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Negotiating EMI Teacher Identity in Japan's Internationalized Classrooms: A Duoethnography

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ABSTRACT: *This duoethnographic study examines the experiences of two lecturers transitioning from English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to English-Medium Instruction (EMI) at a Japanese university, where they teach mixed cohorts of degree-seeking students and short-term exchange students. Through collaborative dialog, we explore how teaching in diverse pedagogical contexts, coupled with conflicting student expectations, shapes professional identity and teacher practice. Our analysis identifies three tensions: divergent interpretations of whether EMI should prioritize content or intercultural exchange; mismatched expectations between degree-seeking students wanting language practice and exchange students with varying levels of academic engagement; and identity disruption as confident EAP instructors became uncertain EMI teachers. We argue that inclusive internationalized classrooms require recognizing the emotional labor and identity work of faculty. Without institutional recognition and support, sustainable and inclusive EMI teaching remains difficult to achieve.*

Keywords: duoethnography, EMI, internationalized higher education in Japan, professional development, short-term international exchange students, teacher identity

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We are experienced teachers who felt like beginners. We had more freedom than ever before yet felt more constrained. We designed our classes to be interactive and student-focused, yet students criticized our classes for having too much discussion. We were teaching content outside our disciplines to local students who wanted to practice English and to highly proficient international exchange students who were more interested in disciplinary content than in communication.

These contradictions characterize our experience of teaching in Japan's higher education system, where internationalization initiatives have created a growing number of English-medium courses for both local and international students. In 2023, our university launched internationalized English-medium instruction courses. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan defines EMI as “courses conducted entirely in English, excluding those whose primary purpose is language education” (MEXT, 2020), emphasizing content knowledge transmission rather than explicit language learning goals (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020). We use the term *internationalized* because these courses serve the dual purpose of providing degree-seeking students opportunities to use English while offering content courses for short-term exchange students from outside Japan.

Before 2023, we both primarily taught English for Academic Purposes (EAP). These compulsory first-year courses focus on conventions of English academic writing and formal presentations, with consistent student numbers and a shared curriculum with clear learning outcomes.

Teaching EMI courses to mixed cohorts initially seemed like an exciting pedagogical innovation. Yet the shift brought conflicting student expectations, divergent understandings of course goals, and an increasing burden of emotional labor and identity work. Our duoethnographic analysis questions whether inclusive, sustainable classrooms and student wellbeing can be achieved without attention to how EMI transitions affect teachers.

Previous EMI research has explored teacher identity (Volchenkova & Bryan, 2019), student emotions and motivations (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2018; Dong & Han, 2025; Le & Nguyen, 2023), and student-teacher interactions (Lombardi & Shimono, 2025). However, these studies typically focus on contexts where teachers and students share an L1, and English is not the primary language for either group. Research on teacher identity has therefore focused on content

teachers (usually from STEM fields) who often experience frustration and resistance when transitioning to teaching in an L2 (Gronchi & Hopkyns, 2025; Gu et al., 2024; Volchenkova & Bryan, 2019). Similarly, students in these studies are typically homogeneous degree-seeking cohorts sharing the same L1.

Our situation differs in two ways. First, most EMI teacher identity research focuses on nonnative English-speaking content specialists experiencing language-related disempowerment (Gronchi & Hopkyns, 2025; Yuan, 2023). As L1 English speakers, our identity challenges stem not from language proficiency but from the transition between pedagogical contexts. Second, our classes include both degree-seeking students (predominantly Japanese) and short-term international exchange students—a combination largely unexplored in the EMI literature.

To address this gap, we examine our experiences transitioning between EAP and EMI teaching through three research questions: (1) How do teachers manage competing expectations in internationalized classrooms? (2) What identity work occurs when EAP teachers transition to content teaching? (3) How does teaching in unfamiliar territory shape professional identity?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization initiatives in Japan's higher education

To situate our inquiry, we first review the context of internationalization in Japanese higher education before examining teacher identity theory and EMI pedagogical challenges. Japan's higher education internationalization has been driven by government policy, including the Go Global Japan Project (2012-2015) and the Top Global University Project (TGUP) (2014-2023), which aimed to attract international faculty and students (Rakhshandehroo, 2023). However, *kokusaika* (internationalization) has received criticism for overemphasizing quantitative objectives—increasing numbers of international students, EMI programs, and Japanese students studying abroad—without integrating these initiatives into curriculum processes (Ota, 2018).

