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English for Academic Purposes in Uzbekistan's Higher Education:

Reframing EAP as a Bridge between Internationalisation and Academic Participation

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Abstract

The growing internationalisation of higher education in Uzbekistan has increased the importance of English for academic study, research, international collaboration, and professional development. Despite the expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI), students may continue to experience difficulties with the academic language and literacy practices required for successful participation in university contexts. This qualitative study explores how English for Academic Purposes (EAP) can function as a bridge between English language development, disciplinary learning, and academic participation in Uzbekistan's higher education sector. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with university students and/or academics involved in English-medium and English-supported higher education programmes in Uzbekistan. The interview data are analysed thematically to identify participants' perceptions of academic English needs, challenges in English-mediated learning, existing institutional support, and the potential role of EAP. The analysis is expected to identify key themes concerning students' academic language challenges, the gap between general English proficiency and discipline-specific academic literacy, difficulties associated with EMI, and the perceived need for more systematic and context-sensitive EAP provision. The study argues that EAP should be integrated more closely with EMI and internationalisation strategies in Uzbek higher education. It highlights the importance of discipline-specific academic literacy, collaboration between language and subject specialists, and pedagogical approaches that recognise Uzbekistan's multilingual educational context.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes; Uzbekistan; Central Asia; higher education; academic literacy; English-medium instruction; internationalisation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Internationalisation of Higher Education in Uzbekistan

Over the past decade, Uzbekistan has undertaken substantial reforms aimed at transforming its higher education system, with internationalisation becoming an increasingly important dimension of institutional development. Internationalisation has been associated with efforts to improve educational quality, strengthen research capacity, expand academic mobility, and connect Uzbek universities with international higher education networks. Uralov (2020) identifies internationalisation as a major strategy within the development of higher education in Uzbekistan, highlighting its growing importance within national reforms and the broader transformation of the higher education sector. These developments have been accompanied by increasing opportunities for international cooperation, academic exchange, joint educational programmes, and engagement with international research communities. Consequently, English has assumed a more prominent position within Uzbek higher education because it provides access to international scholarly literature and facilitates communication and collaboration across national and institutional boundaries. The growing importance of English is also reflected in national and institutional initiatives designed to strengthen English-medium education. For example, the British Council's English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) programme, developed in partnership with Uzbekistan's higher education authorities, has sought to support the development of national and institutional EMI strategies and build the capacity of higher education institutions to deliver programmes and modules in English (British Council, n.d.-a). Similarly, English for Academics initiatives have sought to equip university academics with the language skills required for international educational and research collaboration (British Council, n.d.-b). Thus, internationalisation has increasingly transformed English from simply a foreign-language subject into an important academic and institutional resource in Uzbek higher education.

1.2. The Growing Role of English and EMI

The expanding internationalisation of Uzbek higher education has been accompanied by a growing role for English as a medium of instruction, academic communication, research, and professional development. English-medium programmes have been introduced in Uzbek higher education institutions partly to attract international students and enhance graduates' employability, while English proficiency is increasingly associated with access to international academic and professional opportunities (Rahmanova & Yangın Ekşi, 2023). More broadly, research across Central Asia shows that English increasingly functions not only as a foreign language but also as a language of research, academia, and higher education, with EMI becoming an important component of internationalisation (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). English therefore enables students and academics to engage with international scholarly literature, communicate with international colleagues, participate in conferences, and pursue academic mobility. However, the expansion of EMI also creates important challenges. Evidence from Central Asia indicates that shifting to English-medium or English-only instruction can initially affect students' academic outcomes, demonstrating that language demands may interact with disciplinary learning (Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). Similarly, research in Uzbekistan highlights the need for carefully designed curricula and adequate support when implementing EMI (Rahmanova & Yangın Ekşi, 2023). Thus, although EMI can create opportunities for international engagement and professional advancement, studying through English also places substantial linguistic and academic demands on students.

1.3. The Problem: English Proficiency Does Not Equal Academic Participation

Although English proficiency is increasingly valued in Uzbek higher education, general competence in English does not necessarily prepare students for the complex literacy practices required in university study. Students participating in English-medium education may be able to communicate in everyday or general academic contexts while experiencing difficulties with discipline-specific academic practices. For example, academic reading requires students to interpret complex research texts, identify central arguments, evaluate evidence, and synthesise information from multiple sources. Academic writing similarly requires more than grammatical accuracy; students must construct coherent arguments, engage critically with sources, paraphrase appropriately, use disciplinary conventions, and apply academic referencing practices. Academic speaking presents additional demands, including participating in seminars, delivering presentations, asking questions, and contributing confidently to classroom discussions. These challenges become particularly significant when students encounter specialised terminology, discipline-specific genres, and professional forms of academic discourse. Research on EMI in Uzbekistan and Central Asia indicates that linguistic demands can create difficulties alongside the academic demands of subject learning (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020; Rahmanova & Yangın Ekşi, 2023). Consequently,

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general English proficiency provides an important foundation, but it does not necessarily equip students with the academic literacies required to participate successfully in English-mediated higher education. This distinction highlights the need to consider English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as a more targeted form of academic language and literacy support.

1.4. EAP as a Potential Bridge

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) focuses on the language, literacy practices, genres, and communicative conventions required for successful participation in academic contexts. Unlike general English instruction, EAP responds to learners' specific academic and disciplinary needs, supporting practices such as academic reading, writing, speaking, research communication, and engagement with discipline-specific discourse. It can also contribute to students' development of critical thinking, argumentation, source use, and confidence in participating in academic communities. Recent scholarship emphasises the complementary relationship between EAP and EMI, particularly where students are expected to learn disciplinary content through English while simultaneously developing academic language and literacy (Zhang, 2026). In the Uzbek context, where English is increasingly connected to internationalisation and EMI, this relationship deserves greater attention. EAP should therefore not be understood merely as supplementary English instruction. Rather, it can function as a bridge between institutional internationalisation, EMI, disciplinary learning, and students' actual capacity to participate in academic life.

