

Teaching by Inquiry: Integrating Socratic, Maieutic, and Indirect Communication in EMI

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Abstract - *The rise of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) presents complex challenges for educators tasked with teaching subject content in English to linguistically diverse students. While EMI often prioritizes content delivery, it frequently neglects the cognitive and communicative demands of learning in a second language. This paper explores how three inquiry-based pedagogical approaches—Indirect Communication, the Maieutic Method, and the Socratic Method—can support deeper engagement in EMI contexts. Rooted in purposeful questioning and dialogic interaction, these traditions foster interpretive thinking, learner agency, and reflective language use. Each method is examined for its philosophical grounding and practical application, with attention to how they can enhance both content understanding and English proficiency. By shifting the teacher's role from content expert to facilitator of inquiry, this framework offers a more inclusive, student-centered model for EMI. The paper concludes with a practical sequence for implementation that integrates language, thinking, and disciplinary learning through layered questioning strategies.*

Keywords: *Indirect communication, maieutic, Socratic, EMI, higher education, questioning*

I. INTRODUCTION

As English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) continues to expand across higher education worldwide, educators face the dual challenge of conveying complex subject matter while also supporting students' language development (Griffiths, 2023). This challenge cannot be met by simply translating content into English or assuming that exposure alone will lead to proficiency. What is required is a shift not only in curriculum, but also in classroom interaction and teacher mindset (Su et al., 2021). By leveraging the potential of questions, instructors can move EMI classrooms beyond teacher-centered delivery towards learner-centered exploration (Ustuk & Hu, G., 2025). Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how dialogic and indirect approaches can reshape EMI practice.

When EMI teaching is rooted in conversation, curiosity, and reflection, the classroom becomes a space where students can do more than listen—they can participate. Questions become invitations to explore, challenge, and interpret (Vrikki & Evagorou, 2023). Indirect communication strengthens this process by prompting students to search for meaning rather than passively receive it (Tooley, 2024).

The Maieutic method enables them to uncover what they already sense but have not yet articulated, while the Socratic method sharpens this discovery through dialogue that tests and reshapes ideas (Tooley, 2024; Ho et al., 2023). Applied together in the EMI classroom, these approaches allow students to not only communicate what they know, but to use English to construct and refine their thinking.

This paper introduces three question-based approaches, compares how each frames student-teacher interaction, and examines how they can be aligned with the goals of EMI instruction. By bridging these pedagogies, it proposes a model of EMI that supports both language growth and intellectual development.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in addressing a central tension within EMI. While EMI promotes internalization and access to global knowledge, it also risks reducing classroom interaction to a focus on content delivery and language accuracy rather than fostering deeper thinking (Su et al., 2021). Addressing this gap requires pedagogical strategies that make classroom interaction both intellectually engaging and linguistically supportive.

The need for this study arises from three considerations: First, students in EMI settings often hesitate to participate due to language barriers or cultural norms that discourage direct confrontation (Lin et al., 2023). Second, the adaptation of the Socratic method to EMI has received limited scholarly attention, leaving a lack of pedagogical models for teachers in multilingual classrooms (Vrikki & Evagorou, 2023). Third, there is a growing call in higher education for approaches that integrate critical thinking with communicative competence (El Yazidi, 2023).

In response to these challenges, this study seeks to contribute to the field by (1) mapping conceptual connections across three dialogic traditions, (2) offering concrete practices that can be adapted by EMI instructors, and (3) opening avenues for further research into culturally responsive, question-driven pedagogy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid expansion of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in higher education has generated significant interest among researchers and educators alike. As more institutions adopt EMI to enhance internationalization and academic competitiveness, questions have emerged about its effects on teaching practices, student engagement, and learning outcomes (Macaro et al., 2018; Dearden, 2015). While EMI is often framed as a vehicle for content delivery in English, a growing body of research points to a deeper need: pedagogical approaches that not only convey subject matter but also support language development and foster critical thinking (Pecorari & Malmstrom, 2018; Airey, 2020).

This dual demand—teaching both language and content—places unique pressures on EMI educators. In this context, teacher questioning has been identified as a key instructional strategy that can support dialogic learning and linguistic growth, especially in classrooms where students are

navigating a second language (Ustuk & Hu, G., 2025). To further address this complexity, three philosophical traditions offer valuable, though often overlooked, contributions to EMI pedagogy: Indirect communication, the Maieutic Method, and the Socratic Method. Even though each of these approaches has been studied in its own disciplinary context, there remains a gap in the literature regarding their application to EMI, which remains underexplored. At their core, however, they share a commitment to inquiry, reflection, and the transformative role of dialogue—making them highly relevant to the challenges of teaching through English in multilingual settings.

This literature review examines existing scholarship on these traditions, with a focus on how their principles might inform and enrich EMI teaching, and examines how they can be harmonized with the goals of EMI instruction. By bridging these pedagogies and bringing them into conversation with current EMI research, this review lays the groundwork for a more holistic and question-centered approach to instruction—one where language learning, disciplinary thinking, and inquiry converge.

