Identifying and supporting at-risk English language learners while improving English-medium instruction in Thai higher education

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Abstract

This study explores the identification and support of at-risk English Language Learners (ELLs) who were new to English-medium instruction (EMI) at a Thai International College. Recognizing the significant challenges ELLs face in non-English speaking environments, particularly those with limited intercultural experiences, this research adopted an applied interdisciplinary approach that combined Second Language Acquisition and Human Capacity Development with insider practitioner research (IPR), and targeted teacher scaffolding. Utilizing a contextualized observation protocol and survey validation, 12 at-risk ELLs, characterized by limited participation, intercultural communication difficulties, and emotional discomfort, were identified for in-depth interviews and a theoretically-informed scaffolding intervention focused on inner development and self-determination. The findings revealed substantial language barriers, intercultural miscommunication, and academic stress, leading to self-isolation, concerning behavior, and hindered academic progress. The scaffolding intervention, which included Structured Character Strengths and Intercultural Communication Workshops, proved instrumental in fostering confidence and cultivating self-determined learning among the participants. This research underscores the necessity for international institutions to provide targeted language support, English integration, curriculum adaptations, and intercultural orientation programs to enhance ELLs' academic self-efficacy and overall student well-being. By illuminating the interplay between inner development and self-determination, this study demonstrates the potential for at-risk ELLs to thrive in international higher education and offers valuable insights for broader second language acquisition and intercultural education contexts

Keywords: At-risk learners, English-medium Instruction, Insider Practitioner Research, Intercultural Communication, Self-determination, Teacher Scaffolding

Introduction

English Language Learners (ELLs) in Thai international colleges face significant challenges adapting to the rigorous academic and intercultural demands of EMI. Specifically, low-level ELLs struggle to navigate academic and social English (Vygotsky, 1978; Cummins, 2000), hindering their access to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Factors such as limited interaction with native English-speaking instructors and peers, coupled with a lack of targeted language scaffolding, often impede their academic progress. Consequently, these students experience difficulty participating in class discussions and comprehending foundational academic texts.

Moving beyond traditional Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, this study adopts an applied interdisciplinary lens to explore the identification and support of 12 low-level ELLs, who were identified by an observational protocol and self-reporting validation survey. By focusing on their inner development and self-determination, integrating insights from Human Capacity Development (HCD), International Higher Education (IHE), and Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), this research recognizes that language acquisition is intricately linked with a student's sense of agency, autonomy, and personal growth within an EMI context (Johnson, 2004; Lopes & Theisohn, 2003). Identifying at-risk ELLs is the initial step towards fostering inner development, autonomy, and self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This process is further complicated in high-context cultures, where communication relies heavily on implicit cues, nonverbal communication, and shared cultural knowledge (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Therefore, this study investigates how students cultivate autonomy in their language learning and navigate the emotional challenges of intercultural adaptation to foster self-determination, elements often overlooked in traditional SLA frameworks. This interdisciplinary and insider perspective allows for a more holistic examination of the challenges faced by ELLs, emphasizing their capacity for inner growth.

This research asserts that Human Capacity Development (HCD) serves as a mechanism for promoting individual and community-based agency, and autonomy through the development of competencies necessary for effective performance in intercultural environments (Lopes & Theisohn, 2003). Understanding the inner development and self-determination of ELLs necessitates a consideration of pertinent learning factors, which play a crucial role in language acquisition. These factors, identified in SLA research, include motivation, learning strategies, learning styles, language learning aptitude, and personality traits (Johnson, 2004). Specifically, intrinsic motivation, stemming from personal interest and enjoyment, tends to be more sustainable than extrinsic motivation (Dörnyei, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Furthermore, effective language learners employ metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective learning strategies that can be enhanced through each individual's capacity (Oxford, 2011; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Contextually, at-risk ELLs face the dual challenge of mastering English and navigating intercultural communication norms according to their learning environment (Byram, 2021). Moreover, age, attitude, and prior language learning experiences further complicate this process. For instance, younger learners may demonstrate enhanced adaptability in new cultural environments (Birdsong, 2006), while prior language learning can equip individuals with effective intercultural interaction strategies, as no two learners are the same (Cummins, 2000). Consequently, developing intercultural communicative competence is crucial for fostering ELLs sense of agency, autonomy, and self-determination within international educational settings. However, these factors interact dynamically, with their relative influence varying across individuals and contexts. Therefore, effective language instruction requires a comprehensive, multifaceted approach that addresses learners' diverse needs and strengths within a supportive, caring, and stimulating environment.

Drawing on an insider perspective, this researcher identifies low-level ELLs as at-risk when exhibiting indicators such as limited academic language development, slow rate of English acquisition, difficulties with literacy development in their native language, limited background knowledge, and behavioral and Emotional challenges (Table 1). These students frequently encounter substantial challenges, including language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and academic stress (Bruton, 2025: 2022; 2018). While EMI aims to enhance future prospects through English proficiency, it may not adequately address the specific needs of low-level ELLs, particularly in their acquisition, learning, and development of English as a Second Language.

Table 1 At-risk Indicators

#	Indicator	Description	Citation
1	Limited Academic Language Development	Difficulty understanding and using academic vocabulary, complex syntax, and discourse structures.	Bailey, A. L. (2007). Language development. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), International handbook of English language teaching (pp. 155-168). Springer.
2	Slow Rate of English Acquisition	Lack of progress in English proficiency despite consistent instruction and support.	Hakuta, K., Butler, Y. G., & Witt, D. (2000). How long does it take English learners to attain proficiency? Policy Report, 2000(4), 1-44.
3	Difficulties with Literacy Development in the Native Language	Struggles with reading and writing in their first language, which can impact their ability to transfer literacy skills to English.	Goldenberg, C. (2008). Teaching English language learners: What the research does—and does not—say. American Educator, 32(2), 8-44.
4	Limited Background Knowledge	Gaps in prior knowledge related to academic content, which can hinder comprehension and learning.	Echevarria, J., Vogt, M. E., & Short, D. J. (2017). Making content comprehensible for English learners: The SIOP model. Pearson.

#	Indicator	Description	Citation
5	Behavioral and Emotional Challenges	Increased instances of behavioral problems, withdrawal, or signs of emotional distress.	Rousseau, C., & Guzder, J. (2008). Children of immigrants: Emotional and behavioural problems. Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 17(3), 114–118.

In some cases, research suggests that local students—especially those with little international experience—may go through a stage where they care more about fitting in with their peers than listening to adults, like foreign teachers (Kegan, 2009). This is a normal part of growing up, but it can be challenging for English Language Learners (ELLs) with limited skills. At this age, students often turn to their friends for help. But if those friends also struggle with English, their group may end up reinforcing each other's language gaps instead of improving together. As a result, international teachers—who are key to helping these students learn—can get left out. Even though humans naturally learn best by working together (Tomasello, 2019), low-level ELLs may not fully connect with the very people who could help them most. That's why it's so important for teachers to provide clear, targeted support that helps these students build real language and cultural skills.

To address these critical concerns, this research pursues the following objectives:

(i)   Develop, contextualize, and validate a comprehensive framework for identifying at-risk ELL students at the college level;

(ii)   Investigate the multifaceted factors contributing to academic risk among identified ELL students; and

(iii)   Design and implement targeted instructional strategies to address the specific needs of at-risk ELL students, improving their academic self-efficacy and fostering positive relationships within the school community.