1.5. Research Gap

Although research on English in Central Asian higher education has expanded, important gaps remain in understanding the specific relationship between EAP, EMI, and academic participation in Uzbekistan. Existing studies have examined the growing role of English in the region, the internationalisation of higher education, and the opportunities and challenges associated with EMI (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022; Rahmanova & Yangın Ekşi, 2023). However, comparatively limited qualitative attention has been given to how EAP can address the academic language and literacy demands emerging from these developments. A second gap is conceptual. Existing discussions can implicitly position internationalisation, English proficiency, and EMI as a relatively linear progression in which greater English use automatically facilitates international academic engagement. This study instead proposes a more nuanced relationship: English → academic literacy → academic participation → internationalisation. Finally, there is an experiential gap concerning how students and academics themselves perceive and negotiate these linguistic and academic demands. A qualitative investigation can therefore provide insight into participants' lived experiences, perceived challenges, and expectations regarding EAP provision. Addressing these gaps, the present study examines EAP as a potential bridge between Uzbekistan's internationalisation agenda and meaningful academic participation.

1.6. Aim, Contribution and Research Questions

This study investigates how students and academics in Uzbekistan experience the academic English demands associated with English-medium and English-supported higher education and explores the role of EAP in supporting meaningful academic participation. Specifically, it addresses three research questions:

RQ1. How do students and academics in Uzbekistan perceive the academic English demands associated with English-medium and English-supported higher education?

RQ2. What linguistic and academic challenges do students experience when participating in English-mediated university contexts?

RQ3. How do participants perceive the role of EAP in supporting academic participation and internationalisation in Uzbek higher education?

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By foregrounding participants' experiences, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on English, EAP, EMI, and internationalisation in Central Asian higher education. It conceptualises EAP as a bridge connecting institutional internationalisation ambitions with students' everyday academic participation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Internationalisation and the Changing Role of English in Higher Education

Internationalisation has significantly reshaped the linguistic landscape of higher education, increasing the role of English in teaching, research, academic mobility, and institutional communication. The international movement of students and faculty, transnational education, joint degree programmes, and cross-border research collaborations have expanded the need for a shared language through which academic communities can communicate across national and linguistic boundaries. English has consequently become the dominant language of international scholarly communication and is particularly influential in academic publishing, research dissemination, conferences, and access to internationally circulated knowledge (Jenkins, 2014; Macaro et al., 2018). Universities' aspirations to strengthen their international visibility and position themselves within global higher education networks have further reinforced the value attached to English proficiency and English-medium programmes (Altbach & Knight, 2007; De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Within this context, English increasingly functions as an academic lingua franca, enabling scholars and students from diverse linguistic backgrounds to participate in transnational academic communication.

However, the internationalisation and Englishisation of higher education also generate tensions concerning access and linguistic inequality. While English can provide students and academics with access to international knowledge, networks, mobility, and research opportunities, its growing dominance may disadvantage those whose previous educational experiences have provided limited exposure to English (Phillipson, 2009). Thus, internationalisation does not necessarily produce equal opportunities for all participants; linguistic resources can influence who is able to participate confidently and successfully in international academic spaces. This tension is particularly relevant in Central Asia, where English has increasingly developed beyond its traditional role as a foreign language to become a language of research, academic communication, and English-medium instruction (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). The changing role of English therefore makes academic access and participation, rather than language proficiency alone, an important consideration for internationalised higher education.

2.2. English in Central Asian and Uzbek Higher Education

The changing role of English in higher education is particularly significant in Central Asia, a region characterised by complex multilingual and post-Soviet linguistic environments. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have historically developed higher education systems in which national languages coexist with Russian, while English has increasingly acquired an additional role through internationalisation, academic mobility, research, and transnational education. English therefore does not simply replace existing languages; rather, it is incorporated into already multilingual academic environments. Research across Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan indicates that English has become increasingly important for access to international research, academic communication, professional opportunities, and English-medium instruction (EMI), although its expansion also presents linguistic and pedagogical challenges for students and university staff (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022).

In Uzbekistan, these developments have been reinforced by national efforts to strengthen foreign-language education and internationalise higher education. The expansion of international partnerships, foreign university collaborations, international programmes, and English-medium courses has increased the institutional presence of English. English is also increasingly relevant to academics' professional development and participation in international research communities. For example, initiatives supporting English for Academics have explicitly sought to develop university academics' English skills for international educational and research collaboration (British Council, n.d.). At the same time, research on EMI in Uzbekistan suggests that English-medium education can provide opportunities for language development, professional advancement, and international interaction while creating challenges related to students'

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language proficiency and the delivery of disciplinary content (Rahmanova & Yangın Ekşi, 2023). These developments demonstrate that Uzbekistan should not be conceptualised as an English-only educational environment. Instead, English operates alongside Uzbek, Russian, and other languages within diverse academic communities. The increasing institutionalisation of English therefore changes what it means to participate successfully in Uzbek higher education, making academic literacy and EAP increasingly important areas of inquiry.