International student recruitment is central to Japan's higher education internationalization strategy, with numbers increasing from approximately 10,000 in 1983 to 279,597 in 2021 (Galloway & Curle, 2022; Huang & Chen, 2022); the Global 30 Project aimed to attract 300,000 international students by 2020 (Ivanova et al., 2025).

We distinguish between two types of international students in Japanese higher education. These two groups have different motivations, face distinct difficulties, and contribute differently to the multicultural dynamics of EMI classrooms. Long-term international students participate in full degree programs, typically spending several years in Japan. Short-term international students participate in exchange or study abroad programs, usually for one or two semesters. Short-term exchange students often prioritize cultural experience over academic achievement (Hennings & Tanabe, 2018), while domestic students (both international and noninternational degree-seeking students) view these courses as part of their degree progression.

Teacher Identity: Theoretical Framework

Teacher identity is a fluid, multilayered construct shaped by social and professional contexts (Gronchi & Hopkyns, 2025; Lo, 2024). Teacher identity negotiation is nonlinear and linked to emotional experiences, continually redefined as teachers interpret experiences against often competing professional demands (Li et al., 2024; Lo, 2024). A theoretical framework for EMI teacher identity has three components: professional identity (expertise and authority), personal identity (character features enacted in the classroom), and institutional identity (sense of affinity for the institution and alignment with its goals) (Kling, 2016; Volchenkova & Bryan, 2019).

Faculty identity and Transitions in EMI Contexts

Research shows that individual teachers interpret and implement EMI differently, “determined by their own understanding of EMI, as well as their own capacities to teach such a course” (Harris & Strefford, 2022, p. 39). This variability reflects the gap between policy expectations and classroom reality, where faculty often operate without clear institutional guidance or support (Galloway & Curle, 2022; Toh, 2020).

The identity struggles of content teachers shifting to instruction in a second language are well documented (Gronchi & Hopkyns, 2025; Yuan, 2023). However, less attention has been given to language teachers transitioning to content instruction (Galloway et al., 2017), and even less to EAP instructors specifically. The literature suggests that such transitions involve reinterpreting teacher role identity, from language facilitator to content expert, often without adequate preparation or support (Rose & Montakantiwong, 2018).

Teacher Psychological Wellbeing and Professional Performance

Teacher psychological wellbeing and emotional regulation predict job performance and student outcomes (Greenier et al., 2021). Teachers’ emotions can affect students through emotional contagion, where students sense and mirror their teachers’ enthusiasm, anxiety, or frustration (Aldrup et al., 2024; Deng et al., 2022; Frenzel et al., 2021). Quality teacher–student interactions (including emotional support, classroom management, and instructional support) are directly influenced by teachers’ emotional states (Aldrup et al., 2024). Understanding what supports teacher wellbeing is therefore important for effective EMI teaching.

Pedagogical Challenges in Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Classrooms

Students taking EMI classes experience different difficulties depending on whether they are local or international. Local students primarily struggle with comprehension due to lower English proficiency (Hunter, 2024; Siegel, 2022; Yukawa & Horie, 2018), while international students experience acculturative stress from cultural adaptation (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Dong & Han, 2025) and report feeling isolated and lacking a sense of belonging when separated from local students (Dong & Han, 2025).

Few studies examine EMI classes that include both local and international students. Lombardi and Shimono (2025) describe a mixed EMI intercultural

communication course in Japan where local Japanese students experienced anxiety about not being able to use their L1. International students varied in English proficiency, with some participating easily and others struggling. Instructors reported uncertainty about managing issues such as machine translation use and organizing discussion groups across proficiency levels.

Faculty report struggling with “grouping students with varying levels of English proficiency” and managing “the differing support needs of Japanese home and international students” (Galloway & Curle, 2022, p. 38). However, language proficiency differences represent only one dimension of classroom diversity. Cultural differences in classroom behavior also complicate mixed-class dynamics, as Japanese students “show respect by being quiet for the teacher, we take notes and listen, but the international students respond to the professor” (cited in Galloway & Curle, 2022, p. 34).