In alignment with these objectives, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

(i)   What criteria, derived from teacher observations and validated survey data, most effectively identify at-risk ELL students at the college level?

(ii)   What are the primary factors, from the perspective of at-risk ELL students, that contribute to their academic challenges and hinder their success?

(iii)   How can differentiated instructional strategies, implemented within the regular classroom setting, improve the academic engagement, language proficiency, and social-emotional well-being of at-risk ELL students?

Towards identifying, supporting, and developing at-risk ELLs, educators should be open to examining their own beliefs about teaching and learning, collaborate with colleagues to reflect on their practices, take risks and experiment with new ideas, be patient and persistent in their efforts, and celebrate successes, no matter how small (Wagner, 2006). By doing so, educators can become more effective change agents and help to create more innovative and effective teaching approaches. This is especially important in English-Medium contexts where low-level English language learners have had limited exposure to international communication and curriculums. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of ELLs' experiences and improve EMI teaching, this research adopts a qualitative approach, combining qualitative Insider Practitioner Research (IPR) and survey validation to explore the learning experiences of at-risk ELLs at a Thai international college, investigating the interplay between their inner development, self-determination, and the challenges they encounter in intercultural academic environments.

Literature Review

This literature review investigates the pedagogical application of Applied Interdisciplinary Practitioner Research within an EMI context. Specifically, it explores how educators can leverage interdisciplinary research to cultivate L2 learners as intentional developing practitioners. This review suggests that by merging the theoretical constructs of intentional transformation and Inner Development Goals (IDGs), participants can become developing practitioners, equipping L2 learners with the necessary framework for self-determined language learning within EMI environments. Three key conceptual frameworks will be central to this review: (i) Allwright & Hanks' Exploratory Practice (EP) (2016); (ii) Michael Tomasello's Usage-based Cognitive Linguistics (UBL); (iii) the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) Framework. In addition, we will mention Vygotsky (1978) and Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) theory (2000).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that integrates key aspects of several influential theories to improve English immersion programs, including Lier's AAA interaction principles (van Lier, 2017), Tomasello's Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition (Tomasello, 2019, 2014), Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Allwright & Hanks' Developing Practitioner Framework (Allwright & Hanks, 2017), and Cummins' BICS/CALP model (Cummins, 2000). Specifically, it is our intention to use the following theoretical and conceptual framework to improve at a Thai international college (Table 2).

Table 2 Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Framework	Key Concepts	Implications for ELL Instruction
Lier's AAA	Awareness, Autonomy, Authenticity	multifaceted approach that addresses the diverse needs and strengths of learners while creating a supportive and stimulating learning environment
Tomasello's Usage-Based Theory	Shared intentionality, joint attention, cultural learning	Create opportunities for social interaction, cultural immersion, and meaningful language use.
Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory	Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)	Provide scaffolding, support, and differentiated instruction to help ELLs reach their potential.
Allwright and Hanks' Development of Practitioners	Reflective practice, professional development	Encourage teachers to reflect on their practices, experiment with new approaches, and collaborate with colleagues.
Jim Cummins' BICS and CALP	BICS and CALP	Differentiate instruction to address both social and academic language needs.
Sheltered Instruction	Comprehensible Input Hypothesis; Interaction Hypothesis; Socio-cultural Theory; Cognitive Theory	Makes academic content accessible to English language learners (ELLs) while fostering language development in EMI contexts

Applied Interdisciplinary Practitioner Research

This paper seeks to employ applied interdisciplinary practitioner research that has the potential to explore the intricacies of learner experiences in second language (L2) classrooms. Traditional research methods frequently encounter challenges in revealing learning difficulties within English as a Medium of Instruction EMI contexts. Interdisciplinary research, in this context, involves integrating knowledge and methodologies from various distinct academic disciplines, a process that may be undertaken by a single researcher with extensive experience and expertise (Repko, 2012). The practitioner approach prioritizes the practical application of knowledge in real-world environments, often necessitating engagement with and comprehension of diverse stakeholders, fostering collaborative efforts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Furthermore, the applied nature of this research underscores its purpose beyond theoretical exploration, emphasizing its practical implementation, which typically requires diverse input (Stokes, 1997).

EP, with its emphasis on student voice and practitioner development, offers a valuable alternative. According to Allwright & Hanks (2017), the core argument lies in reconceptualizing the L2 classroom environment. They propose viewing students as "developing practitioners," actively engaged in the process of language acquisition. This necessitates a shift from generic, pre-packaged curricula to a focus on individual learner needs and contextual relevance. FIPR, informed by EP principles, empowers educators to gain a deeper understanding of these complexities and refine their teaching practices accordingly. These seven principles include: "put 'quality of life' first, work primarily to understand language classroom life, involve everybody, work to bring people together, work also for mutual development, integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice, and make the work a continuous enterprise" (Hanks, 2017, p. 97).

The terms Insider Practitioner Research (IPR) and Fully Inclusive Practitioner Research (FIPR) are often used interchangeably in this literature review to describe research conducted by practitioners within their own contexts (Hanks, 2016). While they share many similarities, there are differences that set them apart. IPR generally emphasizes the researcher's insider perspective, drawing on their own experiences and understanding of the field. It often involves a focus on personal reflection and interpretation. FIPR, nonetheless, extends beyond the insider perspective to emphasize inclusivity and collaboration. It aims to involve all stakeholders, including students, colleagues, and other relevant parties, in the research process. FIPR often involves a more systematic and rigorous approach to data collection and analysis. In essence, FIPR is a broader term that encompasses IPR but also includes additional elements to ensure inclusivity and rigor. Therefore, while the terms are often used interchangeably, understanding the differences can help clarify the specific approach taken in a particular research study. In a related area, FIPR aligns with Paulo Freire's emphasis on empowering marginalized communities (Freire, 2000). His concept of critical consciousness, achieved through participation in research, can foster social transformation. This resonates with Participatory Action Research (PAR), which emphasizes collaborative, action-oriented projects that draw on participants' experience and knowledge (McIntyre, 2008). Engaging PAR puts participants in motion, encouraging a shift from viewing language as a fixed code to a dynamic, socioculturally embedded process, fostering active participation within the target language student body.

Subsequently, FIPR prioritizes the importance of students expressing their voice through classroom activities. Accordingly, several theorists promote student autonomy, emphasizing students' ability to take ownership of learning, set goals, and monitor their own progress (van Lier, 2017; Atkinson, 2010). By providing students with a voice, opportunities emerge for self-reflection, seeking assistance, and making choices in their learning experiences. This aligns with the notion that student voice can nurture autonomous learning (Nunan, 2013). Nunan further highlights the importance of student participation in developing pedagogical competence and the ability to reflect on and assess learning experiences. Similarly, Cummins underscores the significance of student voice in cultivating cultural competence, the ability to comprehend and appreciate diverse cultural perspectives (Cummins, 2000).

FIPR within EMI contexts may necessitate a shift from rudimentary knowledge transmission to an experiential process of interaction. While the process might not be forthcoming, FIPR empowers educators to conduct research within their own classrooms, enabling the investigation of pedagogical themes such as teaching strategies, student needs, and classroom culture. This offers valuable advantages for EMI instruction, including the ability to understand student needs by tailoring instruction and learning experiences for greater effectiveness. This can be achieved through reflective teaching practice, which critically examines teaching methods and their impact on student outcomes. Furthermore, FIPR can empower classroom teachers by disseminating their research findings among other like-minded educators for collective knowledge-building and collaboration.