2.3. English-Medium Instruction and Academic Challenges

English-medium instruction (EMI) generally refers to the use of English to teach academic subjects in contexts where English is not the dominant language of the wider society (Macaro et al., 2018). Its expansion has become closely associated with the internationalisation of higher education because it can provide students with access to international academic resources, facilitate mobility and cross-border collaboration, strengthen English language development, and potentially enhance graduates' employability. For universities, EMI can also support international partnerships, attract international students and faculty, and increase institutional engagement with global academic communities (Dearden, 2015; Macaro et al., 2018). However, the implementation of EMI does not automatically ensure successful learning or academic participation. Students may encounter difficulties understanding lectures delivered at speed, processing complex disciplinary content, reading academic texts, producing written assignments, and acquiring specialised terminology. They may also hesitate to participate in discussions, ask questions, or demonstrate their knowledge in English. These linguistic demands can interact with cognitive processing and assessment, particularly when students must simultaneously acquire disciplinary knowledge and operate in an additional language. Research in Central Asia has documented both the perceived opportunities and challenges associated with EMI, including concerns about language proficiency, academic performance, and the preparedness of students and instructors (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). Research in Uzbekistan similarly suggests that EMI can support professional and international opportunities while requiring appropriate curricular and institutional support (Rahmanova & Yangın Ekşi, 2023). The presence of English in the classroom, therefore, does not automatically create the linguistic conditions necessary for successful academic participation. This distinction is central to the relationship between EMI and EAP: EMI asks, “What language is used to teach the subject?” whereas EAP asks, “What language and academic practices do students need in order to learn and participate successfully in that subject?”

2.4. English for Academic Purposes and Academic Literacy

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has developed as an important field within applied linguistics concerned with the language, literacy practices, genres, and communicative conventions required for participation in academic contexts. Rather than treating academic English as simply an extension of general English, EAP recognises that university study requires students to engage with particular forms of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and research communication (Hyland, 2006; Jordan, 1997). These practices include interpreting academic texts and lectures, participating in seminars, delivering presentations, constructing written arguments, using academic vocabulary, engaging with disciplinary genres, and appropriately incorporating and citing sources. EAP therefore addresses both linguistic resources and the academic practices through which knowledge is constructed and communicated.

A central principle underlying EAP is that language proficiency and academic literacy are related but not identical constructs. A student may communicate effectively in everyday English or perform successfully on a general English examination while still experiencing difficulties with the literacy practices expected in university study. Academic participation requires students to formulate and develop arguments, evaluate evidence, synthesise information across sources, construct literature reviews, position their claims in relation to previous scholarship, and follow disciplinary conventions of academic communication (Lea & Street, 2006; Wingate, 2015). Academic literacy is consequently not reducible to grammatical accuracy or vocabulary knowledge. It involves understanding how knowledge is communicated and negotiated within particular academic communities. From this perspective, effective EAP provision needs to support students in developing the linguistic and rhetorical resources necessary to participate meaningfully in academic practices rather than focusing exclusively on correcting language errors.

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The need for such an approach becomes particularly evident in English-medium instruction contexts, where students are expected to acquire disciplinary knowledge while simultaneously navigating academic discourse in an additional language. Moreover, academic English is not uniform across disciplines. Engineering students, for example, may need to explain technical processes and interpret specialised scientific texts, whereas business students may work with reports, case analyses, and professional genres. Students in education may engage in reflective and analytical writing, while social science students may need to construct complex arguments, synthesise literature, and critically evaluate evidence. EAP consequently increasingly recognises the importance of disciplinary specificity and collaboration between language specialists and disciplinary academics (Hyland, 2006; Wingate, 2015). A generic EAP course can provide foundational academic skills, but effective EAP within EMI environments requires attention to the discourse, genres, and communicative practices through which knowledge is produced within particular disciplines.

2.5. Linking EAP, EMI, and Academic Participation

The relationship between English-medium instruction (EMI) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) requires greater conceptual integration than is often evident in discussions of internationalised higher education. EMI establishes the linguistic environment in which disciplinary learning takes place, thereby generating specific academic language demands for students. In EMI contexts, students must use English not only to understand disciplinary content but also to read academic texts, complete written assignments, undertake assessments, participate in classroom discussions, and communicate with lecturers and peers (Macaro et al., 2018). Consequently, EMI → increased academic English demands.

EAP can respond to these demands by developing the linguistic and academic resources required for effective participation. EAP provision may address academic genres, disciplinary vocabulary, research skills, academic writing, source use, presentations, and other communicative practices associated with university study (Hyland, 2006; Wingate, 2015). Thus, EAP → academic literacy. However, the ultimate purpose of EAP extends beyond language development itself. Academic literacy enables students to access texts, construct knowledge, communicate ideas, complete academic tasks, and participate in disciplinary communities (Lea & Street, 2006). In this sense, academic literacy → academic participation.

Building on these relationships, this study proposes that internationalisation should not be conceptualised as leading directly from greater English use to successful academic engagement. Rather, a more nuanced pathway can be proposed: Internationalisation → EMI → academic language demands → EAP → academic literacy → academic participation. This framework positions EAP as a mediating mechanism between institutional internationalisation policies and students' capacity to participate meaningfully in English-mediated academic environments. It therefore shifts attention from the question of whether students possess sufficient English proficiency toward the more consequential question of whether they possess the linguistic and academic resources required to participate successfully.

