an observed class, later noting in the stimulated recall interview, “Some students require a lecturing approach, whereas others would desire interactive.” She clarified, “It’s not just teaching style—they bring cultural habits from prior schooling, like expecting me to lead or wanting group work.” These accounts highlight instructors’ perceptions of challenges tied to both cultural influences (for example, norms of participation) and pedagogical preferences (for example, lecture vs. interaction), illustrating the complexity of aligning diverse classroom dynamics with cultural integration goals.

### ***Overcoming Linguistic and Communication Barriers***

In addition, teachers also struggled to integrate cultural content due to students’ diverse linguistic and communication conventions. While at the very core of the linguistic problem of EMI, this challenge paradoxically spoke in very direct terms to their ability to integrate cultural content effectively, as cultural meaning is heavily dependent on effective communication. During a class observed for English literature, OP2 led a discussion of cultural issues within texts, traversing the room from table to table to interact with the students, but frequently pausing to paraphrase questions for the students. She made the point in the stimulated recall interview by saying, “In class debate in our class, there have been some students who struggled to clarify themselves clearly due to linguistic limitations.” She went on to say, “I’ve noticed this over the years—students who are non-English-background students get caught on idioms that we’ve grappled with, like ‘stiff upper lip.’ I adapt by slowing down, but it requires ongoing

effort to keep cultural points open for discussion.” Similarly, OP8, who taught mathematics, used cultural references (for example, ancient numerals) during one observed lesson, using a whiteboard to draw out symbols, but breaking his stride to analyse English jargon. In the stimulated recall interview, he remarked, “Even in mathematics, where language isn’t supposed to be a problem, the way students express their reasoning can be affected by how well they know English.” He added, “I’ve taught this long enough to see it—some stumble over ‘justify’ or ‘derive.’ I’ve got to bridge that gap so the cultural math history isn’t lost.” OP9, in an East Asian studies class, adjusted her delivery during an observed discussion on globalisation, switching between concise and elaborated explanations, and noted in the stimulated recall interview, “Indirect and direct styles of communication cause misunderstandings. I have to constantly adjust my style to ensure that everyone understands.” She explained further, “I’ve dealt with this for a decade—some expect bluntness, others subtlety. It’s about keeping the cultural thread clear despite the language tangle.” These examples underscore how instructors adapt their communication approaches to mitigate language barriers, ensuring cultural integration remains accessible and meaningful.

### ***Selecting Culturally Relevant Materials***

Instructors also faced challenges in selecting culturally relevant materials that aligned with course objectives for diverse student groups. This difficulty involved balancing academic rigour with cultural inclusivity, as cultural resources needed to resonate with varied student backgrounds. In one of the classes of ancient Chinese literature that was observed, OP3 showed a series of Tang dynasty poems on the screen, quickly shifting the attention and pointing out key lines with a laser pointer, trying to connect them to Confucian virtues. During the stimulated recall interview, she stated, “It is hard to supply materials that interest every student as much. There are certain pieces that are viewed to be useless in a student’s own cultural environment.” She described:

I’m teaching ancient Chinese texts—naturally, it’s about China, but I feel like some international students view it as far away. I’ve spent years constructing texts; I select ones with themes that are universal everywhere, like duty, but it is difficult when they do not all connect directly at the same time. (OP3)

OP6 used a Japanese case study of negotiation in a lesson observed, distributed handouts, and paced while creating the setting, but outlined in the stimulated recall interview, “Case studies from other nations can put students off because they cannot get themselves into that particular cultural context.” He went on to say, “I’ve taught in multinational companies—Japan’s way is

different. I choose these to show real-world stakes, but some don't grasp it without more familiar examples, and finding those is a chore." OP10 integrated a podcast on Southeast Asian travel trends in an observed class, adjusting speakers and scribbling notes on a whiteboard, yet mused in the stimulated recall interview, "Travelling is culturally diverse by definition, but keeping the examples appropriate for all is an ongoing task." He clarified, "I've travelled these regions—every culture's take on tourism differs. I attempt to shoot wide, but it's a balance to stay near the course without leaving someone behind." These descriptions highlight teachers' efforts to choose materials that connect cultural content with educational goals, reflecting their perceived responsibility to remain relevant and responsive to diverse classroom populations.

### ***Managing Time Constraints***

The need to fit wide-ranging curriculum topics into concise timetables allowed little space for the investigation of cultural issues. Teachers expressed concern over a lack of time to exhaustively address the cultural topics at the cost of the academic objectives of the course. OP4 concurred: "There just isn't time to delve deeply into cultural controversies. Attempting to balance the curriculum needs with integrating culture is an ongoing struggle." OP7 agreed, saying, "Our course outline is so packed that including in-depth cultural debates appears almost impossible." OP1 added his voice, declaring, "Technical courses have required curriculum requirements, with little room for cultures."

### ***Addressing Stereotypes and Misconceptions***

Some participants also mentioned that students' stereotypes and misconceptions were prevalent, which stood in the way of establishing a respectful and open-minded classroom culture. For example, during one class being observed where they discussed social norms, students harboured stereotypical views about certain cultures. OP5 explained, "I had to resist students' blanket generalisations about a foreign culture, and that can be difficult not to do at the expense of embarrassment." OP2 added, "Stereotypes occur quite often in literature. It's hard to respond without alienating students." OP9 also mentioned, "Correcting misinformation is an art so as not to get students defensive." This implies the need for careful and effective methods of challenging and deconstructing stereotypes and fostering more respectful and inclusive class discussions.

### ***Fostering Intercultural Respect and Empathy***

Creating a classroom setting where students of diverse backgrounds are respected and valued

was also a major challenge. Classroom observations showed that OP6 put conscious effort into promoting intercultural empathy and respect for students, which is essential for effective intercultural communication. Specifically, he initiated a discussion wherein students shared their own experiences relating to cultural identities and forced them to listen to one another carefully in an effort to break stereotypes and create mutual understanding. He said, “Encouraging respect and empathy is required, but not always easy. My record at instilling these values is inconsistent.” OP10 further added, “Empathy development activities can break down because of students’ preconceptions.” OP4 also shared, “Promoting respect for each other requires constant effort and different ways to operate.” Difficulty in instilling mutual respect and empathy also indicates a need for more pedagogical intervention and active effort in planting these values.

### *Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*

Assessing the intercultural communicative competence and awareness of students was another particular challenge. In class, some teachers did try to test students’ progress in this respect successfully. OP7 claimed, “It’s even harder to assess intercultural communicative competence than to assess academic success. I do it via engagement and afterthoughts, but not precisely.” OP1 continued, “Students’ intercultural awareness and integration are hard to measure,” and OP8 claimed, “Even in a technical programme, there is a need for understanding cultural background but a lack of measurability.”

In short, the challenges of EMI teachers in incorporating cultural aspects into their teaching practice are multifaceted and varied. They range from having to cope with multiple cultural demands, transcend linguistic constraints, include suitable cultural content, manage time constraints and stereotypes, build mutual respect, and assess intercultural communicative competence.

### **4.3.4 Section Summary**

This section addressed the third research question through an investigation of the degree and nature to which teachers’ ideas of cultural integration are implemented in their classroom practice based on data from 10 lesson observations and stimulated recall interviews. The findings reveal a tension between deliberate strategies and continuous problems that both show the teachers’ ideal of cultural inclusion and shed light on the pragmatic challenges they encounter.

Section 4.3.1 identified four key approaches: interactive and experiential, content-based and multimedia, theoretical and reflective, and intercultural. These methods in engineering, business, and history contexts are aligned with teachers' goals of increasing cultural literacy, being globally savvy, and showing relevance to the subject matter, often based on experience-driven motivations. Section 4.3.2 talked about complex challenges. Teachers needed to balance several student expectations, manage language differences, and locate suitable cultural differences. Time pressure limited fuller cultural inquiry, and stereotypical and intercultural skill assessment were not easy either. Promoting mutual respect was also difficult, according to the participants.

Generally, these findings indicate that teachers deliberately integrate culture in EMI instruction in several ways, as forecasted by their cultural beliefs on its usefulness in language, diversity, and world readiness. Their practice is, however, constrained by pragmatic realities—diversity of students, linguistic frontiers, financial constraints, and institutional demands—highlighting the necessity for increased support, training, and evaluation interventions to optimally realise their intentions of cultural integration.

#### **4.4 Chapter Summary**

The three research questions of this study have been addressed in this chapter by probing the Chinese higher education EMI teachers' conceptualisations, justifications, and pedagogies for cultural inclusion through questionnaire data (N=56), interview data (N=10), and classroom observations with stimulated recall interviews (N=10) in detail. The results reveal a strong determination to put culture in EMI through deliberate actions, moderated though by pragmatic and institutional factors.

Section 4.1 clarified teachers' intuitive understanding of the inherent connection between culture and language. Section 4.1.1 presented three thematic understandings: common practices and beliefs as culture, such as social norms; immaterial and material identity markers, such as literature and food; and a framing context to education, such as learning spaces, with interviewees identifying material artefacts, symbols, and high culture products. Section 4.1.2 reaffirmed an almost universal endorsement of interdependence between culture and language,

the latter acting as a vehicle for the expression of cultural identity and heritage. Results such as these depict rich, multisided, cultural contexts showing various teaching approaches.

Section 4.2 addressed the question of why there was cultural integration and referred to the perceived need for it and some of its characteristic features. Section 4.2.1 also demonstrated strong backing with 59% (N=33) of the survey respondents and a majority of the interviewees (N=7) agreeing to full integration in terms of the reasons for understanding language, cultural sensitivity, and job readiness at an international scale, while warning of not overloading the students. Section 4.2.2 emphasised the most critical characteristics—content knowledge (for example, business etiquette), communication styles (for example, politeness), and sociocultural norms (for example, gender roles)—valued in developing empathy and critical thinking. Section 4.2.3 reflected ambivalent attitudes towards university policy in relation to cultural integration in EMI, with 50% (N=28) affirming their cultural orientation but 20% (N=11) asking for further training and professional advice due to uneven application. These results reflect an intention moderated by institutional diversity.

Section 4.3 explored the actualisation of these opinions in practice. Section 4.3.1 identified four approaches—interactive, content-based, theoretical, and intercultural—describing purposes of cultural awareness and global competency, often forged from experience. Section 4.3.2 lists problems, including dealing with different student expectations, noting language differences, having limited access to useful materials, experiencing very tight time constraints, facing stereotypes, teaching respect, and assessing intercultural competence. These problems help to underpin the intent vs. practice tension.

As explored in the next chapter, key points for discussion include: the research describes EMI teachers as forceful in integrating culture to promote language learning, diversity, and world-readiness on a nuanced perception of culture's depth and width. However, their practice is constrained by student diversity, linguistic complexity, insufficient resources, and unbalanced support from the institution, suggesting the need for more in-depth training, policy refinement, and measurement tools to link practice with their teaching vision.

## Chapter 5 Discussion

This chapter synthesises and critically interprets the findings of the study to address the research questions and highlight the theoretical and practical contributions of this research to the field of EMI in Chinese higher education. The discussion is structured around the three research questions, with themes emerging from the data analysis that are compared and contrasted with existing literature. The three research questions are as follows:

- 1) In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture?
- 2) What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI?
- 3) To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery?

The sections within this chapter are linearly arranged to trace the research questions and to create a progression from concept to practice implementation. Chapter 5 begins with the exploration of the EMI teachers' conceptualisations of culture (Section 5.1). The discussion highlights different perspectives on definitions of culture, referencing theoretical debates about culture in EMI contexts. Following that, the chapter discusses to what extent culture should be incorporated into EMI practice according to the attitudes and suggestions of the instructors (Section 5.2). Subsections are how cultural incorporation can help enhance language ability and perception of context, intercultural knowledge and understanding, critical thinking and global citizenship, and intercultural communicative competence and professional preparedness. Finally, the chapter considers whether and how instructors' constructions of culture become embedded in what they do and how they do it (Section 5.3). Based on classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews, the section critically evaluates how theoretical conceptualisations are transformed into practical procedures. Some of the emergent themes include the selection of cultural elements, the guiding principles of integration in their application, and the incorporation of intercultural approaches. The findings are compared with existing models of cultural integration, highlighting areas of alignment and divergence with these models. Among some of the challenges are students' resistance to cultural integration in language learning, the lack of institutional support for cultural integration, and the scarcity of culturally diverse learning materials. Overall, this chapter's structured progression captures the thematic development from abstract cultural concepts to concrete challenges and manifestations of cultural integration in EMI settings.

## **5.1 Diverse Interpretations of Culture in EMI Contexts**

This section responds to the research question: In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture? It provides a close reading of the complex way EMI teachers conceptualise culture, straight from the empirical evidence of Section 4.1.1 and set within broader theoretical contexts. To answer the first research question in a systematic way, this section is structured around five various conceptions of culture that arose from the participants' answers, each dealt with in its respective subsection: (1) culture as a lived experience, such as food and routines (Subsection 5.1.1); (2) culture as social norms and rituals, with a focus on the conventions' structuring role in social life (Subsection 5.1.2); (3) culture as national identity and shared values, linking culture to collective beliefs and national stereotypes (Subsection 5.1.3); (4) culture as a constructed and negotiated space, continuously shaped through interaction and negotiation (Subsection 5.1.4); and (5) culture as academic disciplines, seamlessly integrated into the content of various subjects (Subsection 5.1.5). These categories, emerging from the 56 questionnaire responses and 10 interviews, encapsulate the diversity of teachers' perceptions within China's EMI context.

### **5.1.1 Culture as Lived Experience**

One of the most prominent interpretations of culture expressed by the participants revolves around the tangible aspects of everyday life, such as food, clothing, and daily routines (see Section 4.1.1). Several instructors, including IP1 and IP3, emphasised that material practices are key components of cultural identity. IP1 suggested that culture enters daily life through areas like clothing, food, and residential spaces, resonating with Hall's (1980) conceptualisation of culture as a whole way of life. Hall (1980) emphasises the everyday practices, customs, and behaviours that constitute social life rather than solely institutionalised high culture, such as art, literature, and philosophy. Hall's analysis, grounded in the culturalist paradigm, suggests that culture is not merely an intellectual phenomenon but is lived and enacted through the material and social practices of daily life, forming the basis of cultural identity. For example, IP3, reflecting on her Chinese heritage, made the observation that "The way we prepare and present food reveals much about our cultural values and social ties. It's a way of clinging to our cultural heritage and giving it to others." She continued further, "When I am teaching culture, I try to connect it to their daily life, such as how people behave in public,

the kinds of foods that they eat, and what is considered polite.” This approach is congruent with Hall’s (1980) contention that culture is not this monolithic, abstract entity but instead something built and renegotiated on a daily basis through everyday action and interaction. This renders the subject matter available for students of any background to be able to relate to in a realistic, concrete way. More generally, Hall’s (1980) emphasis on “small c” culture as the material that one can see and touch in everyday life has deep resonance for the ways in which teachers will actually go about teaching culture in the EMI classroom. By engaging with material cultural forms, teachers relocate culture into a more tangible, near-at-hand reality for students, particularly those without an intuitive understanding of abstract ideas of culture. Moreover, this definition also diverges from more official, conventional definitions of culture that focus on high culture, such as art, music, and literature.

Although these aspects are significant, attention to ordinary practice is only part of a larger, broader movement in intercultural communication and education. This movement, as highlighted in recent research (Baldwin et al., 2014), prioritises grounding cultural knowledge in everyday practice and tangible experience. The findings of this study identify that EMI teachers most frequently cited teaching through daily routines as a means of making culture more tangible and accessible to students. This position aligns with Bennett’s (2017) perspective that ICC involves sensitivity to cultural differences, encompassing both complex cultural attributes—such as art, literature, and formal rituals—and everyday cultural attributes, such as social routines and daily norms that reveal a society’s interaction styles and values. Bennett’s (2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), developed through decades of intercultural research, frames ICC as a progression through stages of perceptual complexity, requiring awareness of both material (for example, dress, cuisine) and immaterial (for example, values, beliefs) cultural dimensions, providing a foundation for examining these competencies in detail.

To address the first research question, which explores teachers’ understandings of culture in EMI, it is also helpful to examine how their use of everyday cultural practices reflects their conceptualisations of culture as lived experience. By analysing these practices, we gain insight into how teachers perceive culture’s role in fostering ICC and creating inclusive learning environments within EMI contexts. In this study, teachers’ attention to everyday practices—such as IP1’s reference to “what we wear, the food that we eat, and the houses we live in” or QP2’s reference to “sharing music from one culture to another”—mirrors this broader scholarly

focus. By integrating culture into tangible and concrete forms, such teachers make it accessible, bridging complex and everyday cultural elements, as advocated by Bennett (2017), while also aligning with the pragmatic, student-centred methodologies promoted by Jackson (2014) and Byram (2021). This alignment with current trends underscores the ongoing relevance of everyday practices in fostering intercultural communicative competence within EMI programmes, reinforcing their role as both a pedagogical tool and an indicator of evolving educational priorities.

In introducing culture through everyday classroom practices, some EMI teachers reported that they could foster a more inclusive learning environment that embraces diverse cultural experiences while encouraging critical reflection. For instance, instead of simply sharing music to highlight cultural diversity, teachers might facilitate discussions on how music reflects histories of migration or resistance, such as analysing protest songs from different cultures (QP2). Similarly, rather than only sharing knowledge about cultural heritage, students could explore how food practices are tied to economic disparities or colonial legacies, like the global spread of certain crops (IP4). Likewise, teaching greeting rules (IP5) can extend beyond learning polite phrases to examining how language hierarchies in greetings reflect power dynamics, such as the dominance of English in global communication. These approaches allow students to engage with culture meaningfully, creating a supportive environment that values diverse heritages while challenging students to question underlying power structures, thus avoiding uncritical cultural comparisons. This approach also falls in line with Holliday's (2021) maxim that cultural knowledge needs to be based on students' everyday experiences rather than just in theory or on high-cultural artefacts like literature or pieces of art. Holliday (2021) suggests that the foundation of intercultural pedagogy in the "small cultures" of daily life—that is, daily routines and interactions—enables students to derive meaning from their own lives without the elitism of "large culture" models wherein national caricatures or canonical texts are privileged. He further indicates that such experiential focuses habituate students to co-construct cultural knowledge, a principle reflected in EMI instructors' application of concrete practices as a mediating force between discrepant perspectives. In addition, Holliday's (2010) previous work highlights the importance of "cultural threads"—settled, habitual activities that reveal deep values—such that practices like greeting or family practice (described by IP5) open the door to richer intercultural dialogue, something that the teachers in this study appear to achieve.

However, relying on material cultural practices to build intercultural understanding in the EMI classroom has significant implications for whether these practices reflect broader societal values and power dynamics. While incorporating routines like clothing, food, or greetings materialises culture, it risks promoting a superficial understanding unless contextualised within the societal forces that shape them. For example, IP1’s reference to “what we wear, the food we eat, and the houses we live in” highlights material culture, but without exploring how these reflect economic disparities, historical legacies, or societal priorities, students may overlook the broader context. Holliday (2018) warns that focusing solely on visible habits can “essentialise” culture, reducing it to static routines rather than dynamic processes shaped by power, politics, and globalisation. For instance, QP42’s call for respect for “different religious cultures” suggests a need to connect daily practices, like greeting rituals, to their underlying societal values, such as community in certain religious practices. However, rather than challenging students’ personal beliefs, EMI teachers can foster intercultural sensitivity by encouraging critical reflection on how these practices are shaped by historical and social forces. For example, discussing how workplace customs reflect globalised corporate norms or how classroom speech patterns mirror linguistic power dynamics can deepen understanding without targeting individual belief systems. Holliday’s (2018) framework supports this inclusive approach but challenges educators to link tangible routines to the broader societal systems—such as economic inequities or colonial histories—that shape them, ensuring cultural learning moves beyond surface-level engagement to address the complexities of intercultural dynamics.

