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Policy-mediated translanguaging in Chinese EMI-TNHE: student attitudes, learning practices and academic performance

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ABSTRACT

English-medium instruction (EMI) in transnational higher education (TNHE) is often governed by English-dominant expectations, although students routinely draw on bilingual resources to learn. Research rarely connects students' translanguaging attitudes with learning-related measures and the policy conditions shaping bilingual resources use and recognition. Drawing on (Spolsky's, B. (2009). *Language management*. Cambridge University Press) framework of language beliefs, practices and management, this mixed-methods study examined survey data from 222 Chinese EMI-TNHE undergraduates and interviews with 12 students. Students reported favourable translanguaging attitudes, with no significant overall difference between Business and STEM students. Attitudes were positively but modestly associated with self-rated English proficiency and academic performance. Interviews revealed that bilingual resources supported conceptual understanding, annotation, resource searching and assessment preparation, particularly in self-directed learning. However, classroom flexibility depended largely on teachers' language choices, while English-medium assessment marked the clearest boundary of formally recognised performance. We conceptualise this configuration as a policy-mediated division of linguistic labour, in which Mandarin supported comprehension and preparation, while English retained greater authority in disciplinary terminology and formal assessment. The findings show that favourable translanguaging attitudes and bilingual learning practices can coexist with an English-dominant institutional hierarchy, highlighting how linguistic resources are functionally differentiated and institutionally recognised in EMI-TNHE.

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Language policy; English-medium instruction; transnational higher education; translanguaging; student attitudes

Introduction

Transnational higher education (TNHE) has become a prominent form of higher education internationalisation in non-Anglophone contexts. In China, commonly known as 中外合作办学 (*zhongwai hezuo banxue*), TNHE refers to programmes and

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institutions jointly established by Chinese and overseas partners, primarily for students enrolled in China (De Costa et al., 2021a; State Council, 2003). Since the 1990s, TNHE has expanded rapidly under national internationalisation policies and the growth of cross-border provision by overseas universities (Huang, 2007). By 2020, over 600 Chinese universities had partnered with more than 800 overseas institutions, leading to nearly 2,300 approved institutions and programmes (China Education Online, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2025). By bridging overseas curricula and qualifications into Chinese regulatory and educational structures, TNHE creates a distinctive language policy environment in which internationalisation goals intersect with domestic educational requirements.

English-medium instruction (EMI) is central to many of these collaborations because English is associated with the internationalisation goals, academic quality and global mobility (Macaro, 2018; Macaro et al., 2018). However, EMI is not simply a pedagogical choice. By assigning particular functions, values and legitimacy to languages across teaching, learning and assessment, it also constitutes a form of language policy and planning (Liao et al., 2025; Liddicoat, 2016). This policy dimension is especially salient in Chinese EMI-TNHE, where English is institutionally positioned as a key medium of disciplinary study, while Mandarin retains formal regulatory status and remains embedded in students' communicative practices (Ou et al., 2021). The two languages therefore coexist within the same learning environment without necessarily carrying the same academic functions or degrees of institutional recognition. This coexistence makes translanguaging particularly relevant to EMI-TNHE.

The assumption that EMI should operate through English-only norms has been challenged by the multilingual turn in applied linguistics (Bonacina-Pugh, 2020). Translanguaging provides a perspective on how multilingual speakers mobilise their linguistic and semiotic repertoire for meaning-making (García, 2009; García & Li, 2014). While code-switching refers to alternation between linguistic codes, translanguaging shifts attention to how speakers draw on available resources as an integrated repertoire to accomplish communicative and learning purposes (Li, 2018). In EMI-TNHE, this perspective enables examination of how students draw on Mandarin and English for disciplinary learning within an environment where the two linguistic resources do not have equal institutional status.

Research has documented students' translanguaging practices and attitudes in Chinese EMI settings (Fang & Liu, 2020; Sultana & Fang, 2024; Zhou & Mann, 2021). More recent quantitative research has begun to examine relationships between translanguaging and learning-related factors such as motivation, engagement and English proficiency (Gu et al., 2024; Yuksel et al., 2025). However, these strands have rarely been brought together with the language policy conditions under which students' bilingual practices are enacted. This matters because favourable attitudes toward translanguaging do not necessarily mean that bilingual resources are equally available or recognised across different learning contexts. Understanding the educational significance of translanguaging therefore requires attention to students' attitudes and practices and the forms of language management that shape how bilingual resources are used and recognised.

The present study addresses this gap through Spolsky's (2009) framework of language beliefs, practices and management. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods

design, it examines students' translanguaging attitudes and their associations with self-rated English proficiency and academic performance, and then uses qualitative evidence to explain and contextualise these quantitative patterns. Particular attention is given to how English and Mandarin are used and recognised under different forms of language management. In doing so, the study examines whether language policy contributes to a patterned differentiation in the academic work performed by different linguistic resources. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What attitudes do Chinese EMI-TNHE students hold toward translanguaging?

RQ2: How are these attitudes associated with self-rated English proficiency and academic performance?

RQ3: How do students' language practices and experiences of language management help explain and contextualise the quantitative patterns across different EMI-TNHE learning contexts?