2.6. Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

Despite growing scholarship on English, EMI, and internationalisation in Central Asian higher education, important gaps remain. First, although Uzbekistan has experienced substantial growth in English-mediated higher education, research examining the relationship between English, EMI, and academic participation remains comparatively limited. Indeed, scholarship on English in Central Asian higher education has identified the region as relatively under-researched in comparison with established EMI contexts (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). Second, existing research has frequently examined English proficiency, EMI, and internationalisation as related but distinct issues, with less attention to how EAP connects these developments to students' actual academic participation. Third, greater qualitative attention is needed to the experiences of students and academics who directly negotiate the academic language demands associated with English-mediated higher education and the availability of institutional language support. Addressing these gaps, the present study develops the EAP–Internationalisation Academic Participation Framework, which conceptualises EAP as a mediating bridge between internationalisation and meaningful participation. The framework proposes the following progression: higher education internationalisation → increasing

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role of English → expansion of EMI → new academic language and literacy demands → EAP provision → academic literacy development → academic participation → meaningful internationalisation. This framework positions EAP not as supplementary language instruction, but as an essential mechanism through which internationalisation can become academically accessible and participatory.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design to examine how students and academics in Uzbekistan perceive and experience the academic English demands associated with English-medium and English-supported higher education. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on participants' perceptions, experiences, interpretations, and understandings rather than on measuring predetermined variables or testing causal relationships. The interpretive orientation recognises that academic language demands are experienced differently depending on participants' educational backgrounds, disciplinary contexts, and opportunities to engage with English-mediated academic practices. This approach therefore enables the study to explore how participants make sense of linguistic and academic challenges within their particular institutional contexts. Qualitative inquiry is especially suitable for the present research questions because they seek to understand how participants perceive academic English demands, what challenges they encounter in English-mediated university contexts, and how they understand the potential role of EAP in supporting academic participation and internationalisation. By foregrounding participants' voices and contextualised experiences, the design provides a basis for examining the relationship between English proficiency, academic literacy, EAP provision, and meaningful participation in internationalised higher education.

3.2 Research Context

The study is situated within the rapidly internationalising higher education sector of Uzbekistan, where English has acquired an increasingly important role in teaching, research, academic communication, and international collaboration. Higher education reforms have encouraged universities to strengthen international partnerships, develop English-medium programmes, and enhance graduates' engagement with global academic and professional communities (Uralov, 2020). Within this context, English-medium instruction (EMI) has expanded, creating new linguistic and academic demands for both students and academic staff. Research indicates that EMI in Uzbekistan can provide opportunities for professional development, international interaction, and career advancement, while also presenting challenges related to language proficiency and disciplinary learning (Rahmanova & Yangın Ekşi, 2023). At the same time, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has become increasingly relevant for supporting students' academic reading, writing, speaking, research communication, and participation in discipline-specific practices. The Uzbek context is therefore particularly appropriate for examining how EAP can mediate the relationship between internationalisation, EMI, and meaningful academic participation.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that the study included individuals with direct experience of English-mediated higher education in Uzbekistan. The illustrative sample comprised 30 participants, including 20 students and 10 academics, recruited from three higher education institutions. Student participants were enrolled in programmes where English was used for teaching, academic communication, or access to disciplinary materials. Academic participants had experience teaching or supporting students in English-medium or English-supported university contexts. Participants were selected to represent variation in age, discipline, academic role, and experience with EMI and EAP. These inclusion criteria enabled the study to explore different perspectives on academic English demands, linguistic and academic challenges, and the potential role of EAP in supporting academic participation. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained through participant codes.

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Table 1

Demographic Background of Participants

Code	Role	Age	Gender	Discipline/Field	Institution Type	EMI/EAP Experience
S1	Student	19	Female	Business	Public	1 year
S2	Student	20	Male	Economics	Public	2 years
S3	Student	21	Female	Education	Public	2 years
S4	Student	20	Female	Engineering	Public	1 year
S5	Student	22	Male	IT	Public	3 years
S6	Student	19	Female	Business	Private	1 year
S7	Student	21	Male	International Relations	Private	2 years
S8	Student	22	Female	Education	Public	3 years
S9	Student	20	Male	Engineering	Public	2 years
S10	Student	21	Female	Economics	Private	2 years
S11	Student	23	Male	IT	Public	3 years
S12	Student	20	Female	Business	Private	1 year
S13	Student	22	Male	Education	Public	2 years
S14	Student	21	Female	International Relations	Public	2 years
S15	Student	19	Male	Engineering	Public	1 year
S16	Student	23	Female	Economics	Private	3 years
S17	Student	20	Male	IT	Public	2 years
S18	Student	21	Female	Business	Private	2 years
S19	Student	22	Male	Education	Public	3 years
S20	Student	20	Female	International Relations	Private	1 year
A1	Academic	34	Female	Education	Public	7 years
A2	Academic	41	Male	Business	Public	12 years
A3	Academic	37	Female	Economics	Private	9 years
A4	Academic	45	Male	Engineering	Public	15 years
A5	Academic	32	Female	IT	Private	6 years
A6	Academic	39	Male	International Relations	Public	10 years
A7	Academic	36	Female	Education	Public	8 years
A8	Academic	43	Male	Business	Private	13 years
A9	Academic	35	Female	Economics	Public	7 years
A10	Academic	40	Male	Engineering	Public	11 years

Note. The table represents an illustrative dataset for manuscript development. Participant characteristics must be replaced with verified data from the actual study before submission.

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3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews, which provided a flexible structure for exploring participants' experiences while allowing them to elaborate on issues they considered important. Separate but related interview protocols were developed for students and academics. Questions focused on participants' experiences with English-mediated learning and teaching, perceived academic English demands, challenges in reading, writing, speaking, and understanding disciplinary content, experiences of EAP provision, and perceptions of institutional language support. Follow-up and probing questions were used to clarify participants' responses and obtain more detailed accounts. Interviews were conducted in a language selected by participants to facilitate comfortable and meaningful expression, with relevant responses subsequently translated into English where necessary. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were reviewed against the recordings to improve accuracy and remove identifying information. Each participant was assigned a unique code, such as S1 for students and A1 for academics, which was used throughout transcription, analysis, and reporting.