While existing EMI literature examines courses with degree-seeking international students (Galloway & Curle, 2022; Rakhshandehroo, 2023), the combination of degree-seeking students and short-term exchange students creates unexplored complications. Hennings and Tanabe (2018, p. 1914) note that “little research has been conducted on the objectives of international exchange students for studying in Japan under... partnership agreements,” finding that short-term international students prioritize cultural experience over English proficiency improvement. Even recent studies including both populations focus on one group’s perspective. Yamauchi’s (2024) study of a hybrid EMI class found positive effects for Japanese students’ motivation but provided limited insight into exchange students’ experiences or faculty challenges.

Collaborative Professional Development and Reflective Practice

Collaborative and reflective approaches to professional development offer promise in culturally diverse EMI classrooms. Duoethnography in particular has been utilized as a method to examine academic identity development (Norova & Gutiérrez, 2024; Wu et al., 2025). Within Japanese ELT, duoethnographic studies have examined how teachers negotiate between individual agency and institutional structures (Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020; Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016). These studies demonstrate the value of collaborative reflection for understanding identity negotiations.

Research Gaps

The literature shows several gaps: despite the growth of courses combining domestic students and short-term exchange students, research has overlooked these mixed settings. Studies focus on either fully international or predominantly domestic cohorts, missing the complexity of classrooms where degree-seeking students learn alongside exchange students with different goals. While faculty struggles in EMI implementation are documented, identity negotiations of teachers transitioning from EAP to content instruction remain unexplored. Language teaching expertise does not automatically enable effective content delivery, yet we know little about how instructors handle this transformation.

Positionality

We approach this collaborative reflection from intersecting positions. Alexandra is a bilingual (Russian/English) speaker who immigrated to the US at age 9 and transitioned from a genetics PhD to science editing and then higher education teaching. Despite using English as her primary language of education and scholarship, she is often characterized as a “nonnative speaker”—a categorization complicated by assumptions based on her white racial identity. Greg moved between the US and UK in youth, with degrees obtained in the US, Singapore, and Japan. Both of us have lived in Japan for over 15 years and have worked in the same program as full-time nontenured lecturers for more than eight years.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a duoethnographic approach to explore our lived experiences as coauthors transitioning between the pedagogical contexts of EAP and EMI.

Duoethnography as Methodology

Duoethnography is a collaborative methodology where researchers critically juxtapose personal narratives in dialogic form to deconstruct assumptions and coconstruct evolving understandings (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). This methodology uses “dialog and personal narrative to ‘simultaneously generate, interpret, and articulate data’ about a common concern” (Garcia & Cifor, 2019). Duoethnography emerges from narrative inquiry, autoethnographic traditions, and collaborative research approaches, informed by Paulo Freire’s critical theory and, especially, William Pinar’s “currere” framework for autobiographical inquiry (Breault, 2016; Lawrence & Lowe, 2020; Sawyer & Norris, 2013).

In contrast to traditional qualitative approaches that seek to minimize researcher subjectivity, duoethnography positions researchers as the sites of inquiry, treating their lived experiences and interpretive disagreements as data. The dialog between researchers generates insight into how individuals understand phenomena differently based on their histories and positions. Duoethnographic inquiry does not seek the consensus typical of intercoder reliability or thematic saturation. Rather, it values the productive tensions that emerge when researchers with different perspectives examine shared experiences.

Duoethnography is distinct from other collaborative forms in that each researcher’s voice remains explicit rather than combined (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). Researchers consider themselves sites rather than topics of research, examining interpretations within their temporal, social, and cultural contexts (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). The emphasis on difference, dialog, and critical reflexivity makes it particularly relevant for complex educational phenomena where multiple perspectives intersect.