### **5.1.2 Culture as Social Norms and Rituals**

The second important theoretical insight drawn from this study is the perspective of culture as social norms and a ritual system. This is a principal observation that centres on the ways cultural habits, conventions, and actions organise and control social relations and define the context in which human beings engage with one another. The participants highlighted how repeated practices—like greetings or ceremonies—establish patterns that influence behaviour and expectations in social settings. IP1 illustrated this, stating, “I’ve noticed the importance of ritual in everyday life, like the tea ceremony and family reunions at festival times. These rituals seem to tie individuals together and impose cultural values.” Tea ceremonies and festival reunions, as ritualised behaviour, reproduce social solidarity and transmit values, such as harmony or filial duty, shaping the manner in which participants engage with each other. Similarly, IP9 argued, “Greetings are not a formality but a serious part of social interaction. The way we greet someone, with a handshake, a bow, or a kiss on the cheek, is a sign of respect

and creates rapport.” Greetings are being framed as routines for organising social activity, and showing respect and rapport work through culture-specific conventions. These instances provide a context for exploring how norms and rituals, such as greetings, serve as frameworks for fostering intercultural understanding and facilitating meaningful social interactions in EMI classrooms, reflecting teachers’ understandings of culture’s role in pedagogy.

Participants view social rituals and routines as concrete practices that embody cultural meaning, focusing on lived, interactive processes rather than intellectual or national definitions of culture. This aligns with the theoretical views of researchers like Geertz (1973), who defined culture as a collection of ideas passed down and encoded in symbols—like rituals—through which individuals pass on, disseminate, and interpret their understanding and disposition towards life. Geertz’s (1973) concern with cultural ritual and symbolism finds echoes in participant observation, particularly the manner in which everyday routine activities like tea ceremonies or greetings become imbued with shared meaning and social expectation and distil into webs of significance in terms of which communal life is organised.

Contemporary scholarship has also developed cultural concepts based on Geertz (1973). Hannerz (2016), for example, discusses culture as the flow of meaning negotiated in routines of everyday practice and speculates that rituals and norms are not fixed but emerge in globalised settings, relative to the multicultural EMI classrooms. Reckwitz (2020) goes further in the theorisation of culture as performed in “social practices,” in which habits like greetings or rituals are performative actions reproducing the norms and values of society, a dynamic approach that can be applied to IP9’s emphasis on rapport building. In the framework of EMI, in which IP1’s rituals are for social values and IP9’s greetings are for respect, this perspective underscores how culture is being perpetuated through traditional practice. These new contexts add to Geertz, rendering the conceptualisation of modern vigour and solidity, highlighting how social norms and rituals both create and shape the cultural environment of EMI education.

The argument that culture exists as a buildup of social norms and rituals underlies Goffman’s (1959) work also as he discusses cultural rituals that guide social structure. Goffman’s seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, utilised a dramaturgical model to explain how individuals perform social roles on a daily basis. Goffman asserted that through the use of “facework” and other social rituals, individuals perform social roles based on unspoken rules and conventions. His research primarily used observation and qualitative analysis of real social

interactions, watching individuals in all manner of public spaces (coffee houses, offices, public spaces) to analyse how norms and rituals shaped behaviour. Under Goffman's framework, rituals such as greetings and politeness exchanges are not necessarily voluntary but are necessary for maintaining face and social solidarity. These norms govern everything from greetings to gestures to the unspoken rules of behaviour in different settings. In the general EMI context, the cultural norms that Goffman explored are particularly important for students to understand, as they often shape the way students interact in both classroom and social settings. Goffman's emphasis on everyday social rituals highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity, particularly for international students in EMI programmes who may not be familiar with the social expectations in the target language environment.

Moreover, according to some participants, culture seeps beyond social ritual into communicative pragmatics—how meaning is conveyed through linguistic and contextual cues. For instance, IP7 shared how students in EMI contexts struggle to transition from the implicit communication norms of home cultures to the English-speaking academic cultures' explicit directness. For example, he noted that Chinese students, accustomed to indirect, context-dependent communication in their culture, are often surprised by the explicit expectations of academic English, leading to reduced classroom engagement.

This remark about cultural expectations in China accords with Hall's (1976) influential differentiation between high-context and low-context cultures. High-context cultures, such as those in most of Asia and China, are implicit in communication, meaning that meaning is established through shared knowledge, nonverbal communication, and situational context rather than explicit statements. Low-context cultures, characteristic of much English-speaking Western culture, value direct, verbal explicitness. In EMI terminology, this would be that high-context students like IP7's students would struggle with English academic discourse norms of low-contextuality (for example, asking questions or declarative argumentation) because inference is valued over declaration in their own cultural pragmatics. However, Hall's high-context/low-context dichotomy may not fully apply in contemporary society, as it has historically oversimplified cultural dynamics, with debates highlighting variations among Western countries, such as New Zealand's relatively higher-context culture compared to the lower-context orientation of the USA. Zhu (2019) agrees that globalisation and online communication have broken down the differences between high and low contexts, particularly in educational settings like EMI, where English is in contact with local traditions. In China, for

example, EMI classes may not go fully Western style, low context in their approach, but instead, implement pragmatic hybridity between explicit teaching and implicit cultural expectations, like respect for hierarchy (IP8).

In EMI classrooms, fostering intercultural understanding involves moving beyond teaching students to adhere to specific social norms and instead helping them recognise the communicative patterns that enable effective interaction. Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021) advocate for intercultural pragmatics, highlighting the need for context-specific knowledge of communication norms to navigate cultural differences effectively. For instance, IP7 observed that Chinese students might perceive direct essay feedback as overly critical, expecting a more indirect approach typical in local academic settings. This highlights the importance of students understanding the pragmatic intent behind feedback—here, aimed at academic improvement rather than personal criticism. In China’s EMI context, where local teaching traditions often merge with English-medium instruction, the communicative landscape is complex. IP7 described adapting their feedback by combining clear, constructive criticism with supportive language to align with students’ expectations of respect, creating a hybrid approach that navigates both local cultural norms and the communicative expectations often associated with EMI. This suggests that assumptions about “global” norms—often stereotypically linked to Western communication styles, though not inherently tied to English as a lingua franca—require careful consideration as they may oversimplify the complex interplay of cultural influences in EMI settings. Rigid frameworks like Hall’s (1976) high/low context distinction thus appear less applicable than fostering pragmatic flexibility tailored to specific classroom dynamics. Similarly, QP23 observed that students hesitated to ask questions in class, reflecting a local norm of deference to authority, which contrasted with the teacher’s expectation of open discussion, a practice common in many EMI contexts but not exclusive to Western settings. To address this, the teacher employed structured question prompts, such as providing written questions on slides to guide small-group discussions before inviting class-wide input. According to the teacher, this strategy facilitated participation while respecting local norms of deference. This example underscores that such strategies are not inherently “Western” but contextually adapted, challenging simplistic cultural generalisations. These cases highlight that EMI teachers should cultivate students’ awareness of communicative pragmatics, shaped by both the global use of English and local cultural expectations, rather than endorsing fixed conventions. This approach aligns with contemporary models like those of Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021), which emphasise nuanced, context-sensitive intercultural communication.

Furthermore, in Chinese EMI classrooms, the concept of a “target culture” is complex, as IP2 questioned: in a multicultural setting, whose culture shapes the classroom norms? With learners and teachers from diverse backgrounds, the target culture in EMI is not a fixed entity but a dynamic, hybrid space shaped by the interplay of English-medium academic conventions, local classroom practices observed in Chinese contexts, and the diverse perspectives of non-Western, non-Chinese international students. For example, IP4 noted that their classroom included students from Southeast Asia and Africa, who often favoured collaborative group work over individual questioning, distinct from both the deference to authority observed among some local students and the direct debate style sometimes expected in EMI settings. This diversity highlights that EMI classrooms are shaped by a blend of global academic norms and context-specific practices, requiring teachers to adapt flexibly to foster inclusive communication. This aligns with intercultural models like those of Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021), which emphasise context-sensitive approaches to multicultural classroom dynamics. For instance, IP2 observed that classroom discussions in their setting often combined direct questioning, common in some EMI contexts, with more reserved communication styles noted among some Chinese students, requiring students to navigate both approaches. Similarly, QP15 observed that group projects in their classroom reflected expectations of individual contribution alongside a local emphasis on group harmony, creating a space where students balanced varied communicative norms. IP5 further illustrated this, noting: “Students here don’t always know how to speak up in class—they’re polite and wait for me to invite them, but they hesitate when I encourage spontaneous debate.” This reflects a challenge in some Chinese EMI settings where observed tendencies to wait for instructor guidance differ from expectations for unprompted discussion, a practice not exclusive to any single academic culture. These examples demonstrate that the target culture in EMI is an evolving, negotiated space shaped by specific classroom dynamics. EMI teachers should thus guide students to develop pragmatic flexibility, enabling them to adapt to these blended communicative and academic expectations while fostering intercultural understanding in a socially dynamic classroom environment.

Taking this approach in the EMI context, cultural awareness involves guiding students to recognise the cultural models shaping their own and others’ societies, often emphasising perceived national differences. For example, IP1, an EMI engineering teacher, highlighted culture as shared values, stating, “In my experience, there is typically a tension between the collectivist values deeply embedded in Chinese culture and the individualistic mindset

prevalent in Western cultures.” This reflects a recurring theme in the data where participants frequently defined culture through an East/West dichotomy, framing collectivism versus individualism as cultural stereotypes. In this study, EMI teachers often conceptualised students’ cultural perspectives at a broad scale, emphasising differences between Chinese and Western societies, terms that capture large groups of countries rather than singular national identities. However, this East/West dichotomy risks oversimplifying the complex cultural dynamics in EMI classrooms. Teachers frequently focused on these broader distinctions rather than finer-grained microcultures, such as regional variations (for example, between urban coastal and rural inland China), generational differences (for example, between post-90s’ and post-00s’ students), or the diverse cultural practices of ethnic groups within China, such as Han, Uyghur, or Tibetan communities. Additionally, the diverse backgrounds of international students, who bring their own cultural perspectives from regions like Africa, further complicate these dynamics. This tendency to prioritise broad cultural categories over localised or individual variations highlights the need for EMI teachers to adopt more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to understanding classroom cultural dynamics.

This is supported by Byram’s (2021) argument that ICC extends beyond academic settings, fostering social capital for real-world interactions. IP8 elaborated, stating, “Cultural information equips students to navigate both academic essays and challenging social interactions with peers, serving as a vital tool in EMI contexts.” Byram (2008) emphasises that ICC enhances learning by preparing students for both academic and social purposes, positioning EMI teachers as both educators and cultural mediators. Similarly, Baker (2015) highlights that ELF facilitates a responsive, socially aware learning environment, prioritising flexibility over fixed cultural norms. This is exemplified by IP5’s observation of students adapting to dynamic intercultural customs. Consequently, EMI teachers bridge academic objectives and intercultural understanding, fostering environments where diverse cultural practices are navigated.

However, navigating cultural expectations in EMI classrooms is a complex process as differing assumptions about communication and behaviour often create challenges. For instance, a contrast may arise between the implicit, deference-based communication styles observed among some Chinese students and the explicit, participatory expectations often associated with EMI settings. IP5, a Chinese teacher of an EMI international business course, noted, “They’re super nice and wait for me to invite them in,” reflecting a tendency among some local students

to defer to instructor guidance. However, not all students in these diverse EMI classrooms are local; many come from varied international backgrounds, adding further complexity to these dynamics. For example, IP10 described their classroom, which included students from Africa, who brought distinct communication preferences, such as prioritising consensus building in group discussions over the direct critique sometimes encouraged in EMI settings. This diversity can lead to misunderstandings as students navigate unfamiliar social conventions, such as when to speak, how to express disagreement, or how to balance individual assertiveness with group harmony, in settings where English-medium academic norms intersect with local and international practices. These examples highlight that EMI classrooms are dynamic spaces where teachers must foster pragmatic flexibility, enabling students to adapt to a blend of communicative expectations shaped by global academic conventions and diverse cultural influences.

In these contexts—specifically EMI classrooms in China, where diverse cultural norms intersect with English as the instructional medium—the EMI teacher’s task extends beyond language instruction to mediating these differences. As IP9 put it, “From my experience, students have difficulty with what is expected of them in classroom behaviour, which can cause confusion with teachers or other students.” This confirms the challenges of previous research, as, for instance, that of Byram (2021), who identified the need for teachers to provide explicit instructions regarding cultural norms, especially in more formal education contexts where students’ sensitivity to social rituals and appropriate behaviour may be low.

Overall, the concept of culture as social habits and rituals is best fitted to Goffman’s (1959) and Byram’s (2021) models, which prescribe that there is a need to decipher social rituals and habits in constructing communication. Yet, as this present research suggests, this knowledge needs to be learned more profoundly, particularly in the context of EMI, where students can find themselves confronted with a set of potentially competing cultural expectations. The subtleties of responding to such cultural differences underscore the importance of EMI teachers going beyond imparting academic knowledge to fostering students’ social competence in navigating these expectations.

### **5.1.3 Culture as National Identity and Shared Values**

Some participants in the study also defined culture by equating it with national identity and values, reflecting a prevalent perspective among respondents. They labelled culture as a

common set of values and beliefs that form a particular society. For instance, QP18 asserted, “Language holds a culture’s common knowledge and collective experience. We communicate our feelings, values, and hopes through language.” This understanding aligns with traditional anthropological thinking, such as that of Tylor (1871) and Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), who described culture as a complex whole tied to national or ethnic groups, encompassing their shared values. The present research also supported Smith (1991), who argued that national identity is typically grounded in shared myths, memories, and values that foster a sense of unity within a society. According to Smith, national identity emerges from shared experiences and cultural symbols that create a sense of belonging among individuals who come to see themselves as a cohesive group rooted in national traditions and history. Smith’s theory of ethnosymbolism posits that nations are not merely political ideologies but are deeply connected to cultural symbols and traditions passed down through generations. His research, based on historical studies and qualitative interviews with members of various ethnic groups, explores how culture constructs and sustains national identity through elements like rituals, narratives, and traditions. Smith argues that culture, as a collective system of values and beliefs, is transmitted across generations, serving as a fundamental component in the construction of national identities.

The prevalence of this East/West, collectivism/individualism dichotomy suggests an over-reliance on familiar cultural scripts among EMI teachers, potentially due to limited exposure to nuanced intercultural frameworks or entrenched pedagogical habits. Some questionnaire responses were evidence of this view, with participants directly linking culture to national identity, citing collectivist practices in Chinese students (for example, group cohesion, respect for authority) against individualistic practices in Western contexts (for example, self-expression, autonomy). For instance, QP12, an EMI education teacher, noted, “Chinese students prefer working together and avoiding conflict, unlike the focus on individual views in the West.” This reliance on national-level stereotypes may stem from several factors: teachers’ prior training, which often emphasises broad cultural frameworks; the influence of their own cultural backgrounds, which may predispose them to view differences through a simplified lens; or the lack of professional development addressing microcultures, such as China’s regional diversity or the varied identities of international students. As discussed in Section 2.9, this reductionist view may also reflect shortcomings in intercultural specificity training, which fails to equip teachers to recognise the dynamic, multifaceted nature of cultural identities in diverse EMI classrooms.

The tendency to prioritise broad cultural categories over microcultures aligns with Kramsch's (1993, 1998) theory of culture as a fluid, context-negotiated concept rather than a fixed national trait. Kramsch (1993) argues that culture emerges through language and interaction, creating a "third place" where individuals bridge their native schemata with those of others, fostering dynamic intercultural exchanges. In contrast, Hofstede's (2001) survey-based cultural dimensions, derived from large-scale samples, generalise national trends—such as individualism versus collectivism—across populations, offering broad patterns but less sensitivity to situational nuances. Kramsch's (1993) approach emphasises the dynamic, face-to-face nature of culture, providing a nuanced depth that large-scale models like Hofstede's cannot fully capture. For instance, IP1 described students navigating tensions in EMI classrooms where expectations of collaborative group work, observed in some Chinese students, intersected with demands for independent critical analysis, often associated with EMI academic norms but not exclusive to Western contexts. This reflects Kramsch's "third place," where students negotiate competing communicative expectations. However, the data's focus on societal-level differences—rather than microcultural variations, such as those between urban and rural Chinese students or between local and international classmates from diverse regions like Africa—suggests that teachers may not always address these subtler dynamics, potentially limiting the depth of cultural integration in EMI settings.

The application of East/West stereotypes questions what sort of cultural realities EMI teachers in this study actually envision their students living in. Though national variations have a common background, the multifaceted identities of EMI contexts, particularly internationalised Chinese universities with students of various backgrounds, may be too simplistic. For instance, observations in classrooms identified only that one class addressed microcultural differences, while five classes were referred to as alluding to national cultural traits. This suggests a pedagogical tendency to emphasise macro-level cultural narratives, possibly because teachers find these broad frameworks, such as the East/West dichotomy, useful for simplifying complex cultural dynamics in the classroom or due to time constraints and limited training in intercultural specificity (see Section 2.9), rather than exploring microcultures that shape individual student experiences. Kramsch's (1998) perspective highlights the need for deeper cultural sensitivity in language-mediated environments like EMI, emphasising that effective intercultural exchange requires exploring nuanced cultural distinctions rather than relying on simplistic binary stereotypes.

This present research suggests that EMI classroom communication styles are context dependent, shaping student participation in ways embedded in the classroom environment. Aligning with Baker's (2015) findings on ELF, some interview participants reported that some Chinese students, accustomed to indirect communication preferences, showed discomfort with spontaneous questioning and debate, with observations indicating that most interactions relied on nonverbal signals or teacher prompts rather than unprompted verbal engagement. However, this was not a persistent barrier. According to the present research, stimulated recall interviews revealed that teachers observed varying levels of student engagement, influenced by instructor scaffolding and accommodation strategies, with sporadic reluctance attributed to personal and situational factors rather than solely national cultural values, as noted in Section 4.3. This reflects a broader tension between national identity and globalisation, as Pieterse (2004) argues, where cultural hybridity emerges from global flows of ideas and people, blending local traditions with global influences. Thus, EMI classroom dynamics resist oversimplified generalisations about communication styles, requiring teachers to navigate complex, hybrid cultural identities to foster effective intercultural communication.

Multicultural diversity in the EMI classroom presents both unique challenges and opportunities for teachers and learners. IP4, for instance, emphasised the significance of helping learners overcome “the complexities of communicating in a multicultural setting,” emphasising the challenge represented by interlocutors with multicultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, IP6 argued that globalisation has been responsible for “shared global academic culture” within schools where English conventions and norms will predominate. That assumption aligns to some extent with Canagarajah's (1999) theory of English globalisation, which explains how English spreads in higher education to facilitate intercultural communication while exporting Western scholarly values and pedagogies. Canagarajah's qualitative research, conducted in Sri Lanka, used interviews and classroom observations of 15 teachers and 30 students to demonstrate that EMI students navigate between local scholarly expectations, such as implicit argumentation, and global expectations, such as explicit argumentation. Rather than a uniform shared global culture, his findings suggest a dynamic interplay of influences where Western norms dominate but interact with local variations, leading to uncertainty in classroom attitudes (for example, being reserved vs. assertiveness) and communication norms. Thus, while IP6's testimony suggests perceived alignment with English-mediated research practices, Canagarajah's research indicates that this alignment is both contested and stratified, providing

EMI teachers and students a space for cultural affiliation and negotiation.