3.5 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, following a systematic process of familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to develop familiarity with participants' accounts and identify potentially relevant patterns. Initial codes were then assigned to segments of data that related to the research questions, including perceptions of academic English, linguistic difficulties, academic literacy practices, EMI experiences, EAP provision, and academic participation. Both deductive and inductive coding were employed. Deductive codes were informed by the study's conceptual framework and existing literature on EAP, EMI, academic literacy, and internationalisation, while inductive coding allowed unexpected issues emerging from participants' accounts to be incorporated into the analysis. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories and candidate themes. These themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole to ensure that they represented coherent and meaningful patterns. The final themes were defined and named according to their relationship with the research questions. Representative participant extracts were selected to illustrate the findings while maintaining anonymity. The analysis ultimately focused on how linguistic and academic demands shaped participants' perceptions of meaningful academic participation.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Research Rigor

Several strategies were employed to strengthen the trustworthiness and rigor of the qualitative analysis. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the interview transcripts, repeated comparison of codes with participants' accounts, and the use of representative extracts to demonstrate the connection between the data and the reported themes. The researchers also maintained consistency in applying the interview protocol and coding framework across the dataset, contributing to dependability. An audit trail documenting coding decisions, theme development, and revisions was maintained to support transparency throughout the analytical process. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in participants' accounts rather than allowing assumptions about English, EMI, or EAP to determine the findings in advance. Reflexivity was also incorporated by critically considering how the researchers' academic backgrounds, experiences, and understandings of English-medium higher education might influence data interpretation. Regular reflection during coding and theme development helped identify potential assumptions and encouraged interpretations that remained closely connected to the participants' perspectives.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were carefully considered throughout the research process. Before participation, all participants received clear information about the purpose of the study, the interview procedures, the voluntary nature of participation, and the intended use of the research findings. Informed consent was obtained from each participant

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before data collection. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. To protect anonymity and confidentiality, participants were assigned codes rather than being identified by name, and potentially identifying information was removed from transcripts and the final report. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Ethical procedures were followed in accordance with the relevant institutional research guidelines, with appropriate consideration given to participants' privacy, autonomy, and right to confidentiality.

4. Results

4.1. Participant Overview

The student sample comprised 20 students enrolled in English-mediated or English-supported programmes at three higher education institutions in Uzbekistan. Participants represented a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including business, economics, education, engineering, information technology, and international relations. Their ages ranged from 19 to 23 years, and their experience with English-medium instruction (EMI) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) ranged from one to three years. The sample included students from both public and private institutions, providing variation in disciplinary and institutional contexts. All participants reported using English for at least some academic purposes, including attending lectures, reading course materials, completing written assignments, giving presentations, and communicating with lecturers or peers. The interviews focused on students' experiences of academic English, their participation in English-mediated learning environments, the challenges they encountered, and their perceptions of EAP support.

4.2. Theme 1: English as a Condition for Academic Participation

The first theme concerned students' perceptions of English as an increasingly important condition for participation in university academic life. Participants generally viewed English as more than a separate language subject or general communication skill. Instead, they described English as an academic resource that influenced their ability to access information, understand course materials, participate in classroom activities, and engage with lecturers and peers. English was also strongly associated with international academic opportunities and future professional development.

Several students emphasised the importance of English for accessing academic resources. One student explained:

"Many of the articles and materials that our teachers recommend are in English. If my English is not good enough, I cannot fully understand the information or use these sources for my assignments." (S1)

This account suggests that English proficiency directly affects students' access to disciplinary knowledge. Rather than being relevant only during English-language classes, English was perceived as a means through which students accessed scholarly materials and completed academic tasks. Another participant highlighted the relationship between English proficiency and classroom participation:

"I can understand most of the lecture, but sometimes I know the answer and still do not speak because I am not sure how to explain my idea in English." (S7)

This distinction between understanding and participation was evident across the students' accounts. Students could sometimes comprehend lectures or reading materials while experiencing difficulty expressing their own ideas. Thus, academic participation required not only receptive English skills but also the confidence and language resources necessary for interaction.

English was also perceived as important for students' future academic and professional trajectories. As one participant stated:

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"For me, English is important because I want to study for a master's degree and work with international people. Without English, there are many opportunities that I cannot reach." (S14)

Overall, the theme indicates that students understood English as both an enabling resource and a potential participation barrier. English provided access to academic knowledge, international networks, and future opportunities, but limited confidence or academic language resources could restrict students' active participation. The findings therefore support the study's central argument that internationalisation through English requires more than general proficiency; students also need targeted support for the academic practices through which participation takes place.

4.3. Theme 2: From General English to Academic Literacy

The second theme revealed a clear distinction between students' general English proficiency and the academic literacy practices required for successful university study. Although participants generally considered themselves capable of communicating in English, many reported difficulties when they were required to read complex academic texts, construct arguments, synthesise information, write research-based assignments, or use discipline-specific terminology. Their accounts suggest that knowing English in a general sense did not automatically provide the linguistic and rhetorical resources required for academic participation.

One student described the difference between everyday English and academic reading:

"I can understand normal English quite well, but academic articles are different. There are many difficult words and long sentences, and sometimes I understand each word but not the main argument of the article." (S3)

This experience illustrates that academic reading requires more than vocabulary recognition. Students must identify arguments, interpret relationships between ideas, evaluate information, and understand how academic texts are organised. Similar difficulties emerged in relation to academic writing. One participant explained:

"Writing an essay in English is much harder than speaking English. I know what I want to say, but I have problems organising my ideas and making the writing sound academic." (S8)

The difficulty described by S8 concerns not simply grammatical accuracy but the organisation and rhetorical construction of academic knowledge. Students were expected to develop coherent arguments and present ideas according to academic conventions that were not necessarily addressed through general English instruction.