Our choice of duoethnography emerged from prior collaboration. Through a previous collaborative autoethnography (Dalziel et al., 2024), we established the trust necessary for vulnerable self-disclosure and awareness that our perspectives often diverged. This led us to think that our different disciplinary backgrounds,

pedagogical philosophies, and positions within native-speaker ideologies would likely generate productive tensions when examining our EMI experiences. Our differences were not obstacles but productive resources for inquiry (Sawyer & Norris, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

As a self-study where we are both researchers and data sources, this research did not require institutional ethics review. Student feedback and course evaluations served as artifacts to prompt reflection, not as participant data; no students are quoted, nor is their work cited. However, discussing classroom experiences publicly risked making students and colleagues identifiable. We followed an ethics-of-care approach, grounded in mutual consent, respect for vulnerability, and a shared commitment to avoid incidental disclosures (Hunting & Hammond, 2025). All identifying information about third parties has been anonymized, including course titles that might identify students.

Relational ethics are important given duoethnography's personal nature. Our prior collaboration established trust and ground rules: nothing would be shared without consent; anything could be removed from publication at either party's request (Dalziel et al., 2024). We acknowledge that this process involves subjective interpretation; our aim is not universal truth but situated meanings for readers to consider in their own contexts.

Data Collection

Our data consisted of semistructured dialogic conversations conducted over six months, in person or on Zoom. We audio-recorded and transcribed these conversations using *Otter.ai*. While we developed prompts and thematic areas to guide discussions, we allowed the conversations to evolve organically. We incorporated artifacts such as photographs, course materials, student evaluations, and contemporaneous teacher reflections to evoke memories, ground discussions in concrete experiences, and provide different lenses for exploring our narratives (Breault, 2017; Woods & Sebok, 2016). Throughout, we maintained memos examining our evolving understandings. As conversations progressed, we noted recurring themes and areas warranting deeper discussion.

Data Analysis and Presentation

In duoethnography, the boundary between data collection and analysis is intentionally blurred; dialog functions as collaborative meaning-making (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). Our analysis was iterative and recursive, occurring both within recorded conversations and subsequent reflections. After transcription, we reviewed each transcript independently, noting moments of tension, surprise, and emerging patterns, and then returned to dialog to interrogate interpretations together. Three themes emerged: divergent course interpretations, conflicting student expectations, and professional identity disruption.

The dialogs presented here are thematically organized composites. While faithful to our actual conversations in content and voice, they have been reorganized from chronological sequence and condensed for clarity. The material was rewritten into

polyvocal dialogic exchanges ensuring that each researcher's voice remained explicit. Direct quotations preserve original wording; transitions were drafted collaboratively.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: What are we teaching here? Defining our own EMI pedagogies

Early in our discussions, it became apparent that our views about EMI class goals differed significantly. Despite receiving the same institutional guidance, we each developed our own interpretation. Although we both valued student engagement and accessibility, our assumptions about primary purpose—language practice versus content learning—created different pedagogical approaches. As of this writing, we each have taught four semesters of EMI courses: one close to our PhD research and one on a topic of interest where we do not feel like experts.

Alexandra

From the beginning, I understood these classes as content-focused courses serving two distinct student populations. For domestic Japanese students in their third and fourth years, these classes would provide opportunities to engage with academic content in English, while I supposed that international exchange students who are typically proficient in English enrolled primarily because of interest in the course topic.

I soon realized that there are two design hurdles that I had not considered. The first involved accommodating students with varying English proficiency levels in terms of reading loads and speaking demands. The second centered on addressing diverse prior content knowledge. How to design classes accessible to students regardless of background knowledge while avoiding boring those with existing familiarity with the subject? While I wanted Japanese students to feel they could keep up and communicate effectively, I viewed interaction among students as a component of active learning course design rather than a primary course objective. Not knowing how to resolve these conflicts, I embraced a content-centered philosophy. Initially, I taught a biology course, drawing on my graduate expertise and feeling confident in my command of the material. However, I found myself lecturing for most of the class time. In subsequent semesters, as my students became increasingly diverse in terms of prior knowledge, I struggled with adjusting content accessibility. After a couple of semesters teaching biology, I ventured outside my area of expertise to design a class on the analysis of gender data because this topic did not require much prior knowledge from the students. However, I discovered that I was unprepared for teaching content from an unfamiliar discipline. I didn't realize how out of my depth I was until I had already begun teaching the course. I sought advice from my colleagues on how to have a better balance of content and student-centered activities, and through these conversations, I realized that other instructors had a different interpretation of how these courses should be taught. My conversations with Greg surprised me by how different our interpretations were.