Literature review

Multilevel language policy and its enactment in EMI-TNHE

Language policy in EMI-TNHE is produced across multiple levels. National regulations permit the use of foreign languages where needed while identifying Mandarin and standard Chinese characters as the basic medium of instruction (State Council, 2019). Within this regulatory framework, transnational universities often develop expectations concerning English language admission, language support and language use, and many programmes position English-medium as an important part of their educational model (De Costa et al., 2021b; McKinley et al., 2021; Rose et al., 2020b). These arrangements create a policy environment in which different linguistic resources may be assigned different functions and degrees of legitimacy.

Universities therefore operate as meso-level language planning agents by translating wider policies into local arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment (Liddicoat, 2016). These arrangements are further mediated by teachers and students rather than implemented uniformly. EMI teachers exercise considerable discretion in how institutional language expectations are enacted locally (De Soete & Slembrouck, 2025; Heron et al., 2024), and in Chinese EMI settings may draw on Mandarin and other bilingual resources to explain disciplinary concepts, manage interaction and support students in processing demanding content (Chen et al., 2023; Gu et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2014; Zhou & Mann, 2021). Such variation should not be understood simply as a gap between policy and practice, since this risks treating policy as a fixed text against which classroom practices are judged as compliant or non-compliant. Rather, language policy is interpreted, negotiated and produced by agents operating across institutional levels and interactional contexts (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2022). In TNHE, for example, Ou et al. (2021) showed how an English-medium language policy was negotiated through local multilingual practices, with students and institutional agents creating spaces for broader linguistic repertoires within an English-oriented environment. Language policy is thus realised unevenly across learning contexts through the actions of institutional and classroom actors rather than uniformly imposed from one level to another.

Assessment represents a particularly consequential site within this multilevel process because it determines which linguistic resources can receive formal recognition. Assessment requirements can generate washback by shaping what students attend to, practise and prioritise before the point of assessment (Taylor, 2005). EMI assessment research has also shown that disciplinary knowledge and language can be difficult to separate when students are required to demonstrate disciplinary understanding through English (Hultgren et al., 2022; Şahan & Şahan, 2022). From a translanguaging perspective, assessment design further influences whether learners' wider linguistic repertoires are recognised as legitimate resources for demonstrating learning. Wang and East (2024) showed that when translanguaging was incorporated into assessment, students could draw strategically on broader linguistic resources, although their responses to such practices varied. Hence, assessment influences not only the language of final output but also which linguistic resources are legitimised throughout the learning process.

Viewed in this way, EMI-TNHE is a multilevel language policy environment in which authority over language use is unevenly distributed across institutional and learning spaces. The relevant question is not simply whether English or Mandarin is used, but what academic functions different linguistic resources perform, who can authorise their use, and whether that linguistic work receives institutional recognition.

Translanguaging attitudes in context

Within EMI-TNHE, translanguaging attitudes concern students' evaluations of the value and legitimacy of drawing on different linguistic resources for learning. Students often value translanguaging for supporting comprehension, participation and confidence when learning disciplinary content through English (Fang & Liu, 2020; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2021; Zhou & Mann, 2021). However, attitudes are not uniformly positive. Some students associate extensive first language use with reduced exposure to English or with weakening the international and academic value associated with EMI (Baker & Hüttner, 2019; Chang, 2019; Galloway et al., 2020).

Attitudes may also vary with learner and disciplinary factors. Webb et al. (2023) reported disciplinary variation in translanguaging attitudes, while Yuksel et al. (2025) found that the relationship between tested English proficiency and translanguaging attitudes differed across engineering and social science students. Lee and Lo (2017) similarly showed that classroom language preferences were related not only to proficiency but also to students' imagined L2 identities. Williams (2023) found that students could rely on their first language for securing disciplinary understanding while continuing to associate English with technical terminology and academic legitimacy. These findings suggest that translanguaging attitudes reflect differentiated beliefs about what particular linguistic resources are useful for and where they are considered appropriate in EMI learning.

Importantly, attitudes should not be equated with actual language practices. Students may value translanguaging but have limited opportunities to initiate it in teacher-directed interaction or assessed work. Conversely, they may depend extensively on bilingual resources while continuing to regard English-medium instruction as academically legitimate (Fang & Liu, 2020). Attitudes and practices should therefore be examined as related but distinct dimensions of students' language experience.

Translanguaging and learning-related measures

Although existing research shows that translanguaging can support learning processes in EMI, evidence linking it to learning-related measures remains limited and methodologically uneven. Studies have shown that multilingual resources can facilitate conceptual explanation and knowledge construction (Jiang & Zhang, 2023; Muguruza et al., 2023; Pun & Macaro, 2019; Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2019), while multilingual note-taking can help students process English academic input and connect concepts across languages (Siegel, 2023). These studies demonstrate the value of translanguaging for conceptual access and meaning-making, but improved comprehension or participation is not equivalent to measured English proficiency or academic performance.

Quantitative research has begun to examine these relationships more directly. Gu et al. (2024), drawing on survey data from EMI students in mainland China, found relationships among reported teacher translanguaging, students' translanguaging attitudes, motivation, engagement and perceived learning. Yuksel et al. (2025) examined the relationships between students' translanguaging attitudes and tested English proficiency across disciplinary groups. Recent reviews point to the same limitation. Lu et al. (2025) found that EMI and CLIL translanguaging research has focused predominantly on practices, perceptions and language ideologies, with less attention to learning-related measures while Liao et al. (2025) highlighted broader methodological constraints in research on translanguaging pedagogy in EMI.

