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English Desires at an English-Medium Instruction University: The Journeys of First-Year Students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This study used the concept of desire in language learning to explore the first-year English journeys of undergraduates at an English-medium instruction (EMI) university in Hong Kong. Desire in language learning is an underexplored area in EMI research but a relevant concept for gaining a multilayered picture of the incentives and pressures of English. Using a collaborative research design, the study offers an account of 10 first-year students with an IELTS band of approximately 5.5, lower than the institution's average. Thirty written reflections and 30 semi-structured interviews formed the main data collection, gathered over the academic year. Thematic analysis showed that the learners desired more connection and confidence with English so that they could access academic and professional opportunities and identities. They desired a new English experience in which they could interact authentically and gain acceptance of their English skills. They encountered pressure and frustration with the EMI experience, ultimately making compromises in their imagined trajectories with English. Their strong desires for English, however, remained intact. The study shows the need for a well-architected English experience for universities to fulfill the promises of EMI, especially for learners in the lower bands of English proficiency expected for EMI study.

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INTRODUCTION

Desire is a potent and multilayered force driving each learner's pursuit of English. English desire encompasses the imagined self; it is "the energy and beliefs around what people think English can bring to their lives" (Petrie, 2019, p. 46). The images that learners hold toward English, and the perceived contribution that English can bring to their aspired selves, can incentivize commitment and resilience with their language learning. Language desires do not only energize learners but are also shaped within the contexts in which the language learning takes place, making them a site of struggle and negotiation. As the images and beliefs that learners hold toward English are inhabited by the priorities and expectations of others, desire can bring about "internal conflict, ambivalence, repression, and even animosity" (Motha & Lin, 2014, p. 332). Desire is an important concept for language practitioners in understanding the aspirations, pressures, and anguish that learners experience in their pursuit of English. Language teachers can become attuned to the English desires of their students to help them develop command over these desires and their English learning.

This article focuses on the English desires of learners at an English-medium instruction (EMI) university. EMI, commonly defined as the teaching of content subjects in English without priority placed on language development (Pecorari & Malmström, 2018), has seen significant growth in recent years (Dearden, 2014; Macaro, 2018). EMI is tied to the desires of universities and the desires these institutions have for their students. Commonly pitched merits of EMI include raising institution profiles (Macaro, 2018), fostering internationalization (Lasagabaster, 2022), and enhancing the employability prospects of students (Galloway, Kriukow, & Numajiri, 2017). However, transitioning to an EMI university can be "turbulent" for students (Tajik, Manan, Schamiloglu, & Namyssova, 2024, p. 6). Language challenges in academic study (Aizawa & Rose, 2020), access to social activities in English (Gardner & Lau, 2019), and identity conflicts in the EMI environment (Teng, 2019) are some reported concerns suggesting that the student EMI experience could be better architected in many contexts. This is especially the case for students with lower bands of English proficiency who may struggle to attain the potential benefits of EMI.

In his summary of research agendas for EMI, Sah (2022) highlights the need for studies which focus on emotional, identity, and equity challenges, especially within the transition to EMI higher education. Situated within this research need, this article explores the tensions between student desires for English and their facilitation through

EMI. The research focuses on students who were beginning their academic journeys at the lower threshold of English proficiency usually required for EMI studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Desire in Language Learning

Desire has been described as a positive energy that spurs language learners as they reach for new identity claims (Motha & Lin, 2014; Turner & Lin, 2020). Studies to date have shown how English desires can be infused into learners' larger transformative aspirations. Liu (2022), for example, described how private high school students in Thailand saw English as an instrument to achieve their desired places in prestigious EMI universities and future work in famous international companies. For Liu, the formation of these desires was embedded into the discourse of English as a tool for the accumulation of cultural capital (i.e., the knowledge and skills commonly thought to lead to social and economic advantages). In another study, Sharma (2021) showed how investment in English and multilingual repertoires was seen to enable and sustain Nepalese tourism workers' desire for romantic relationships with foreigners. English desire was a mediational tool to access social capital (i.e., connections and networks) and rebalance global inequalities as the Nepalese men strived for more power to overcome the constraints of their socioeconomic position. These studies show how desire for English can be an energizing force as learners seek more prospects, mobility, and agency.