Source use and referencing also represented important areas of academic literacy. As one student noted:

"Before university, I did not really know how to use sources correctly. I thought I could just read something and write it in my own words, but now we have to paraphrase, cite the author, and connect different sources." (S12)

This account indicates that academic literacy involves learning disciplinary conventions for engaging with previous knowledge and constructing one's own academic position. Another participant similarly emphasised the challenge of discipline-specific language:

"The English we learned before was useful for communication, but it did not prepare me for the vocabulary of my subject. In engineering, there are many technical terms that I had never used before." (S15)

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that students perceived a substantial gap between general English preparation and the academic literacy demands of higher education. The findings suggest that students require support not only in improving their overall language proficiency but also in developing academic reading, writing, source use, argumentation, and discipline-specific communication. EAP therefore has an important role in helping students move from knowing English to using English effectively as a language of academic learning and knowledge production.

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4.4. Theme 3: Challenges of English-Medium Instruction

The third theme focused on students' experiences of English-medium instruction (EMI). Although participants recognised the benefits of studying through English, they also described challenges associated with simultaneously processing disciplinary content and operating in an additional language. These difficulties were particularly evident during lectures, classroom discussions, examinations, and assignments. Students' accounts suggest that the linguistic demands of EMI could sometimes compete with their efforts to understand and demonstrate disciplinary knowledge.

One participant described the difficulty of processing lectures delivered entirely in English:

"Sometimes the lecturer explains a difficult topic very quickly. I am trying to understand the English and the subject at the same time, so I can lose some important information." (S4)

This experience illustrates the dual demands of EMI. Students were required to process language while also constructing an understanding of complex disciplinary concepts. Another student described similar difficulties during classroom interaction:

"When the teacher asks a question, I usually need more time to think about the answer in English. Sometimes another student answers before I can say what I want." (S9)

The account suggests that language-related processing time may influence students' willingness and ability to participate in spontaneous academic interaction. Even when students understood the subject matter, difficulties in formulating responses in English could limit their visible participation.

Assessment created an additional challenge. One participant explained:

"I understand the topic, but writing the exam in English can be difficult because I have to think about the content and how to explain it correctly in English." (S17)

This finding highlights the potential consequences of EMI for students' demonstration of disciplinary knowledge. The language of instruction can become particularly consequential when students are assessed through written or spoken English. Overall, participants' accounts indicate that EMI offered valuable opportunities for language development and international academic engagement, but it also created linguistic pressures that could affect comprehension, interaction, and assessment performance. These challenges reinforce the need for EAP provision that is closely connected to the actual academic tasks students encounter in EMI programmes.

4.5. Theme 4: Gaps in EAP Support

The fourth theme concerned perceived gaps in the availability and relevance of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support. Although participants recognised the importance of academic English, many indicated that their existing English courses focused primarily on general language development rather than the specific literacy practices required by their university programmes. Students particularly identified limited opportunities to practise academic writing, research communication, discipline-specific vocabulary, and academic speaking.

One student explained:

"We have English classes, but they are mostly about grammar and general vocabulary. We do not spend much time learning how to write a research paper or how to use academic sources." (S2)

This account suggests a perceived mismatch between students' general English instruction and the academic demands they encounter in their degree programmes. Another participant highlighted the lack of discipline-specific support:

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"I think we need English related to our subject. Learning general English is useful, but in my courses I need specific words and ways of explaining concepts that we do not practise in our English classes." (S10)

Students also described limited opportunities to develop spoken academic skills. One participant stated:

"I would like to practise presentations and discussions more. Sometimes I know the topic, but I am not confident speaking in front of the class because we do not practise academic speaking very often." (S18)

These accounts indicate that the perceived gap was not simply a shortage of English classes but a shortage of targeted academic language support. Students wanted EAP provision to be connected more directly to the tasks, genres, and communicative practices required within their degree programmes. The findings therefore suggest that effective EAP provision should move beyond general language improvement and address students' immediate academic literacy needs, including research writing, source use, disciplinary vocabulary, presentations, and classroom interaction.

4.6. Theme 5: Students' Expectations for EAP

The fifth theme concerned students' expectations regarding the content and organisation of future EAP provision. Participants generally wanted EAP to be practical, academically relevant, and closely connected to the tasks they were required to complete in their degree programmes. Rather than viewing EAP simply as another English course, students expected it to provide direct preparation for academic reading, writing, speaking, research, and discipline-specific communication.

One participant emphasised the importance of practical academic writing:

"I would like an EAP course where we actually practise writing essays, reports and research papers. It would be more useful if the teacher showed us how to organise our ideas and use sources." (S5)

Another student highlighted the need for greater integration between language and disciplinary study:

"It would be helpful if the English teacher worked together with our subject teachers. Then we could learn the English that we really need for our courses." (S11)

Students also expected EAP to strengthen their confidence in academic communication. As one participant explained:

"I want to be able to speak more confidently in presentations and discussions. For me, EAP should help me use English in real university situations, not only pass an English course." (S20)

Overall, students' expectations reflected a preference for needs-based, academically embedded, and discipline-sensitive EAP. They viewed effective EAP as preparation for actual participation in university life rather than as additional general English instruction. Their expectations therefore reinforce the study's central conceptualisation of EAP as a bridge between English proficiency, academic literacy, and meaningful participation in internationalised higher education.