Taken together, these studies indicate two remaining issues. First, the relationship between students' own translanguaging attitudes and learning-related measures, particularly academic performance, requires further examination. Second, such relationships need to be interpreted in relation to the language policy conditions that shape the enactment of bilingual practices. Addressing both issues requires an analytical framework that connects students' beliefs and practices with the forms of language management operating in EMI-TNHE.

Language policy as the analytical framework

Spolsky's (2009) framework provides an analytical basis for connecting students' translanguaging attitudes and language practices with the management of language use. Language policy is conceptualised through three interrelated dimensions, including beliefs, practices and management. Beliefs concern the values attributed to languages and ways of using them. Practices refer to the recurrent patterns of language use. Management involves attempts by agents with recognised or claimed authority to influence those practices (Spolsky, 2009, 2019). In the present study, translanguaging attitudes are treated as one evaluative aspect of students' broader language beliefs, while their reported use of English and Mandarin represents language practices. Institutional expectations, teacher-directed language choices and assessment requirements are examined as forms of management that shape the opportunities and constraints surrounding those practices.

This framework also helps situate the study in relation to existing concepts. A policy-practice gap highlights divergence between formal policy and actual practices. The

linguistic market foregrounds the unequal value and legitimacy attached to linguistic resources (Bourdieu, 1991), while scale draws attention to how such value may vary across contexts and levels (Blommaert, 2010). Bilingual education research has documented a functional distribution, or 'division of labour' between languages, whereby different languages become associated with different pedagogical, spoken and written functions (Camilleri Grima, 2001, 2013). Translanguaging scholarship, however, draws attention to the hierarchies that may be reproduced when linguistic resources are assigned different roles (Li & García, 2022).

Building on these perspectives, the present study examines how differences in the academic functions of English and Mandarin are related to language policy processes. The term policy-mediated division of linguistic labour is used to describe a configuration in which linguistic resources perform different forms of academic work while receiving different degrees of authority and institutional recognition. The concept thus brings together three analytical dimensions, namely, functions, authority and recognition and asks what academic work different linguistic resources perform, where and by whom their use is authorised, and whether that work is formally recognised. It is developed through the interpretation of the findings rather than applied as an a priori coding category.

Methodology

Research context and participants

This study was conducted at a joint international college in China established through a partnership between a Chinese university and a university in an English-speaking country. The college offers four undergraduate programmes: one Business programme and three engineering-related STEM programmes. To preserve the anonymity of the research site, specific programme titles are not reported. The three STEM programmes shared a substantial proportion of their first-year foundational curriculum and were hence grouped as STEM for the quantitative disciplinary comparison.

All four programmes adopt an EMI model, with major-related core modules taught in English by both domestic and international teachers. Students studied within a dual institutional structure and were required to satisfy the academic requirements of both partner universities. Formal assessment in major-related core modules was conducted in English, while Mandarin remains the dominant language of students' prior education and everyday linguistic experience. Publicly available college webpages were reviewed as contextual documents to examine how the programme represented EMI, internationalisation and global mobility.

At the time of data collection, participants had completed their first year of university study, during which they had taken compulsory general and major-related modules. Most modules had been taught by Chinese teachers using English as the medium of instruction. All participants were Chinese nationals who had studied English as a foreign language throughout formal schooling. According to the undergraduate admissions regulations of the host university, admission required a minimum Gaokao English score of 110 out of 150. All participants had therefore met a common minimum English language entry requirement.

Research design

The study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In the first phase, survey data were used to establish the overall pattern of students' translanguaging attitudes and their associations with self-rated English proficiency and self-reported academic performance. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews examined how students drew on bilingual resources across self-directed learning, classroom interaction and assessment, and how these practices were shaped by language policy conditions. The follow-up qualitative phase therefore served an explanatory function, and the two phases were integrated at the interpretation stage, with the qualitative findings used to explain and contextualise the quantitative patterns.

Surveys

An online survey was administered in September 2024. Translanguaging was explained in accessible terms as the flexible use of Mandarin and English for learning, including translation, bilingual annotation and drawing on both languages to understand disciplinary content. The survey collected demographic information, including discipline and gender, and measured self-rated English proficiency, academic performance and translanguaging attitudes.

Although all participants had met the programme's minimum Gaokao English entry requirement, individual Gaokao scores were not used because participants came from different provinces, where the format and components of the English examination were not the same, and Gaokao scores reflected pre-entry English performance. Students were therefore asked to rate their current English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good), and the mean of the four ratings was used for self-rated English proficiency measure.

Academic performance was measured using students' average grade across the major-related core modules completed in the previous semester. The specific modules varied by programme, while general education, language and culture related modules were excluded. The included core modules were formally assessed in English, typically through a combination of a final examination and continuous assessment. Students reported their average grade using five categories: A+/A/A-, B+/B/B-, C+/C/C-, D+/D/D-, and below D-. For analysis, these categories were coded from 5 to 1 respectively, with higher values indicating stronger academic performance.

Translanguaging attitudes were measured with five items adapted from Rivera and Mazak (2017) and Moody et al. (2019), using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale was designed to capture students' general attitudes toward translanguaging in EMI classrooms, rather than a comprehensive multidimensional account of students' language beliefs. The items addressed perceived naturalness, appropriateness, overall benefit, contribution to confidence in English and value for disciplinary learning.