Though English desires can energize learners and propel their language learning, the formation and realization of these desires is complex, exposing what is lacking in each learner. Desire has been theorized as being "dialectically constructed in the relationship between the macro-domains of public discourses and the micro-domains of individual experience" (Piller & Takahashi, 2006, p. 59). Ownership of desires and how they were formed is thus a crucial element in observing the desires of our students. Motha and Lin (2014) highlight that language desire is co-constructed and multilayered. They suggest that it is perpetuated by different stakeholders such as governments, institutions, communities, teachers, and learners themselves. Desires are also sedimented over different timescales from the immediate learning environment to the historical narratives of English in each geographical context. As access to English is uneven

in many contexts, it may be impossible for learners to keep up with the desires of governments, institutions, and communities. English desires therefore have the potential to be unrealistic or exploitative rather than liberating. For example, Sah and Li (2018) concluded in their study of EMI in Nepalese schools that desire for mobility via English can be an illusion, with their participants gaining minimally in English proficiency and content knowledge, and many failing their examinations. Desire exposes what is lacking as well as what might be achieved. This lack, or deficit, refers to the framing or internalizing of language skills as not meeting specific expectations, exposing the distance from the desired self. This perceived deficit, alongside the energy to succeed, can manifest in each learner (Turner & Lin, 2020). For Motha and Lin (2014), desire for English, and the perceived opportunities and influence it brings can be "simultaneously productive and oppressive" (p. 335).

In this article, I view desire for English as an ensemble of learners' projections and imaginings of their future-using selves. These desires can range from being more tangible or workable to illusionary or out of reach. Some English desires can be useful motivators if harnessed critically, but they can also work counter to the interests of the individual (Takahashi, 2013). English desires are context and identity-driven, situating the concept within a sociolinguistic perspective (Sharma, 2021). From this perspective, researchers (e.g., Liu, 2022; Sharma, 2021; Takahashi, 2013) have tended to use qualitative and especially ethnographic research designs to move understanding beyond the desires themselves to the circulation of influences that mediate those desires. For Liu (2022), a focus on desire can be useful in understanding how learners position themselves with English. This is an important consideration for TESOL teachers as while English can be desired, a learner's positioning may influence their chances of establishing a productive academic identity (Sung, 2019). To complement recent longitudinal EMI research (e.g., Soruç, Yuksel, Horzum, McKinley, & Rose, 2024) measuring constructs related to psychological factors (e.g., self-efficacy; motivation; self-regulation), a sociolinguistic focus on English desire can provide useful insights into the tensions learners have with English in the EMI context.

EMI Universities and the Student Experience

Studies within the growing EMI research context point to strong student support for EMI. Heightened employability (Galloway,

Numajiri, & Rees, 2020), meeting international peers (Iwaniec & Wang, 2023), pursuing specialized knowledge (Rose, Curle, Aizawa, & Thompson, 2020), improving English proficiency (Chapple, 2015), and developing multilingual identities (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2018) are reported motivators. Despite the incentives of EMI, students with lower English proficiency struggle to adapt to the language demands. Students with previous experience of schooling through the medium of English have fewer linguistic challenges in their university EMI studies (Aizawa & Rose, 2020; Evans & Morrison, 2018). Also, students in university EMI contexts with a certain proficiency threshold (around IELTS 6.5) have fewer language challenges (Kamaşak, Sahan, & Rose, 2021; Rose et al., 2020). Lack of English proficiency in tertiary contexts can lead to "peripheral participation" (Teng, 2019, p. 54) and silencing in the classroom (Sung, 2019), with students "wrestling with confidence issues" (Sah, 2023, p. 8). Though lower-proficiency students may struggle in their EMI studies, there are potential gains. Rose et al. (2020) found that their Japanese participants passed EMI subjects and felt that they had benefitted in terms of future career enhancement. Evans and Morrison (2018) concluded that students who were less experienced with EMI worked through their English language struggles at university to make improvements. Students' efforts can influence the EMI experience. For example, Zhou and Thomas (2023) found that some of their first-year EMI students managed to move past a survival phase in academic listening to develop a more resilient and future-oriented perspective. Despite these agentive measures, universities committing to EMI must ensure that the curriculum provides ample opportunities for students to make English and study gains. More research is needed to articulate the EMI experiences of students below the IELTS 6.5 band to inform the development of English opportunities which meet their needs.