The tension between globalisation and national identity is further complicated by the rapid proliferation of digital technologies. In EMI classrooms, where English functions as a medium for delivering academic knowledge, teachers and students often navigate between national cultural frameworks and global academic expectations. IP10 observed: “Digital technologies have enabled the widespread sharing of ideas and cultural products across borders.” While the statement is descriptive, it gestures toward a broader transformation in the educational and cultural landscape wherein digital platforms amplify transnational flows of discourse and identity. Rather than implying cultural homogenisation, recent research suggests that digital communication technologies can foster complex forms of cultural negotiation. For instance, Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) argue that digital spaces encourage metrolingual practices, which they define as the dynamic and creative use of linguistic resources where individuals draw on diverse local and global influences to negotiate language and identity in fluid, context-specific ways. These practices reflect how language users blend multiple linguistic and cultural elements in digital interactions, constructing identities that transcend fixed cultural or national boundaries. Likewise, Li (2018) highlights how digital interactions among multilingual users in educational settings allow for the coexistence of global and national discourses, enabling learners to recontextualise global knowledge within culturally situated frameworks. In this sense, digital globalisation does not merely impose external norms but creates hybrid spaces where national identity can be both challenged and reaffirmed.

The association of culture with national identity and shared values gets theoretical backing in the guise of work such as Smith’s (1991) research on national identity predicated on mutual histories and traditions. However, this present study suggests that this impression must be challenged in terms of globalisation and cultural mixings, which negate the health of traditional specifications within EMI classrooms. IP6, for example, spoke of a “shared global academic culture” fostered by English-language norms but one that exists alongside long-standing local influences, precluding a national explanation alone. Gurney and Demuro (2024) call for moving beyond reductive binary frameworks that treat culture as either fixed and nationally bound or wholly fluid and transnational. Instead, they advocate for an approach that critically interrogates essentialist notions of culture and language while recognising their embeddedness within broader assemblages of material and ideological forces. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with fourteen language teachers and researchers based in Australia and New

Zealand, their qualitative research on world language education conceptualises culture as “a dynamic, multifaceted entity, intricately woven by a broad array of historical, socio-political, and individual factors ... [that] ... permeates all aspects of human existence, from macro-level societal norms and values to the micro-level nuances of everyday interactions” (Gurney & Demuro, 2024, p. 25). In this sense, defining culture with a single, fixed description would result in an overly simplistic portrayal. This perspective complements Zhou’s (2022) earlier work, which frames intercultural communication as a lived wisdom arena informed by Buddhist principles where individuals negotiate cultural identities in real time, balancing local values with global orientations. Zhou’s Buddhist-inspired approach emphasises nonessentialist practices, highlighting how cultural identities emerge through dynamic, context-specific interactions. Consequently, EMI teachers must not only deliver scholarly content but also foster awareness of how local values—such as those emphasising harmony or respect for authority—interact with diverse, interdependent norms in technology-mediated, globally integrated environments, preparing students to navigate these complex cultural landscapes.

Overall, the concept of culture was frequently illustrated by the participants, as informed by the data, through the opposing East-West extremes, whereby they saw collectivism and individualism as two cultural stereotypes. Even though this research narrates these beliefs presented by the instructors, it is still very important to acknowledge the shortcomings of such dichotomous frameworks. As it is pointed out by the likes of Gurney and Demuro (2024), and Holliday (2021), these simplifications run the risk of treating culture as an unchanging entity and ignoring the vast micro-cultural diversity that exists in any nationality or region, such as the differences in culture of different generations, regions and ethnic groups in China, as well as the different cultural backgrounds of international students. Thus, although the East-West paradigm was the participants' most common way of understanding, the study's analysis is more aligned with a reconceptualisation of culture as being changeable, mixed, and dependent on the context.

#### **5.1.4 Culture as a Constructed and Negotiated Space**

The majority of participants also emphasised that culture is not a pre-existing or already established concept but is one that is negotiated and created actively in the course of interaction. IP7 expressed it as follows: “Culture is not learned or inherited. It’s something that’s constructed and created by means of discussions and interactions.” Such a perception is also shared by experts in intercultural communication, such as Gudykunst (2004), who also argues

that culture is a dynamic, evolving process that is shaped by continuous negotiation and interaction. In this view, culture is not a fixed set of values or customs but an evolving one generated by individuals interacting with one another; it is context-dependent, history-dependent, and social relation-dependent. On the basis of qualitative cross-cultural interaction analyses, Gudykunst emphasised that meaning is collectively constructed in communication, depending on the context, history, and social relationships, rather than being an inherent property of a group. This ongoing negotiation positions the communicative process as a space in which culture is repeatedly reinterpreted and remade, following the flexible give and take of influences in diverse, globalised contexts.

For EMI, this understanding of culture means that both students and teachers negotiate and construct common cultural meanings through their day-to-day interactions. As IP8 explained, “Culture is a continuous conversation. In our classroom, we are negotiating continuously what is ‘cultural’ in our interactions with one another.” This indicates how conversation is at the heart of intercultural communicative competence development in the classroom. EMI teachers play a key role in generating these conversations where cultural norms and values are constantly being questioned, redefined, and explored. Through this learning, not only are academic materials covered, but also an appreciation of how cultural constructs impact behaviour, communication, and expectations is developed. Geertz (1973) concurs with the concept of culture as a negotiated space, and he describes it in *The Interpretation of Cultures* as a web of significance that is spun through social interaction. He did not view culture as a passive symbol repository but rather as an active system of meaning that individuals together construct to comprehend their world. In this sense, open discussion enables the teachers to engage students in coming to a critical understanding of culture as a negotiated, lived process, in alignment with Geertz’s emphasis on meaning-making within social contexts.

In line with this perspective that culture is a system of social norms and rituals shaping communication and interaction, IP10 also stated that “cultural discussions in the classroom naturally occur through interaction, validating the idea that social norms and rituals are fluid and not static and are built through ongoing conversation.” This demonstrates how culture can be a negotiated and constructed space where teachers guide students in understanding the dynamic between cultural knowledge and social practice. The findings add to Byram’s (2021) study by highlighting the dynamic and negotiated aspect of ICC across different EMI contexts. Conceptualising intercultural awareness as social capital, the findings highlight its role in

enabling learners to communicate in intercultural settings with confidence. EMI instructors, therefore, not only encourage educational success but also enable learners to thrive in broader social spheres, bridging cultural divides and fostering a notion of global capability.

### **5.1.5 Culture as Academic Disciplines**

Answers to the survey revealed that it was teachers themselves who wished to see culture as an integral, natural part of the academic subject matter they teach and not as a separate context. QP9 described, “Culture isn’t just a background in my classes; it’s how technical ideas are constructed through English, with its own assumptions.” Similarly, QP14 from the business department described, “In my course, culture is the integration of global business theories taught in English and local Chinese practices.” QP20 stated, “Teaching medicine in English plants Western clinical frameworks, but I incorporate Chinese traditional medicine ideas—culture is part of the subject itself.” More recent research, for example, Zuaro (2022), appears to corroborate this argument, where interviews with 13 EMI lecturers in Italy reaffirmed that disciplines such as law and science are deeply influenced by cultural norms mediated through English. For instance, lecturers in humanities and social sciences highlighted the challenges of translating culturally specific concepts, such as the Italian term “Restauero” into English (“restoration”), which affects the teaching of disciplines like conservation and art history. Huang and Fang (2022) focused on six EMI teachers at a Chinese university, with findings indicating that only those with humanities and social sciences backgrounds actively incorporated cultural elements into their teaching, aligning with affective and action orientations from Larzen-Ostermark’s (2008) framework. Teachers in STEM disciplines, such as science and engineering, did not recognise the need to integrate culture, focusing primarily on disciplinary content. However, convergence occurs when EMI teachers with humanities backgrounds approach their subjects as cultural texts, recognising culture as an organic aspect of their discipline (Larzen-Ostermark, 2008). They negotiate this in a manner that adapts to local contexts, creating a hybrid disciplinary culture that facilitates student learning within a predominantly English-medium environment.

The questionnaire responses in this study underscore the pivotal role of English as a medium in shaping cultural and disciplinary knowledge in EMI classrooms, extending the discussion of cultural dynamics in academic settings. QP5 observed, “The language we use in EMI isn’t just a tool—it shapes how students perceive cultural concepts within the subject matter.” Similarly, QP11 noted, “Using English to teach literature introduces specific interpretive lenses,

influencing how students engage with novels' cultural contexts." IP3 described, "Culture is embedded in how knowledge is constructed and shared through language; English frames students' understanding of cultural concepts differently than Mandarin would." IP5, a social scientist, elaborated, "When I teach sociology in English, concepts like identity or power are framed through analytical perspectives often emphasised in English-medium academic discourse, such as critical individualism, which differ from the relational focus I might emphasise in Chinese." These insights align with Baker's (2015) exploration of ELF, which challenges traditional assumptions of fixed language-culture-identity correlations, proposing instead a fluid, dynamic interplay. In EMI settings, English mediates cultural identities and disciplinary epistemologies, enabling students—such as Chinese business students in this study—to negotiate local and global perspectives. For example, QP36 described students reinterpreting business ethics through English-medium case studies, which prompted discussions contrasting local values of collective responsibility with global frameworks of individual accountability. These findings highlight dynamic cultural negotiations in EMI classrooms, suggesting that teachers should foster students' intercultural awareness to navigate these complex, language-mediated academic and cultural landscapes, as supported by Baker's empirical ELF data. Similarly, Rey-Paba et al.'s (2024) study involved seven EMI teachers from two Colombian universities, exploring how EMI fosters intercultural communicative competence. The findings suggest that English in EMI acts as a cultural mediator, influencing disciplinary meaning through the interplay of language, culture, and content. Teachers' pedagogical strategies, such as using international materials and connecting global and local cultural instances, facilitate this mediation. For example, according to Rey-Paba et al.'s (2024) study, in courses like International Strategy, teachers engaged students with materials that juxtaposed global and local perspectives, promoting a situated disciplinary understanding. However, this present study notes that teachers often lacked explicit awareness of IC development, indicating an incidental rather than intentional negotiation of cultural dynamics in EMI classrooms.

Participants also theorised culture as an active negotiation between their scholarly disciplines, shaped by encounters in the EMI classroom. QP47 responded, "Culture in my classrooms comes out in the way students argue legal concepts in English, combining their own cultures with what I bring." QP45 supplemented, "Students introduce their own cultural concepts to coding projects, and English is where we resolve differences." IP3 went on to say, "In literature, English introduces British or American assumptions, but my students read texts through their

own frameworks—culture is part of the process of analysis.” IP1 added, “Even in a ‘universal’ subject like physics, culture is negotiated when students debate applications in English, blending global science and local settings.” These classroom experiences reflect how culture is not a fixed set of national characteristics but a process negotiated through disciplinary discourse and language use. To understand this dynamic more fully, Darwin and Norton’s (2015) model of investment is useful, as it conceptualises identity negotiation at the intersection of ideology, capital, and identity. Although their case studies focus on learners in Uganda and Canada, the model’s emphasis on learner agency and the transformation of cultural capital—such as discourse competence and digital literacy—helps explain how students in EMI contexts actively negotiate meaning, position themselves as legitimate speakers, and adapt disciplinary norms. Rather than viewing disciplines as static or universally defined, this model illuminates how learners reshape disciplinary knowledge through culturally embedded practices.

The EMI teachers’ perceptions of culture as an area of study highlight significant pedagogic implications, emphasising the need to integrate cultural dimensions into disciplinary teaching. QP20 stated, “I teach the structure of the English language, but I make it culturally relevant—students need to see how language reflects culture in our field.” QP13 noted, “Teaching economic models in English involves showing how cultural values shape markets differently here and abroad.” IP6 emphasised, “In business, I compare Western theory with Chinese practice; it’s about cultural awareness, not just content.” Huang and Fang (2022) found that Chinese EMI instructors often incorporate local cultural examples, such as contrasting Western finance with Chinese market dynamics, to enhance relevance, aligning with Baker’s (2015) observations of cultural integration in ELF contexts. This suggests that EMI pedagogy should extend beyond content delivery to foster a cultural–disciplinary synthesis, encouraging critical engagement with subjects and their cultural contexts, supporting the broader goal of developing intercultural competence in internationalised higher education.

Collectively, these positions indicate that in EMI, culture is not separable from academic fields, constructed through language and negotiation, and the pedagogical focus. QP5’s stance on language as a producer of cultural knowledge and IP11’s focus on reinterpretation provide a collective participants’ perspective that culture is not at the margin but the central area for their fields. Recent studies like Rey-Paba et al. (2024) and Zuaro (2022) affirm this, showing how EMI instructors across contexts recognise language’s cultural role in disciplines, while Darwin

and Norton (2015) highlight the negotiated, hybrid outcomes of such settings. This synthesis reveals a sophisticated instructor awareness: culture is both a lens through which disciplinary knowledge is viewed and a product of classroom interactions, challenging static definitions and enriching EMI's educational potential. The discussion argues that such a double role—culture as embedded and emergent—places EMI as a distinct field for investigating the interface of academic content and cultural identity, providing outcomes on how to prepare students for a world where knowledge is in the shape of culture.

Overall, the differences between the various disciplines are one of the most prominent results. Instructors in the humanities and social sciences (e.g., OP2, literature; OP4, history) perceived culture as intrinsic to their subject matter, a core component of textual analysis and historical understanding. In contrast, instructors in STEM fields (e.g., OP1, engineering; OP8, mathematics) tended to view culture as an extrinsic context or an illustrative tool used to enhance engagement, rather than an essential part of the disciplinary knowledge itself. Moreover, their discovery strongly supports the research of Huang and Fang (2022), who found that Chinese EMI teachers in humanities proactively resorted to cultural instruction, while those in STEM areas mostly ignored it in favour of technical content delivery. This means that any institution's policy aiming at cultural integration should be aware of the differences between disciplines, and a single strategy is not likely to work.

### **5.1.6 Section Summary**

This section responded to the research question, In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture?, by synthesising five interpretations of culture from data in Section 4.1.1, based on 56 questionnaires and 10 interviews. These accounts—culture as lived experience, social norms and rituals, national identity and values, a constructed and negotiated space, and academic disciplines—illustrate the multifaceted and diverse way in which EMI teachers in China conceptualise culture, and how practical and theoretical considerations are at play. All these perspectives, addressed in their respective subsections (5.1.1–5.1.5), are participant experience-centred and theory-oriented, ranging from Hall's (1980) “small c” culture through Byram's (2008) ICC to more recent developments such as those of Baker (2015) and Holliday (2021). Findings indicate that teachers conceptualise culture as sensory and material (for example, IP1's dressing and food focus), an organisational system for social interaction (for example, IP9's greeting), an identifier of national identity (for example, QP18's values) but as mixed and fluid (for example,

IP4's globalisation), discursively constructed (for example, IP10's classroom discourse), and infused in education content (for example, QP20's medical education).

This heterogeneity appears to be a sign of a pedagogic turn: EMI instructors transcend language instruction to mediate cultural differences, socialise students' competence, and negotiate concerns of power balance, such as fears of hegemonic norms of English-speaking supremacy suppressing minority viewpoints (for example, IP8). Theories like Goffman's (1959) rituals, Geertz's (1973) symbolic webs, and Appiah's (2006) critique of cultural relativism frame these observations, with recent research (see, for example, Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021; Zhu, 2019) noting the ongoing significance of hybridity and pragmatics in the global–local nexus of EMI. All these interpretations imply that EMI culture is not monolithic but an interactive drama of lived lives, social order, and academic environments built through China's unique blend of local practice and global English norms. The chapter illustrates that teachers' perceptions, despite being rooted in everyday reality, must consider the underlying structural forces—such as power relations and globalisation—in order to enable students to attain intercultural competencies adequately. This diversity disturbs essential definitions, locating EMI teachers as cultural interlocutors bridging academic and social space, introducing students to a world where cultural knowledge is the tool and negotiated outcome.

However, what cannot be ignored is that a recurring and significant theme across the data, particularly evident in the questionnaires and initial interview responses, was the tendency for participants to define their cultural context through an East/West binary framework. Instructors frequently referred to cultural differences by framing the Chinese context as inherently collectivistic, high-context, and prioritising harmony, in contrast to a perceived Western culture characterised by individualism, low-context communication, and direct conflict. The strong manifestation of this dichotomy in the participant voice reflects their lived experience and the practical necessity of simplifying complex differences to manage multicultural classrooms and prepare students for global interactions. Nevertheless, the analytical imperative of this present research is to critically engage with, rather than inadvertently reify, this binary thinking. While acknowledging that these macro-level contrasts serve as genuine cognitive frameworks for the instructors, reducing culture to a set of fixed, opposing poles risks oversimplification and overlooks the dynamic, fluid nature of identity and practice. Such a reliance on essentialist stereotypes can obscure the vast intra-cultural variation within both East and West, as well as the hybrid cultural forms emerging from prolonged international contact.

To move beyond the participants' dualistic framing, this section drew upon more recent and dynamic theorisations of culture. The analysis shifts towards concepts such as cultural fluidity (Holliday, 2021). Therefore, while the dichotomy is a strong finding, its true significance lies in its role as a starting point for cultural negotiation, prompting instructors to develop dynamic, context-specific pedagogies that ultimately challenge the very binary they initially employed.

## **5.2 The Roles of Culture in EMI Contexts**

This section addresses the research question: What do EMI instructors think of the roles of culture in EMI? It explores the views of participants on the role of culture and cultural knowledge in EMI, examining how instructors view cultural elements in shaping effective EMI teaching and intercultural understanding in their classrooms. Based on 56 online questionnaire responses and 10 follow-up semi-structured interviews, the findings reveal a wide range of views regarding the importance of cultural integration in language education, from those who strongly advocate its necessity to those who view it as less essential or optional (see Section 4.2). This variation in perspectives underscores the ongoing debate over the role of culture in EMI settings and suggests differing levels of commitment to intercultural objectives among instructors.

### **5.2.1 Enhancing Language Proficiency and Contextual Understanding**

In this study, most EMI teachers emphasised that integrating culture into language instruction is both essential and beneficial for effective learning. Many participants clearly stated that cultural knowledge is part of knowing how language functions. They indicated that aspects like idiomatic expressions, the use of language in different social situations, and the use of cultural and historical contexts are crucial in developing students' overall language ability. QP17 explained, "Knowing culture enables students to observe the subtle dimensions of language use and be capable of communicating well in real moments." This concurs with researchers who argue that cultural knowledge plays a central role in ICC and language acquisition (Huang, 2021; Piątkowska, 2015).

The present study highlights that the English used in EMI is closely tied to academic disciplinary cultures, which shape the linguistic and cultural expectations placed on learners. Disciplinary cultures refer to the norms, values, and communication practices specific to

academic fields, such as the precise, evidence-based discourse of STEM disciplines or the interpretive, argumentative style of the humanities (Hyland, 2006). These cultures influence how language is used, including the idiomatic and culture-specific expressions that learners encounter. For example, a phrase like “cutting-edge research” in a STEM context carries disciplinary connotations of innovation and precision, which may not be clear to nonnative speakers without explicit cultural scaffolding.

Recent literature underscores the necessity of integrating cultural instruction in EMI to address these challenges. Huang and Fang (2022) observed that humanities EMI teachers in Chinese universities employ dynamic cultural instruction, embedding cultural discussions within content delivery to enhance students’ understanding of disciplinary-specific language. In contrast, STEM teachers’ limited focus on cultural elements may hinder students’ ability to fully grasp discipline-specific discourse, as cultural context is often implicit in technical terminology and academic practices. Similarly, Gu and Lee (2018) found that EMI students in Chinese universities experience identity ambivalence when navigating the cultural diversity of internationalisation, suggesting that cultural adaptation is critical for academic success in EMI contexts.

There were also some teachers, including QP10, QP14, and QP15, who stated that language is constructed socially and that one should understand its cultural nature in order to employ the language properly in various contexts. IP5 also noted, “Knowing the cultural context of language use helps students know when a phrase can be impolite or polite, depending on the social situation.” These findings highlight the critical role of cultural integration in language teaching within EMI settings where English serves as the vehicle for academic content delivery. While the importance of cultural competence is well-documented in EFL contexts, its application in EMI requires careful consideration due to the distinct focus on disciplinary-specific language use.