The survey was reviewed by EMI researchers and was piloted with 30 students in August 2024. Items were refined to enhance clarity and internal consistency. The final

survey was distributed to first-year TNHE students, receiving 222 valid responses, including 72 from the Business programme (32.4%), 35 from STEM programme A (15.8%), 57 from STEM programme B (25.7%), and 58 from STEM programme C (26.1%). For the disciplinary comparison, the three engineering-related programmes were grouped as STEM (N = 150). The sample included 129 male (58.1%) and 93 female (41.9%) respondents.

Survey data were analysed in SPSS 31.0.2.0. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) indicated a single-factor solution, with an eigenvalue of 3.93 accounting for 78.58% of the variance. Factor loadings ranged from .80 to .94, supporting a coherent one-factor structure. The five-item scale also showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .93). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then conducted using maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS. The one-factor model showed acceptable-to-good fit, $\chi^2(5) = 10.62$, $\chi^2/df = 2.12$, CFI = .99, TLI = .99, RMSEA = .07, and SRMR = .07. Composite reliability was high (CR = .95), and the average variance extracted (AVE = .79) provided further evidence of convergent validity.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the main variables. Independent-samples t-tests examined differences in translanguaging attitudes by disciplinary groups. Pearson's correlation was used to examine the associations between translanguaging attitudes and self-rated English proficiency. Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to examine the association between translanguaging attitudes and academic performance because academic performance was measured using ordered grade categories.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in November 2024 with 12 survey participants who volunteered for follow-up participation (see Appendix 1). The interview sample comprised six students from the Business programme and six from one of the three STEM programmes. The interviews explored four broad areas: attitudes toward translanguaging and EMI; use of Mandarin and English in disciplinary learning; perceptions of teachers' language choices; and the influence of institutional expectations and English-medium assessment. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, the first language of the participants and the interviewer, to support clarity and comfort. Each interview lasted approximately 40 min, was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants also provided anonymised examples of bilingual learning materials. Institutional webpage extracts and student learning materials were used as contextual evidence.

Interview data were analysed using qualitative content analysis informed by Bengtsson's (2016) four-stage process of decontextualisation, recontextualisation, categorisation and compilation. Transcripts were read repeatedly and meaning units relevant to students' language beliefs, practices and experiences of language management were coded. Spolsky's (2009) framework guided the analysis to language beliefs, practices and management, but coding was not restricted to these predetermined categories. Particular attention was paid to variation across self-directed learning, classroom interaction and assessment, as well as similarities and differences between the two interview groups. Initial coding was conducted independently by two researchers and later discussed and refined through iterative comparison. Three themes were developed: (1) comprehension-oriented translanguaging across learning practices; (2) language management across

institutional, classroom and assessment contexts; and (3) differentiated beliefs about the functions and values of English and Mandarin.

Findings

Survey results

Students' attitudes toward translanguaging

Students reported generally favourable attitudes toward translanguaging in EMI classrooms, with an overall mean score of 3.85 (SD = .71). As shown in Table 1, mean scores for all five items were above the midpoint of the 5-point scale. Among the respondents, 76.58% agreed that translanguaging is a natural and appropriate practice in EMI classes, 63.52% considered it beneficial, 66.67% felt it boosts their confidence in English, and 65.32% viewed it as essential for learning disciplinary content. Overall, most students evaluated translanguaging positively as a resource for EMI learning.

Independent-sample t-tests were conducted to examine differences in students' overall attitudes by discipline. STEM students reported slightly more favourable attitudes (M = 3.87, SD = .68) than Business students (M = 3.80, SD = .78), but this difference was not statistically significant, $t(220) = -.63$, $p = .53$.

Translanguaging attitudes and learning-related measures

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics among translanguaging attitudes, self-rated English proficiency and academic performance. Students' mean self-rated English proficiency was 3.01 (SD = .58), while the mean academic performance score was 3.88 (SD = .72).

Translanguaging attitudes were positively associated with self-rated English proficiency ($r = .17$, $p < .05$). Spearman's rank-order correlation also showed a positive association between translanguaging attitudes and academic performance ($\rho = .15$, $p = .025$). Overall, the associations between translanguaging attitudes and learning-related measures were positive but modest.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for students' attitudes toward translanguaging in EMI.

	Mean	SD	SE
Translanguaging is a natural practice in EMI classes.	3.91	.77	.05
Translanguaging is an appropriate practice in EMI classes.	3.92	.77	.05
Translanguaging is beneficial in EMI classes.	3.95	.76	.05
Translanguaging develops my confidence in English in EMI classes.	3.73	.86	.06
Translanguaging is essential for learning subject content in EMI classes.	3.72	.89	.06

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and associations with translanguaging attitudes (N = 222).

Variable	M	SD	SE	Associations with translanguaging attitudes
Translanguaging attitudes	3.85	.71	.05	–
Self-rated English proficiency	3.01	.58	.04	$r = .17$*
Academic performance	3.88	.72	.05	$\rho = .15$*

Pearson's r was used for self-rated English proficiency; Spearman's ρ was used for academic performance. $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Interview results

To explain and contextualise the survey patterns, the qualitative analysis examined students' learning practices, experiences of language management and broader language beliefs. The 12 interviewees comprised six students from the Business programme and six from one of the three STEM programmes. Anonymised participant codes were used throughout, with participant profiles provided in Appendix 1. Three interconnected patterns were identified: comprehension-oriented translanguaging across learning practices; language management across institutional, classroom and assessment spaces; and beliefs about the differentiated functions and values of English and Mandarin.