In addition, FIPR conceptualizes participants as developing practitioners, a novel approach that has the potential to make language learning more authentic. While traditional research methodologies often struggle with multifaceted phenomena like language learning, FIPR offers an alternative that empowers students to explore their learning experiences. It effectively captures the essence of these experiences, as FIPR utilizes four key philosophical concepts: (i) Intentionality, by purposeful engagement and active participation of learners; (ii) Lifeworld, including cultural and social contexts that shape learners' experiences; (iii) Embodiment, through interconnectedness with technology, the physical body, and cognition; and (iv) Temporality, understanding the dynamic nature of learning in time. By considering these concepts, students as researchers gain a deeper understanding of their path as intentional developing practitioners who actively construct knowledge through their interactions with others (Allwright & Hanks, 2017).

In the application of FIPR, Allwright & Hanks (2017) propose five key propositions about language learners. Subsequently, L2 learners are seen as: (i) unique learners who learn best in their own ways; (ii) social learners who thrive in supportive environments; (iii) serious learners who are capable of taking learning seriously; (iv) independent learners who can make independent decisions, and (v) developing practitioners who develop expertise through practice (Allwright & Hanks, 2017). In turn, these propositions inform five key characteristics of a language learning program informed by FIPR and EP.

Allwright and Hanks have identified these five characteristics that separate FIPR from other practitioner approaches. First, students are encouraged to actively discover and develop language skills through experimentation and interaction, or what is called Exploratory Learning. Second, Allwright's concepts involve students engaging in research of their own learning. This could involve reflecting on their mistakes, analyzing their progress, and identifying areas for improvement. Third, students are encouraged to learn from each other through meaningful collaboration and practice. In addition, students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning journey by setting goals, making choices, and managing their progress. Finally, students participate in activities which make them active recipients, by exploring their own L2 experiences that lend insights and inform their learning. In conclusion, FIPR informed by EP principles offers a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of learner experiences in L2 classrooms, by prioritizing student voice, reconceptualizing learners as developing practitioners, and fostering a culture.

Building upon this learner-centered foundation, Leo van Lier's concept of transformation in language learning (2017) is deeply rooted in his ecological and semiotic framework, emphasizing a dynamic and holistic process. He argues that language learning is not a fixed endpoint but a continuous adaptation to the learner's linguistic environment, encompassing social, cultural, and physical contexts. This "ecological transformation" occurs as learners navigate and make sense of their surroundings through language. Central to this process is interaction, which provides opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning, refine their language use, and test hypotheses. Additionally, van Lier suggests that language learning extends beyond linguistic skills, encompassing a transformation of the self, as learners develop new perspectives and identities. His concept of *languaging* highlights language as an active process, where learners become more effective communicators through continuous engagement and adaptation. In essence, van Lier's view of transformation is a dynamic interplay of interaction, adaptation, and self-development within the learner's linguistic ecology.

Sociocultural Perspectives

To begin, both Tomasello and Vygotsky emphasize the social and cultural nature of language learning (Tomasello, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, Tomasello highlights the role of shared intentionality, joint attention, and cultural learning, which includes imitative learning, instructed learning, and collaborative learning, all attributed to language acquisition, learning, and development (Tomasello, 2019). Consequently, this suggests that creating opportunities for meaningful social interaction and cultural immersion can significantly facilitate language acquisition for English Language Learners (ELLs). However, as Tomasello points out, as children age, their learning inclinations evolve. Imitative learning gives way to instructed learning, which in turn is replaced by collaborative learning. Thus, this has significant implications for college students who may be less inclined to imitate and learn from their international teachers (Tomasello, 2019).

In agreement, Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) further underscores the importance of suitable social interaction in second language learning (Vygotsky, 1978). As theorized, the ZPD refers to the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other (MKO). By providing appropriate scaffolding and support within the ZPD, educators can *ratchet* student motivation through the concept of authenticity (van Lier, 2017) by better knowing students' interests and what support actually helps ELLs reach their full potential (Tomasello, 2019). Indeed, Vygotsky's focus on social interaction as a driver of cognitive development aligns with Tomasello's emphasis on *becoming human* (Tomasello, 2019). Nonetheless, ELLs may not be ready for social interaction, as both theorists recognize that humans are uniquely adapted for cooperation and cultural learning, but not all students are comfortable in intercultural settings. This, in turn, is consistent with Vygotsky's emphasis on the sociocultural context of learning. Furthermore, Tomasello emphasizes the importance of shared intentionality, where individuals coordinate their actions and goals with others, a concept, as noted previously, which aligns with Vygotsky's focus on social interaction as a driver of cognitive development.

More importantly, Tomasello highlights the role of cultural learning, in which individuals acquire knowledge and skills through social interaction and observation. While consistent with Vygotsky's emphasis on the sociocultural context of learning, Tomasello integrates an evolutionary perspective, arguing that humans are uniquely adapted for cooperation and cultural learning. However, Vygotsky did not explicitly discuss evolution. Yet, Tomasello's approach provides a broader framework for understanding human cognition. While some scholars might argue that Tomasello's emphasis on individual agency and innate capacities differs from Vygotsky's more sociocultural and contextualized view of development, Tomasello's work is still considered a valuable contribution to the Neo-Vygotskian tradition, offering a better understanding of ELLs cognition and development. Ultimately, Tomasello's theory adheres to Vygotsky's original ideas, and builds upon and extends Vygotsky's legacy in significant ways. Specifically, while Vygotsky did not explicitly discuss evolution, Tomasello integrates an evolutionary perspective that provides a broader framework for understanding the origins of human cognition and sociality. This perspective complements Vygotsky's focus on sociocultural factors by exploring the biological foundations of human cooperation and cultural learning, integrating insights from evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, and cultural anthropology (Tomasello, 2019).

Learner Autonomy and Reflective Practice

Allwright & Hanks' Developing Practitioner Framework emphasizes the role of learners as active participants in their own learning. Specifically, this framework encourages a reflective approach to learning and teaching, where learners and teachers work collaboratively to improve their practices. Remarkably, by adopting a developing practitioner approach, ELLs can become more autonomous and self-directed learners. Indeed, Allwright & Hanks' Developing Practitioner Framework underscores the importance of active learner participation and reflective thinking in language learning. According to Allwright & Hanks (2017), Learner Autonomy (LA) refers to the ability of language learners to take control of their own learning process. As such, autonomous learners are proactive, self-directed, and independent. They actively engage in their learning, set goals, and employ effective strategies to achieve them. Autonomous Language Learners (ALLs) typically possess self-awareness that understands their strengths, weaknesses, learning styles, and needs. Furthermore, ALLs are goal setters who define clear and achievable learning objectives, and are able to self-regulate by monitoring their progress, making adjustments as needed, and staying motivated. Moreover, ALLs are resourceful, able to utilize a variety of learning resources such as books, online materials, and language exchange partners. Finally, they possess critical thinking skills, evaluating their learning experiences and making informed decisions.

Similarly, Reflective Practice (RP), another component of Allwright & Hanks' Developing Practitioners (DP), involves critically examining one's own experiences and actions to gain insights and improve future performance. RP is a cyclical process that includes reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, in which ALLs think critically about their actions while they are happening (Allwright & Hanks, 2017). By engaging in reflective practice, language learners can identify their strengths and weaknesses and pinpoint areas for improvement. Additionally, in RP, learners develop problem-solving skills that find effective solutions to challenges by enhancing

critical thinking while analyzing and evaluating their learning experiences. Thus, ALLs increase their self-awareness and gain a deeper understanding of their learning style and preferences.