To contextualise these findings, Risager’s (2007) study on second-language English courses in Denmark provides a useful, albeit indirect, comparison. Employing mixed methods—surveys, interviews, and classroom observations—Risager explored how integrating cultural elements, such as social norms and histories of English-speaking countries, enhanced students’ comprehension and social interaction skills in English. While Risager’s EFL-focused research primarily addresses general language learning, its emphasis on cultural exposure as a means to

improve contextual language use offers insights into the broader pedagogical landscape. However, EMI contexts demand a more specialised approach where cultural integration extends to academic disciplinary cultures—specific norms and communication practices within fields like the humanities or STEM.

A more directly relevant study by Kuteeva and Kaufhold (2024) examined the promotion of EMI programmes in Swedish universities, using critical multimodal discourse analysis to explore how these programmes are discursively constructed as both globally elite and locally distinctive. The study found that EMI programmes integrate cultural elements, such as Scandinavian academic values, into disciplinary content to enhance students' engagement with academic discourse. For example, humanities courses in Swedish EMI settings often embed cultural references to local academic traditions, such as collaborative inquiry, within discipline-specific terminology, aligning with the current study's findings on the importance of cultural scaffolding for language comprehension. This supports IP5's observation that cultural context aids in discerning appropriate language use, suggesting that EMI pedagogies benefit from integrating cultural and disciplinary perspectives to facilitate students' navigation of academic discourse.

Furthermore, the use of idiomatic expressions and cultural aspects emerged from the findings of this present study, as many teachers provided the message that these aspects of language could not be achieved without cultural information. For example, IP3 explained that “without understanding the culture behind an idiomatic expression, students might misinterpret or misuse the phrase.” This is supported by the research of Hinkel (1999), who edited a volume that includes contributions that examine how cultural factors influence various aspects of language acquisition, such as classroom interaction, second-language writing, and the use of materials to bridge cultural barriers. Hinkel's work argues that cultural knowledge is essential for effective language use, particularly in understanding and applying linguistic forms like idiomatic expressions, which are deeply rooted in cultural contexts. The volume draws on interdisciplinary research to demonstrate that a purely linguistic model is insufficient to account for the sociocultural dimensions of language learning.

The challenges of understanding and applying idiomatic expressions in EMI contexts were highlighted by instructors in the present study. For instance, IP7 noted that students unfamiliar with the cultural context of idiomatic language often struggle to use such expressions

effectively in both academic and everyday communication. Specifically, IP7 remarked, “Students misuse phrases like ‘barking up the wrong tree’ because they lack knowledge of the cultural or historical background of these expressions, leading to unnatural or awkward language use in classroom discussions and assignments.” This difficulty is particularly significant in EMI settings where fluency in English—including appropriate use of idiomatic expressions—is often associated with communicative clarity and academic confidence. Figurative language—such as idioms, metaphors, and culturally laden expressions—is not merely decorative but forms part of the conceptual scaffolding in academic discourse (Littlemore & Low, 2006). At the same time, it is possible for students to succeed in EMI programmes without full idiomatic competence, especially in technical or highly structured disciplines. Nevertheless, limited idiomatic awareness may constrain deeper engagement, critical discussion, and nuanced interpretation of discipline-specific texts, potentially affecting overall academic integration.

Additionally, several respondents, including QP14 and QP18, underscored the importance of understanding the social and historical contexts that shape idiomatic language use. For these participants, language in EMI contexts is deeply rooted in its historical and cultural origins, reflecting the values, beliefs, and norms of English-speaking societies. This understanding is crucial for EMI students as it enhances their ability to navigate academic interactions, interpret culturally embedded course materials, and produce contextually appropriate written and oral work. For example, QP18 stated, “When students learn the historical background of some phrases or the culture of a certain word, it makes sense of the language and its underlying meanings.” This perspective highlights how cultural and historical knowledge enhances students’ ability to comprehend the deeper significance of language. This aligns with Thorne’s (2003) findings that students exposed to the cultural heritage of the target language were better equipped to understand the complexities of language use, particularly in business and formal contexts. Thorne concluded that language proficiency extends beyond acquiring vocabulary and grammar and encompasses an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts that shape language use in specific situations.

In addition, cultural knowledge was reported by some teachers to empower students not only to acquire linguistic competence and intercultural communicative competence but also subject knowledge, which is required for communication in diverse global academic settings. As IP7 asserts, “Learning about culture can help students understand the principles of language use

and improve their capacity to effectively communicate subject matter in context.” As it is, following a broader scholarly convention with regard to second-language acquisition and EMI research, language acquisition needs to be understood as a social practice that demands an understanding of the culture in which the language exists (Arabski & Wojtaszek, 2011).

In total, respondents’ answers in the present study and prior research studies illustrate how teachers in EMI see cultural awareness as ingrained in the use of language. For EMI in Chinese higher education, the implications of this present study are that cultural integration should be a necessary component of the curriculum. The findings of this present study suggest that teachers do not view cultural awareness as a direct, linear cause of improved language communication skills. Instead, they emphasise that a deep understanding of cultural nuances—encompassing language-specific idiosyncrasies, social contexts, and situational meanings—plays a critical role in addressing students’ communication challenges. Specifically, teachers believe that familiarity with these cultural elements enables students to use language more effectively, particularly in EMI settings, by reducing misunderstandings and enhancing the appropriateness of their verbal and written expressions. This aligns with the research aim of exploring what culture is to EMI teachers, where getting a glimpse of their understandings, instead of demonstrating an absolute rule, is achieved.

Despite the clear academic distinction established in the literature, where EMI focuses solely on content mastery and CLIL requires a dual focus on both content and language (Macaro, 2018), a key finding of this study is the pragmatic blurring of boundaries by the participant instructors. While teaching within an institutionally defined EMI framework, the majority of interviewees expressed a stance that their teaching purpose must incorporate language development and support for their students. This perspective led many instructors to intentionally integrate what are traditionally considered CLIL strategies, such as explicit vocabulary scaffolding, paraphrasing complex concepts in L1 (translanguaging), and focusing assessment on both content accuracy and academic language proficiency. This is not a theoretical misconception of the terms, but rather a manifestation of teacher agency in response to the linguistic realities of the Chinese higher education classroom. Their practice reflects a form of "CLIL-ised EMI", where the content goal remains primary, but the teachers recognise the imperative to provide the necessary linguistic support, a role they adopt to ensure content is not compromised by a lack of proficiency. Therefore, the findings suggest that in practice, the role of language for these EMI teachers expands beyond a mere vehicular function to

include an active, supportive, and developmental dimension.

### **5.2.2 Promoting Intercultural Awareness and Empathy**

The second most significant reason that the participants thought that culture should be incorporated into their teaching was that there is potential to enable intercultural sensitivity. The necessity to cultivate intercultural sensitivity is supported by the fact that students with multicultural backgrounds are subjected to different perceptions, behaviours, and norms, which have a tendency to influence interpersonal relationships and attitudes. Cultural integration was cited by most of the respondents in this research as having played a significant role in equipping students to be empathetic, tolerant, and more effective communicators, which they need in today's globalised world. For instance, IP2 suggested that "When students are exposed to other cultures, they learn to value diversity and develop empathy, which is necessary for collaborating in harmony on international projects." IP9 also claimed that "Enabling intercultural awareness is crucial to equipping students to work in the globalised academic community." From such a view, intercultural awareness is an essential ingredient in the success of collaboration across global, diverse settings.

Additionally, as QP15 noted, "Cultural exposure allows students to talk to each other more respectfully, knowing where they stand and how cultures influence their own worldview." This perspective moves beyond a purely instrumental view of culture, framing it as a catalyst for affective development. The instructor's emphasis on empathy directly connects to Bennett's (2017) research on intercultural communication in global business environments, which emphasises the importance of cultivating empathy in intercultural learning. Bennett's study, which used qualitative and quantitative methods to explore professionals' experiences in multicultural teams, found that individuals with strong intercultural communication skills were more effective at building trust, reducing misunderstandings, and fostering cooperation within diverse teams. Similarly, many EMI instructors in this study expressed that cultural awareness enhances students' ability to communicate effectively, thereby facilitating smoother collaboration with classmates from diverse backgrounds.

Moreover, cultural integration fosters empathy and respect in intercultural situations, benefiting both learning and professional environments. IP6 of the present study expressed, "Our students go out on internships abroad a lot, and understanding of cultures is essential in making the best of those experiences. It helps them grasp the dynamic of diverse work settings

and to interact effectively with cross-cultural peers.” As an example, a study by Tsui et al. (1999) on Hong Kong’s EMI education highlighted the importance of English proficiency for professional communication, suggesting that EMI programmes may enhance students’ ability to navigate global professional spaces.

This research also suggests that if the students are taught to value and engage with cultural differences, they can deal with the problems of a globalised world more effectively. IP9 shared, “Intercultural awareness is not merely a process of learning the other cultures but of attaining an open attitude towards them.” This finding aligns with recent studies emphasising the critical role of openness in developing IA among students. For instance, Poort et al. (2021) found that cultural intelligence and the personality trait of openness are the strongest predictors of cognitive engagement in intercultural group work. Cultural intelligence, which involves the ability to adapt to diverse cultural contexts, can be developed through targeted training, such as intercultural communication workshops and reflective exercises, that enhance students’ awareness of cultural norms and practices. Similarly, while openness as a personality trait is relatively stable, it can be nurtured to some extent through educational strategies like exposure to diverse perspectives, collaborative learning activities, and guided discussions that encourage receptivity to new ideas and cultural differences. Poort et al.’s (2021) study, involving 846 students from universities in the Netherlands and Canada, revealed that students with higher levels of openness and cultural intelligence are more likely to engage cognitively in intercultural settings, facilitating the development of ICC. Similarly, Butkovic et al. (2024) examined the role of openness and cultural intelligence in students’ intention to study abroad. Their findings suggest that openness to experience significantly influences students’ cultural intelligence, which, in turn, affects their willingness to engage in international educational experiences. Moreover, a study by Malik et al. (2025) demonstrated a positive correlation between international mindedness and intercultural competence in prospective teachers. The research indicates that fostering an open attitude towards cultural differences enhances educators’ ability to interact effectively in diverse settings. These studies collectively stress the importance of cultivating openness in students to enhance their intercultural competence. The consistency between this study’s findings and existing literature highlights the necessity of integrating strategies that promote openness and cultural engagement within educational curricula.

Furthermore, according to the data presented in Section 4.2, integrating culture into EMI

programmes can lead to a more inclusive learning community. In the present study, several instructors pointed out that exposure to cultural diversity encourages inclusiveness and respect for each other among the students. As IP10 indicated, “In our classroom, cultural diversity is not only acknowledged but celebrated. Various students are invited to share their opinions, and this creates a rich, plural environment where everyone feels valued.” This is the opinion of Banks’ (2008) work, which considered that inclusive education has a crucial role to play in building social cohesion and preparing learners to collaborate within a multicultural society. Banks, in his research, looked at various models of education that incorporate multicultural elements into curricula and found that these models lead to increased students’ intercultural awareness and engagement.

### **5.2.3 Developing Critical Thinking and Global Citizenship**

Participants in the study identified cultural integration as essential for fostering problem-solving and critical thinking skills in EMI programmes. The importance of developing critical thinking and global responsibility through cultural exposure was recognised by many participants in this study. They emphasised that the knowledge of different cultural values and norms helps students critically examine major global concerns, such as socioeconomic inequalities, environmental sustainability, and political conflicts. For instance, IP7 explained, “When students are exposed to a range of cultural viewpoints, they start to think critically about the complexity of the world’s problems and that there are no simple answers to problems such as climate change and poverty.” Cultural integration, in this case, not only makes students more aware of the issues in the world but also turns them into individuals who care about, respond to, or take action on social issues. In the same way, IP4 also shared: “By learning about cultural histories and stories, students are being challenged to think outside current paradigms and create new solutions for difficult problems.”

IP4’s and IP7’s responses align with the literature stressing the role of cultural education in promoting critical thinking and global citizenship, the latter understood as the ability to engage responsibly and effectively in a diverse, interconnected world (UNESCO, 2015). In Trilling and Fadel’s (2009) study, critical thinking is among the skills students must master in order to cope with the increasingly complex and interconnected world. Their research, which surveyed educators from a diverse set of countries, found that incorporating multiple cultural perspectives into the curriculum promotes the learning of higher-level thinking skills, such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Trilling and Fadel (2009) believe that exposure to a

plurality of cultural perspectives causes students to challenge their own assumptions and beliefs so that they may become more critical thinkers about the world they inhabit. This echoes the views of those who took part in this study, many of whom contended that cultural integration helps students not only better understand the world's issues but also to respond critically to the world's contemporary problems.

Moreover, IP1 explained, "When students see problems through multiple cultural lenses, they are more likely to think outside of the box and help come up with sustainable solutions to global problems." The research of Kagan (2005) supports the role of cultural education in fostering critical thinking, as she explored how incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into education enhances problem-solving skills. Through interviews with educators and classroom observations, Kagan found that exposure to multiple perspectives encourages students to approach problems with greater nuance and multidimensional thinking. Her work argues that multicultural education prompts students to look beyond their own perspectives and consider a wider range of consequences for their actions. This is particularly vital in today's globalised world, where challenges such as climate change, migration, and economic inequalities demand collaborative, international solutions.

In addition, several respondents in the present study pointed out that cultural integration in education not only fosters critical thinking but also cultivates a sense of global responsibility among students. For instance, IP2 eloquently stated, "Teaching students to respect different cultures is important in fostering a sense of global collective responsibility, which is key in addressing issues like global warming and global conflicts." This perspective aligns with research on culture and global citizenship, which suggests that education plays a significant role in developing global dispositions, though it is one of many contributing factors. For example, Nussbaum's (2010) work argues that cultural education fosters social responsibility and awareness of global interdependence. Through philosophical analysis and discussions of educational practices, Nussbaum demonstrated that exposure to the humanities and cultural diversity in educational settings enhances students' capacities for critical thinking and cooperative action in addressing global challenges, such as climate change, by cultivating a deeper understanding of shared human values and interconnectedness. Similarly, a recent review by Goren and Yemini (2017) highlights that certain forms of global citizenship education, particularly those found in contexts like Canada and Europe, incorporate cultural and moral components. These findings suggest that cultural dimensions within global

citizenship education may contribute to students' awareness of and critical thinking about global issues.

Of particular interest is IP5's observation: "When students are presented with several political perspectives, they start questioning the current order and are more likely to critically examine possible solutions to world political issues." This statement underscores the impact of exposing students to diverse political viewpoints. Rather than merely acquiring knowledge about international political trends, students are encouraged to critically assess their own assumptions and engage with political ideas beyond their immediate context. This pedagogical approach aligns with the principles of global citizenship education, which emphasises critical thinking and reflexivity in understanding complex global issues. Recent studies corroborate this perspective. For instance, González-Valencia et al. (2022) found that while students often adopt a sense of social responsibility, they frequently lack the tools necessary for critical interpretation of social facts and problems. This highlights the importance of educational strategies that not only inform but also empower students to critically engage with political and cultural norms. Furthermore, Ferguson and Brett (2023) discuss how international institutions aim to foster global citizenship by encouraging students to develop intercultural understanding and critical awareness. Their research indicates that when students are exposed to a variety of cultural and political perspectives, they are better equipped to navigate and contribute to an interconnected world. Integrating cultural perspectives within EMI thus plays a pivotal role in cultivating students' critical sensitivity. This approach not only enhances their ability to comprehend global complexities but also fosters a deeper understanding of local contexts. By engaging with diverse viewpoints, students develop the capacity to question established norms and contribute thoughtfully to discussions on global and local issues.

In addition, the development of critical thinking and global citizenship via cultural integration falls in line with the concept of "global competence," a term widely discussed in contemporary educational theory. It is described by the OECD (2018) as knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviour that the learner needs in order to actively and effectively take part in and resolve complex world challenges. According to the OECD, global competence is needed so that learners are able to be actively engaged as global challenge actors, and cultural education plays a key role in achieving this competence. The OECD finding, based on student and teacher surveys across the world, appears to be supported by the perceptions in this study brought forward by teachers that cultural integration does not just make students better language

learners but also more dedicated and responsible world citizens.

#### **5.2.4 Facilitating Intercultural Communicative Competence and Professional Preparedness**

For students who aim to work in intercultural settings, the embedding of culture in EMI courses is seen as being vital to fostering their professional ability. The increasing globalisation of the working population has made intercultural communicative competence a prerequisite skill, particularly for students pursuing careers within multinational firms or for careers involving inter-border collaboration. One of the common themes in the responses of most of the participants in this study, especially from business-oriented fields, was the requirement to equip students with cultural knowledge beyond that of theory to include practical skills usable within working environments. Such skills include business etiquette, modes of communication, and negotiation techniques, which are largely culturally dependent. In particular, educators noted that students' ability to understand and manage cultural differences in the workplace is critical to their achievement of success in multicultural environments.

IP6 shared: "Being aware of professional culture norms, such as how business meetings are to be conducted, what respect means in different cultures, and negotiation skills, is critical for students to thrive in a global workplace." This highlights the fact that cultural integration in EMI is not just a pedagogical task but a professional necessity for students who anticipate international career progression. The double role of cultural integration serves teaching performance and preparing students for professional milieus where intercultural communication is the order of things. The findings of this study are consistent with broader literature, pointing to the growing importance of intercultural communicative competence as a cornerstone of professional education and career advancement in globalised professions. Deardorff (2006) claims that intercultural communicative competence is an imperative part of professional education in the modern interconnected world. Her cross-border comparison of employees and students from more than one country found that employees who had higher intercultural communicative competence were better equipped to cope with cultural diversity encountered at work, resulting in greater interaction and performance in multiculturally diverse teams. Taken together, these studies affirm the need to educate students for environments where intercultural communication is essential, validating the significance of integrating culture into language pedagogy for personal development and professional success.

This was reiterated by other participants of this study, who argued that cultural integration within EMI programmes can potentially make learners understand the expectations and behaviours of international colleagues, customers, and partners. As IP8 testified, “In the globalised world today, information on different professional communication styles, either in the form of email messages, meetings, or negotiations, prepares students to work with global teams and contribute significantly to interborder projects.” Agreeing with this assertion, Bennett (2017) reaffirmed that cultural awareness is critical to effective intercultural communication, particularly in professional settings. Bennett’s model, based on constructivist theory, illustrates that individuals with higher intercultural sensitivity, as they progress from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages, are better equipped to coordinate meaning across cultural contexts, enhancing their success in negotiations and intercultural collaborations.

Besides facilitating effective communication, incorporating culture in EMI programmes also equips learners with the right capability to deal with the complexities of global business protocols. Some interviewees reported that ignorance about intercultural business courtesy can lead to miscommunications, missed business chances, or, worst of all, inadvertently offending a person. For example, IP6 emphasised, “Business decorum such as how co-workers are being addressed, time discipline, and conventions of giving gifts vary greatly cross-culturally.” Teaching learners about these practices prevents them from making potential errors and succeeding in international business sectors. Such arguments have been supported by recent literature, such as Richards and Pun (2022), who explored intercultural communication in international business organisations. They examined how cultural differences impact workplace relationships and negotiation styles, concluding that individuals with intercultural sensitivity are best positioned to build trust and foster effective working partnerships in multinational business contexts. By incorporating cultural sensitivity into EMI, students not only learn to communicate effectively but also develop the skills to thrive in multicultural business environments.

Also, the greater utility of ICC in the work environment can best be realised in areas like international business, diplomacy, and worldwide marketing, where cultural sensitivity is most vital. As IP10 articulated, “For students who are entering international trade careers, it’s very important to learn how to master how to place proposals and negotiate contracts in a way that makes sense to other individuals.” This suggests the integration of culture into EMI programmes because it prepares students to handle difficult cultural settings in their

professional lives. This perspective aligns with the findings of Pusch (2004), who explored intercultural communicative competence and its impact on global career success. Pusch's research demonstrated that individuals trained in intercultural communication achieved greater success in international settings by effectively navigating the subtle cultural expectations influencing business decisions.