The Hong Kong Context: English Desire and Pedagogical Challenges

English has high status in Hong Kong which stems from its use within the government, legal system, and judiciary since colonial times (Poon, 2004) and its growing role within trade and commerce over the past few decades (Li, 2017). In Hong Kong, Cantonese is the principal teaching language in government primary schools, while at the university level, English is primarily used (Evans & Morrison, 2017). There have been many changes in language policies relating to the

Medium of Instruction (MOI) in secondary schooling, but English has generally been the preference of parents (Poon, 2004). The use of English within higher education amplifies pressure at the secondary level to prepare students to compete for university places, succeed in an English university setting, and thus have better chances of entering professional occupations (Evans, 2013). Access to English has been uneven because many families do not have the cultural or economic capital to support their children's English development (Li, 2017). When policy makers permitted more use of English to teach in secondary schools through laissez faire MOI policies, the unintended impacts included reduced interaction and student engagement (Li, 2017) as the linguistic demands were too severe for many students and teachers. Conversely, MOI policies which only allowed a select number of schools to teach in English were criticized for being inequitable as they reduced chances for social mobility for most students (Choi, 2003). The most recent "fine-tuning" policy has attempted to retain mother-tongue ideals for education while providing exposure to English (Education Bureau, 2010). Under this policy, schools are given more flexibility than the previous Chinese-medium policy to choose the MOI depending on the subject and language levels of students. Though student-specific MOI is the most workable option, there is no evading the fact that English is a gatekeeper for admittance and success at the university level.

Desire for English in Hong Kong can be summarized as being historically embedded into collective notions of status, mobility, and opportunity. As a resource that is unequally accessible but crucial for success, English has been a site of struggle for many learners. This struggle not only encompasses language challenge but also the tensions that learners experience in striving for the perceived benefits of English. The present study moves beyond the commonly reported motivators or discourses of English to explore the English desires of first-year undergraduates. It documents the tensions the participants experienced in striving for these desires in the EMI environment. Tensions refer to the unease, strain, or pressure experienced in a social dynamic and can be distinguished from challenges which are more task and skill specific.

Research questions:

1. What were the English desires of first-year students attending an EMI university in Hong Kong?
2. What tensions did the students experience in reaching for their English desires in the EMI environment?
3. How did the students deal with these tensions in reaching for their English desires?

METHODS

Research Context

The study investigated the English desires of 10 first-year students at a public EMI university in Hong Kong. These students were admitted into the university with the local English secondary exam score of Level 3, equivalent to an IELTS band of approximately 5.5 (HKEAA, 2013). Most courses at the focal university adopt English as the official language of instruction. The EMI model of the university fits into what Macaro (2018) calls the concurrent support model in which students receive language support alongside their studies. Students at the university are required to take an average of eight credits of English language. The impact of the focal students' secondary school English score was that they needed to take a general proficiency course (3 credits/39 contact hours over 13 weeks) in semester 1, while students receiving higher scores took an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course (3 credits). The focal students took this EAP course in their second semester when higher scoring students took an elective English course. Students commonly take an English for specific purposes course in years 3 or 4 (2 credits/26 contact hours over 13 weeks). These courses are taught by an English language unit of which the researcher was a teacher. Due to COVID-19, the participants' second semester courses were taught online.

Research Approach

The study adopted a *critical ethnographic sociolinguistic* approach (Heller, Pietikäinen, & Pujolar, 2017). The study was critical in illuminating who and what is legitimized or disqualified (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009) in exploring the English desires of the participants. It was ethnographic in topic and perspective (Shaw, Copland, & Snell, 2016), and sociolinguistic in investigating how English matters to the participants in their unique context (Heller et al., 2017). In collaborating with the students, I joined their English journeys (Flowerdew & Miller, 2013) and viewed dialogue as a legitimate way to discover, develop, and verify claims (Denzin & Giardina, 2009). I met the students each week through an English mentoring scheme run by the English language unit. This scheme provides personalized and informal academic support through small group mentoring led by EAP teachers. The focus of the mentoring sessions is to encourage, advise, and support students in their adjustment to using English in academic

settings (Kohnke & Jarvis, 2019). Though not a research method, the mentoring sessions were an essential part of the research design as they helped me to build rapport with the participants and understand the issues that were important to them. This enabled deeper reflections and discussions during the data collection as the participants had already considered the issues, knew the researcher, and subsequently felt more relaxed and informed during interviews. This approach is what Mann (2016) and Rabbidge (2017) describe as the parameters of sensitivity established before the interview to enable the participants to interact authentically and comfortably. The study received ethical approval, written consent from the Head of the English language unit, and informed consent from the participants.