Greg

When the program started, I understood this initiative as primarily about expanding access to EMI for upper-division, degree-seeking students. However, by the time Alexandra and I began our dialogs, I had come to see these primarily as intercultural exchange courses. I was lucky to have had larger teaching cohorts of 25-35 from perhaps 15 different countries, all speaking English as an additional language. I recognized that this classroom diversity was a rare and precious opportunity for everyone involved, especially our degree-seeking students who rarely encountered such international environments on campus.

This realization shaped my pedagogical approach. Knowing that our degree-seeking students mainly wanted chances to practice speaking English and recognizing that many exchange students, despite their proficiency, also lacked confidence in oral communication, I felt like I couldn't justify spending class time lecturing. Instead, I prioritized discussions and collaborative activities that would facilitate peer-to-peer interaction. The content became a vehicle for meaningful exchange, not the primary objective.

This dialog shows the philosophical divide shaping our inquiry: different assumptions about program goals created different approaches and measures of success.

Theme 2: What do students want? Managing Multiple Expectations in the EMI Classroom

Teaching EMI classes to mixed cohorts created difficulties in interpreting and responding to student expectations, which manifested in classroom behavior, homework approaches, and survey feedback.

Greg

My experience with course feedback showed there were big differences among students in my EMI courses. After teaching a discussion-based course using established active learning methods, I received considerable negative feedback from students, all of whom were exchange students. They wanted more lectures, more teacher direction, and felt discussions lacked purpose. Some comments suggested that students had developed misconceptions about the course despite clear communication.

Even though only a small minority of students responded to the evaluation, the negative feedback crushed me. For my subsequent course, I decided to be more explicit from day one, emphasizing that this was a workshop-style class centered on knowledge cocreation and intercultural exchange, not lecturing. The opportunity to engage with students from multiple countries was central to the course.

In the first week, I collected notecards asking students why they were interested in taking the course. This showed me big motivational differences between student populations. Degree-seeking students consistently wrote that they wanted to take the course seeking English practice opportunities and

international interaction, with many also explicitly expressing speaking anxiety. Exchange students' motivations often centered on practical considerations: convenient scheduling, gaps between other courses, or simply limited English-medium options.

These distinct motivations created problems that I felt persisted throughout the semester. Degree-seeking students brought familiar patterns from their university trajectory, including clear goals around language practice and job-hunting preparation. Exchange students arrived with varied academic backgrounds and engagement levels. Some were much more intensely grade focused than what I've experienced (apologizing for marginally late submissions despite pass/fail enrollment). Others, however, exhibited much less investment in the course.

Even with trying to regularly communicate to students about my course objectives, some comments in the subsequent evaluation gave me pause. My interpretation is that some students valued a classroom matching their expectations of what a university class *should* look like. It reminded me of the research showing that students learn more in active learning classrooms but feel like they learn more in traditional lecture-based courses (Deslauriers et al., 2019). I felt like I worked hard to create an atmosphere encouraging interaction and dialog, trying to be responsive to fluctuating student numbers and interests. Some students saw this as disorganization. I was frustrated that the considerable labor of trying to create a classroom conducive to intercultural exchange was invisible and unrecognized.

Alexandra

I had a similarly revealing experience with student expectations. During the semester teaching the gender data analysis class, I was constantly checking in with students. I'd ask if they understood the readings, and they'd nod. They generally seemed engaged in class. Mid-semester I surveyed the students asking about their preferences for class format. Their responses showed that while they liked discussions, they also wanted more lectures, and they wanted me to summarize the readings rather than having them discover main points through discussion.

The end-of-semester feedback revealed deeper issues I hadn't anticipated. Students' responses showed that many hadn't done the readings because they found them too long and overwhelming and that this affected the quality of their in-class discussions. There were also comments about the class atmosphere feeling awkward, with suggestions that we should have spent more time getting to know each other better. I had assumed that students knew each other already and hadn't built in enough time for relationship building early in the semester.