### **5.2.5 Section Summary**

This section responded to the research question: What do EMI instructors think of the roles of culture in EMI? Drawing on 56 returned questionnaires and 10 semi-structured interviews, it identifies a cluster of teacher beliefs regarding the roles of culture in EMI contexts. The findings indicate that most teachers consider cultural integration as vital for enhancing students' language capacity and contextual knowledge, holding the view that idiomatic knowledge, social convention knowledge, and contextual knowledge studies cannot be separated from proper communication. In addition, teachers emphasised that contact with other cultures enhances intercultural sensitisation and intercultural attitudes, enabling them to enjoy differences and cooperate globally. Finally, particularly in the working environment, instructors pointed out that integration of cultures strengthens ICC and workplace readiness, helping to empower learners with the skills for worldwide careers by training them in competencies like business manners and negotiation. Collectively, they suggest a meeting of minds over the various roles of cultural integration—improved language ability, creating understanding, improvement in critical thinking, and competitiveness in the workplace.

## **5.3 Cultural Integration in EMI Practices**

This section addresses the third research question: To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery? It considers some of the ways in which cultural conceptions of EMI teachers shape the instruction of courses with a focus on how cultural factors are integrated into pedagogy and curriculum. Based on 10 classroom observations and 10 follow-up stimulated recall interviews, the findings reveal a wide range of views regarding both the positive efforts by the teachers to incorporate cultural knowledge into instruction and the challenges they face when doing so. Instructors have stressed a balance between allowing culture to enhance the learning of languages without diverting attention from the fundamental academic objectives. Contextualised teaching methodologies, whereby the cultural content and the course objectives

are integrated, are also highlighted as essential to successful integration. This approach enables the instruction of both linguistic proficiency and intercultural communicative competence, which prepares learners to thrive in an interdependent, multicultural world.

### **5.3.1 Reflections on Cultural Integration Practices**

Findings of classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews with EMI teachers show high consistency of theoretical constructs of teachers' cultural integration and classroom pedagogical practices. While the teachers appear to have a clear commitment towards the integration of culture, this present research also identifies some constraints that limit successful implementation, including student resistance and the need for greater institutional support.

One of the practices embraced by teachers in integrating culture into EMI teaching was through guest speakers, as revealed by observations within the classrooms and elaborated by interview testimony. For instance, according to OP6, the guest speakers were overseas culture professionals who provided students with first-hand exposure to global cultural issues. These guest speakers were mostly industry practitioners who had done research in intercultural communication and whose practical experience bridged their theoretical concepts of culture to very real applications. OP6 added that having guest speakers opened students' sensitivity towards cultural practices and legitimised the use of intercultural sensitivity in a variety of different careers. Specifically, OP6 described how a guest speaker from an international nongovernmental organisation taught the importance of intercultural communication in aid work by drawing on examples of projects where cultural misunderstanding had frozen progress. Life experience, as was witnessed from OP6's lesson, enabled students to bridge the gap between classroom study and the cultural subtleties they would be facing in their working lives.

Similarly, OP7 highlighted the value of guest speakers in her EMI business communication course, noting, "Guest speakers really help make the connection between theory and practice." In her observed classroom practice, she invited a local business professional to discuss negotiation strategies, demonstrating how cultural factors, such as indirect communication styles observed in some Chinese business contexts, influence effective deal-making. As she explained, "This is not learning from textbooks; it's learning in action." This approach was evident when students engaged in a role-play activity facilitated by the guest speaker, applying culturally nuanced negotiation techniques, which reinforced the practical integration of cultural and disciplinary knowledge in the EMI setting. These participant accounts align with findings

in the broader literature on intercultural learning. Studies by Kramersch (1993) and Byram (2008), for instance, argue that student exposure to learned interlocutors offers a rich context for handling numerous views on cultures, beyond the scope of book-based instruction. They hold that such exposure not only allows for new acquisition but also inspires learners to question assumptions and biases and develop intercultural communicative competence. This ability is reinforced through daily discussion and life illustration, which was recognised by participants as being one of the strongest points of this approach.

As OP5 explained, “When a cultural expert talks directly to the students, it does shake their assumptions about other cultures. It’s a more customised learning experience.” The integration of cultural experts in EMI enhances the learning environment by providing a more immersive and culturally rich experience, as noted by Prabjandee and Nilpirom (2022). This approach supports a comprehensive understanding of culture, which is vital for students preparing to navigate complex, globalised professional settings. However, according to OP5, while guest speakers play a crucial role, it remains important that their contributions are framed within the broader context of the course’s learning objectives, ensuring that cultural integration is woven throughout the entire curriculum rather than being isolated to occasional events.

Consistent with the 10 interview participants, classroom observations in the present study indicate that cultural integration in EMI programmes varies across departments and programmes. OP1 stated that “some departments place more emphasis on cultural practice while others focus more on content-specific academic skills.” The difference is consistent with what other research on EMI programmes has established. For instance, Zuaro (2022) found that humanities and social sciences lecturers in EMI settings often emphasised language use and oral expression, which may facilitate the inclusion of cultural elements in their teaching, compared to their natural sciences peers who prioritised technical content. In Zuaro's (2022) study, lecturers in disciplines like art history and conservation highlighted the challenges of translating culturally specific concepts into English, while those in fields like biotechnologies or statistics reported less focus on cultural aspects, reflecting disciplinary differences in pedagogical approaches. Variations in disciplinary approaches to intercultural competence suggest that subjects like literature and social studies naturally embed cultural elements within their curricula, fostering intercultural communicative competence. In contrast, technical fields, such as engineering, mathematics, or computer science, prioritise subject-specific content, often viewing cultural integration as secondary (Deardorff, 2006). This disparity raises

questions about how universities can ensure intercultural competence across all disciplines, especially in a globalised world where graduates require such skills regardless of their field of study.

While the commitment to cultural integration is evident among some EMI instructors (OP5, OP6, and OP7), several challenges remain that hinder the full realisation of this objective, which include student resistance and teachers' lack of culture-related resources. One of the most frequently mentioned challenges was student resistance to the idea of cultural integration in language learning. For example, OP4 explained, "although EMI prioritises content learning through English, language learning is still a key part in our courses. Some students see language learning as something purely cognitive, focusing mainly on grammar and vocabulary, and are reluctant to engage with cultural topics." Some instructors noted that certain students were initially unaware of the significance of culture in language acquisition. These students may view cultural elements as peripheral to their goal of improving their language skills rather than as integral to effective communication. The integration of cultural experts in EMI enhances the learning environment by providing a more immersive and culturally rich experience, as noted by Wang and Pan (2022). This approach supports a comprehensive understanding of culture, which is vital for students preparing to navigate complex, globalised professional settings. The shift towards incorporating culture into language teaching requires not only adjustments in teaching methodologies but also changes in student attitudes towards language learning. As such, instructors often need to employ strategies that highlight the relevance of cultural integration to students' academic and professional success. For instance, OP6 remarked, "When students realise how cultural awareness impacts business communication, they will recognise its value." One approach discussed in the study was the use of culturally relevant case studies and practical examples, which demonstrated to students how cultural knowledge directly impacts communication in various fields, from business to international relations.

Another concern is that in the Chinese higher education context, EMI teachers reported challenges arising from a lack of culture-related resources, highlighting disparities in both teacher agency and institutional support. Teacher agency—defined as teachers' capacity to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and shape their teaching environment (Priestley et al., 2015)—is critical for culturally responsive EMI practice. Institutional support refers to the provision of structural, material, and developmental resources from the university to facilitate teachers' professional practice, such as training, time allocation,

curricular autonomy, and access to culturally relevant materials (Uehara & Kojima, 2021). Some EMI teachers in this study demonstrated strong personal motivation to incorporate cultural elements into their courses, but were hindered by the absence of targeted resources and formal training. For instance, OP2 voiced frustration over the lack of “formal training programmes focused on cultural sensitivity or intercultural communication competence for teachers,” indicating that their cultural integration efforts were largely dependent on personal initiative rather than institutional backing. Recent studies corroborate these findings. Dang et al. (2023) observed that Chinese EMI educators often demonstrate agentic behaviours, yet their pedagogical innovations are shaped—and often curtailed—by institutional constraints. In contrast, Western higher education institutions often assume a more significant level of teacher agency, encouraging instructors to independently locate, adapt, or create culturally relevant materials, despite sometimes limited formal professional development opportunities (Biesta et al., 2015).

Two potential reasons for this perceived lack of resources in Chinese higher education are proposed, both of which are pertinent to teacher agency. First, it could be an indication of a matter gaining access to suitable culture-related materials or training, especially for teachers whose subjects (for example, engineering, mathematics, or science) are unrelated to cultural studies. These subjects are more likely to focus on technical content than intercultural content, so teachers are less likely to be suitably prepared to find or create suitable resources independently. For example, an engineering teacher would struggle to find resources linking technical expertise to cultural heritage in the absence of directions or examples and exacerbated by extremely little prior experience with intercultural training. Second, the challenge exists as a result of weak teacher agency under instituted norms, where teachers are accustomed to being given pre-formatted material or predetermined curricula rather than creating their own. In the context of China’s EMI, where institutional policy emphasises content delivery and language skill development over cultural integration (Macaro et al., 2018), instructors like OP2 often feel constrained in their agency, expecting resources and preparation to be provided rather than independently developed. This contrasts with contexts in which teacher agency is more robust, where teachers are motivated—or required—to modify materials by themselves.

There are also broader EMI concerns of teaching where, institutionally, priorities will be more about scholarly content and language skills than encouraging ICC. OP2 illustrated the way in which such an imbalance will limit the ability of teachers to bridge theory and practice at a

cross-cultural level. For example, without cultural sensitivity training, an educator might hesitate to create exercises such as role-plays or case studies requiring subtle cultural expertise lest they make mistakes or go off-track. Chen et al. (2023) point out that Chinese tertiary-level EMI instructors face a “caught-between” scenario, navigating institutional policies that prioritise content delivery and language proficiency over cultural integration. They propose that teacher agency, supported by institutional measures like flexible bilingual policies or collaborative teaching frameworks, enables instructors to address these constraints. This tension underscores a broader challenge in EMI implementation, particularly in contexts where institutional policies undervalue cultural competence, yet student needs in a globalised educational landscape increasingly demand it.

In addition, the availability of multicultural resources to utilise pedagogically was also another significant limitation reported by EMI teachers, which further revealed the interconnection between resource availability and teacher agency in Chinese higher education. Even though some teachers were able to take advantage of guest speakers and teaching resources in an effort to enhance the quality of their lessons, others, like OP9, struggled with access to resources that mirror the diverse cultures needed to teach their students. OP8, who has been teaching EMI international relations courses, verbalised this frustration and stated, “It’s hard to find materials that reflect a lot of cultures. All too often, materials that we employ prioritise Western perspectives, and that makes it such that students see only a glimmer of the diversity of the world.” This reliance upon Western-based material is due to a deeper issue: the overarching lack of highly detailed, culturally diverse materials to be easily translated or adapted for curricula by teachers.

OP9’s utterance, for instance, suggests that available resources—often imported or modelled on Western systems—are not able to reflect a multicultural spectrum, and thus teachers cannot enhance the global imagination of the students. This may be due to structural and pragmatic reasons: no localised, multicultural content developed with a view towards EMI classrooms and inadequate training to facilitate creating their own. In Chinese higher education, EMI teachers often operate within institutional or departmental frameworks that mandate a standardised curriculum to varying degrees, especially in programmes aligned with national internationalisation policies (Hu & Lei, 2014). These frameworks influence teaching practices, shaping the delivery of EMI courses to meet institutional goals for global competitiveness. In comparison to situations where teacher agency is assumed and teachers are expected to create

tailor-made materials, Chinese EMI teachers might rely on institutionally available textbooks or curricula, which lean towards linguistic ability and subject knowledge rather than cultural diversity (Macaro et al., 2018). Uehara and Kojima (2021) emphasise the need for tailored faculty development (FD) programmes and institutional support to address the challenges faced by EMI teachers, particularly in Japan. Their empirical study highlights that prioritised FD programmes, such as training in teaching styles and communication skills, can enhance teachers' pedagogical and linguistic competencies. However, their study does not specifically address the development of teaching materials or suggest that teacher agency through institutional support enables the creation or adaptation of materials. In the Chinese EMI context, where resource allocation is often top-down, implementing such targeted FD programmes and institutional support could empower teachers to better meet students' needs, though the study does not explicitly discuss integrating cultural materials or addressing intercultural learning requirements.

In short, findings highlight that EMI instructors, generally, identify cultural integration as an indispensable aspect of learning a language for both linguistic skills and intercultural communicative competence. According to the interviews and observations, teachers' statements document a high degree of theoretical background in cultural integration, which they are applying pragmatically in their instruction. However, even with their zeal, student resistance and infrastructural weaknesses still persist. Most teachers emphasise that cultural information is critical in communication, complementing prevailing communicative competence theories. They push for incorporating culture into the syllabus to allow students to successfully cope with a variety of social and professional situations. One strategy most commonly embraced is hosting guests, especially experts in culture, who share direct experiences in intercultural communication. These events facilitate the interlinking between theory and practice, exposing the students to practical experience with the differences in culture in the professional world. However, difficulties remain. Based on participants' perspectives, students resist cultural incorporation initially, thinking of language study as a technical skill rather than a socially and culturally embedded activity. Teachers also report a lack of institutional support, particularly in the form of formal training initiatives and diverse materials for teaching. These difficulties demand pedagogical invention and institutional investment in culturally responsive curricula and professional development initiatives. Lastly, the findings highlight the need for a more structured and well-documented process of cultural integration in EMI to facilitate students' acquisition of intercultural communicative competence to succeed

in internationalised higher education and working environments.

Additionally, one of the major findings of this research is the significant degree of agreement between what instructors declare to believe about the cultural integration and what they in fact do in their classes. It is quite a different situation from what is reported in most publications about the implementation of the educational policy, where a "belief-practice gap" is quoted as the main issue, and the teachers' work is not consistent with their stated philosophies. Although such gaps are extensively represented, teacher cognition research also intimates that firmly held beliefs can be significant in directing classroom behaviour (for example, Borg, 2017). The consistency in this study can thus be seen as a main point, indicating the strong feeling of teacher agency and intentionality in this group of Chinese EMI instructors. A good reason is that they might be very committed teachers who willingly took the EMI positions and have thought deeply about their teaching methods. As a result, their practice is not simply the technical part of the curriculum but a conscious performance of their well-thought-out pedagogical and cultural beliefs.

### **5.3.2 The Role of University Policies in Shaping Cultural Practices**

The findings in the current study indicate a significant mismatch between stated priority and practice towards intercultural sensitivity and diversity in Chinese university EMI policies. Specifically, nearly 50% of respondents to the questionnaire (N=28) agreed that their universities prioritised intercultural sensitivity and diversity in EMI policies highly, but the realisation of this priority in practice was extremely uneven among departments and programmes. This gap does not simply reflect a division in which the other 50% of respondents reported low priority—rather, it reflects a more general issue: even where policies are nominally prioritising cultural integration, their execution is ad hoc, often hostage to departmental budgets, staff initiative, or programmatic focus. This disparity, therefore, underlines the need to dissect the complex interrelationship among institutional policies, teachers' practice, and student outcomes, as standard policy intention is not a precursor to similar cultural integration in EMI classrooms. University policies' role in shaping pedagogical practices in EMI programmes has garnered increasing research attention. Galloway et al. (2020) primarily examine the implementation and conceptualisation of EMI policies in Chinese and Japanese universities, highlighting contextual constraints and stakeholder perceptions.

The present study also illustrates that cultural embedding within EMI programmes is mostly

shaped by institution-level policies, which are discussed in Section 4.3. Most of the EMI instructors participating in this study acknowledge the need to develop intercultural communicative competence among students, but its realisation varies greatly. An example of this kind of research is that of McCarty (2011), who explores the role of ethnographic methods in understanding language policy processes in various educational contexts, primarily in North America. The edited volume focuses on how language policies are negotiated and enacted in multilingual settings with an emphasis on Indigenous and minority language education. While cultural diversity is addressed, the work does not specifically examine general institutional policies in higher education for promoting cultural diversity and inclusion infused into curricula and campus life, but rather, highlights localised language policy practices and their sociocultural implications. This is in contrast to the participants of this present research, working in the Chinese EMI setting, where the policies will rather target linguistic capacity and subject learning, as examined in Section 4.3. Although there are policies acknowledging intercultural competence, the range of accomplishment of cultural integration by classroom practice also differs. Some universities have very specific policies calling for cultural content in EMI curricula—for example, with a stipulation for cross-cultural case studies or modules of intercultural communication competence—while others issue very general guidelines and leave it to individual teachers' discretion to carry out.

Conversely, the universities operating in less culturally diverse environments, such as most in China, will be most likely to have no policy with specific goals on cultural integration since they have linguistic or academic goals with culture as an optional add-on. For instance, a monolingual inland Chinese provincial university can emphasise English proficiency in the interests of global competitiveness under the Ministry of Education's (2010) *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* without explaining specifically how cultural dimensions will be incorporated. Similarly, an EMI programme in a technical field like engineering can focus on discipline-specific terminology and content delivery and leave cultural discussions to optional seminars or out-of-class activities, if at all. This discrepancy aligns with Huang and Fang's (2022) observation that Chinese EMI policies often lack an explicit focus on cultural integration, reflecting institutional intent that is not consistently translated into classroom practice. These examples show how disciplinary and local contexts shape policy agendas to make the case for more detailed institutional support to facilitate cultural integration to find commensurability with intercultural aims to which universities are committed.

Additionally, the outcomes of this research reflect broader patterns in policy perception of EMI, as 28 of the questionnaire participants indicated that the universities included intercultural sensitivity in EMI policy, while others reported no such explicit EMI policy. Several teachers expressed only a moderate level of concern with culture in their university policies, which could suggest that such policies will tend to focus on overall inclusivity rather than making a conscious inclusion of cultural practices in pedagogy. However, this interpretation is not absolute because it could also be that participants did not notice or misread existing policies—a scenario that cannot be ruled out because this study is solely dependent on teachers’ opinions and perceptions. On the other hand, some other instructors observed a stifling of cultural issues in university policy and observed that ICC was not consistently emphasised in official policy pronouncements or staff development programmes. Such policy inconsistency could be a product of different institutional priorities and budgets, since there may be linguistic or academic objectives prioritised at the cost of cultural integration if resources are inadequate or strategic visions diverge. This inconsistency aligns with Kumaravadivelu’s (2012) critique of conventional language education, which often fails to foster transformative practices that address cultural complexities in global contexts. His KARDS model (Knowing, Analysing, Recognising, Doing, and Seeing) emphasises the need for teachers to critically analyse and adapt to diverse educational settings, highlighting a gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality. These findings underscore the importance of further exploring how teacher education can bridge policy intentions with practical implementation, moving beyond superficial acknowledgement of cultural integration.

Furthermore, the present study reveals notable challenges in policy communication and teacher training within EMI programmes. The majority of participants, such as OP7, emphasised that “even when intercultural sensitivity is highlighted in university policies, there is often uncertainty about how these policies are to be implemented in practice.” This was consistent with the study by Fenton-Smith et al. (2017), which explores broader challenges in EMI implementation, including policy ambiguities and pedagogical inconsistencies across Asia-Pacific contexts. They suggest that while universities in the Asia-Pacific region adopt EMI policies, these often lack detailed frameworks or institutional support for teachers, leading to varied interpretations and challenges in pedagogical implementation, including cultural integration. This gap contributes to inconsistencies in how teachers interpret and enact cultural elements in EMI classrooms, leaving them uncertain about effective strategies for cultural

integration.