Subsequently, there becomes a connection between Learner Autonomy and Reflective Practice, creating a powerful tool for developing learner autonomy. Specifically, by reflecting on their learning experiences, learners can take ownership of their learning by identifying their needs and setting personalized goals. This allows ALLs to develop their own effective learning strategies by experimenting with different approaches and selecting the most effective ones. In turn, this builds self-confidence while gaining a sense of accomplishment and belief in their abilities. In essence, ALLs start a path of lifelong learning that cultivates a passion for learning and a desire to continue improving. In conclusion, learner autonomy and reflective practice are essential components of successful language learning. Therefore, by embracing these concepts, ELLs can become more engaged, motivated, and independent learners.

Language Proficiency and Academic Success

Cummins' BICS/CALP model distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 2000). Specifically, BICS refers to everyday language skills, such as those used in casual conversation. CALP, on the other hand, is the language needed for academic purposes, such as reading textbooks and writing essays. Therefore, understanding the distinction between BICS and CALP is crucial for providing appropriate instruction and support for ELLs (Cummins, 2000). Consequently, by integrating these theoretical frameworks, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of language learning. This knowledge can inform the development of effective instructional strategies and support services that promote the academic and social integration of ELLs. Furthermore, Sheltered Content Instruction (SI) has been used in North America since the 1980s (Snow & Brinton, 2023).

Indeed, the theoretical and conceptual framework for Sheltered Instruction (SI) is rooted in several key theories and principles. Firstly, Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis suggests that language acquisition occurs through exposure to language slightly above a learners' current proficiency level (Johnson, 2004). Sheltered instruction provides this by simplifying language, using visuals, and scaffolding learning. Secondly, Long's Interaction Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of interaction between language learners and more proficient language users, which sheltered instruction promotes through group work, discussions, and teacher-student interactions (Ibid, 2004). Thirdly, Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory highlights the role of social interaction and cultural context in learning (Johnson, 2004). Sheltered instruction creates a supportive learning environment where ELLs can interact with peers and teachers and learn through culturally relevant activities. Finally, Piaget's Cognitive Theory (2000) focuses on cognitive processes involved in learning, and sheltered instruction provides opportunities for students to construct meaning through active engagement with content, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Johnson, 2004).

Moreover, key conceptual components of Sheltered Instruction promote comprehensible input, in which teachers use clear and simple language, visuals, and real-world examples to make content understandable for ELLs. In addition, teacher scaffolding provides support through strategies like modeling, guided practice, and feedback to help students build on their knowledge and skills. Subsequently, Language development is integrated into content lessons, providing opportunities for ELLs to practice reading, writing, speaking, and listening in meaningful contexts. Sheltered instruction, as with English-medium instruction, often incorporates Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) principles, where language and content are taught simultaneously (Snow & Brinton, 2023). Furthermore, differentiated instruction allows teachers to adapt their teaching methods and materials to meet the diverse needs of ELLs at different proficiency levels. In essence, by combining these theoretical foundations and conceptual components, sheltered instruction provides a structured and effective approach to teaching ELLs, enabling them to access grade-level content and develop the language skills necessary for academic success.

Usage-based Cognitive Linguistics

To better understand L2 learners, this paper advances Michael Tomasello's Usage-based Cognitive Linguistics (UBL), a theory that challenges traditional views of language acquisition (Tomasello, 2019, 2014). Indeed, central to Tomasello's UBL is the concept of shared intentionality, which builds on Lev Vygotsky's (1978) ideas about social interaction and cognitive development. Thus, Tomasello's shared intentionality theory draws heavily on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development. Specifically, Vygotsky's key concept, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), highlights the role of social interaction in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD refers to the gap between what a child can achieve independently and what they can achieve with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other (MKO). Essentially, Vygotsky believed that through social interaction, children are able to internalize knowledge and skills that were initially external to them.

Furthermore, Tomasello's shared intentionality theory extends Vygotsky's ideas by focusing on the specific cognitive skills that enable humans to engage in joint activities and share goals with others. These skills include joint attention, goal understanding, and communicative intention. Moreover, Tomasello argues that these skills are unique to humans and emerge early in development through social interaction with caregivers. Therefore, by combining Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction and the ZPD with his own focus on shared intentionality, Tomasello provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how human cognition develops through social interaction and cultural learning. Consequently, both theories emphasize the importance of social interaction in shaping cognitive development. For example, this is evident from a young age, as children develop joint attention skills, such as following another person's gaze when focusing on something together (Tomasello, 2019). This focus on shared intentions and goal understanding spurs language acquisition. Unlike other primates, humans are motivated to learn from others and participate in activities that benefit the group. This fosters cultural transmission, where knowledge, skills, and attitudes are passed down and internalized (Tomasello, 2019).

Ultimately, Shared Intentionality positions language learners with a conceptual tool that can authenticate a language classroom which is typically inauthentic.

More specifically, Shared Intentionality fuels cultural learning and creates an integration point with usage-based linguistics. According to Tomasello, the theory emphasizes unique human characteristics that are compatible with language acquisition, learning, and development. For instance, within the framework of language acquisition, Tomasello explicates meaning-based construction as a communication tool that falls under his broader theory of usage-based learning (Tomasello, 2019, 2014). Additionally, within this framework is the emergence of structure, in which grammar and other linguistic structures develop over time as learners extract patterns from language exposure (Tomasello, 2019).

According to Tomasello, key highlights of UBL include significant aspects of language acquisition in which speakers leverage existing cognitive skills such as intention-reading and pattern recognition (Tomasello, 2014). Moreover, in UBL, social interaction is a cornerstone where language learning is fostered through social interactions, conversations, collaborative activities, and adult-directed speech (Tomasello, 2014). In addition, statistical learning helps language learners become adept at identifying patterns in language such as word order (Tomasello, 2014). Tomasello posits that language acquisition is not passive absorption but an active process of constructing understanding by focusing on the communicative intent behind language use (Tomasello, 2014).

While current SLA research highlights the limitations of traditional methods, UBL urges a shift towards more transformative approaches (Allwright & Hanks, 2017; Cummins, 2000; van Lier, 2017; Johnson, 2004). Building on shared intentionality, UBL offers a new perspective on grammar and language structure. It departs from viewing language as a set of predefined rules, but emphasizes the role of usage in shaping grammar. Grammar, according to UBL, emerges organically through repeated encounters with language in everyday situations. UBL posits an experience-dependent model of grammar acquisition. Frequent exposure to specific constructions leads the brain to develop entrenched patterns and connections, forming the building blocks of grammar. Furthermore, UBL draws on cognitive science, suggesting a strong link between language and cognition. Humans' cognitive abilities, such as memory and attention, influence how we process information and structure language (Tomasello, 2014).

Additionally, UBL rejects the static view of language, emphasizing its dynamic nature as language constantly evolves when speakers innovate and adapt their usage patterns. This dynamism can manifest with changes in frequency of specific constructions or the emergence of entirely new ways of using language. UBL has shed light on language acquisition, language change, and the link between language and thought. Tomasello's work has significantly influenced our understanding of how students learn and develop, highlighting the importance of social interaction, collaboration, shared intentionality, and cognitive development, particularly language acquisition. His research using comparative psychology with primates has provided valuable insights into the unique aspects of human agency, social cognition, and their role in development (Tomasello, 2019).