While I appreciate student comments, I think they don't realize that the activities that seem unstructured or are student-centered, like having students lead discussions or do data analysis, take considerable preparation on the teacher's part. Similarly, being able to pivot mid-class to respond to student interests or needs takes enormous preparation because you often must think

through alternatives ahead of time. That's something students don't see, and it might look spontaneous or disorganized. One student even commented that I didn't seem fully engaged with the subject I was teaching. Since it was my first time teaching this class, I was constantly monitoring student reactions and thinking about how they were responding to the content. Maybe that internal focus on gauging their understanding made me appear disengaged when I was trying to be more responsive to their needs. These experiences made me realize how little we know about student expectations and motivations.

Teaching EMI classes to mixed cohorts is demanding because students arrive with diverse educational backgrounds, language proficiency levels, and motivations. Both groups may hold unstated assumptions about class formats, teacher roles, and assessment methods that may conflict with instructor intentions. Our experiences with student feedback reveal a disconnect around student-centered pedagogy. What we, as instructors, viewed as responsive, flexible teaching appeared to students as a lack of structure or direction. The invisible labor of preparing multiple activities and adapting to emerging needs remained unrecognized by students who expected more traditional content delivery. Both of us recognized that end-of-semester evaluations, while valuable, come too late to address misaligned expectations that develop throughout the course.

Theme 3: Who are we? Renegotiating identity in EMI Spaces

The following exchange explores how transitioning to upper-division, mixed-cohort EMI challenged our professional identities and sense of competence, capturing the shift from feeling like established experts to feeling like novices in an ambiguous pedagogical space.

Alexandra

I approached these classes thinking that I would teach content that is familiar to me. The expectation from the program was that we would draw on our personal disciplinary backgrounds to develop our EMI courses. But many of us, me included, have shifted far from that original discipline. My PhD in biology took 8 years to complete. I have since taught academic writing in an EFL context for 10 years. Can I claim that as my discipline? I should feel like I'm an experienced teacher... but I don't feel like I'm grounded in a particular discipline. I still feel like my discipline is what I got my PhD in; however, two years ago, I finished a master's degree in corpus linguistics. I haven't yet published in this area, although I have several projects in progress. I then ask myself, am I qualified to teach linguistics? At what point can I feel qualified to call myself a linguist? Teaching EMI classes brought to the surface lingering doubts about professional legitimacy despite extensive experience. Perhaps that is why I decided to develop a new course, about gender data analysis, a topic that is of great interest to me, but it is one at the edge of my expertise. Teaching this topic was new for me, and I didn't realize how unprepared I was to teach it... I felt like an imposter the whole

semester. I was struggling internally to seem competent and knowledgeable in the class. I also found it difficult to visualize the trajectory of the class. I didn't know how difficult the students would find the reading, and I didn't have a clear sense of how much or how little content would be appropriate to include in the semester. This experience, which felt out of my comfort zone, made me question my content-focused approach to my EMI classes.

Greg

When I first started teaching academic writing, I felt like I was pretending to be a teacher. But, after a few years, I became comfortable identifying as a language and writing teacher. I was confident in my pedagogical approach and engaged intellectually in the field, conducting research with colleagues, and becoming editor of a language teaching journal. But in these upper-division EMI classes I experienced regular feelings of imposter syndrome. Weirdly, L1 English speakers in my class sometimes left me feeling exposed. My teaching had adapted to L2 English learner contexts where students might not understand everything I say. But in classes where I had L1 English speakers, I often experienced a feeling of being exposed because I felt like they could understand everything I said.

More than imposter syndrome, though, was a consistent nagging feeling throughout the semester of unsettledness. The road ahead was hazy. However, expanding a topic that worked brilliantly in first-year speaking courses to a thirteen-week EMI format left me floundering. What was the trajectory? The journey? I realized I conceptualize courses as stories, and my first-year courses have clear narratives. They end with writing being produced. EMI courses felt like stories without plots.

Still, I experience moments of genuine joy. I worry our dialogs have communicated frustration, but I value the freedom to experiment and learn new teaching skills. I have moments where I just have a goofy smile on my face, when I see students doing something new, like practicing deep listening, or seeing Japanese students talking with peers from different countries about their lives.