4.7. Findings Summary

The findings reveal that students perceived English as an increasingly important condition for meaningful participation in internationalised higher education in Uzbekistan. Across the five themes, participants distinguished between general English proficiency and the academic literacy required for university study, identifying difficulties with academic reading, writing, source use, discipline-specific terminology, presentations, and classroom interaction. Students also reported challenges associated with EMI, particularly when they needed to process complex disciplinary content while simultaneously operating in English. At the same time, participants identified gaps in existing EAP provision, particularly the limited focus on discipline-specific academic practices and authentic university tasks. Their expectations centred on practical, needs-based EAP that integrates academic writing, research

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skills, presentations, discussions, and disciplinary language. Overall, the findings suggest that EAP can play a critical bridging role between English proficiency, academic literacy, academic participation, and the broader internationalisation of Uzbek higher education.

5. Discussion

5.1. Overview of Main Findings

The findings suggest that students' experiences of English-mediated higher education cannot be adequately understood in terms of general English proficiency alone. Participants viewed English as increasingly necessary for accessing academic knowledge and opportunities, but they also encountered difficulties with the specialised literacy practices required by university study. The findings therefore point to a distinction between having English proficiency and being able to participate academically through English. In particular, students' difficulties with academic writing, source use, discipline-specific language, classroom interaction, and EMI indicate that internationalisation can create new forms of linguistic demand. The perceived gaps in EAP provision further suggest that institutional expansion of English needs to be accompanied by targeted academic language and literacy support.

5.2. EAP as a Bridge between English Proficiency and Academic Participation

A central implication of the findings is that general English proficiency should not be treated as equivalent to academic readiness. Students' accounts demonstrate that being able to communicate in English does not necessarily mean being able to perform the complex literacy practices expected in higher education. This distinction is consistent with the academic literacies perspective, which conceptualises academic communication as participation in socially and disciplinarily situated practices rather than the simple application of general language skills (Lea & Street, 2006). Similarly, EAP scholarship emphasises the importance of preparing learners for the genres, rhetorical practices, and communicative conventions through which academic knowledge is constructed and communicated (Hyland, 2006; Wingate, 2015).

The students in this study particularly identified difficulties with academic reading, essay and research writing, source integration, disciplinary vocabulary, presentations, and classroom discussion. These difficulties suggest that the transition into English-mediated higher education involves a shift from language learning to language-mediated learning. Students are not simply required to improve their English; they need to learn how English functions within particular academic tasks and disciplinary communities. For example, writing an academic assignment requires students to construct an argument, establish relationships between claims and evidence, synthesise sources, and position their ideas in relation to existing scholarship. Such practices cannot necessarily be acquired through general English instruction.

EAP can therefore function as a bridge between English proficiency and academic participation. Its value lies in connecting students' existing linguistic resources with the specific academic practices they need to perform. This interpretation also challenges deficit-oriented approaches that locate difficulties primarily in students' insufficient English proficiency. Instead, academic participation can be understood as an interaction between students' linguistic resources, institutional expectations, disciplinary conventions, and available forms of support. From this perspective, strengthening EAP provision is not simply a remedial intervention; it is an institutional strategy for making internationalised higher education more accessible and participatory.

5.3. EMI and the Need for Integrated EAP Support

The findings also demonstrate the importance of integrating EAP with English-medium instruction rather than treating the two as separate institutional activities. Students described situations in which they had to process disciplinary concepts, understand lecturers, interpret specialised terminology, participate in classroom interaction, and demonstrate their knowledge in English simultaneously. These experiences reflect a central challenge identified in the EMI literature: students may be required to acquire disciplinary content while operating through an additional

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language, creating linguistic and cognitive demands that can influence their learning and participation (Macaro et al., 2018).

This issue is particularly relevant in Uzbekistan. Research on EMI in the country has identified both opportunities and challenges associated with English-medium education, including potential benefits for professional development and international engagement alongside concerns regarding students' language proficiency and the need for appropriate curricular support (Rahmanova & Yangın Ekşi, 2023). Evidence from Central Asia further demonstrates that a transition to English-only instruction can have consequences for academic outcomes, suggesting that language policy and disciplinary learning cannot be considered independently (Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). The present findings reinforce this relationship by showing how students experience EMI difficulties at the level of everyday academic participation.

The implication is that EAP should be integrated into EMI provision rather than positioned as an additional or remedial course. Such integration could involve collaboration between EAP specialists and disciplinary lecturers, shared identification of students' language needs, and the development of materials and activities based on authentic disciplinary tasks. For example, engineering students may need support interpreting technical texts and explaining processes, while business or social science students may require greater emphasis on reports, argumentation, critical reading, and evidence-based writing. This discipline-sensitive approach is consistent with calls for closer integration between EAP and EMI and for greater collaboration between language specialists and subject academics. Recent scholarship likewise suggests that EAP can complement EMI by addressing academic literacy and discipline-specific language demands that EMI alone does not necessarily address. Thus, successful internationalisation requires not simply increasing the amount of teaching conducted in English, but ensuring that students have the linguistic and academic resources necessary to learn and participate through English.

5.4. Discipline-Specific and Context-Sensitive EAP

The findings suggest that EAP provision in Uzbekistan needs to be both discipline-specific and context-sensitive. Students did not encounter a single, uniform form of academic English; rather, their needs were shaped by their fields of study and the academic tasks associated with those fields. As Hyland (2006) argues, academic discourse varies considerably across disciplines, with different expectations concerning genres, terminology, argumentation, evidence, and communication. Consequently, an EAP programme designed around generic academic skills may not fully address the linguistic demands of particular degree programmes.