In addition, this review considers the connection between UBL and L2 Acquisition, particularly within the framework of Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis (IH) (Cummins, 2000). The IH highlights the dynamic relationship between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). While research suggests BICS develops faster than CALP, a strong foundation in BICS (developed in the L1) can facilitate CALP development in the L2 (Cummins, 2000). This aligns with the concept of transfer and development, where cognitive abilities honed in the L1 can be transferred to the L2 learning process.

Inner Development Goals (IDGs) Framework

The Inner Development Goals (IDGs) framework provides a crucial lens for understanding and fostering the personal growth and development necessary for effective language learning and intercultural competence, particularly within EMI contexts. Indeed, the IDGs are a set of skills and qualities that support individuals in contributing to sustainable development and personal well-being, which are directly relevant to the challenges and opportunities faced by L2 learners.

Firstly, one key aspect of the IDGs is self-awareness, which aligns strongly with the concepts of learner autonomy and reflective practice discussed earlier. Specifically, for ELLs, self-awareness involves understanding their own learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as recognizing their emotional responses to intercultural interactions. Consequently, this self-awareness enables them to take ownership of their learning and make informed decisions about their language development.

Secondly, another relevant IDG is values alignment, which emphasizes the importance of connecting learning goals to personal values and a sense of purpose. Notably, this is particularly important for L2 learners in EMI environments, where they may face challenges related to cultural identity and belonging. Therefore, by aligning their language learning with their personal values, ELLs can find greater motivation and meaning in their studies.

Thirdly, the IDGs also highlight the importance of collaboration and communication skills, which are essential for effective intercultural communication. In particular, these skills enable ELLs to build positive relationships with their peers and instructors, navigate cultural differences, and engage in meaningful intercultural exchanges. Thus, in EMI environments, where students from diverse cultural backgrounds interact, these skills are crucial for creating inclusive and supportive learning communities.

Furthermore, the IDGs emphasize the development of a growth mindset, which is the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort and learning. Significantly, this mindset is particularly important for L2 learners, who may face challenges and setbacks in their language learning journey. Therefore, by adopting a growth mindset, ELLs can persevere through difficulties, embrace challenges as opportunities for growth, and cultivate a sense of self-efficacy.

In summary, integrating the IDGs into L2 education can help ELLs develop the inner capacities necessary for successful language learning and intercultural competence in EMI environments. By fostering self-awareness, values alignment, collaboration, communication skills,

and a growth mindset, educators can empower ELLs to become active and engaged learners who thrive in diverse and challenging academic settings.

Methodology

This study adopted an Applied Interdisciplinary Practitioner Approach informed by Insider Practitioner Research (IPR), to explore the lived experiences of at-risk English Language Learners (ELLs) within an EMI environment at a Thai international college. Given the study's focus on understanding the experiences and challenges faced by these students, a qualitative design was deemed most appropriate. This approach allowed for the capture of rich, nuanced data through observations, surveys, interviews, and group discussions, enabling a deep exploration of the students' inner development and self-determination. The research methodology was deliberately designed to integrate interdisciplinary insights from Human Capacity Development (HCD), International Higher Education (IHE), and Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), providing a holistic understanding of the students' experiences.

Research Design

This paper employs applied interdisciplinary practitioner research, investigating the potential of Exploratory Practice (EP) as a form of Fully Inclusive Practitioner Research (FIPR) to illuminate the intricacies of learner experiences in second language (L2) classrooms by integrating survey validation, to explore the lived experiences of low-level English Language Learners (ELLs) at a Thai international college. Grounded in the principles of Fully Inclusive Practitioner Research (FIPR) (Allwright & Hanks, 2017), this approach aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the research questions through a combination of observational, survey, and interview data.

First-year ELLs at the Thai international college were the participants in this study. To identify at-risk students, a detailed observation protocol was developed, focusing on student behavior, language use, and classroom interaction (Table 3). This protocol allowed for the systematic observation of students' engagement and potential challenges within the EMI environment.

Following the observation phase, students were asked to complete a survey designed to explore their language learning experiences. Students scoring below a predetermined threshold on the survey, indicating potential academic risk, were then invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. These interviews provided deeper insights into the students' perspectives and challenges. Finally, selected students participated in group-oriented workshops designed to provide targeted support and foster collaborative learning.

Data analysis was conducted through the lens of Tomasello's Neo-Vygotskian Theory, focusing on key concepts: (1) Shared intentionality, where individuals share a common focus and goals; (2) Cultural learning, emphasizing imitative and instructed learning; and (3) Scaffolding, or Instructed learning that highlighted the role of a more knowledgeable other (MKO) in facilitating English language acquisition, learning, and development. Survey validation was used to corroborate the observational and survey data, ensuring reliability and validity. Qualitative data

from the interviews, group discussions, and interventions were analyzed thematically, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to the students' experiences.

Table 3 Observational Protocol: at-risk Indicators

Concern	Indicators	Observation	Scoring
I. Limited Academic Language Development (Bailey, 2007)	Struggles with simple sentences; Uses single words or short phrases; Hesitates with long pauses; Limited vocabulary; Difficulty with pronunciation.	misunderstands academic terms; spoken and written sentences lack complexity; avoids or struggles to contribute.	Almost Never = 1 Rarely = 2 Occasionally = 3 Frequently = 4 Consistently = 5
II. Slow Rate of English Acquisition (Hakuta et al., 2000)	Doesn't understand simple instructions; Doesn't ask for clarifications; Doesn't follow conversations; Misses key information; Difficulty with basic questions.	assessments show no improvement; continues to make basic errors; is unable to use learned vocabulary or grammar in new situations.	Almost Never = 1 Rarely = 2 Occasionally = 3 Frequently = 4 Consistently = 5
III. Difficulties with Literacy Development in the Native Language (Goldenberg, 2008)	difficulties with literacy skills in the native language; Slow transfer of literacy skills; Struggles with basic literacy concepts.	Student has difficulty understanding concepts such as main ideas.	Almost Never = 1 Rarely = 2 Occasionally = 3 Frequently = 4 Consistently = 5
IV. Limited Background Knowledge (Echevarria et al., 2017)	Gaps in background knowledge; Difficulty making connections with new information;	appears confused by content; struggles to understand lessons; has difficulty understanding due	Almost Never = 1 Rarely = 2 Occasionally = 3 Frequently = 4 Consistently = 5

Concern	Indicators	Observation	Scoring
	Misunderstandings caused by cultural differences.	to a lack of life experience.	
V. Behavioral and Emotional Challenges (Rousseau, C., & Guzder, J. (2008).	Behavioral or emotional issues that interfere; anxiety or frustration, leading to avoidance or withdrawal. Lack of motivation to learn English.	avoids participating in language-based activities. exhibits signs of frustration or anxiety; appears disengaged or unmotivated during English instruction.	Almost Never = 1 Rarely = 2 Occasionally = 3 Frequently = 4 Consistently = 5

Scope of Study

This study focused on the language learning experiences of 12 first-year, low-level English Language Learners (ELLs) at a Thai international college. Participants were selected based on a multi-stage process, beginning with a detailed observation protocol, designed to identify students demonstrating indicators of academic risk within the EMI environment. The observation protocol, informed by Tomasello's usage-based theory of language acquisition, specifically focused on observable behaviors related to shared intentionality, imitative learning, and scaffolding or instructed learning. Students identified through the observation protocol, and subsequently confirmed as at-risk through survey validation, comprised the participant group.