Data Collection Methods

The main data collection methods were written reflections and semi-structured interviews which were employed at three stages (start, middle, and end) of the academic year. Altogether, 30 written reflections were collected (three from each participant). Reflective writing was used because it can develop self-awareness and story ownership (Fook, 2011). The reflections were useful in helping the participants to articulate their thoughts before the interviews. In addition, the interview questions drew on the reflections to help gain deeper insights. Students were given the option to write their reflections in Chinese but chose English, possibly because they could gain experience with reflective writing which is a common assignment genre at the university. The participants were given prompts, for example, in the first reflection the prompt read:

> Thank you for sharing your thoughts in this reflection. Please write about your experiences of learning English before university, and your attitudes, feelings and hopes about English at university and for your future.

The second and final reflections asked students to write about their English experiences and attitudes at university after the first semester and at the end of the year.

Thirty interviews were conducted, totaling over 21 hours. The interviews, conducted in English, were intended to be in-depth conversations with the participants. This was especially achieved in the second and final interviews when the students were more used to the approach and treated the interviews as conversation practice. The interviews aimed to benefit the participants in helping them to articulate their English journeys and provide spaces for language practice

(Nasrollahi Shahri, 2018). Overall, conducting the research in English had implications. While limiting the participants' articulation of their experiences, the use of English incentivized the students to join the research and provided authentic speaking practice.

In addition to reflective writing and interviews, I wrote field notes to record observations and thoughts. This included writing about the mentoring sessions, email interactions with the participants, assignments the participants shared with me, informal interactions with teachers at the language unit, and university-wide notices and policies. Field notes were used to enable self-awareness and maintain distance and focus when going too far into a theme (De Costa, 2014, p. 417).

The Participants

The participants were first-year students and 18 years old when starting their university studies. They had grown up in Hong Kong and used Cantonese at home. They had all been introduced to English from an early age either through kindergarten or primary schooling. All participants reported that their parents had low English ability except one (Christine) who reported that her mother spoke some English. All 10 participants attended my mentoring sessions. I met these students each week for 50-minute sessions in groups of three or four throughout the two main semesters. These students did not take my credit-bearing subjects. I recruited them by presenting the research project and mentoring scheme to first-year students in six English classes (with an average of 20 students) taught by other teachers, leaving my contact details. These six classes were selected to gain a range of students as they were organized by discipline. Of the 16 responses and follow-up emails, 10 students joined the research project. The remaining six either did not join or were referred to other mentors because I wanted to gain some balance between male and female students. An overview of the participants can be seen in Table 1.

Researcher Positionality

I mainly met the students through the English mentoring sessions where I positioned myself as a teacher-researcher. I viewed the participants as aspiring students (Rawal & De Costa, 2019) and recognized their achievements in English. The sessions focused on tasks such as goal setting, developing academic skills, interpreting assignment instructions, and reviewing drafts and teacher feedback. At the end of each session, I asked the students what they wanted to focus on the

TABLE 1
Participant Information

	Name	Gender	Age	Home language	MOI during primary schooling	Most used MOI during secondary schooling	Major at university
1	Zoe	Female	18 when entering the university	Cantonese	Cantonese (with regular English classes)	Cantonese	Fashion and Textiles
2	Kara	Female				English	
3	Kyle	Male				English	
4	Marco	Male				Cantonese	Building Technology and Management
5	Anson	Male				English	
6	Leo	Male				English	
7	Jennifer	Female				English	
8	Daniel	Male				Cantonese	Civil Engineering
9	Ryan	Male				English	
10	Christine	Female				Cantonese	Logistics and Enterprise Engineering

Note. Names are pseudonyms.

following week. During most sessions, I asked the students how their EMI studies were progressing, and this created space to talk about their English journeys. During the sessions, I carefully managed the dual roles of mentor and researcher, ensuring that I prioritized the English and study needs of the learners. Attendance was over 90%, including the second semester which was conducted online.

Data Analysis

The approach to data analysis aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2019) insights on reflexive thematic analysis. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and copied the written reflections and field notes into NVivo 12. I coded the data into initial categories before generating deeper themes. I kept notes and screenshots of the evolving themes. This process involved much reworking, revisiting, and questioning to avoid shallow categorizations. I needed to question my assumptions through this process, for example, disconnection with English did not mean that the students were unmotivated; they were both motivated with and disconnected from English. I emailed interview summaries with my developing themes to each student, bringing up some of the themes in the mentoring sessions. Though most feedback only confirmed the themes, some students shared more examples.

FINDINGS

The results are presented under each research question and are chronologically ordered in the three stages of data collection. Key themes are presented by drawing on the experiences of all the participants. These themes represent the common English experiences of the participants as they journeyed across their first year.

RQ1. What were the English desires of first-year students attending an EMI university in Hong Kong?

The students held specific desires toward their English based around their academic identities and professional aspirations. They were hopeful for a different English experience at university which would enable more authentic and active language development than their experiences of learning English at school.