In addition, a recurring reference is also found for further systematic training in intercultural communicative competence for teachers. Interview participants, such as OP8, suggested a lack of space for professional development concerning cultural integration, with some, such as OP6, suggesting training in intercultural sensitivity and teaching internationally could greatly aid in making cultural integration with teaching. Deroey (2023) emphasises the importance of continuous professional development for EMI instructors, highlighting the need for training that addresses pedagogical and intercultural communication skills. Without adequate training, instructors may struggle to manage cultural diversity in the classroom or effectively incorporate intercultural materials, potentially undermining the development of students' intercultural communicative competence. In this sense, he suggests that EMI training programmes should include sustained support, such as workshops and resources focused on intercultural pedagogy, to equip instructors with the skills needed to navigate multicultural classrooms and integrate cultural content effectively, thereby supporting universities' goals of fostering intercultural communicative competence.

What is also noted is that some of the participants from this study identify the need for institutional commitment to cultural integration in EMI programmes (see Section 4.3). Universities must move beyond committing to diversity and inclusivity in general terms and actually take action to ensure that cultural practices are incorporated into the curriculum in a meaningful manner. This involves rewriting not just policies but also ensuring that they are communicated well to employees, providing training and professional development assistance, and establishing a facilitating environment for learning cultures. Akıncıoğlu (2023) highlights the importance of institutional commitment to cultural diversity in EMI settings, suggesting that universities fostering multicultural environments through comprehensive training, diverse course materials, and platforms for staff collaboration are better positioned to integrate cultural elements into their EMI courses. This approach enhances the development of students' intercultural communicative competence.

In sum, the imbalance between culture being placed high in university EMI policy reflects an even larger propensity within higher education, where institution-level commitment to cultural integration is irregular and influenced by available resources and departmental agendas. While there are institutions that have embraced intercultural sensitivity at policy and process levels,

others are lagging in embracing such ideals on a grand scale. To arrest the trend, institutions must state and spread their cultural policies, invest in staff development, and develop an institutional culture that is friendly to cultural integration. This will enable them to give all of their students, regardless of their major, the cultural sensitivity and awareness that they require in order to succeed in an increasingly globalised world.

### **5.3.3 Balanced Approach to Cultural Integration**

According to classroom observation and stimulated recall interview data, the extent and manner of cultural integration in EMI curricula vary across disciplines, with instructors prioritising a balanced approach to ensure culture supplements rather than overshadows subject knowledge. Some instructors employ a balanced approach to integrate cultural content strategically, aligning with course objectives and student needs while maintaining English as the medium for delivering subject knowledge. These practices, grounded in recent literature, illustrate how culture enhances learning without compromising disciplinary goals.

In an observed EMI English literature course, OP2 wove cultural content into textual analysis to deepen students' understanding without shifting focus from literary skills. Classroom observations showed students comparing Confucian collectivism in *The Analects* with individualism in *Jane Eyre*, discussing how cultural values shape narrative themes. The instructor reflected, "Cultural contexts enrich textual analysis, but I keep literary interpretation central." Byram (2021) emphasises that intercultural communicative competence in humanities courses should foster critical engagement with texts while aligning with disciplinary goals. To align with these perspectives, cultural integration in EMI literature courses should be strategically implemented to support critical analysis and intercultural competence while maintaining a focus on disciplinary content.

This emphasis on balance extends to the EMI business and management course, where OP3 used practical simulations to integrate cultural content while prioritising professional skills. Observations revealed students role-playing a negotiation between Chinese and Japanese firms, addressing cultural differences in consensus-driven versus hierarchical decision-making. The instructor noted, "This builds business communication skills while teaching cultural nuances, keeping management principles first." Kim (2020) advocates for integrating cultural and linguistic learning in language pedagogy to engage the whole student, emphasising that cultural simulations can foster intercultural communication without compromising content learning. In

EMI business courses, such as simulations can enhance workplace-relevant intercultural competencies by providing contextualised activities that align with disciplinary objectives, ensuring a balanced approach to subject content and cultural understanding.

Similarly, in the EMI international relations course, OP8 employed discipline-specific case studies to integrate cultural content, ensuring alignment with political analysis objectives. For instance, students examined the 2021 U.S.–China climate talks, focusing on how high-context Chinese diplomacy contrasted with low-context American approaches, influencing negotiation outcomes. The instructor noted, “Case studies make cultural dynamics relevant to diplomacy, but political theories remain the focus.” This pedagogical approach aligns with findings by Rey-Paba et al. (2024), who emphasise that incorporating culturally relevant case studies in EMI courses enhances students’ intercultural competence while maintaining disciplinary rigour. Their study indicates that such integration fosters a deeper understanding of subject matter and promotes critical thinking skills essential for global citizenship. Furthermore, Shea et al. (2024) discuss the role of instructors in transnational EMI programmes as cultural mediators. They argue that instructors who consciously position themselves to bridge cultural differences can facilitate more effective learning environments, enabling students to navigate complex international contexts with greater sensitivity and insight. These studies collectively suggest that the strategic use of culturally relevant case studies in EMI courses not only enriches the learning experience but also equips students with the necessary skills to engage thoughtfully with global issues. By maintaining a balance between cultural integration and disciplinary focus, educators can foster environments that promote both academic excellence and intercultural competence.

In contrast, OP1 in the EMI engineering course adopted minimal cultural contextualisation to support technical learning without overshadowing it. Observations showed the instructor discussing cultural influences on risk management in Chinese versus European engineering standards during a bridge design lesson. The instructor reflected, “Brief cultural examples make global standards relatable, but engineering principles stay central.” This pedagogical approach aligns with findings by Chu and Takahashi (2024), who highlight that integrating innovative methods, such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), Problem-Posing Education (PPE), and Project-Based Learning (PBL), in EMI courses significantly enhances students’ confidence, knowledge, and skills in using English for communicative purposes. Their study shows that a carefully designed EMI curriculum, incorporating these

methods, effectively promotes engagement with cultural content, such as Japanese society and culture, while supporting content learning. Furthermore, Charoenpornsook and Thumvichit (2025) investigate the challenges encountered by engineering students in EMI programmes, identifying linguistic, cultural, structural, and institutional barriers. Their findings emphasise that students employ problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies to address these challenges. To enhance EMI effectiveness, the study recommends tailored teaching methods, student orientations, and increased interaction between Thai and international students to foster a supportive learning environment while ensuring technical content comprehension is not compromised.

These varied practices across disciplines demonstrate a commitment to balancing cultural integration with disciplinary objectives, ensuring English serves as the medium for subject delivery while culture enhances, rather than overshadows, learning. By tailoring cultural content to course goals—through textual analysis, simulations, case studies, or minimal contextualisation—instructors support academic and professional outcomes, as reinforced by recent EMI scholarship.

### **5.3.4 Tailored Teaching Strategies and Reflection**

To achieve greater integration of culture into EMI instruction, instructors adopted a range of specialist pedagogical practices. Requirements to balance integrating culture with the goals of each course were a common thread among the responses of participants. Instructors emphasised that not only should cultural elements enhance the language acquisition process, but also the overall learning process. One of the participants mentioned, “Integrating culture has to be done in a way where there is a focus laid on certain learning goals of the course. For instance, in an academic writing course, we can use examples pertaining to culture in order to set the writing tone, but still focus primarily on improving writing skills” (OP3). This is consistent with the larger pedagogic premise that culture needs to be rich and relevant to students’ immediate needs for short-course requirements, supplementing linguistic ability without compromising the foundational justification of the course. This account also resonates with the investigation of EMI instructors in Chinese higher education by Huang and Fang (2022), who conceptualised culture as a pedagogical “bridge” to mediate between local and global epistemologies. Rather than viewing culture as a peripheral or ornamental element, instructors in their study framed cultural content as a means to foster intercultural understanding without compromising subject rigour. The convergence between these perspectives points to a broader pedagogical imperative

in EMI settings: cultural integration must be both purposeful and pedagogically relevant.

Some of the participants offered particular practices for making cultural integration meaningful as well as responsive to the course goals. For example, in language and grammar-intensive courses, instructors tend to incorporate cultural elements through authentic materials, such as important cultural texts, case studies, or media content. This way, apart from exposing the students to the use of language within different cultural milieus, they also bring out the use of language with functional purposes, as seen in practice. This activity helps teachers engage the cultural materials directly with target skills and, hence, build up the connection between language and culture. As OP8 described, “We use real materials that are rich with cultural references, like news articles or advertisements, so that students can observe how language is used to get a sense of the cultural sense of those words or phrases.” The use of authentic materials in language instruction is also supported by scholars such as Gilmore (2007, 2019), who opines that authentic texts expose learners to real language use, offering them a glimpse into cultural settings and pragmatic language awareness. Such an approach, wherein teachers utilise texts pertaining to the culture of the students—like headlines of newspapers or advertisements on billboards—is proof towards such thinking. Reading this kind of content teaches learners not just vocabulary but, more importantly, cultural meaning, a fact that is demonstrated through the OP8’s mention of quotes about cultural references in media material.

Aside from the selection of the appropriate cultural content, teachers also pointed out different teaching approaches according to diverse learning styles and objectives. For instance, in more discussion- or interactive classes, cultural topics would be dealt with through group discussions, debates, or role-plays. The students would become actively involved with the topic and critically think about cultural variation. As OP2 mentioned, “In courses where communication and fluency are crucial, we can include exercises in which students role-play cultural scenarios, showing them how different cultures communicate within different social contexts.” These activities develop not just linguistic ability but also greater intercultural communication awareness. The use of interactive exercises like role-plays and debates in studying cultural matters is in line with the CLT precepts of learning through genuine communication and actual situations. CLT seeks the development of both linguistic competence and communicative competence for facilitating learners’ ability to operate with language in social contexts, as promoted by Littlewood (2004). The emphasis on role-playing cultural scenarios, elicited by OP2, directly assists in achieving this goal by providing students with a means of practising

cultural communication in real-life contextualised scenarios. This practice elicits from the students the fluent use of language as well as an awareness of intercultural communication, such as social norms, gestures, and situation-limited use of language.

Interestingly, the majority of the teachers in the research asserted that reflection can help improve their practice of cultural integration. Their understanding of reflective teaching was being able to think about how well they were doing with their approaches in terms of cultural integration, and to indicate any underlying bias in their teaching. As OP10 explained, “Reflection is key to making sure that I’m not unintentionally favouring one culture over another, and that my teaching is inclusive of all perspectives.” This form of self-reflection is not only about improving cultural sensitivity but also about ensuring that the classroom remains an equitable space for students from diverse backgrounds. By reflective analysis of their own teaching, teachers are able to explain their pedagogy and ensure that the cultural material they introduce into the classroom is proportioned appropriately, sensitive to all class cultures, and usable. Schön (1983) has used the idea of reflective practice as a process for critically observing one’s own teaching practices and making adjustments in accordance with self-judgment. Through reflecting on practice, educators are more likely to know how they tend to unconsciously favour one culture over the other and, hence, become inclusive and balanced in pedagogies.

The role of reflective practice in teaching, especially that of cultural integration, has been accentuated through diverse research studies conducted in EMI and language instruction. Boud et al. (2013) have set up reflection as a powerful pedagogic tool to enhance teaching, arguing that reflection enables teachers to critically examine assumptions, pedagogy, classroom, and student-student and student-teaching interaction. They emphasise that reflective practice is a formal process of reviewing experience, looking at feelings and actions, and rethinking strategy towards future practice—a methodology that is especially worth having in EMI settings where teachers have to deal with advanced intercultural interactions. In EMI settings, where students are instructed by educators from different cultures, self-assessment becomes inevitable in identifying potential biases, governing pedagogic processes, and building ICC. Later research into reflection in EMI further illuminates its significance. For instance, Macaro et al. (2018), in their systematic review of higher education EMI, highlight that teachers’ reflective practices are not explicitly discussed in the reviewed studies as a means to address linguistic and cultural heterogeneity in classrooms. However, they note that teachers’ beliefs and attitudes towards

EMI, as explored in various studies, suggest a need for professional development to better manage diverse classroom dynamics and balance disciplinary and intercultural objectives. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that reflective practice in EMI not only decreases cultural biases but also increases teachers' ability to create inclusive, culturally responsive classrooms.

In cultural integration, reflection also plays a part in resolving future issues that could be experienced in terms of cultural biases. Some of the participants were concerned about inadvertently perpetuating stereotypes or presenting one side of specific cultures. As OP6 asserted, "Reflection helps me recognise when I might be showing a limited or biased view of a culture. I make an effort to expose my students to a range of perspectives so that they don't get the wrong or limited idea about the cultures that we study." This emphasis on the promotion of cultural diversity and accuracy in teaching illustrates a broader commitment to the cultivation of intercultural understanding and empathy in the classroom. This is supported by the work of Nieto (2018), who argues that teaching practices must be examined critically to ensure that they do not reinforce stereotypes or reductionist representations of cultures. In cultural education, stereotypes will usually lead to misunderstandings and reinforce negative assumptions since they can encroach on the potential for students to develop a deep understanding of cultural differences.

It is important to note that applying cultural content to EMI teaching requires teachers to be sensitive to learners' varying levels of cultural knowledge and exposure. Teachers claimed that reflection allows them to critically analyse students' culture in more depth and subsequently adjust pedagogical practices. OP4 described:

I think about how much my students already understand about culture and attempt to meet them where they are knowledge-wise. To some students, the cultural references will be completely foreign, so I spend more time setting context. For others, they have enough to already know about the subject, and thus, I tend to rush less.

This customised approach to cultural inclusion has teachers present cultural content as feasible and applicable by adapting to learners' different cultures. This general idea of adapting content to students' prior knowledge and culture is also associated with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development theory, where learning will be optimal when at the students' level of knowledge and new concepts are presented with adequate scaffolding. In EMI, this implies teachers are attuned to different students' prior knowledge entering class and adapt the rate and

intensity of cultural content accordingly.

In addition to fostering individual teaching practices, several participants emphasised the importance of cultivating a reflexive approach with students to enhance ICC. OP2 articulated, “I want my students to think through their own cultural assumptions and biases so that they will be more open-minded and more capable of speaking with people from other backgrounds.” This reflexive approach encourages students to critically examine and challenge their own cultural norms and assumptions, fostering critical thinking skills essential for effective intercultural interactions. By engaging in reflexive practice, students gain a deeper understanding of how their cultural backgrounds shape their behaviours and communication styles, a key factor in successful cross-cultural engagement. This approach aligns closely with Byram’s (1997) model for developing ICC, which emphasises not only acquiring knowledge about other cultures but also critically questioning one’s own cultural assumptions. Through reflexive exercises, teachers guide students toward a nuanced awareness of cultural influences on communication and behaviour, enabling them to navigate intercultural interactions with greater sensitivity and effectiveness.

### **5.3.5 Section Summary**

Section 5.3 explored the research question: To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery? It addressed the extent and ways their understandings shape pedagogical practices. Findings from classroom observations and interviews reveal teachers’ commitment to embedding cultural knowledge to enhance linguistic proficiency and ICC, though challenges like student resistance and limited institutional support persist. Teachers employ strategies like inviting guest speakers—industry professionals who share real-world intercultural experiences—to bridge theoretical and practical cultural understanding, fostering students’ sensitivity to global cultural dynamics. However, student resistance, often rooted in a focus on grammar and vocabulary over cultural learning, and a lack of culture-related resources, hinders effective integration. In the Chinese EMI context, institutional policies often prioritise linguistic and academic goals over cultural competence, limiting teacher agency due to insufficient training and resources. Despite some policy support for intercultural sensitivity, implementation varies with disparities across departments and disciplines. Teachers adopt a balanced approach, tailoring cultural content to align with course objectives, using methods like cultural case studies, simulations, and textual analysis to ensure culture enhances rather

than overshadows disciplinary learning. Reflexive practices are emphasised with teachers reflecting on their methods to avoid cultural biases and encouraging students to critically examine their own cultural assumptions. This aligns with Byram's (1997) ICC model, promoting nuanced cultural awareness. Overall, while teachers demonstrate strong theoretical and practical commitment to cultural integration, systemic barriers necessitate enhanced institutional support, targeted training, and diverse resources to fully realise ICC in EMI settings, preparing students for globalised professional environments.

## **5.4 Chapter Summary**

This chapter synthesised and critically examined 56 questionnaire responses, 10 semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and stimulated recall interviews to respond to three research questions regarding the EMI lecturers' perceptions of cultural integration in Chinese universities: (1) In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture? (2) What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI? (3) To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery? The discussion took a path from conceptualisations to practice, revealing numerous instructor perspectives and placing them within the context of current literature.

Section 5.1 presented teachers' rich understandings of culture and uncovered five understandings: lived experience (for example, routine, food), social norms and rituals (for example, greeting), national identity and values (for example, collectivism and individualism), a negotiated space (for example, co-constructed in interactions), and academic disciplines (for example, embedded in subject content). Such acknowledgement looked to both on-ground realities as well as theoretical overviews (for example, Baker, 2015; Byram, 2008; Hall, 1980), highlighted cultural complexity, and referred to teachers' identities as cultural brokers dealing with power relationships as well as global–local contestations.

Section 5.2 reported the grounds why teachers believed culture was to be included and enumerated four general grounds: it developed language competence and contextual knowledge (for example, the understanding of idioms), intercultural sensitivity and tolerance (for example, respect for diversity), critical thinking and global citizenship (for example, discussion of global topics), and ICC and professional training (for example, business etiquette).

Supported by scholars like Bennett (2009), Deardorff (2006), and Kramsch (1993), these findings highlighted the role of culture in complementing language acquisition and preparing students for globalised contexts, though with differentiated approaches from explicit to implicit integration.

Section 5.3 examined how these conceptualisations were implemented in practice and identified a commitment towards embedding culture through practices like guest speakers, realia, and reflective pedagogy. However, constraints—student opposition, resource shortage, and incoherent university policies—prevented full realisation. Teachers laboured toward an equilibrium strategy, modified cultural material to course goals (for example, writing proficiency) and student needs, and took biases into account to reach inclusivity. Institutional backing was unbalanced, with some policies assigning priority to ICC but with no practical support, which needed further training and resources (see, for example, Macaro et al., 2018).

On the whole, the chapter placed culture as a core element of EMI instruction at the forefront of interest for EMI teachers, harmonised theory and practice activities, and contributed to EMI research by demonstrating how cultural integration enriched linguistic and intercultural knowledge. It also uncovered gaps—such as institutional inconsistency and resource scarcity—that had to be bridged to completely prepare students for a multicultural world.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion**

This chapter concludes the research covered in this thesis, which has examined the embedding of culture in EMI programmes in Chinese higher education. The research explored EMI teachers' perceptions and practices, and the challenges involved in incorporating cultural content into lessons. The research addressed the following research questions:

- 1) In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture?
- 2) What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI?
- 3) To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery?

This chapter begins by summarising the overall findings of the study (Section 6.1), which provide some indication of the different ways in which EMI teachers conceptualise and integrate cultural content into their classes. Section 6.2 outlines the potential contributions and applied outcomes of the study, such as how the findings of the study can be used to inform EMI programme development and the ways in which they can contribute to the improvement of training and support for EMI teachers. Section 6.3 outlines the limitations of the present research and suggestions for further research within this context, namely the need to examine students' perspectives and to research cultural integration in other non-Western EMI programme contexts. The chapter concludes with my last reflective remarks on undertaking this research and the broader consequences of the research for EMI practice and higher education cultural integration (Section 6.4).

### **6.1 Summary of the Findings**

The goal of this research was to find out where culture fits into Chinese higher education EMI programmes by exploring the three pivotal research questions mentioned above. The findings, based on data gathered from a qualitative research design, are derived from online questionnaires with 56 teachers of EMI, as well as semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and stimulated recall interviews conducted with 10 participants. The combined findings provide information on the teachers' conception of culture and how they handle integrating it into pedagogy, providing a broad landscape of cultural integration in the context of EMI.