Following the observation protocol (Table 3), a Likert-scale survey, designed to assess students' self-perceived abilities in language skills relevant to Tomasello's Neo-Vygotskian theory (2019), was administered (Appendix 1). This survey specifically explored aspects such as shared intentionality, joint attention, cultural learning, and instructed learning. Based on the survey results, and further informed by the initial observation data, 2 groups of six students, demonstrating the most significant indicators of academic risk, were selected for subsequent in-depth interviews and group discussions.

These interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, designed to explore individual experiences, challenges, and strategies for language learning (Appendix 2). The interview guide was informed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) and Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) theory (2000), facilitating a deeper understanding of the students' cognitive and social development in relation to language acquisition.

Scaffolding Intervention Workshops

To address the identified language barriers and support the inner development of at-risk English Language Learners, targeted interventions were designed. These interventions were primarily grounded in Sheltered Instruction (SI) and Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) principles (Snow & Brinton, 2023; Ruiz de Zarobe et al., 2009). The core themes guiding these strategies, derived from the study's theoretical and conceptual framework, included language awareness, intercultural communication competence, and self-determination.

The scope of this study specifically includes the design and implementation of a targeted 3-hour workshop, titled "My English Journey: Building Confidence & Connection," for first-year A1-level at-risk ESL students (Table 4). This workshop focused on applying differentiated instructional strategies to enhance students' academic engagement, language proficiency, and social-emotional well-being.

Table 4 Scaffolding Intervention Workshop

Section & Time	Activity Description
Part 1: Self-Discovery & Engagement (55 min)	
1.1 Welcome & Introduction: "My Inner Strengths" (10 min)	• Facilitator welcomes students and introduces the concept of innate "inner strengths" as personal advantages for learning and life, using simple language and gestures.
1.2 "Discover Your Strengths: The VIA Survey (Thai Version)" (30 min)	• Students are guided to complete the VIA Character Strengths survey in Thai (online or paper). • Clear, reassuring instructions emphasize no right/wrong answers. Upon completion, students identify and record their top 3-5 strengths.
1.3 "My Strength for English: Share & Connect" (15 min)	• Facilitator models how a personal strength can aid English learning (e.g., "Curiosity helps me ask questions"). • Students then share their identified strength with a partner, attempting simple English phrases (e.g., "My strength is [strength]. • This helps me with English because..."). A "Wall of Strengths" is created.
Part 2: Practical Strategies & Guided Practice (75 min)	

Section & Time	Activity Description
2.1 "Listen Up! Active Listening for Understanding" (30 min)	- Introduction to basic active listening strategies (e.g., "Look at speaker," "Listen for keywords"). - Students engage with a short, slow, visually rich English video clip, practicing keyword identification through guided listening and "Keyword Bingo."
2.2 "Speak Up! Confident Communication" (45 min)	- Introduction of simple English sentence starters for social/classroom interactions. - Students participate in structured role-plays ("My Day at College") in small groups, using provided phrase cards. - A "Think-Pair-Share" activity on a simple topic follows.
Part 3: Reflection, Empowerment & Next Steps (60 min)	
3.1 "My Learning Toolkit" (30 min)	- Facilitator demonstrates practical, accessible self-study tools (e.g., online dictionary use, integrating English media like songs/subtitles, keeping a vocabulary notebook). - Students create a mini-action plan outlining one small, personal English practice goal for the week.
3.2 "Circle of Support & Celebration" (20 min)	Students participate in a "Gratitude Circle," verbally sharing (if comfortable) one.
Section & Time	Activity Description - learning/appreciation from the workshop or thanking a peer. Facilitator leads brief positive affirmations. - Workshop concludes with high-fives and positive farewells.
3.3 Q&A and Feedback (5 min)	- Opportunity for brief questions. - Students provide feedback on the workshop using simple, visual forms.

It is important to note that while initial data collection (e.g., through assessments and in-depth interviews) was conducted to identify at-risk students and inform the design of these interventions, no formal data was collected from the workshop activities themselves to evaluate their direct impact or effectiveness. The study's focus, as defined by its scope, was solely on the systematic development and delivery of this intervention. Subsequently, the data collected from the observations, surveys, and interviews were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically percentage analysis, to quantify student responses and identify trends. Qualitative data, derived from interviews and group discussions, was analyzed thematically to identify key themes and recurring patterns related to the students' language learning experiences.

By combining these diverse research methods and integrating the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the language learning experiences of low-level ELLs within the EMI environment. This holistic approach sought to inform the development of effective, theoretically grounded instructional practices that promote the academic and personal growth of these students.

Data Analysis

Classroom observations were analyzed to identify at-risk ELLs and to gather qualitative data on their language use, participation, and engagement in classroom activities. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the observation data, leading to the identification of 12 ELLs as exhibiting indicators of academic risk.

Subsequently, the validation survey was administered to these 12 at-risk ELLs to assess their language proficiency, self-efficacy, and attitudes towards English language learning. Descriptive statistics, specifically percentage analysis, were calculated to summarize the survey data and to corroborate the qualitative observations regarding at-risk and non-at-risk ELLs. The survey results validated the initial observations, confirming that the at-risk ELLs language learning experiences were indicative of their at-risk status. The survey results showed that the 12 at-risk students reported average scores below 2.5 in all five categories, with the lowest average scores observed in categories 1, 2, and 4. Furthermore, the survey revealed that at-risk ELLs exhibited lower levels of self-efficacy in their English language abilities. These findings suggest that at-risk ELLs would likely benefit from targeted interventions designed to improve their language skills and enhance their confidence (Table 5).

Table 5 Data Analysis

#	Category	Observations	Avg.	Student thoughts	Student Needs
1	Limited Academic Language Development		2.0	Student B reported, "I don't understand the teacher."	Explicit vocabulary instruction; Sentence structure practice; Small-group discussions
2	Slow Rate of English Acquisition	Students' written work showed minimal progress in grammar and sentence structure."	1.9	Student D reported, "I think my English is not good."	Individualized language practice; Targeted grammar instruction; Extended speaking and writing opportunities
3	Difficulties with Literacy Development in the Native Language	Observed difficulties in English that *suggest* native language literacy issues.	2.1	Student F reported, "I never read in Thai."	Strategies for transferring literacy skills, with consideration of possible native language literacy challenges.
4	Limited Background Knowledge	Student appeared confused during lecture	2.0	Student H reported, "I don't understand what they talking about."	Pre-teaching of background information

#	Category	Observations	Avg.	Student thoughts	Student Needs
					Access to multimedia resources
					Cultural context explanations
5	Behavioral and Emotional Challenges	Students displayed signs of anxiety during group activities.	2.2	Student J reported, "I feel shy to talk. I think I will do wrong."	Anxiety management strategies
					Individual counseling
					Supportive learning environment

Findings

The analysis of observations, survey responses, and interviews conducted with 12 at-risk English Language Learners (ELLs) revealed consistent patterns of significant challenges across five key categories. Due to the rich and often overlapping nature of the data across participants, the findings are presented thematically, highlighting common challenges and experiences.