Desire to Overcome Past Disadvantages to Better Connect with English

The participants felt disadvantaged with the lack of English opportunities in their childhoods. This included not attending English kindergartens and not being able to receive much parental support with English such as help with homework. Anson felt disadvantaged compared with peers, and this led to the feeling of animosity toward English. As Anson (Interview 1) comments:

> Some of them have some English lesson in kindergarten they always see their fluent teacher. So, they taught English in small age, but I don't think we have this chance. Thanks to my primary school, this terrible experience, I hate English in that moment.

When comparing himself to more proficient students, Ryan (Interview 1) commented that "they can just feel this environment, feel this English since they were young," and Kyle commented that he did not "have a good beginning in English" (Interview 1). The participants reported that their experiences of studying English at school were examination focused which caused further disconnect with the language. Jennifer (Interview 1), for example, lamented that:

> I seldom spoke English. At the same time, I only learn a lot of exam skills in order to achieve a higher mark. However, I realize that my level of English is so poor when apply on daily life.

The students longed for more ease and affinity with English which they saw in more proficient peers. They viewed university as a fresh opportunity to connect with English.

Learner Desire for the Acceptance of their English Skills Via More Confidence and Fluency

The students were worried about how their English abilities would be judged. Leo (Interview 1) reflected that he spoke "English in a terrible way" and that due to his English he may be "treated as weak." He wanted to avoid this situation and be "treated as normal." Ryan also felt embarrassed with his English and said that he would not speak with international students. As Ryan (Interview 1) put it: "I'm embarrassed. Well, I've studied English for so many years." Zoe (Reflection 1) was "afraid to communicate with others using English" feeling that her foundation in English was lacking. At the same time, the participants were energized by the possibilities of English. They imagined themselves being confident, fluent, and articulate when communicating in academic, social, and professional situations. Ryan hoped for high grades understanding that "learning English is a best way to get more improved on [his] other subjects" (Interview 1). Zoe desired to become "a person to speak fluent English and become more confident to speak English" (Interview 1). She imagined using English in a future role as a researcher in the government. Daniel's desire for better English was to "stand out" during job recruitment (Interview 1). Darvin and Norton (2015) note that a learner's capital is re-evaluated in a new learning context. These students were concerned about how their language skills would be evaluated and felt that better confidence and fluency was essential for their acceptance in the EMI environment. Jennifer (Reflection 1) encapsulates the point: "English is one of the important criteria to evaluate a person's education level so I sincerely hope that I can speak fluently and use English without any big difficulties."

Desire for a New English Experience Centered Around Self-Directed Learning and Authentic Communication

The lack of interactive English experiences during schooling produced a desire for a new learning experience at university. Leo (Reflection 1) hoped that "there may be some other way for [him] to improve English skills instead of only keeping doing mock papers and

exercises." Ryan (Interview 1) surmised that learning English at university was more student-driven: "I learn for myself, and not my teachers ... That's my own experience and not teacher experience." Despite feeling embarrassed about his English, Ryan wanted to join extra-curricular clubs and societies to practice his English. Kyle (Interview 1) also hoped to practice English outside class and speak English with international students:

> I would love to speak more to the foreign exchange students. They are a great opportunity. Mmm, I think English in university is a very important language for us to building our global network.

The students wanted to break free from their past English learning experiences which they perceived as reducing their chances to connect with the language. They imagined that the EMI experience would enable more active enhancement of their English where they could be involved in the university community. One strong image for these students was conversing fluently with international students.

> *RQ2*. What tensions did the students experience in reaching for their English desires in the EMI environment?

In the early weeks of their second semester, the overall themes were ones of language struggle, pressure, and frustration as the students navigated their EMI journeys. Despite the challenges the students faced, their desires for English remained intact, fueled by the practical and status incentives of English.

Feeling Constrained by Language Challenges in Reaching for English Desires

The students relayed that developing their English was a priority for success in the new environment. As Marco put it: "If I don't build my English, I can't study well in here" (Interview 2). However, the students experienced a range of language challenges and continued to feel insecure about their English proficiency. These challenges especially included vocabulary range, lecture listening, and writing longer assignments. This tension between their desire for enhanced English and their real-life struggle in academic subjects caused much anguish. Part of this anguish was the feeling that they were playing catch up with more capable students who could complete assignments more efficiently. Daniel (Interview 2) summarizes the problem below:

> There are some disadvantages because first of all is, I usually spend a lot of time to write essay because my English writing and reading is not

good. For me to find the essays, to find the journals or other sources to write essay, I usually need to use Google translate to translate the essay, the sources and then to write in the essay. Therefore, it cost time more than other students, which they're fluent and have a good English level.