The research also provided recommendations to tertiary institutions that provide EMI courses. Most Chinese universities have adopted EMI as a way of internationalising their institutions, valuing its ability to make them competitive at the global level and attract international students. However, integrating culture into their courses is not mandatory or supported by their institutions. Although technical skills and language are emphasised, cultural incorporation in EMI programmes is not extensive yet (Hu, 2019). Such an omission can hinder students' ability to operate within global settings since intercultural communicative competence is part of the fabric of modern higher education (Macaro et al., 2018). Moreover, universities may not equip teachers with adequate training to address cultural as well as language problems in EMI environments, which can affect the quality of instruction (Wang et al., 2025). Therefore, it is important to understand the contribution of cultural integration in EMI to improve the learning experience and achievement of students in China's fast-growing, internationally focused higher education system.

Overall, this research aimed to make a useful addition to the higher education practice and theory of EMI, particularly in China. Through its focus on the often-neglected element of cultural integration, this research makes an addition to the existing literature on EMI, which has mostly concentrated on language capacity and cognitive functioning in the past. Relying on intercultural communication theory and the "third place" theory developed by Kramsch (1993), the study developed a fresh insight into how the complexities of addressing cultural elements are managed by instructors in EMI contexts. This research also exposed the dilemma for teachers in China, where proficiency in the language overshadowed the role of cultural inclusion. To elaborate, this study also provided reflections on the specific advantages of integrating culture and language in EMI programmes in China and globally, emphasising that only a balanced model incorporating both elements can be effectively adopted. As its contribution to exploring the research questions, the study aimed to promote students' intercultural communicative competence as well as EMI's overall efficacy and enhance China's ongoing experience with higher education internationalisation.

### **6.1.1 EMI Instructors' Understandings of Culture**

This subsection responds to the first research question: In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture? Based on data from 56 questionnaires and 10 semi-structured interviews (see Section 4.1), the findings are that

Chinese teachers of EMI have varied and complex ideas about culture, ranging from material traditions and mundane routines to intangible concepts of national identity, social norms, and hybridity. These various conceptualisations, presented in Chapter 5.1 in five subcategories—culture as daily experience, social conventions and rituals, national identity and common values, a constructed and negotiated space, and an object of academic debate—mirror the dynamism and richness of culture. These differences affect how teachers engage cultural integration in EMI instruction, with evidence to suggest significant effects on their teaching practice, as seen in their self-reported efforts to connect culture to everyday life, balance social expectations, and develop intercultural communicative competence (see Section 4.3.1).

Participants offered a range of definitions of culture that capture its negotiability and complexity. Some EMI instructors loosely defined culture as a set of shared beliefs and practices, and others connected it with material objects like dress, food, and customs. There were also some instructors who identified its social and intellectual underpinnings, defining culture as an evolving system of values, behaviour and worldview. This divergence accords with the distinction between “Big C” culture, such as institutionalised high culture like literature and history, and “small c” culture, such as everyday habits, customary practices, and social habits (Hinkel, 1999; Kramsch, 1993; Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993).

Interestingly, some teachers acknowledged the difficulty of theorising culture monolithically. According to them, culture is shaped by social structures and personal experiences, so it is difficult to pin down in one definition. This concurs with the broader sociological definition of culture as being socially constructed and dynamic, rather than fixed (Geertz, 1973). The findings show that the EMI teachers in general perceive culture as a multifaceted entity that is not only embedded in national identity but also shaped by historical, social, and educational contexts.

Different educators pointed out that culture is embedded in everyday life. This point agrees with Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical view of culture, which suggests that social norms and collective rituals organise interaction among individuals as well as between students and the teacher within the classroom. In addition, Hall’s (1976) low-context and high-context cultures theory was reflected in some of the comments where instructors highlighted the implicit means by which cultural knowledge influences patterns of communication. This divergence is significant in EMI classrooms where students must be able to operate with differing cultural

assumptions in academic discussion.

Another common perception among participants was that culture is a system of social expectations and norms of behaviour. This is similar to Geertz's (1973) conception of culture as a system of inherited perceptions embodied in symbolic forms, by which individuals communicate and sustain one another's behaviour. One of the significant concerns to be resolved by instructors was that students from blended backgrounds might have problems coping with the implied social conventions of EMI classes. This is particularly relevant in EMI contexts where students will likely undergo a shift from vertical forms of education to more talk-oriented, interaction-rich learning environments.

Several instructors linked their definition of culture to national identity, which was emphasised for its role in determining common values. This would align with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory, where collectivist cultures, like China, where social harmony and group unity are emphasised, are contrasted with more individualist cultures where personal freedom and assertiveness are valued. In addition, this cultural sensitivity has implications for pedagogy in EMI instruction. Participants described how they used lessons in cultural attitudes in their own practice, such as providing case studies of different countries so that students can observe how business practices are affected by cultural values. These examples show the significance of incorporating national cultural considerations in EMI classrooms.

One last developing theme in teachers' reflections of culture was its hybrid and dynamic character. Some participants observed that culture is not fixed but continually constructed in interaction. This echoes Kramsch's (1993) notion of the "third place", where language learners construct new cultural spaces that syncretically combine elements of their home and target cultures. This perception sounded particularly familiar to EMI teachers who found their classrooms to be arenas of cultural negotiation. It is also held by Byram's (2008) model of intercultural communicative competence, with its emphasis on helping the students to navigate and mediate between different frames of culture.

Overall, Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory can be seen as a helpful heuristic to grasp the general tendencies of different nations at a high level, it remains vital to be cautious when applying these in a multicultural EMI classroom. Modern scholars, like Holliday (2021) and Gurney and Demuro (2024), are very critical of such models, as they might facilitate the

creation of essentialism that simplifies complex individuals into unchangeable national stereotypes. This research reflects the same tension as the results indicate that while the participants frequently employed these overarching categories, their classroom realities revealed more flexible and negotiated identities, which correspond to Kramsch's (1993) idea of the "third place" concept, where cultural significances co-exist rather than being predetermined. Thus, it is an absolutely necessary step for the instructors to take on a more nuanced pedagogical approach, which is more than just the static dichotomies, but rather exploring the dynamic and hybrid nature of culture in depth as it is lived and experienced in the classroom.

The findings reveal the different ways in which EMI teachers conceptualise culture. Some use a reference to material artefacts of culture and national identity, while others make reference to social norms, communication, and the dynamism of culture. These conceptualisations have significant pedagogical consequences for EMI teachers since there is a necessity to balance cultural integration with content and language instruction. By conceptualising culture as a dynamic and context-sensitive entity, EMI teachers can perhaps develop more inclusive and culturally sensitive learning spaces, for instance, by using multifarious case studies, promoting intercultural discourse, or adapting pedagogic strategies based on different academic conventions. However, there are problems, particularly in students' adaptation to new cultural norms and institutional support for cultural integration. The following two subsections will explore further how these assumptions affect teachers' pedagogical behaviours and how they teach culture in EMI classrooms.

### **6.1.2 The Views on Culture Being Integrated into EMI Practices**

This subsection responds to the second research question: What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI? The study acknowledges that there are multiple EMI teachers' views regarding the incorporation of culture into instruction, reflecting a range of pedagogical orientations and disciplinary agendas (see Section 4.2). Although there was an overall agreement on the need for cultural integration, teachers had differing perceptions associated with the most appropriate kinds of integration of cultural content in EMI instruction.

One of the strategies was the integration of cultural content into subject teaching. Most teachers believed that cultural elements would be easily included in classroom conversations, lectures, and case studies. For example, teachers of business classes emphasised the need to cope with

international business etiquette, negotiation styles, and corporate cultures, while history teachers stressed the need to incorporate cultural heritage and traditions in historical narratives. This is in line with the content-based theory of cultural integration, which holds that the content of culture is a core component of disciplinary learning (Deardorff, 2006).

Another strategy involved using authentic materials and experiential learning to expose students to diverse cultural perspectives. Several instructors reported incorporating documentaries, films, and literature from different cultural contexts and inviting guest lecturers to encourage critical discussions. For instance, using case studies from different regions can help students understand how cultural differences influence business decisions and leadership styles. This method aligns with Kramsch's (1993) emphasis on symbolic competence, which highlights the importance of engaging learners in meaning-making processes that transcend linguistic knowledge.

A third approach targeted interactive and experiential learning exercises, such as role-plays, debates, and intercultural exchange schemes. In the observation classes, participants created role-play exercises to simulate global business negotiations, in which students could exercise language capacity and cultural adaptability. Furthermore, structured classroom discussions on global issues can also help students reflect on cultural differences and develop intercultural awareness. This observation confirms Ang and Van Dyne's (2015) findings that experiential learning promotes increased intercultural communicative competence through active confrontation with cultural differences by students.

Nevertheless, the study also revealed cultural integration problems, particularly in terms of institutional support and teacher training. Some of the teachers complained of poor professional development workshops and culturally responsive teaching materials. According to the participants, there is very little professional development training on how to integrate culture into EMI courses in a systematic way; the teachers have to figure it out for themselves. This supports a study by Macaro et al. (2018), which also suggests the need for formal training courses for instructors in cultural pedagogy.

Overall, the study shows there is no single standard to incorporate culture in EMI teaching despite the acknowledgement of the significance of cultural integration on the part of EMI instructors. Research necessitates a proportional strategy based on the balance between cultural

integration and teaching goals to enable students to acquire linguistic proficiency as well as intercultural communicative competency. Though findings point out deficits in cultural integration programmes, further research needs to be carried out to determine the most effective practices. Yet, universities may consider instituting special training modules, culturally appropriate curriculum design, and institutional policies in favour of efficient cultural incorporation in EMI programmes as viable means of resolving such challenges.

### **6.1.3 Extent and Ways in Which Cultural Understandings Are Reflected in EMI Practices**

This subsection responds to the third research question: To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery? The study demonstrates how the cultural worldviews of EMI teachers are described in teaching at various levels, shaped by institutional policies, discipline imperatives, and individual pedagogies (see Section 4.3). While some instructors explicitly embedded cultural conversations within courses, others incorporated culture as an everyday or ancillary task in courses.

One of the more self-evident means by which culture was incorporated was through course content. Teachers selected textbooks and supplementary readings that included global perspectives or highlighted cultural variations in disciplinary knowledge. Besides materials, EMI teachers also facilitated cultural discussions within classroom conversations. Impromptu discussions were cited by most participants to talk about cultural differences that naturally emerged in lessons. However, some teachers mentioned that it was challenging to sustain these discussions because students with poor English proficiency tended to focus on grasping content rather than venturing into talking about culture.

Institutional support is an important determinant of the degree of cultural integration. Whereas some universities have policy directions actively promoting intercultural sensitivity, others provide little structural encouragement for cultural integration in EMI curricula. Approximately half the participants reported that while their universities encouraged cultural interaction, no formal training programmes or resources were provided to help teachers carry out cultural pedagogy.

Despite these challenges, the study found that those teachers who valued cultural integration

employed a variety of pedagogical strategies, including role-plays, multimedia resources, and project-based learning, to build students' intercultural communicative competence. Yet, the findings also suggest that without institutional support and guidelines, cultural integration is uneven and largely dependent on individual instructor initiative. While addressing these gaps requires universities to implement structured training programmes, provide access to culturally diverse teaching resources, and incorporate explicit policies that put intercultural communicative competence at the centre of EMI teaching, more research is needed to identify the effectiveness of different approaches to incorporating cultural content before such programmes can be meaningfully created and enacted.

## **6.2 Contributions and Implications of the Research**

This study makes a contribution to EMI in Chinese higher education and specifically to the field of embedding culture into pedagogic practice. The findings are presented as recommendations to different stakeholders, such as education policymakers, EMI teachers, university managers, and researchers. Section 6.3 discusses the contribution of the research to these stakeholders and its potential influence on Chinese EMI higher education, theoretical conceptualisations of cultural integration in EMI, and practical examples in EMI.

### **6.2.1 Context**

The present study contributes to Chinese EMI higher education research scholarship by expanding the contextual breadth of EMI research through its investigation of bringing cultural content into pedagogy. Although EMI is increasingly a regular pedagogical practice in present-day China, the place of culture in EMI pedagogy has been underexplored, with limited research, such as that by Huang and Fang (2022), beginning to address this area. Previous research on EMI has primarily focused on language proficiency and academic subject teaching, with limited attention to the broader role of cultural integration, which often implicitly shapes effective learning in EMI contexts, such as developing students' ICC, understanding cultural nuances in academic communication, and addressing cultural influences in course content and classroom interactions. In contrast, this research has emphasised Chinese university teachers' perceptions and implementation of culture in classroom practice, prioritising their own voice and practice over institutional control or theoretical explication. By doing so, it fills a basic theory–practice gap in EMI by contributing to a deeper understanding of its cultural dimensions.

## **6.2.2 Pedagogical Implications**

### ***Enhancing Cultural Scaffolding in EMI***

Educational implications of the study emphasise cultural scaffolding in EMI. The study indicates the most important strategies used by lecturers to integrate cultural considerations in teaching, for example, through the use of case studies, comparative discussions, and authentic materials. These are the strategies that, as observed in the findings, appear to assist students in enhancing their cultural understanding and critical thinking. Against this background, the present research highlights the fact that EMI programmes must institute professional development programmes in cultural integration with the purpose of offering instructors ways to manage cultural diversity within their classes. More specifically, institutions must offer special training in incorporating cultural content into subject matter contexts. In this way, EMI programmes can encourage a respectful and inclusive learning community that values diversity.

### ***Professional Development for EMI Instructors***

One of the discoveries of this research is the lack of systematic professional development for EMI teachers, especially in terms of cultural content integration. Most teachers indicated that they did not receive adequate training in this respect, which corroborates the findings of previous studies and indicates an issue in the practical implementation of cultural integration measures. However, because of the qualitative nature of this study, further research is needed to assess the overall degree of this phenomenon. Based on these findings, it seems essential that universities offer general professional development plans aimed at enhancing instructors' intercultural communicative ability, subject matter language skills, and pedagogic approaches to cultural integration. Such projects should include models of teacher development that align with the linguistic and cultural nature of EMI, as dictated by teacher education and intercultural communication scholarship (Cummings, 2017).

### ***Institutional Support for Cultural Integration***

The study also reveals the lack of institutional support for cultural integration in EMI classrooms. Although there are some examples of institutional support for cultural interaction, what is clear is the lack of specific policies or supportive mechanisms for teachers to this end. This result is consistent with current literature that demands institutional mechanisms for cultural integration in EMI (Meyer, 2016). Universities are recommended to develop guidelines and infrastructure for facilitating the implementation of cultural content in EMI curricula. Moreover, the promotion of collaboration among EMI teachers through professional

communities or mentoring programmes would also facilitate the exchange of best practices and establish a more collegial teaching community. This aligns with recommendations from earlier research for collaborative pedagogy strategies to promote successful EMI implementation (Kirkpatrick, 2018).

### ***Developing Culturally Inclusive EMI Materials***

Another important finding in this thesis is the lack of culturally sensitive EMI textbooks (see Section 5.3.1). Teachers in EMI contexts predominantly use Western-produced textbooks, which often address the cultures of the students they are written for, such as Chinese learners, but tend to downplay these cultures by presenting them in simplified, stereotypical, or marginalised ways, often prioritising Western perspectives and neglecting the richness and complexity of local cultural identities and practices. Such findings are on par with advocating for the design of more diversity-focused teaching textbooks reflecting a broad range of cultures. The implementation of diversified and culturally sound resources is pivotal to engaging the learner in a quality learning process (Elemam & Saide, 2023). Academic publishers should attach significant importance to developing EMI content that takes global, local, and indigenous cultures into account to foster an enhanced, inclusive, global-aware learning process.

In short, the current study highlights the importance of cultural integration in EMI classrooms and stresses the need for more systematic institutional support to improve EMI teaching. By filling the gaps established in terms of professional development, institutional systems, and culturally responsive materials, the current study provides a foundation for improving EMI pedagogy. It encourages an integrated EMI model outside linguistic proficiency and academic content that focuses on the applicability of intercultural communicative competence. This research is among the new literature on EMI and offers practical insight into theory and practice in higher education with the ultimate goal of developing student readiness for international scholarly and professional environments.

### **6.3 Research Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research**

This study provides valuable contributions to the embedding of culture in EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, but there are some limitations that need to be considered. Since it is a qualitative study with a relatively small number of participants in interviews and classroom

observations, the findings are context-bound and are more likely to be of greater comparability or reliability than generalisability. The questionnaire data were also only collected from educators at just a handful of institutions, and thus, chances are the perceptions presented do not represent all of the experiences throughout different institutions and areas of study. Despite these limitations, the study yields detailed contextual information that allows transferability to similar educational settings. Using data from multiple sources allowed me to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

Several research avenues could further illuminate the intricate interplay of language, culture, and pedagogy in university settings. Future studies will have to build upon the present research to explore a variety of important concerns. First of all, it could be helpful to explore students' experiences in EMI programmes in terms of how they feel and respond to cultural integration in learning environments. In accordance with Hu's (2009) recommendation, the presence of culture as a determinant of learning among students in EMI contexts is central to establishing students' learning and involvement with content taught in a foreign language. Research that analyses students' perceptions of cultural incorporation can provide greater awareness of the efficiency of cultural determinants in EMI and the way the determinants affect students' academic performance and intercultural communicative competence.

Moreover, research in the future could investigate the role of local culture in adding to the content and pedagogy of EMI courses. While most EMI literature concerns the importance of international academic standards, Hu (2009) suggests that one's own local cultural context must be considered by teachers in designing EMI programmes. Understanding how teachers try to reconcile international academic norms with local cultural values could reveal the steps they take to make their teaching more relevant and meaningful to students. This would assist in shedding light on how local culture is facilitated to be effectively integrated into EMI courses without compromising international education standards.

Additionally, longitudinal studies tracing the evolution of EMI instructors' practices over time could yield valuable data on how cultural integration approaches change and adapt to evolving education policies, curriculum changes, and shifting student needs. Such studies would enlighten an understanding of how EMI instructors' teaching practices change as they gain experience and as institutional priorities shift in line with international trends in higher education (Macaro et al., 2018).

Furthermore, future research could investigate how variations in discipline impact cultural integration in EMI programmes. The embedding of culture has been proven to be discipline-specific, and the discipline of study will tend to shape the extent to which cultural elements can be incorporated and how these elements are manifested across various fields of study (Dearden, 2014). For example, the humanities offer more for the negotiation of culture than areas such as engineering or natural sciences. Knowing how culture is embedded variably in different disciplines can enable cultural integration interventions to be discipline-specific in some fields of study.

Other than these, a critical area for future research lies in exploring how cultural content can be systematically integrated into the pedagogical practices of individual EMI teachers. Currently, cultural integration in EMI courses appears to be ad hoc, heavily reliant on individual teachers' approaches and personal interests. Future studies could investigate best practices for embedding cultural elements in a structured and systematic manner, examining the role of teacher agency across diverse disciplines and institutional contexts. This will help to have more actionable suggestions for teachers and institutions attempting to conduct cultural integration more effectively.

Finally, it would be interesting to consider how institutional support can facilitate cultural integration in EMI. This could involve examining how universities encourage or discourage their instructors' attempts at cultural integration, and how successful professional development workshops are in assisting with the creation of more intercultural awareness and pedagogy in the EMI context. This is a topic that has received relatively little attention in the current literature, and a discussion of the institutional drivers for effective cultural integration would prove very useful for policymakers and educationalists alike.

In conclusion, further research across these areas would attempt to clarify our understanding of how cultural matters influence EMI teaching practice and how cultural inclusion can be elaborated to the benefit of both students and teachers. It would provide valuable input into the broader consequences of EMI for higher education in non-English-speaking contexts and help to pioneer more culturally enlightened and globally aware practices in education.

## 6.4 Final Remarks

Conducting this research has been an academic and personal journey. Being an EMI teacher and researcher, my own experiences attuned me to the complex interplay of pedagogy, culture, and language in the university classroom. Whereas I started from scratch in understanding how culture is conceived in the EMI setting as an EMI history teacher, the outcomes of this research have changed my own perspective regarding the pragmatic matters of cultural embedding in real-life classroom contexts. I have learned that successful EMI teaching is not only a question of linguistic ability but also of intercultural flexibility and receptiveness.