Comprehension-oriented translanguaging across learning practices

All 12 interviewees described drawing on both Mandarin and English at some point in disciplinary learning, although the balance between the two varied. Across both interview groups, Mandarin was consistently used to support comprehension and interpretation of English-medium content. Common practices included translating terminology, annotating English materials in Mandarin, comparing Chinese and English explanations and consulting Mandarin language resources. We interpret these practices through a translanguaging perspective because students coordinated resources across Mandarin and English for meaning-making, while recognising that individual practices such as translation and annotation can also be described as forms of bilingual alternation. For example, HB linked bilingual explanation with both disciplinary understanding and engagement with English:

> For me, bilingual instruction is more helpful in improving my English. I still need Chinese because it helps me understand more, such as translating concepts or word usage. (HB)

Similarly, MT described Mandarin annotation as a resource for interpreting English texts:

> Chinese helps me understand English better. When I encounter some words that I don't understand in English sentences, I annotate them in Chinese. I think the two languages complement each other. (MT)

The functional differentiation between the two languages was particularly explicit in MQ's account:

> I translate English into Chinese for understanding, and translate Chinese into English for output, but I don't translate Chinese into English for understanding. I still can't do that … At the moment, using English to learn disciplinary knowledge might just be for exams. (MQ)

MQ's account illustrates how students moved across linguistic resources within the learning process, using Mandarin particularly to secure understanding while retaining English for disciplinary expression.

Students also extended such bilingual meaning-making beyond the classroom through self-directed learning. They used bilingual notes, Mandarin language online resources and cross-language searching when English-medium instruction did not provide sufficient conceptual access. JW described Mandarin as his default resource for resolving incomplete understanding:

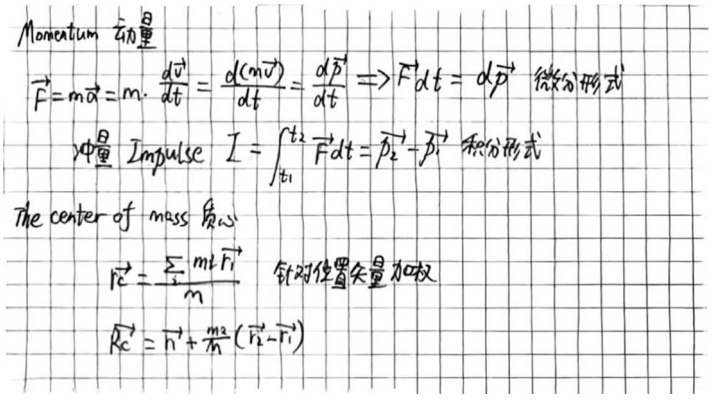


Figure 1. QM's physics notes.

> When I don't understand a concept, the first thing I do is search for the Chinese explanation of it. Subconsciously, as a native speaker of Chinese, my understanding through Chinese is certainly stronger than through English. If I want to learn something new, Chinese materials carry more weight for me than English ones. (JW)

No consistent disciplinary difference emerged in these comprehension-oriented practices. All participants described using Mandarin to support disciplinary understanding, although the disciplinary content differed. In the learning materials provided, QM's physics notes retained English disciplinary terms and formulae while Mandarin annotations explained underlying concepts, whereas XY's economics slides contained Mandarin glosses alongside key English definitions (Figures 1 and 2). Despite differences in disciplinary content, both examples show English being retained for specialised terminology while Mandarin performed interpretive work.

In more difficult cases, reliance on Mandarin could become extensive. YN explained:

> When it comes to learning disciplinary knowledge, I struggle a lot. I feel like I'm attending Bilibili University because I have to watch content on Bilibili every day to understand the confusing content. I'm now completely resistant to speaking English. If it's a Chinese teacher, I don't understand why they can't explain things to us in Chinese. (YN)

YN's position was more critical than that of most interviewees, who generally valued English-medium instruction while seeking greater bilingual support. Across the accounts, however, students exercised their greatest linguistic agency in self-directed learning spaces.

Language management across institutional, classroom and assessment spaces

Institutional expectations established the English-dominant context in which students' practices occurred. The college website promised an 'immersive English language environment' and stated that core modules delivered by either Chinese or overseas teachers were taught through English. It also associated EMI with a 'world-class international educational experience,' the development of 'multilingual graduates' and advantages in applying for overseas doctoral study. These statements positioned