These findings are similar to Liu's (2022), whose participants also felt stressed because their desires for better academic English were unmet. As Liu summarized, language learning was not only a process of language acquisition but also one of self-positioning.

Pressure in Imagining that Peers were Closer to Reaching the English Expectations of the Ideal Graduate

Also contributing to this sinking feeling was the impact of English on the students' futures. A common theme stemming from the perception that their English was below par was the knock-on effect in competing for internships, exchange trips, and graduate employment. The learners were especially concerned about meeting employers' English expectations. As Leo (Interview 2) suggests, "no one will expect, uh, people graduating from university, and they have bad English." Observing that peers had greater confidence with English, they imagined that these peers were closer to reaching the English expectations of employers. Kara (Interview 2) below encapsulates these feelings suggesting that English-competent peers will hold "higher value."

Kara: *Me and Kyle have been discuss, um a lot like our futures, like how to find our career and then we both know that English is so important because, we um, we just talk about like if you are a person with really, really good English and now you can speak fluently and present really well, in the future if you, uh, enter in a, like a fashion company and then now your boss maybe, uh, will send you to like other country and then present the company's orders or other thing and then you will have like, um, higher value, I think.*

Andrew: *Yeah, okay.*

Kara: *So if right now the students have already, um, equipped with better English and then, um, he or she not need to learn English like us or do something and then, um, I think they were more easier during these four years or like find jobs.*

In competing with peers and aligning with the wishes of employers, the EMI experience can exert emotional strain on learners (Şahan & Sahan, 2023). While the EMI environment reinforced the participants' desires for English, it also reconfirmed, in their minds, their distance from these desires. Attempting to reduce this distance was a major tension.

Frustration that the EMI Experience Did Not Meet Their Expectations for Spoken English Interaction

The students reported minimal interactions with international students or informal speaking opportunities in English. Christine (Interview 2) relayed that "in my daily life I don't really talk, I don't use English" which was a common experience for all the participants. The English language classes and the mentoring sessions were the main opportunities to speak English as these students reported that they did not have an English-speaking network. Although lectures were mainly conducted in English, informal interactions with lecturers were commonly in Cantonese. This was welcomed by Daniel who could present himself more fluently in Cantonese, but criticized by Kyle, who saw it as a missed opportunity to practice English. At the beginning of semester 2, the participants were starting to attend classes online. This shift to online learning further reduced social interactions in English. The lack of informal opportunities to enhance English did not meet the students' desires to find new and authentic ways to enhance their language skills and confidence. This caused tension as it was difficult for the participants to make progress toward their desired selves as fluent and confident communicators in English.

The hope and excitement conveyed at the start of university had now given way to the reality of studying academic subjects in English with minimal social avenues to enhance their speaking skills. However, the students continued to hold unfaltering desire for English as the gravity of English for success in their studies and futures became stronger. As Zoe (Interview 2) put it "English is a basic ticket for us to stepping into the society."

RQ3. How did the students deal with these tensions in reaching for their English desires?

By the end of the academic year, the students had needed to re-scope their original visions for their English development. At the same time, despite disappointment in the EMI pedagogy, they retained their strong desires for English.

Compromise in Reaching for English Desires

Reaching their English desires was slower than expected. This led the participants to readjust their imagined trajectories with English. While some found it hard to shake off the deficit lens on their English skills, others remained positive and comfortable in the compromises they had made with their English expectations. Kara, who had wanted to "speak like native speakers" (Reflection 1), had now become more realistic about her English journey:

> I do not think I can speak English fluently but at least my listening is improved a lot and I have smooth communication. This is a big encouragement to me. I hope that next semester I can improve more in writing and speaking. (Reflection 3)

Kara remained positive about her English journey and was planning goals for the coming semesters. Others had lowered their English projections more drastically. Daniel (Interview 3) was afraid of not meeting his targets and therefore did not want to set high goals.

> My expectation is very low because, uh, my English skills, my English level is not really good. And then I don't set my target is not very high because I when I set a high target I cannot achieve that.

Language learners re-scope their visions of their future language-using selves based on experiences with the target language (Henry, 2014). As the participants journeyed through their first year, this re-scoping had resulted in varying shifts in the English trajectories they plotted. Some had more closely retained projections of their English-competent selves, while others had watered down these visions. This holds similarities with the analysis of Zhou and Thomas (2023) who found that learners who push beyond a survival mentality can develop more resilient and forward-looking perspectives.