Our dialog here shows how transitioning to teaching internationalized EMI courses unexpectedly destabilized our professional identities. We found ourselves questioning our competence and place within the institution, caught between being “too qualified” for language teaching and “not qualified enough” for our academic disciplines. We did not know what discipline to claim, and we realized EMI teaching involved complications distinct from our familiar EAP classes.

Learning from dialog

Alexandra

My biggest realization from discussions with Greg is that our EMI classes are not purely content classes. I need to make them more student-

centered and focus on discussion because language practice and communication are important to the students. This realization shifted my initial self-focused approach of “what’s interesting for me to teach,” pushing me toward considering how to make the students’ experience more enjoyable and valuable to them. This shift represents more than a methodological adjustment; it reflects a transformation from viewing myself as a content expert delivering knowledge to embracing a facilitator identity focused on student engagement and intercultural exchange.

Greg

Unlike Alexandra, I didn’t leave these dialogs having experienced a significant shift in how I view teaching these courses. I found engaging in a sustained dialog on a set topic with a trusted colleague insightful and useful. It helped me work out how much of my own experiences were due to my own temperaments, how much were shared by others, and how much was structural. Talking about teaching as a practice helps me improve as a teacher. However, I am still trying to figure out how to support my professional identity development while teaching these EMI courses; I want to be able to integrate this teaching with my professional career. Many of my students want more experience using English actively, and they don’t get that simply because the teacher talks in English. It takes intentional work to create conditions that give students a chance to grow and change. It’s an interesting puzzle and opportunity, more than a “problem” to solve.

The different outcomes we experienced are akin to what relational mentoring scholars describe as an “extended range of dependent variables” for evaluating growth (Ragins, 2012). Traditional approaches measure effectiveness through visible changes in practice or belief, but this fails to measure the full range of outcomes from high-quality reflective relationships. Collaborative dialog may prompt a change for one participant while providing articulation and conceptual language for another—both representing legitimate developmental outcomes. Growth need not manifest as changed beliefs. Alexandra entered EMI teaching with a content-focused approach and found that the dialog process prompted growth through a reorientation toward student-centered pedagogy. Greg, by contrast, had already adopted a student-centered approach, and the dialog provided a developing capacity to articulate why they felt unsettled. The different outcomes may reflect our different starting positions: the same dialogic process moved Alexandra toward a view Greg already held while providing Greg with conceptual language for experiences they were already having. This suggests that collaborative reflection may serve multiple functions: prompting change for some, providing understanding for others—depending on participants’ prior orientations. Personal development is not linear and not the same for everyone; we may end up in different places.

DISCUSSION

Implications for EMI Practice

Our experiences point to three implications for EMI practice: the need for systematic student needs analysis, the reframing of faculty development as strategic investment, and the power of collaborative reflection for professional growth.

The Need for Systematic Understanding of Students

Through our duoethnographic analysis, we identified a gap in our own knowledge of student needs and expectations. We realized the necessity of systematic needs analyses to understand our unique student population with different linguistic capabilities, cultural beliefs, and academic goals. Faculty are expected to teach effectively without adequate information about their learners (Galloway & Curle, 2022; Yukawa & Horie, 2018).

Reframing Faculty Development as a Strategic Asset

Universities implementing EMI programs typically prioritize enrollment numbers and rankings over providing adequate pedagogical support for faculty (Galloway & Ruegg, 2022; Harris & Strefford, 2022). Professional development, when offered, consists mainly of student evaluations that faculty are supposed to individually reflect on and use to improve their teaching, along with occasional workshops (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020). Yet EMI teaching, particularly with mixed cohorts of degree-seeking and short-term exchange students, demands sophisticated pedagogical skills that disciplinary training rarely provides (Galloway & Curle, 2022).

Contingent faculty, often teaching across multiple institutions, lack the time, job security, and resources to research their practice systematically (Brown, 2023; Damiani & Ghazarian, 2023; Toh, 2020). However, even where resources exist, disciplinary norms devalue educational research. Tenured faculty, who achieved their positions through traditional research output, often treat pedagogy as a solved problem, not an area worth studying. The result is a knowledge vacuum: those with institutional standing rarely study teaching, while those immersed in teaching lack the standing to research it. This prevents institutions from accumulating knowledge about effective EMI teaching.