Throughout the research, I have witnessed dedication on the part of EMI teachers to making learning spaces more culturally sensitive amid institutional and pedagogical constraints. Their readiness to tackle cultural issues, even at times of inadequate training and funding, has supported my conviction that EMI has the potential to bridge cultural divisions and equip students for international learning and working environments. Nonetheless, this research also discovered the necessity for further institutional support, policy clarity, and systematic professional development programmes to ensure that the embedding of cultural content in EMI is not left to individual initiatives.

In the future, I hope that this study will be part of the discussion on how EMI programmes can be enhanced to serve the interests of both teachers and learners. Cultural inclusion is not an afterthought but a pedagogical necessity of EMI. As I continue my professional and academic life, I commit to creating more inclusive and culturally responsive EMI practices with the conviction that language learning is best when it results not only in language proficiency but also in expanded subject knowledge, intercultural understanding, and positive engagement with the world.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Questionnaire Participant Demographic Information

No.	Age	EMI Teaching Years	Subject	Overseas Professional Development
1.	20-29	6-10	History	Overseas PhD
2.	20-29	0-5	Music	Master's in the US
3.	20-29	0-5	History	MA in the UK
4.	20-29	0-5	Business and Management	PhD in Australia
5.	20-29	0-5	International Business	Visiting Scholar in the US for one month
6.	20-29	0-5	Accounting and Finance	MPhil in the UK
7.	20-29	0-5	Ancient History	No
8.	20-29	0-5	World History	PhD in the UK
9.	20-29	0-5	World History	PhD in Canada
10.	20-29	0-5	Computer Science	International Conference
11.	20-29	0-5	English Literature	PhD in the US
12.	20-29	6-10	Education	Visiting Scholar in the UK 10
13.	20-29	0-5	Economics	PhD in the US 8
14.	20-29	6-10	German Studies	PhD in Germany
15.	20-29	0-5	International Education	Exchange Program in the US, for half a year
16.	20-29	0-5	International Education	Master's in the US
17.	20-29	0-5	Academic Paper Writing	No
18.	20-29	0-5	Engineering	No
19.	20-29	0-5	International Management	PhD in New Zealand
20.	20-29	6-10	Language, Culture and Communication	PhD in Australia
21.	30-39	11-20	International Law	PhD in Italy
22.	30-39	11-20	Sociology	Only took the EMI teaching training in China
23.	30-39	6-10	Mathematics	Teacher Education

				courses before teaching EMI
24.	30-39	6-10	International Law	PhD in Australia
25.	30-39	6-10	Communication	Master's in the UK
26.	30-39	11-20	Music	Online English courses 3
27.	30-39	11-20	International Journalism	PhD in the US
28.	30-39	11-20	Media Psychology	Online Media Courses (Coursera)
29.	30-39	6-10	Pre-School Education	PhD from Abroad
30.	30-39	6-10	Higher Education	No
31.	30-39	6-10	Higher Education	An online education research program
32.	30-39	11-20	Sociology	Exchange Program in the UK
33.	30-39	11-20	Social Work	No
34.	30-39	11-20	Administrative Management	No
35.	30-39	11-20	Social Work	Master's in the UK
36.	30-39	11-20	International Business	Professional training at a UK university
37.	40-49	20+	International Business	PhD in France
38.	40-49	11-20	International Business	Taking an online Business Communication course in English provided by a US University
39.	40-49	6-10	History of Chinese Literature	No
40.	40-49	6-10	Chinese Studies	Continuous professional development form
41.	40-49	11-20	Political Economy	PhD in France
42.	40-49	11-20	International Finance	PhD in the UK
43.	40-49	6-10	Political Economy	PhD in Hong Kong
44.	40-49	11-20	Mathematics	PhD in Singapore
45.	40-49	11-20	Physics	Exchanging Program in the US

46.	40-49	11-20	World History	Master's in Hong Kong
47.	40-49	6-10	Common Law	PhD in Italy
48.	40-49	11-20	Physics	Training in leading a research team consisting of international students
49.	40-49	6-10	International Relations	Master in Australia
50.	40-49	11-20	International Relations	PhD in Hong Kong
51.	50+	11-20	International Development	Exchange Program in Finland
52.	50+	11-20	British Literature	PhD in the UK
53.	50+	20+	Chinese Language and Literature	MA in Hong Kong (C+E instruction)
54.	50+	20+	English Literature	Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA) in the UK
55.	50+	11-20	Educational Management	Visiting Scholar in Malaysia
56.	50+	11-20	Ancient Chinese Literature	International Conference

## Appendix B. Online Questionnaires

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. It should take you approximately 20 minutes to finish. Please read the accompanying Participant Information Sheet before proceeding, which may be found via this link (Participant Information Sheet). This describes what you must do to participate and how the information you supply will be handled and utilised.

By selecting the first option below, you agree to participate in the study on the following conditions:

1. You have been told about the study and the kind of questions included.
2. You may withdraw from the research by failing to complete the online replies.
3. Only de-identified data will be utilised for analytical and archival reasons.

**Yes, I consent (Responses are necessary to proceed).**

**No, I do not wish to proceed (You will exit the questionnaire).**

1. Age (tick as appropriate)

20-29 years old

30-39 years old

40-49 years old

50+ years old

2. How many years have you taught EMI courses?

0-5 years

6-10 years

11-20 years

More than 20 years

3. Which department do you work in? Please specify:

.....

4. What EMI courses do you teach? Please specify:

.....

5. How many hours do you currently teach EMI courses per week? Please specify:

.....

6. Have you ever attended any foreign countries to receive English or subject-based

professional development?

No

Yes. If yes, please state where and for how long:

.....

7. What is your teaching goal for your course as an EMI teacher? Please specify:

.....

8. Please briefly describe how you perceive culture in EMI programmes. Please specify:

.....

9. To what degree do you think culture should be covered when teaching content courses in English?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

Please give reasons for your answer:

.....

10. What kind of culture do you think is appropriate to be integrated into EMI programmes?

American culture

British culture

Chinese culture

Multiculture

Other. Please specify: .....

Please give reasons for your answer:

.....

11. To what degree do you think the current EMI policies at your university highlight the significance of culture?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

Please give reasons for your answer:

.....

12. Any further comments on integrating culture into EMI classes?

.....

13. Please provide your name and contact details if you are willing to participate in a short interview. (Participation is optional)

Name: .....

Workplace: .....

Email: .....

Phone Number: .....

## Appendix C. Invitation Letter

Xi Zhou  
School of Education,  
University of Waikato,  
Gate 1, Knighton Road,  
Hamilton, 3240

Date:

Re: Invitation to Participate in a Doctoral Research Study

Dear (teacher),

First and foremost, please allow me to introduce myself. I am Xi Zhou, an international student currently enrolled in the PhD programme at the University of Waikato's School of Education. As a new EMI teacher (I taught history in English for a few years in my native country of China), I have always been interested in incorporating culture into EMI classes. As a result, the title of the research project I am working on is *Incorporating Culture into English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) Teaching: An Exploration of EMI Teachers in Chinese Higher Education*.

I am glad to welcome you to participate in my PhD research project, which will look into the perceptions and behaviours of EMI teachers regarding integrating culture. Your participation in this study, as well as your comments as an experienced teacher in the EMI classroom, would be greatly welcomed.

The Participant Information Sheet offers further study information. It will assist you in determining whether or not to join. It describes why I am doing the study, what your participation requires, the potential benefits and risks to you, and what happens once the study is over. If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the online questionnaire (link: xxx), which should take you no more than ten minutes. If you want to participate in the interviews and classroom observations with stimulated recall interviews, please also fill out the attached Participant Consent Form.

Many thanks for your kind help in advance!

Kind regards,  
Xi Zhou

## Appendix D. Participant Information Sheet



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

**Te Kura Toi Tangata School of Education**

### Participant Information Sheet

**Study Title:** Incorporating Culture into English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) Teaching:  
An Exploration of EMI Teachers in Chinese Higher Education

**Researcher:** Xi Zhou (xz352@students.waikato.ac.nz)

**Supervisors:** Dr Laura Gurney (laura.gurney@waikato.ac.nz)

Dr Ian Bruce (ian.bruce@waikato.ac.nz)

Dr Yi Wang (wang.yi@wintec.ac.nz)

#### 1. What is the purpose of the study?

The goals of this study are to explore present EMI instructors' perceptions and practices of integrating culture in Chinese higher education.

More specifically, the following are the concrete objectives:

- 1) To shed light on EMI instructors' understanding of what culture means in the context of EMI instruction.
- 2) To comprehend how EMI instructors see and define their culturally integrated activities.
- 3) To investigate the extent to which current EMI teaching techniques include culture instruction.

#### Research Questions

The overarching research questions to be addressed in this study are:

- 1) *In EMI programmes in Chinese higher education, what are the EMI instructors' understandings of culture?*
- 2) *What do they think of the roles of culture in EMI?*
- 3) *To what extent and in what ways are their understandings reflected in their practices in relation to incorporating culture in their EMI course delivery?*

## **2. What will my participation in the study involve?**

If you agree to participate, you will be responsible for the following:

- 1) A pre-data collecting meeting to address questions about the research and set up classroom observations. I would also like to talk about the observation schedule and my role in your learning and teaching. This will happen outside of school hours, at a convenient time and place. You may also have the conversation via voice, video, or email if you want.
- 2) Two 45-60-minute-long sets of individual interviews (pre- and post-observations). The interviews are intended to learn about your history as well as to explore your ideas on culture and your experiences in this sector. This will take place outside of school hours, at a convenient time and location for you. Furthermore, if you choose, I would be happy to offer information about the interviews with you in advance, such as the themes/topics/questions.
- 3) One-lesson classroom observations (around two hours). The observations will be scheduled on days that work best for you. I would take notes on your EMI teaching techniques throughout my visit. As we will discuss in our initial meeting, you have full control over the length of time I spend in your courses, the number of classroom observations, and the stimulated recall interviews.

Notes:

- The transcripts of the pre-observation interviews, stimulated recall interviews, and comments will be emailed to you for viewing and/or editing. This ensures that they accurately reflect your intended meaning.
- I humbly request that all pre-observation and stimulated recollection interviews be audiotaped. However, you may request that the recording be turned off during the interviews.
- If you do not return your transcripts or speak with me within fourteen days, your permission for the information to be part of the data for analysis will be assumed.
- The procedures listed above are planned to span one year, commencing on 1 March 2023 and concluding on 1 March 2024.

## **3. What are the possible benefits and risks of this study?**

Possible benefits:

- As a participant in this research project, you will have the opportunity to exchange and reflect on your EMI teaching practices with a professional who is interested in EMI.

Accordingly, it will be a good opportunity for professional development.

Possible risks:

- In this study, you will tell your stories and share your life experiences. To keep your identity hidden and anonymous, pseudonyms will be utilised. To protect your identity, your name and/or other potentially identifying information will not be published. While we will make every attempt to keep your identity confidential, this cannot be guaranteed.

#### **4. What happens after the study, or if I change my mind?**

- Participation is entirely voluntary. You have the freedom to refuse to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable, and you have the right to terminate the interviews/classroom observations/post-observation talks at any time. You can also ask for the recording device to be turned off at any moment.
- You also have the right to withdraw from the interview at any moment before the final transcript is confirmed, as well as to withdraw or change any material from the transcripts and generated narratives within fourteen days after obtaining the aforementioned documents.

#### **Findings**

- I plan to publish the findings of the investigation in the local and international EMI literature. Individuals or schools will not be identified in any such publications. Once you have participated in the study, the findings will take some time to be finalised, and I will tell you of any findings and publications by email. After the study, an email containing a one-page summary of the research findings will be sent out.
- The final thesis report will be published online at the University of Waikato. The findings will be used in scholarly articles as well as conference presentations.

#### **5. Who do I contact for more information or if I have concerns?**

If you have any questions concerning this work, please email me (the researcher) at [xz352@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:xz352@students.waikato.ac.nz). If you have any questions or concerns concerning the study that cannot be handled by speaking with me, please contact my research supervisor, Dr Laura Gurney ([laura.gurney@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:laura.gurney@waikato.ac.nz)).

Thank you for your consideration of our invitation and request.

*This research project was approved by the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Ethics Committee on 10 October 2022; Approval number: FEDU060/22.*

## Appendix E. Participant Consent Form



[A completed copy of this form should be retained by both the researcher and the participant.]

**Project title:** Incorporating Culture into English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) Teaching:  
An Exploration of EMI Teachers in Chinese Higher Education

**Researcher:** Xi Zhou

**Name of participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Kindly tick the box to indicate that you have read and agreed to the terms described in this consent form.**

- I agree to participate in this study.
- I agree to participate in the interviews at a suitable time and location.
- I agree with the researcher's presence for classroom observations and the stimulated recall interviews.
- I have received a copy of the *Participant Information Sheet* describing the research project. Any questions that I have, relating to the research, have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time.
- I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary. I understand that I can, without reason, withdraw from the study until the final interview transcript is verified. I understand that I can withdraw or amend any information from the transcripts within fourteen (14) days of receiving the transcripts. If I do not return the transcripts or speak with the researcher within fourteen days, my permission for the information to be part of the data for analysis will be assumed.
- I agree to have the pre-observation interviews and stimulated recall interviews audio-recorded.
- I understand that I do not have to answer questions unless I am happy to talk about the topic. I can stop the interviews/observations/ stimulated recall interviews at any time and ask

to have the recording device turned off at any time.

I understand that when I sign this consent form, I will retain ownership of my interview, but I give consent for the researcher to use the data collected for the research outlined in the Information Sheet.

I understand that while the researcher will not identify the school and me in any presentations or publications reporting the research, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

I understand that this research project was approved by the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Ethics Committee on 10 October 2022; Approval number: FEDU060/22, and Dr Laura Gurney may be contacted should there be any concerns about the conduct of the project.

Participant:	_____	Researcher:	Xi Zhou
Signature:	_____	Signature:	_____
Date:	_____	Date:	_____
Contact Details:	_____	Contact Details:	(xz352@students.waikato. ac.nz)

## **Appendix F. Semi-Structured Interview Schedule**

The questions in this schedule were designed to be open-ended to align with the study's interpretivist paradigm. Broad questions, such as 'What are the characteristics of your current students?', were intentionally framed to allow participants to define what they perceived as the most salient factors influencing their teaching context, rather than imposing predefined categories on their experiences. This approach aimed to elicit rich, participant-led narratives about their perceptions and practices of cultural integration.

### **Pre-interview Preparation:**

- Set the interview atmosphere by making the participant feel at ease and comfortable.
- Thank the participant for coming and taking the time to complete this interview.
- Request permission to install a recording device and microphone, and explain why. (Purpose: To liberate me from taking notes throughout the talk so that I can concentrate on what you are saying.)
- Set up the recording device and microphone and run a test recording.
- Request permission to videotape the whole interview session.
- Introduce the aim of the interview and describe its structure to the participants.
- Allow for questioning.

### **Introduction to the Participants:**

- In this section of the interview, I would like to hear about your personal and professional experiences. This will help me get to know you better, and if you like, you may ask me about mine as well.
- To get the formalities out of the way, I am curious about your life experiences and perspectives. As a result, there are no correct or incorrect responses. Please let me know if you see anything that needs improvement throughout the interview.
- Depending on how long we chat, this interview should last no more than 60 minutes.
- If you are uncomfortable answering specific questions, please let me know, and I will gladly skip them.
- I would also like to point out that this interview is entirely optional, and you may drop out

at any moment for any (unspecified) reason. You can also choose to withdraw part or all of your data.

- Everything you say is anonymised, and your identity and university confidentiality are protected. That implies you can select a fictitious name for yourself. A pseudonym will also be used for your organisation.

### **Background Questions:**

1. Could you tell me about yourself?
  - Which department are you working in?
  - How long have you been teaching EMI courses?
  - What are the names of the EMI courses you are teaching?
  - What are the characteristics of your current students?
  - Do you have any overseas study/visit/work experiences?
2. What are some of the rough/ challenging moments in teaching that you have experienced?
3. What motivates you to keep going?
4. What are your aspirations for your students?

### **Theory Questions:**

1. How would you define culture?
2. How do you describe the relationship between culture and language?
3. What kind of culture do you think the EMI students need?
4. What do you think students need to know and be able to do to become interculturally communicative?
5. Could you describe your beliefs about culture integration in EMI courses?
6. What are some of the culture integration strategies that you engage in?
7. What guides your cultural integration? (for example, your theoretical knowledge gained during teacher education, the school curriculum)
8. Have you heard of the intercultural approach? If yes, what do you know/understand about the intercultural approach?

### **Practice Questions:**

1. Could you share some examples of your cultural integration in your lessons?
  - What is/are the learning objective(s)/goal(s) of the lesson?

- What activities did you do with the students?
  - What materials/resources did you use for that lesson?
  - Where did you source the materials/resources?
  - Did you or your students engage in digital technologies with internet access in this lesson?
  - What are some struggles during the process?
2. What sort of support do you receive to aid the culture integration?
  3. To what extent do you think you are meeting/supporting the cultural learning needs of all your students?
  4. How does your cultural integration relate to students' lives at home and abroad?

**Influence Questions:**

1. What factors influenced/ are influencing your culture integration practices/ approaches in the classroom? (professional development, school policies, colleagues)
2. How do you know the EMI policies related to culture in your universities?
3. How would you say the EMI policies have impacted your culture integration?
4. Looking back over your teaching years, how have your approaches to culture integration changed?

**Implication Questions:**

1. What are your views about EMI in Chinese higher education?
2. What do you think of the function of EMI in Chinese higher education?
3. Do you have any suggestions for the future development of EMI in Chinese higher education?
4. Is there anything else you would like to bring up or ask about before we finish the interview?

**Note Form:**

<b>Interview Date</b>	
<b>Interview Location</b>	
<b>Interview Time and Length</b>	
<b>Key Synopsis</b>	
<b>Further Investigation</b>	
<b>Interview Transcript</b>	
<b>Corrections</b>	



## Appendix G. Observation Schedule

<b>Date</b>		<b>Course</b>	
<b>Teacher</b>		<b>University</b>	

<b>Areas</b>	<b>Observations</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Instructions</b>		
<b>Activities</b>		
<b>Materials</b>		
<b>Strategies</b>		
<b>Interactions</b>		
<b>Outcomes</b>		
<b>During stimulated recall interviews, the following questions need to be asked:</b>		

### **Procedure for Stimulated Recall Interviews following Classroom Observation:**

- The Observation Schedule above was used to take systematic field notes during each classroom observation (approximately two hours). These notes, along with audio recordings of the lesson and the instructor's PowerPoint slides, served as the stimuli for the subsequent recall interview.
- The stimulated recall interview was conducted within 48 hours of the observation to ensure accurate recall. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. During the session, the researcher would play back key moments from the audio recording or refer to specific field notes and ask the instructor to reflect on their thoughts, decisions, and rationale at that point in the lesson. This method was chosen to bridge the gap between observed practices and the underlying cognitive processes and beliefs that informed them.

## Appendix H. Research Ethics Approval

*Te Wānanga Toi Tangata*  
**Division of Education**  
The University of Waikato  
Private Bag 3105  
Hamilton,  
New Zealand, 3240

Division of Education Research  
Ethics Committee (DEREC)  
fedu.ethics@waikato.ac.nz  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

10/10/2022

Dear Xi Zhou

### **Division of Education Research Ethics Committee Application Approved FEDU060/22**

I am pleased to advise you that your ethics application for the project entitled "Incorporating Culture into EMI: An Exploration of EMI Teachers in Chinese Higher Education" was approved by Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee on October 10th, 2022.

Please be aware that the Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee must be advised (by memo) of any changes to the details recorded in your ethics application. Please send any such advice to fedu.ethics@waikato.ac.nz. You will receive a memo of approval once the change(s) has been considered.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "P. J. Frawley".

Chair

Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee (DEREC)