Retaining Commitment to English

Despite some recalibration in reaching for their English desires, the participants' beliefs in the value of English for enhancing their competitive edge and status remained unshaken. Kyle (Interview 3) suggested that "for the environment of Hong Kong, getting a degree from an English university is definitely more competitive" [than one conducted through Cantonese]. Kara (Interview 3) continued to feel that English was a "tool" which would increase her "level or value." The participants had little agency in challenging the role of English and therefore placed their efforts in pursuing English. When asked if

it was fair that students must study in English at university, Daniel (Interview 2) was more focused on the skills needed to attain employment.

> I think it [English] is unchangeable because the history is, we cannot change the history. And I think, to be honest, I seldomly consider this question about learning English is fair or unfair … The most important way is, I think English is really useful in the workplace, for example to seeking a job. The people always focus on your English level.

These judgments about the status and practical value of English urged the students on. English desire was a cocktail of personal aspirations and the collective expectations of the ideal graduate.

Although the students were disappointed with the lack of everyday social English experiences, further reduced by online learning in semester 2, they continued to seek out English opportunities. This was the agency they had in reaching for their goals. Students reported watching online videos or streaming services in English, held part-time jobs which required English skills, and communicated in English while playing online games.

The new learning style they encountered at university also provided opportunity to enhance their English skills in specific areas, such as academic English. All students seemed to value the approach to learning on task through projects and assignments, and this may have offered them more agency in their learning. Ryan (Interview 3), for example, found that "instead of just learning from books, I think practice is more important." Ryan further explains some differences between learning English at school and university:

> In primary school or secondary school, I learned English just for the examination and quizzes because the teacher don't tell us what is the usage of learning English. They just ask you to – we learn that vocabulary, learn tenses and grammar, but what can I do after learning the English well? But I found it in university, I learn for communication, for knowing about the knowledge and communicate with others, yeah.

Zoe (Interview 3) also appears to have developed a different mindset toward English:

> Before attending to the university, I think, um, English is … it's just a requirement for me to fulfil, but, um, after the uni … but after attend to the university, I think, um, English is a skill for me to communicate with the others.

By the end of the first year, these learners had encountered many tensions in striving to connect with English and become more confident with their English abilities. Though they had needed to re-scope

their original grand visions for English enhancement and authentic use, there were some changes in their mindsets toward English. Overall, the EMI environment had reinforced the importance English, and they had retained their strong desires for English.

DISCUSSION

This study used the concept of desire in language learning to view the first-year English journeys of students at an EMI university in Hong Kong. Though the students echoed many common discourses of English, such as the importance of English for academic success and professional mobility, the collaborative research design helped to gain deeper results. These results show how the students yearned for a fresh opportunity to connect with English. The learners also desired more acceptance of their English in their search of new academic identities and professional opportunities. Despite major tensions and reconciliations in their English journeys, commitment to English remained robust. Figure 1 sums up the common learner experience in envisioning and realizing their English desires. The four areas of expectations, desires, efforts, and realities caused tensions which are represented by the arrows. The English expectations of employers, for

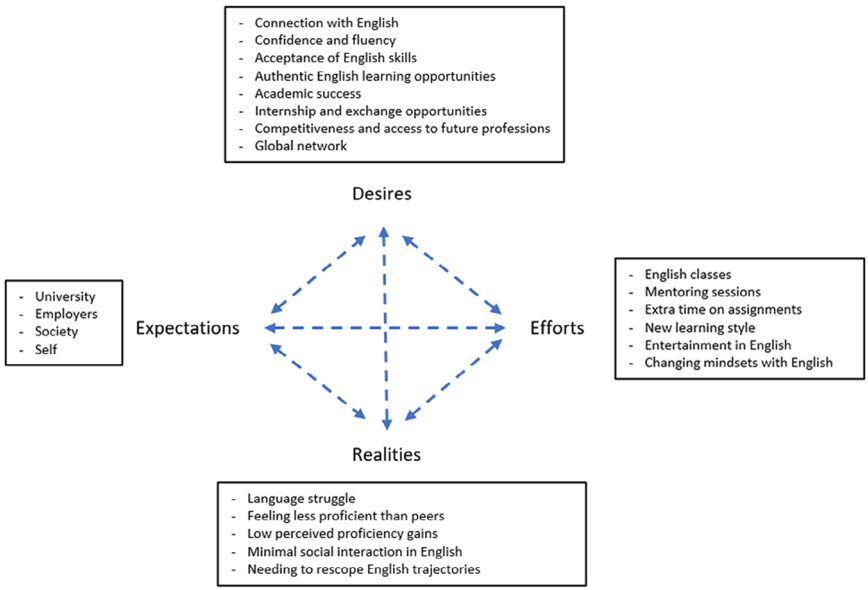

FIGURE 1. Learner tensions in pursuing their English desires.

example, were infused into the learners' desires, simultaneously exposing their perceived language deficit and prompting their English efforts.