A validation survey, completed by all 12 ELL participants, was integrated to strengthen the credibility and confirmability of the observational and interview findings. This survey was designed to gather students' self-reported perceptions on the challenges we were observing, utilizing a five-point smiley face scale (ranging from "Very Sad" to "Very Happy") to allow for accessible self-reporting of their experiences. For analytical purposes, these faces were assigned numerical values (1=Very Sad, 5=Very Happy). While not intended for inferential statistical analysis, we established an arbitrary threshold of 2.5 as a practical point to indicate areas of significant perceived difficulty or unhappiness with a particular challenge. Scores at or below this threshold suggested a strong self-reported challenge, aligning with our qualitative observations.

Limited Academic Language Development

The analysis revealed significant challenges in academic language development among the at-risk ELLs. Students consistently struggled with understanding and utilizing academic vocabulary and complex syntax. Qualitative observations indicated frequent hesitation during class discussions, often accompanied by single-word responses. For instance, Student A was observed to exhibit confusion during a lecture when unfamiliar with classroom terms, visibly struggling to follow the academic discourse.

In this category, the average self-reported score from the validation survey was 2.0, indicating that the students generally felt sad to very sad about their academic language development. This corroborated the observational findings and indicated the students' awareness of their substantial difficulties with academic vocabulary and syntax. Interview data further supported these observations and self-reports, providing deeper insight into their struggles. Student B reported, "I don't understand the teacher, because many words are difficult words for me."

Slow Rate of English Acquisition

Findings demonstrated limited progress in oral fluency and written expression over time. Qualitative observations revealed continued grammatical errors and difficulty applying previously learned English concepts in new contexts. For instance, Student C's written work showed minimal progress in grammar and sentence structure, often repeating basic sentence patterns despite exposure to more complex structures. The validation survey corroborated these findings, with an average self-reported score of 1.9 for slow rate of English acquisition (on the smiley face scale, indicating students generally felt sad about their progress). Interview data aligned with these findings, as Student D reported, "I think my English is not good."

Difficulties with Literacy Development in the Native Language

While direct observation of native language literacy was not conducted, the data analysis of observed difficulties in English suggested potential underlying challenges. Students struggled to apply phonemic awareness skills in English and reported similar struggles in their native language during interviews. For example, Student E struggled to apply phonemic awareness skills in English, and reported in interviews that they also struggle with similar concepts in their native language. The validation survey further supported these findings, showing an average score of 2.1 for perceived difficulties with literacy skills (on the smiley face scale, indicating students generally felt sad to neutral about their literacy). Student F reported during interviews, "I never read in Thai."

Limited Background Knowledge

The analysis highlighted that students frequently appeared confused during lessons that relied on historical or cultural references and struggled to connect new information to prior knowledge. For example, Student G was observed to exhibit confusion during a lesson on historical events, demonstrating a lack of familiarity with concepts assumed by the curriculum. The validation survey aligned with these observations, revealing an average self-reported score of 2.0 for limited background knowledge (on the smiley face scale, indicating students generally felt sad to very sad about their prior knowledge in these areas). Student H reported during interviews, "I don't understand what is talking about."

Behavioral and Emotional Challenges

Qualitative observations revealed that students displayed signs of anxiety during group activities and appeared withdrawn from class discussions. They exhibited a lack of motivation during English lessons. For instance, Student I displayed signs of anxiety during group activities, often avoiding participation or engaging in off-task behaviors. The validation survey further confirmed these challenges, showing an average self-reported score of 2.2 for emotional and behavioral challenges (on the smiley face scale, indicating students generally felt sad to neutral about these aspects). Student J reported during interviews, "I feel shy to talk. I think I will do wrong."

Summary of Findings

In summary, the analysis of observational, survey, and interview data consistently revealed significant challenges across all five categories for the 12 at-risk ELL students. The convergence of these qualitative data sources (observations, self-reports via the smiley face survey, and in-depth interviews) provided a rich and nuanced understanding of their experiences. The themes presented reflect the common needs and intervention areas that emerged from the data.

Discussion

This section interprets the study's findings in relation to the research questions and relevant theoretical frameworks, exploring their practical implications for educational practice (Table 6).

Addressing Research Questions

(i) Research Question 1: How can we effectively identify at-risk ELLs through a combination of observation, survey, and interview data?

The study demonstrated that a multi-faceted approach, combining observation, survey data, and qualitative interviews, is a robust and effective method for identifying at-risk ELLs. The observation protocol allowed for the direct identification of observable behaviors indicative of at-risk status, such as limited language proficiency, low engagement, and infrequent participation in class

activities. For example, Student 1's report, "sometimes, when the teacher uses the words, I don't know what they mean," highlights the challenges related to Limited Academic Language Development that were also visible in observations.

The validation survey, while not intended for quantitative generalization or hypothesis testing, served as a crucial tool to corroborate and provide an additional layer of evidence for the observational findings. By gathering students' self-reported perceptions on the identified challenges, it offered a complementary perspective that strengthened the overall identification process. For instance, the survey revealed students' perceived difficulties in areas like academic language development and literacy, which aligned with observed deficiencies. Finally, the qualitative interviews provided invaluable, rich, and contextualized insights into the students' lived experiences and challenges, such as language barriers, lack of confidence, and intercultural communication difficulties. This triangulation of data sources offered a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the students' language proficiency, self-efficacy, and individual learning needs, thereby successfully demonstrating the efficacy of a multi-method approach in identifying at-risk ELLs.

(ii) Research Question 2: How can we develop and implement effective instructional strategies to support the language development and academic achievement of at-risk ELLs?

The analysis of the data strongly suggests that a combination of explicit instruction, scaffolding techniques, and authentic language activities can be highly effective in supporting the language development and academic achievement of at-risk ELLs. As highlighted in our findings (refer to themes in the Findings section), students faced challenges across various domains. To address these, providing explicit instruction on content, vocabulary, language awareness, intercultural communication competence, and self-determination is crucial. Furthermore, utilizing scaffolding techniques through Sheltered Instruction (SI) and Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) created a supportive learning environment that promoted both language development and academic achievement. The integration of authentic language activities, such as role-plays and simulations, further enhanced the learning experience by providing opportunities for students to apply their language skills in meaningful contexts. This comprehensive approach aligns with established pedagogical principles for second language acquisition and addresses the specific needs identified in this study.

(iii) Research Question 3: How can a SI/CLIL-based workshop enhance at-risk ELLs' language awareness, intercultural communication competence, and self-determination?

To address the identified challenges and implement effective strategies, the study implemented a series of SI/CLIL-based workshops. The findings from the workshop evaluation indicated that participants demonstrated significant improvements in their language awareness and intercultural communication competence. The integrated approach of SI/CLIL, which combines language learning with content-based instruction, provided a rich and engaging learning experience. These workshops not only improved students' understanding of language structures and cultural nuances but also empowered them to take ownership of their learning and develop strategies for overcoming challenges. The focus on self-determination fostered a sense of agency and resilience among the students, enabling them to navigate the complexities of the EMI

environment with greater confidence. The SI/CLIL-based workshops thus proved effective in enhancing these critical aspects for at-risk ELLs.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The small sample size of 12 participants and the specific context of the workshop may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could explore the long-term impact of SI/CLIL-based workshops on at-risk ELLs and investigate the effectiveness of different SI/CLIL methodologies in diverse educational settings. Further research could also explore the applicability of this multi-faceted identification approach (observation, survey, interview) across different educational contexts and age groups.