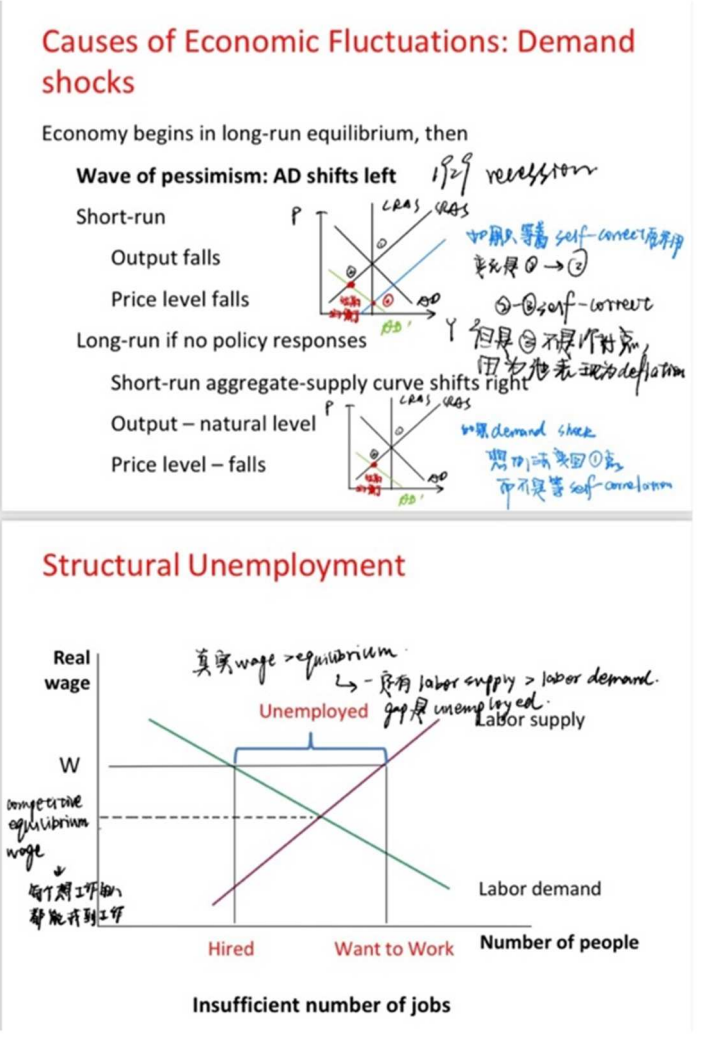


Figure 2. XY's economics slides.

English not only as the designated medium of instruction but also as a resource associated with international education and future academic mobility.

Within this institutional context, however, classroom language management varied. Students reported variation not only across courses but also among instructors teaching the same module. In Physics (a module from the STEM programme), for example, two instructors teaching the same module reportedly adopted different language practices. One used predominantly English, whereas the other conducted most oral explanation in Mandarin while retaining English language slides and disciplinary terminology. In another Microeconomics class (a module from the Business programme), a Chinese instructor reportedly used English predominantly for both oral instruction and learning materials. These examples point to instructor-level variation rather than a systematic disciplinary contrast, showing that institutional EMI expectations were locally mediated through teachers' language choices.

Teacher language choice was salient across all 12 interviews, although students differed in how much bilingual support they preferred. Some favoured Mandarin for clarifying difficult concepts, while others accepted predominantly English-medium teaching provided that disciplinary content remained comprehensible. ZY described how a shift into Mandarin could restore comprehension and attention:

> Sometimes, when a class is taught entirely in English, if I don't understand, my mind wanders. But if the teacher suddenly says, "Let's explain this in Chinese," it can bring my focus back. (ZY)

Opportunities for students themselves to use Mandarin also depended on teachers' linguistic repertoires. XY contrasted classes taught by overseas and Chinese instructors:

> In some courses taught entirely by foreign teachers, when there are concepts I don't understand, asking in English is very difficult to make sense of. But if I ask a Chinese teacher a question in Chinese, the answer is very direct, and it helps me understand that part of the course. (XY)

Thus, whole-class language flexibility depended largely on teachers' language choices, while opportunities for individual bilingual interaction also depended on whether teachers shared students' linguistic resources. Classroom language management was therefore experienced as uneven rather than uniformly determined by institutional EMI expectations.

Assessment constituted a more consistent boundary. 10 interviewees, five in each interview group, described English-medium assessment as shaping the terminology they learned, the materials they reviewed or the language through which disciplinary knowledge had to be demonstrated. SH stated this division clearly:

> Only when I'm dealing with exams do disciplinary terms come in English. The rest of the time I usually study in Chinese. (SH)

He described his everyday studying as 'Chinese, with a bit of English mixed in. After all, there are still exams.' Assessment could also influence which disciplinary terminology students considered worth learning. MQ explained that because her finance examinations were in English, she sometimes learned only the English term and then had difficulty following classmates who discussed the same concept in Mandarin:

> I haven't paid much attention to the Chinese terms for some concepts. I just got a rough grasp of the English words, the exams are all in English anyway, so that's enough. But when classmates discuss our subject using the Chinese terms, sometimes I can't follow, even though I know the corresponding English. (MQ)

These accounts show that English-medium assessment did not prevent bilingual practices during learning, but it shaped the linguistic resources students prioritised in preparation and the language through which disciplinary knowledge was demonstrated.

Language beliefs about the differentiated functions of English and Mandarin

Students' beliefs about the disciplinary value of English and Mandarin were more varied than their learning practices. Three interviewees explicitly positioned English as the more authoritative or original resource in their fields, three regarded English and Mandarin as

broadly equal at their current stage of disciplinary learning, one gave Mandarin greater weight for current disciplinary learning, and the remaining five expressed more conditional views in which the relative value of each language depended on the task, resource or learning context.