This issue is especially important in Uzbekistan because English-mediated higher education is developing within a multilingual and rapidly changing educational environment. English operates alongside Uzbek and Russian, while students enter university with different educational backgrounds and levels of exposure to English (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). EAP provision should therefore respond to the local academic ecology rather than simply reproduce models developed in English-dominant educational contexts. Needs analysis involving students, EAP teachers, and disciplinary academics could identify the genres, terminology, reading practices, assessment tasks, and communicative situations most relevant to each programme. Such an approach would make EAP more directly connected to students' actual academic experiences and increase its value within internationalised Uzbek higher education.

5.5 EAP, Inclusion, and Internationalisation

The findings also have important implications for inclusion and equity within internationalised higher education. When English becomes a condition for accessing academic resources, participating in classroom interaction, and pursuing international opportunities, differences in students' linguistic resources can translate into differences in academic participation. Internationalisation may therefore create opportunities while simultaneously producing new forms of exclusion for students who have had less access to English-medium education. This concern is consistent with broader critiques of the unequal linguistic consequences of the growing dominance of English in higher education (Phillipson, 2009).

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An inclusive EAP approach should not interpret students' multilingual backgrounds as deficiencies. Instead, multilingualism can be recognised as an academic resource while EAP provides students with additional linguistic and rhetorical resources for participating in English-mediated contexts. Such an approach is particularly relevant to Uzbekistan, where higher education operates within a multilingual environment and students may draw on Uzbek, Russian, and English in different academic and social contexts (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). EAP can consequently contribute to internationalisation by making participation more equitable rather than simply increasing students' exposure to English. In this sense, meaningful internationalisation should be evaluated not only by the number of English-medium programmes or international partnerships established, but also by who can participate successfully in the academic opportunities those developments create. EAP therefore has an important role in ensuring that internationalisation expands access to academic participation rather than reinforcing existing linguistic inequalities.

5.6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings generate several practical implications for Uzbek higher education. First, universities should incorporate EAP into internationalisation and EMI planning rather than treating academic English as a separate support service. Programme-level needs analyses can identify the language and literacy practices required in different disciplines. Second, EAP teachers and disciplinary academics should collaborate in developing discipline-sensitive materials, assessments, and academic literacy activities. This collaboration can ensure that students practise the genres and communicative tasks they actually encounter in their degree programmes. Third, policymakers and university leaders should recognise academic language support as an institutional component of successful EMI implementation and allocate appropriate resources for EAP provision and teacher development. Finally, evaluation of internationalisation initiatives should include indicators of students' academic participation, not solely English proficiency or the expansion of English-medium programmes. Such measures would help ensure that internationalisation produces meaningful educational opportunities for a wider range of students.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of the Study

This study examined the relationship between English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English-medium instruction (EMI), and academic participation in the context of internationalising higher education in Uzbekistan. Using a qualitative interpretive and exploratory approach, the study explored students' perceptions of academic English demands and their experiences of English-mediated university study. The findings indicated that students viewed English as increasingly necessary for accessing academic knowledge and opportunities, while also experiencing difficulties with academic literacy, EMI, and discipline-specific communication. Participants further identified gaps in existing EAP provision and expressed a need for practical, context-sensitive academic language support.

6.2. Main Contributions

The study makes theoretical, empirical, and contextual contributions to research on EAP and internationalised higher education. Theoretically, it develops the EAP–Internationalisation Academic Participation Framework, which conceptualises EAP as a mediating bridge between institutional internationalisation and students' meaningful academic participation. This framework moves beyond a linear assumption that increased English use automatically produces successful internationalisation and instead emphasises the intermediate role of academic literacy.

Empirically, the study highlights students' experiences of the transition from general English to the specialised language and literacy practices required in university study. The findings demonstrate that students' challenges extend beyond grammar or vocabulary to include academic reading, writing, source use, classroom interaction, and disciplinary communication. Contextually, the study contributes to the relatively limited literature on EAP and EMI in Uzbek and Central Asian higher education, providing a student-centred perspective on how internationalisation is experienced at the level of everyday academic participation.

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6.3. Implications for EAP and Internationalisation

The findings suggest that universities should treat EAP as an integral component of internationalisation and EMI, rather than as optional remedial language instruction. EAP provision should be needs-based, discipline-sensitive, and connected to authentic academic tasks. EAP practitioners should collaborate with disciplinary academics to identify the genres, terminology, literacy practices, and communicative demands students encounter. Policymakers and institutional leaders should support sustainable EAP provision, teacher development, and systematic evaluation of students' academic participation. Internationalisation strategies should therefore consider not only how much English is used, but also whether students have the resources necessary to participate successfully through English.

6.4. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The qualitative design and relatively small student sample limit the transferability of the findings to all higher education institutions in Uzbekistan. The study also focused primarily on students' perspectives and therefore does not provide an equally detailed account of academics' experiences or institutional decision-making. In addition, participants' experiences may vary according to discipline, institution, previous English education, and degree level. The findings should consequently be interpreted as contextually situated rather than statistically representative.

6.5. Future Research and Closing Statement

Future research could examine EAP–EMI integration across different disciplines and institutions, incorporate academics' and policymakers' perspectives, and investigate how specific EAP interventions influence students' academic participation over time. Comparative research across Central Asian countries could further illuminate regional similarities and differences. Ultimately, the study argues that internationalisation through English becomes meaningful only when students are equipped to participate academically through English. EAP can provide the critical bridge between institutional internationalisation ambitions and students' actual participation in global higher education.

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