Teacher Questioning

In every classroom, questions shape the flow of thinking and interaction. Teachers rely on them not only to check understanding but to open conversations, guide exploration, and prompt reflection. In EMI classrooms, questions carry extra weight: they support content learning *and* offer students opportunities to practice English meaningfully. Studies show that well-crafted questions can prompt higher-order thinking, connect ideas, and increase participation (Ustuk & Hu, G., 2025; Costa & Mariotti, C., 2023; Vrikki & Evagorou, 2023; Tooley, 2024). But effective questioning requires more than instinct—it demands planning and intentionality, especially in settings where students are still building confidence in academic English. Churchill et al. (2016) remind us just how central questioning is: teachers may ask up to 15 million questions over their careers. But asking more questions isn't the goal—asking better ones is. The real shift comes when teachers move from testing knowledge to building it.

Many EMI teachers feel unprepared for this shift. In Sweden, Airy (2020) found that teachers often say, "I don't teach language," highlighting a disconnect between content and language teaching. Macaro et al. (2018) similarly notes a lack of training in effective EMI pedagogy. In Hong Kong, this has led to missed opportunities for interaction and student growth (Li & Ke, 2024). Still, there is growing recognition that questioning—when done well—can transform EMI learning. Vrikki and Evagorou (2023) found that open-ended questions invite students to expand their thinking, while Hu and Duan (2019) caution that without scaffolding, questioning alone may fall short of supporting both content and language goals.

Improving how teachers ask questions is one of the most practical ways to enhance EMI classrooms. But it requires more than new techniques—it calls for a new mindset. Approaches such as indirect communication, the maieutic method, and the Socratic method

offer frameworks for asking questions that invite reflection, dialogue, and deeper understanding. These are explored in the following sections.

Indirect Communication

Indirect communication, originally explored by Kierkegaard (2000), offers a way of speaking that does not tell students what to think, but invites them to think for themselves. Instead of delivering content in a straightforward or authoritative way, indirect communication uses subtlety, metaphor, and layered meaning to awaken reflection (Parmelee, 2015). In the classroom, this means that students are not simply receiving information—they are interpreting it, questioning it, and making sense of it in personal and meaningful ways.

Although not yet widely studied in EMI contexts, indirect communication fits well in language-rich classrooms where students are constantly negotiating meaning. As Tooley (2024) suggests, this method encourages learners to engage with language not only as a tool for expression, but to explore and shape their own understanding. When teachers use narrative, analogy, or storytelling, they leave space for students to draw their own conclusions. This approach shifts the focus from telling students what to know, to helping them discover what knowledge means in their own terms (Parmelee, 2015).

Kierkegaard (2000) argued that direct communication is impersonal—it tells, explains, and declares. But indirect communication cares about *how* something is communicated, not just *what* is said. Yeo (1981) puts it this way: "When one is concerned not simply with communicating something, but about communicating it in such a way as to facilitate a certain kind of understanding, the form of the communication becomes very important" (p. 5). In this sense, indirect communication does not just aim to pass on knowledge—it seeks to open the door to meaning.

Take the word *happiness*. One person may define it as personal freedom, another as connection to others. If a teacher were to ask, "What makes a person happy?" rather than define the term, each student might begin from their own frame of reference. This is the power of indirect communication: it allows words to become starting points for thought, rather than endpoints of instruction. When used in the classroom, indirect communication supports a deeper kind of learning—one that values interpretation, emotional resonance, and intellectual autonomy. In the following section, we look more closely at how this approach aligns with the maieutic method of instruction.

Maieutic Method

Rooted in the Socratic tradition but gentler in tone, the maieutic method helps students bring their own ideas to life. Rather than delivering knowledge, the teacher serves as a guide—like a coach or midwife—assisting students in articulating what they already sense but have not yet named (Fraser, 2020; Johansson, 2019). The term *maieutic*, from the Greek word for midwifery, reflects this view of learning as a process of guided self-discovery.

In EMI classrooms, this method allows students to develop both language and understanding through reflective dialogue. Teachers ask guiding questions that help students explore and express ideas

in their own words, often through peer interaction. The focus shifts from giving answers to cultivating insight.

Kierkegaard (2000) saw true learning as a process of inner growth—one that turns a vague idea into clear understanding through questioning and reflection. He called this capability: knowing something deeply enough to act on it (Tooley, 2024; Herrmann, 2008). While the maieutic and Socratic methods share roots, they differ in tone and aim. The Socratic method often challenges assumptions through debate; the maieutic method fosters discovery without confrontation. It connects personal experience with academic ideas, offering students a safe space to think aloud and grow (Tooley, 2024).

Ultimately, maieutic teaching prioritizes self-awareness, empathy, and meaning-making over correctness. As Dowie (2023) notes, it begins with the learner's own questions—not the teachers. This makes the learning process deeply personal, empowering students not just with information, but with lasting insight.

Socratic Method

Best known in philosophy and law, the Socratic Method uses structured, disciplined questioning to clarify ideas, challenge assumptions, and sharpen reasoning—making it increasingly valuable in EMI classrooms (Dundon, 2019). For students learning in English, this approach supports both critical thinking and the development of precise, academic language.