The student experience of English reflects the notions of "energy" and "lack." The promises of English energized the study participants into developing their language skills while the feeling of inferiority with English preyed on them. The push and pull between these two poles of energy and lack caused tensions as students tried to connect with English and affirm themselves in the EMI environment.

Language teachers also occupy each student's arena of energy and lack. As we endeavor to raise the English capabilities of our students in helping them reach closer to their goals, we simultaneously endorse the promises that infuse their English desires as well as their English deficit. Each teacher must decide if and how to mediate in the entanglement between desire and deficit, and as Motha and Lin (2014) point out, a student may just want to pass an examination. Teachers therefore may not wish to unnecessarily entangle students in debates which may not be a priority for them, or which unnecessarily position them as peripheral stakeholders of English. Teachers can, however, be attentive to "transformative moments" (Benesch, 2013, p. 49) which can either help learners to develop multi-perspective thinking on their English desires or refocus the deficit lens into productive momentum with their language learning. One example of a planned intervention comes from Rose and Galloway (2017) who introduced a classroom task cycle in which students were asked to analyze and debate a government campaign to promote standard English. Written reflections suggested that the task enabled the students to question the ideologies behind the promotion of standard English and explore the use of different varieties of English in different contexts.

The notions of desire being co-constructed and multilayered are well supported by the results of this study. The students' desires for English were embedded into their perceptions about what was desired by the university and prospective employers. The EMI experience confirmed and heightened the role of English as an important part of the desired cultural capital of the ideal graduate, further socializing the students into the "English symbolic order" (Motha & Lin, 2014, p. 346). The imagined evaluations of these stakeholders produced a desire in the learners for acceptance of their communicative ability in English so that they could be considered equal to more proficient peers.

EMI universities can cater to both the proficiency and confidence needs of struggling students. Ample credit space can be given to English for academic and specific purposes courses. English units can also provide additional opportunities with incentives such as credits or certificates recognized by the students' departments. This could

include speaking schemes in which local and international students come together, structured peer mentoring schemes, and the tracking of proficiency alongside targeted resources and English guidance. Activities conducted in small group settings are essential for enhancing the confidence of less proficient English users. The concurrent model to EMI in which language support is undertaken by English units may, however, be insufficient in providing a comprehensive English enhancement experience. If universities commit to EMI, English communication needs to be integrated into the university-wide pedagogy and across the curriculum. Professional development for discipline teachers focusing on the institution's definition of EMI and the contexts of its use, pedagogical choices and MOI trade-offs, and the sharing of EMI research from the student perspective, could help to guide the teaching and learning experience. More structured access to internationalization and social opportunities could also better meet the expectations of students. Gardner and Lau (2019), for example, suggest giving incentives and recognition for student-led intercultural exchange activities. On deciding the approaches used to better architect EMI, meaningful planning with a range of stakeholders (including less English-proficient students) needs to be conducted to inform realistic and inclusive policies (Tajik et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study has offered an alternative perspective on the first-year EMI experience by providing an account of the English desires of university students. The results show that desire was simultaneous energy and pressure as it incentivized action and exposed English insecurity. The study demonstrated how English desire is sedimented from the macro layers of public discourse to the micro layers of personal aspiration. The study also revealed the influence of the learners' past English experiences on their English desires, moving understanding beyond the echoing of the common discourses of English. While the concept of desire did enable fresh articulation of the complex entanglements learners have with English, more studies are needed to further develop and anchor the concept within language learning research. More exploration of how past English experiences inform language desires could help to move the concept forward. Within EMI research, greater focus could be placed on learners' personal battles with English. More in-depth studies working with learners below the IELTS 6.5 threshold could help to inform or possibly deter EMI-only policies in contexts where there is a shallow pool of higher proficiency or international students. This study is limited in that it focused on a small group of students within a single

university. University English teachers and curriculum designers in other contexts may, however, find the student voices relevant in reflecting on their own EMI practices.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Panel (FREP)/Departmental Research Ethics Panel (DREP) of Anglia Ruskin University.

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