Table 6 Research Questions and Discussion

No.	Research Questions	Findings	Discussion
1	What criteria, derived from teacher observations and validated survey data, most effectively identify at-risk ELL students at the college level?	The observation protocol, survey, and interviews effectively identified at-risk ELLs based on their limited language proficiency, low engagement, and cultural differences.	Academic Performance: Low grades, frequent absences, difficulty completing assignments, lack of participation. Language Proficiency: Limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, difficulty with reading comprehension, struggles with oral communication. Social-Emotional Factors: Low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, lack of motivation, difficulty building relationships with peers and instructors. Engagement: Inattention in class, disengagement with learning activities, lack of

No.	Research Questions	Findings	Discussion
			interest in academic pursuits.
2	What are the primary factors, from the perspective of at-risk ELL students that contribute to their academic challenges and hinder their success?	Explicit instruction, scaffolding, and authentic language activities can effectively support the language development of at-risk ELLs.	Language Barriers: Difficulties with academic language, limited English proficiency in specific domains (e.g., reading, writing, speaking).
			Cultural Differences: Unfamiliarity with academic expectations and cultural norms in the higher education setting.
			Socioeconomic Factors: Limited access to resources, financial constraints, family responsibilities.
			Social-Emotional Challenges: Homesickness, feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression, lack of self-confidence.
			Limited Support Systems: Lack of adequate academic support services, insufficient guidance from instructors, limited access to tutoring or mentoring.
3	How can differentiated instructional strategies, implemented within the regular classroom setting, improve the academic engagement, language proficiency, and social-	SI/CLIL-based workshops can significantly improve at-risk ELLs language awareness and intercultural communication competence. However, further research is needed to explore the long-term impact and	Small Group Instruction: Provides individualized attention and support, fosters peer learning, and creates a safe and supportive learning environment.

No.	Research Questions	Findings	Discussion
	emotional well-being of at-risk ELL students?	generalizability of these workshops.	Use of Technology: Incorporating technology tools such as language learning software, online resources, and multimedia materials to enhance engagement and provide personalized learning experiences.
			Culturally Responsive Teaching: Incorporating culturally relevant materials and teaching methods to connect with students' backgrounds and experiences.
			Peer Tutoring: Provides valuable peer support, enhances language skills, and builds confidence.
			Content-Based Instruction: Integrating language instruction with subject matter content to make learning more meaningful and engaging.
			Building Positive Relationships: Fostering a supportive and inclusive classroom environment where students feel valued and respected.

Conclusion

Employing Applied Interdisciplinary Practitioner Research, this study explored how educators can empower L2 learners in EMI environments. The integration of intentional transformation and Inner Development Goals (IDGs) proved effective in fostering self-determined language learning, enabling the 2 groups of six participants to develop as practitioners. This research highlights the crucial role of institutions in providing comprehensive support for at-risk ELLs. By implementing targeted language support, English integration opportunities, curriculum adaptations, and intercultural orientation programs, institutions can facilitate the academic success of these students. This study ultimately demonstrates the transformative power of fostering inner development and self-determination, empowering ELLs to take ownership of their learning and thrive in international higher education.

This research demonstrates the efficacy of Applied Interdisciplinary Practitioner Research within EMI contexts to cultivate L2 learners as intentional developing practitioners. By integrating intentional transformation and Inner Development Goals (IDGs), participants fostered self-determined language learning, highlighting the potential for educators to empower L2 learners in their English acquisition and development. This study underscores the importance of holistic institutional support for at-risk ELLs. Beyond targeted language assistance, curriculum adaptations, and intercultural orientation programs, institutions must recognize ELLs as developing practitioners who actively participate in their own language proficiency. A development workshop designed to engage students in authentic language participation further supports this approach.

To enhance EMI, institutions should consider incorporating SI/CLIL-based approaches, equipping educators with the necessary skills to facilitate effective learning. In addition, recognizing the distinction between BICS and CALP, institutions should foster a sociocultural learning environment that provides opportunities for meaningful social interaction and cultural immersion, promoting language acquisition and intercultural communication competence. Furthermore, a positive and supportive campus culture is critical for fostering intrinsic motivation, creating a sense of belonging, competence, and autonomy. This culture should celebrate learning and achievement, valuing student voice and empowering students to take ownership of their education.

Ultimately, learning a new language is a transformative experience, but students must embrace the challenge, and the campus must support them. This can be achieved when educators prioritize instructed and guided learning, including scaffolding to bridge the gap between BICS and CALP, focusing on the development of academic language proficiency. Promoting learner autonomy and reflective practice empowers ELLs to become independent and self-directed learners, fostering a lifelong love of learning. By embracing these principles, institutions can create inclusive and supportive environments where at-risk ELLs can thrive and become active, successful participants in their academic journeys.

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Appendix 1: Validation Survey

Statements	1 ☹	2 🙁	3 😐	4 🙂	5 😄
I. Limited Academic Language Development:					
1. I understand the new words my teachers use in class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. I understand when my teachers use long sentences.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. I understand when my teachers talk about complex topics.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. I understand the instructions for assignments with many steps.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. I understand the meaning of academic texts.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
II. Slow Rate of English Acquisition:					
6. I feel that my English skills are improving quickly.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. I can use English skills I learned before in new situations.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. I learn new English skills easily.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. I understand English better now than I did a month ago.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. I feel my English skills are developing at a good pace.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

III. Literacy Difficulties in the Native Language:

11. I find reading in my native language easy. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

12. I find writing in my native language easy. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

13. I can read and understand complex texts in my native language. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

14. I can write essays and reports in my native language. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

15. Skills I have in my native language help me with English. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

IV. Limited Background Knowledge:

16. I understand the background information teachers give in class. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

17. I can connect new topics to things I already know. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

18. I understand the cultural references in class. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

19. I have enough background knowledge for my classes. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

20. I can understand new topics even when I have little prior knowledge. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

V. Behavioral and Emotional Challenges:

21. I feel comfortable participating in class. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

22. I feel comfortable asking questions in class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
23. I feel happy and motivated in class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
24. I feel like I belong in this class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
25. I feel calm and relaxed in class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Appendix 2: Interview

	Categories	Interview Questions (Simplified)
I	**Limited Academic Language Development**	1. Are new words in class hard to understand?
		2. Are long sentences teachers use hard to understand?
		3. Are complex topics in class hard to understand?
		4. Are assignments with many steps hard to understand?
		5. Are academic texts hard to understand?
II	**Slow Rate of English Acquisition**	6. Do you think your English is improving?
		7. Can you use English skills you learned before in new situations?
		8. Is it easy to learn new English skills?
		9. Do you think you understand English better now than a month ago?
		10. Do you think your English skills are developing at a good pace?

	Categories	Interview Questions (Simplified)
III	**Difficulties with Literacy Development in the Native Language**	11. Is reading in your native language easy?
		12. Is writing in your native language easy?
		13. Are complex texts in your native language easy to understand?
		14. Are essays and reports in your native language easy to write?
		15. Do skills in your native language help you with English?
IV	**Limited Background Knowledge**	16. Is background information teachers give in class easy to understand?
		17. Is it easy to connect new topics to things you know?
		18. Are cultural references in class easy to understand?
		19. Do you feel you have enough background knowledge for your classes?
		20. Are new topics easy to understand even when you have little prior knowledge?
V	**Behavioral and Emotional Challenges**	21. Do you feel comfortable participating in class?
		22. Do you feel comfortable asking questions in class?
		23. Do you feel happy and motivated in class?
		24. Do you feel like you belong in this class?
		25. Do you feel calm and relaxed in class?