For those who attributed greater disciplinary authority to English, the reasons were often field specific. CT referred to the role of English in programming:

> When writing programmes or codes, many expressions are often based on the habits of English speakers, such as variable naming. The code you type is English, and you don't see code written in Chinese. (CT)

MT similarly grounded the authority of English in economics terminology:

> English is more prominent than Chinese because many definitions in economics are originally in English, and the Chinese versions are just translations. (MT)

MT described English as carrying greater authority while Mandarin facilitated understanding. However, this position was not shared uniformly. For example, ZY regarded Chinese and English as relatively equal in finance because established Chinese translations were widely available.

Across these different positions, Mandarin was repeatedly associated with more secure comprehension. ZY described understanding English explanations through an internal movement into Mandarin:

> When a term is explained in English, I convert the content into Chinese in my mind in order to understand it. If I try to understand directly from the English, it's slower, there's a conversion process in my head. (ZY)

Students therefore did not regard English and Mandarin as interchangeable resources. Their relative value depended on what academic work was being performed. English was frequently associated with disciplinary terminology, original or international resources and formally assessed performance, whereas Mandarin provided greater security for interpreting, confirming and consolidating understanding.

Taken together, the qualitative findings revealed a differentiation in the functions, availability and recognition of English and Mandarin across learning contexts. Students drew flexibly on both languages, but had greater control over their linguistic resources in self-directed learning, while classroom language use was more strongly mediated by teachers and formal assessment remained English-medium. These patterns help contextualise the survey findings by showing how generally favourable attitudes toward translanguaging coexisted with uneven opportunities for its enactment and recognition.

Discussion

This study examined Chinese EMI-TNHE students' translanguaging attitudes, their associations with self-rated English proficiency and academic performance, and the language beliefs, practices and experiences of management within which these relationships were situated. The quantitative and qualitative findings together indicate that students' favourable attitudes toward translanguaging were embedded in a learning

environment in which English and Mandarin performed different academic functions and received different degrees of institutional recognition. We conceptualise this configuration as a policy-mediated division of linguistic labour, providing a basis for interpreting both students' favourable attitudes and the modest associations between these attitudes and the two learning-related measures.

A policy-mediated division of linguistic labour

The functional differentiation of languages is not itself new. Research in bilingual education has shown that different languages may become associated with different pedagogical, spoken and written functions (Camilleri Grima, 2001, 2013), while EMI research has documented selective use of multilingual resources for explanation, terminology work and meaning-making within English-dominant programmes (De Soete & Slembrouck, 2025; Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2019). Translanguaging scholarship has further cautioned that such differentiation is not necessarily neutral, because assigning linguistic resources to different functions may reproduce unequal forms of legitimacy (Li & García, 2022).

The present findings extend this work by showing that functional differentiation was organised across both academic purposes and learning spaces. Students had freedom to mobilise bilingual resources in self-directed learning, whereas classroom flexibility depended more heavily on teachers' language choices and linguistic repertoires. English-medium assessment imposed a more stable boundary by shaping both preparation practices and the language through which academic performance was demonstrated. This is consistent with studies showing that EMI teachers mediate institutional expectations through local classroom decisions rather than simply implementing policy uniformly (Bonacina-Pugh, 2020; De Soete & Slembrouck, 2025; Heron et al., 2024).

Assessment was particularly important because its influence extended beyond the language of final output. Students' accounts indicated that assessment requirements shaped the terminology and resources they prioritised during preparation, consistent with assessment washback (Taylor, 2005). EMI assessment research has similarly highlighted the difficulty of separating language from disciplinary knowledge when students are required to demonstrate disciplinary understanding through English (Hultgren et al., 2022; Şahan & Şahan, 2022). Research on translanguaging assessment further shows that assessment design affects whether learners' wider linguistic repertoires are recognised as legitimate resources for demonstrating learning (Wang & East, 2024). In the present setting, bilingual resources contributed to the construction of disciplinary understanding, but that bilingual work was largely absent from formally assessed performance.

The concept of a policy-mediated division of linguistic labour therefore captures more than a simple policy-practice gap. A policy-practice gap identifies divergence between formal expectations and actual language use, but does not explain how linguistic resources become recurrently associated with different kinds of academic work. The linguistic market foregrounds the unequal value and legitimacy attached to linguistic resources (Bourdieu, 1991), while scale highlights how such value can vary across contexts and levels (Blommaert, 2010). The present concept brings functional differentiation and institutional authority together by focusing on what linguistic resources do, where their use is authorised, who mediates that use, and whether the resulting linguistic

work receives institutional recognition. It therefore helps explain how translanguaging could become an ordinary part of learning without necessarily displacing the privileged role of English in formally recognised academic performance.

Favourable attitudes and differentiated language beliefs

The favourable translanguaging attitudes reported in the survey can be understood through students' differentiated views of what Mandarin and English enabled in disciplinary learning. The interviews showed that students valued translanguaging because Mandarin supported interpretation, conceptual clarification and more secure understanding, while English remained important for disciplinary terminology, international academic resources and assessed performance. Thus, positive attitudes did not imply that the two languages were regarded as interchangeable or equally valuable across all academic purposes. Rather, students valued their complementary functions within EMI learning. This is consistent with previous research showing that EMI students often value translanguaging for comprehension and disciplinary learning (Fang & Liu, 2020; Zhou & Mann, 2021) and with Williams' (2023) finding that students may rely on their first language for clarifying disciplinary meaning while continuing to associate English with technical and academic legitimacy. The findings also help explain why reliance on bilingual resources can coexist with continued acceptance of English-medium provision as academically and internationally valuable (Baker & Hüttner, 2019; Galloway et al., 2020).