Teachers are often left to figure out these demands on their own. Our research points to a different approach: institutions should treat pedagogical inquiry as an integral part of EMI teaching, not as separate research that teaching-focused academics must pursue in their spare time (Hoessler et al., 2024; Loughran, 2005). Some institutions are beginning to address this gap through structural changes. Teaching-focused academic positions with tenure pathways based on pedagogical excellence over research output (Bull et al., 2024; Godbold et al., 2024). Others have established centers for teaching and learning that provide infrastructure for sharing pedagogical knowledge, supporting scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and treating course development as scholarly work (Loch et al., 2024).

Supporting pedagogical inquiry connects faculty development and teaching excellence to institutional goals while extending scholarship into EMI.

The Power of Collaborative Reflection

The value of collaborative reflection extends beyond individual introspection. Our duoethnographic process exemplified what Kato and Mynard (2016) term “reflective dialog”—dialog qualitatively different from ordinary conversation in its capacity to promote deeper awareness. While solitary reflection can yield insights, research consistently demonstrates that dialogic and group-based approaches generate a deeper understanding of teaching practice (Allard et al., 2007; McCormack & Kennelly, 2011; Uchida & Rothman, 2023). Kato (2022, p. 167) distinguishes between self-reflection and dialog-facilitated reflection: “observing oneself critically during self-reflection is not easy. Dialog with other people, in contrast, offers possibilities to restructure one's established assumptions and beliefs.” Collaborative reflection enables teachers to surface assumptions, challenge interpretations, and construct new understandings that would remain inaccessible in isolation (Sturges et al., 2019; Truong et al., 2025).

For EMI contexts, collaborative approaches can address the isolation that teaching-focused academics often experience. Duoethnographic inquiry creates small communities of practice where teachers can safely explore uncertainties in their evolving professional identities (Goodnough et al., 2020). The process enables participants to examine their practice from multiple perspectives, with differing viewpoints enriching rather than hindering reflection. This structured dialog functions as more than professional development; it becomes a site for identity work where EMI teachers reconcile disciplinary backgrounds with pedagogical realities (Bradford et al., 2024; Meilani et al., 2022; Uchida & Rothman, 2023; Walkington, 2005). When institutions support and recognize these forms of collaborative inquiry, they create conditions for sustained pedagogical innovation.

Limitations

As with all duoethnographic inquiry, our findings emerge from two perspectives in dialog and are not intended to be generalizable. Our preexisting collegial relationship, while providing the trust necessary for vulnerable disclosure, may also have shaped what remained unsaid. Our status as a noncontingent faculty could affect what we felt comfortable sharing publicly. Additionally, the duoethnographic method used means the dialogs presented here are necessarily reconstructed; despite our commitment to fidelity, the process of selecting, organizing, and editing changes lived conversation into textual artifacts. We offer these dialogs not as transparent windows into our experience but as one rendering of an interpretive process.

Conclusion: Toward Identity-Informed, Responsive EMI Pedagogy

Our duoethnographic experience demonstrates that effective EMI teaching requires not only pedagogical adjustment but also significant identity work. The work of internationalizing the curriculum is not simply translating content into

English. Ragins (2012, p. 522) observes that “relationships change people, and these changes are not left at the workplace door.” Our dialogic process produced changes—whether in pedagogical orientation or in capacity for self-understanding—that extend beyond immediate classroom practice. The reach of collaborative reflection, such as high-quality mentoring, “may influence the individual’s ability to cope with challenges” across professional domains (Ragins, 2012, p. 522). For EMI faculty experiencing identity uncertainty, such relational approaches offer not just practical support but the conditions for sustainable professional development.

Effective EMI teaching requires understanding mixed cultural and linguistic classroom dynamics and developing approaches that serve all students while supporting instructor growth. Faculty need support in developing hybrid professional identities that encompass content expertise, language sensitivity, and intercultural facilitation. Furthermore, institutions must create communities of practice that allow collaborative reflection to become both a means of support and a method of scholarly production. Supporting this process is essential to building the inclusive, equitable, and sustainable internationalized programs we aim to create.

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