The absence of a significant difference in overall translanguaging attitudes between Business and STEM groups can be interpreted in light of the qualitative findings. Previous research suggests that disciplinary effects on translanguaging attitudes are not uniform. For example, Webb et al. (2023) identified disciplinary differences in general attitudes, while Yuksel et al. (2025) showed that the relationship between English proficiency and translanguaging attitudes differed across engineering and social science students. In the present study, the lack of significant overall disciplinary difference may partly reflect the common language conditions under which students were learning. Despite differences in disciplinary content, students in the two interview groups engaged with specialised knowledge through English while drawing on Mandarin to support understanding. At the same time, disciplinary content shaped the specific grounds on which English acquired academic value, such as programming conventions in the STEM interview group and specialist terminology in the Business interview group. These findings may suggest that discipline can shape how and why particular linguistic resources are valued without necessarily producing differences in students' overall orientation toward translanguaging, which also needs to be understood in relation to the institutional and pedagogical conditions under which EMI is locally enacted (De Soete & Slembrouck, 2025).

Translanguaging as a learning process and its associations with learning-related measures

Translanguaging attitudes were positively but modestly associated with self-rated English proficiency and academic performance. Rather than indicating a direct effect of favourable attitudes on learning-related measures, the interview findings help clarify the learning

processes within which these associations were situated. Students used bilingual resources to clarify disciplinary concepts, annotate English materials, compare explanations, access supplementary resources and prepare for academic tasks. These practices are consistent with research showing that translanguaging can support conceptual access and disciplinary knowledge construction through cross-linguistic explanation, terminology work and bilingual note-taking (Jiang & Zhang, 2023; Muguruza et al., 2023; Pun & Macaro, 2019; Siegel, 2023). The present study therefore extends previous quantitative research linking translanguaging-related variables with learning (Gu et al., 2024; Tong & Shi, 2012) by identifying the learning practices that help contextualise the observed associations.

The modest strength of these associations is equally important. The survey measured students' general attitudes toward translanguaging rather than the effectiveness of particular bilingual practices, while the interviews further showed that opportunities to enact those practices varied across learning contexts. Thus, favourable attitudes may reflect students' recognition of the usefulness of bilingual resources, but attitudes represent only one element of a more complex learning process. This helps explain why translanguaging attitudes were positively associated with the two learning-related measures without showing strong relationships with either.

Implications

The findings have particular implications for language planning in EMI-TNHE, where institutions must reconcile the regulatory position of Mandarin as the basic medium of instruction with the prominent role assigned to English in the international identity and educational model of many transnational programmes (De Costa et al., 2022; State Council, 2019). The policy-mediated division of linguistic labour identified in this study suggests that this relationship should be addressed through more explicit meso-level language planning across teaching, learning and assessment. Rather than prescribing a fixed language ratio, institutions could clarify where bilingual resources can legitimately support disciplinary understanding and where English is institutionally required. Such guidance would reduce reliance on individual teachers to negotiate these expectations independently and could inform teacher development focused on purposeful language choices within a locally defined policy environment (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2022; De Soete & Slembrouck, 2025; Liddicoat, 2016).

Assessment also requires attention because it represented the clearest language boundary in this study. Where partner university or programme requirements make English the expected language of formal assessment, institutions can better connect bilingual learning processes with expected English output through bilingual terminology support, bilingual note-taking and planning, and opportunities to develop disciplinary understanding across languages before producing assessed work in English (Rafi, 2024; Siegel, 2023; Wang & East, 2024).

Limitations

There are several limitations. First, the study was conducted in a single EMI-TNHE college with students at a similar stage of study and covered only two broad disciplinary areas, Business and STEM. Although the survey included all four programmes offered by

the college, the interview sample comprised students from the Business programme and only one of the three STEM programmes. The qualitative findings should therefore not be assumed to represent programme-specific experiences across all three STEM programmes, and transferability to other institutions and disciplinary contexts is limited. Second, English proficiency was self-rated rather than objectively assessed, and academic performance was self-reported rather than independently verified. Although these measures provided common indicators across the sample, they may not correspond fully with objectively measured proficiency and official academic records, and may have been influenced by shared method variance. Third, the five-item translanguaging attitudes scale captured a relatively narrow general evaluative orientation rather than the full multidimensionality of students' attitudes and beliefs. Finally, classroom language practices and teacher beliefs were reconstructed from students' accounts rather than direct observation or teacher data. Future research should extend the study across institutions and disciplinary contexts and incorporate classroom observation, teacher perspectives, independently assessed English proficiency measures and more comprehensive multidimensional measures of translanguaging attitudes.

Ethics statements

All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of College of Foreign Languages, Beijing University of Technology (No. WY202403). Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Declaration of generative AI use

The authors report generative AI was used at the final stage for language editing.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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Appendix 1. Interviewee profiles

Participant code	Gender	Programme of study	Length of learning English (year)
XY	F	Business	15
JW	M	Business	14
ZY	F	Business	15
YN	M	Business	10
MQ	F	Business	13
MT	F	Business	12
ZM	M	STEM	15
CT	M	STEM	12
SH	M	STEM	14
QM	M	STEM	13
GY	M	STEM	12
HB	M	STEM	15