El Yazidi (2023) defines Socratic questioning as a process that helps learners probe their own beliefs: "*What do I mean? What evidence supports this? Could there be another view?*" These layered questions encourage reflection, active participation, and deeper understanding—core goals of EMI instruction.

However, in many non-Western contexts, especially in parts of Asia, the method can feel confrontational. Challenging the teacher or engaging in public debate may conflict with cultural norms that value harmony and respect (Hu & Duan, 2019). As a result, students may hesitate to speak up—even when they have insights to share. To address this, Rob Reich (2003) proposes that the teacher act not as an adversary but as a co-inquirer. Dalim (Dalim et al., 2022) affirms the idea that this collaborative stance fosters curiosity rather than confrontation, inviting students into dialogue rather than debate.

Used with cultural sensitivity, the Socratic method helps students examine ideas from multiple angles, listen critically, and express themselves more confidently in English. As Ho, Chen, and Li (2023) note, it enriches EMI instruction by fostering open-ended inquiry and empowering students to think and speak for themselves.

EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction)

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is typically defined as the use of English to teach academic subjects in settings where English is not the first language (Macaro, et al., 2018). In practice, this means students are learning complex content—such as history or engineering—in a second language. Importantly, EMI is not intended to teach English itself.

Pecorari and Malmström (2018) emphasize that language development is not a formal objective of EMI. While students may hope to improve their English, this is seen as an incidental benefit rather than a planned outcome. This creates a tension: teachers must deliver rigorous content in English without being tasked with supporting language development explicitly. This distinction sets EMI apart from approaches like CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), where both content and language learning are prioritized (Brown & Bradford, 2017). In EMI, the focus is firmly on academic content, yet many students enroll with the hope of improving their English—highlighting a mismatch between institutional goals and learner needs (Dearden, 2015).

Globally, EMI is expanding as universities seek to internationalize, raise rankings, and prepare students for global careers (Su et al., 2021). However, as Airey (2020) notes, EMI does not create new challenges—it exposes old ones: how to move beyond lecture, how to engage learners in dialogue, and how to foster deep understanding. This is where indirect communication, the Maieutic Method, and the Socratic Method become particularly valuable. These approaches help students do more than follow a lesson in English—they encourage them to interpret, reflect, and express meaning in ways that support both content mastery and linguistic growth.

Summary

Indirect communication, the maieutic method, and the Socratic method each offer a unique path into learning, but they share a common foundation: a belief that knowledge is best built through dialogue and questioning. Instead of placing the teacher at the center, these approaches make space for students to take an active role in constructing meaning—something especially powerful in multilingual EMI classrooms. By focusing on interpretation, personal connection, and collaborative reasoning, these methods can help bridge the gap between content mastery and language development. They do not require a change in curriculum, but a change in mindset: from telling to guiding, from answering to asking. In the next section, this paper will offer a practical framework for how these approaches can be integrated into everyday EMI teaching—transforming classrooms into spaces where language, thinking, and learning grow together.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

To address this study's aims, a qualitative, interpretive design was employed. The inquiry proceeded in two stages: first, a targeted literature review that examined the traditions of Socratic questioning, the Maieutic method, and indirect communication; and second, the application of insights from this review in an EMI classroom context through the design and implementation of dialogic teaching activities.

IV. DISCUSSION

Bringing together Indirect Communication, the Maieutic Method, the Socratic Method, and intentional teacher questioning reveals their shared value in EMI classrooms. Though rooted in different traditions, each center on dialogue, reflection, and thoughtful inquiry—elements that support both language development and academic learning in multilingual settings.

To apply these methods effectively, the teacher's role must shift—from knowledge transmitter to facilitator of discovery. In EMI contexts, where students often hesitate due to language barriers or cultural norms, well-crafted questions can lower participation anxiety and open space for meaningful engagement. Language becomes a tool for exploration, not just correctness.

Indirect Communication encourages students to interpret rather than receive information, using metaphors, stories, or images to stimulate reflection. In "filling in the gaps," students practice both thinking and language use at a deeper level. The Maieutic Method draws on students' prior knowledge, inviting them to connect content with their own experiences. In doing so, it promotes fluency, confidence, and ownership of learning—especially valuable in diverse EMI classrooms. The Socratic Method further deepens inquiry by refining students' logic and reasoning. Used sensitively, it fosters collaborative dialogue where students learn to express complex ideas in English and consider multiple viewpoints.

Together, these approaches align well with Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984): Indirect Communication supports reflection, the Maieutic Method emphasizes concrete experience, Socratic questioning fosters conceptualization, and EMI tasks enable application. Practically, an EMI lesson might begin with a thought-provoking prompt, followed by maieutic dialogue that connects to students' lives. Socratic questioning can sharpen insights, leading to a culminating task—such as a presentation or discussion—that consolidates both language and content. In this model, the teacher becomes a "mediator of understanding" (Cornu, 2011, p. 6), organizing interaction between student and knowledge. For EMI learners, this shift transforms the classroom into a space where learning is not just received but actively constructed.

V. PRACTICAL APPLICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Integrating Socratic, maieutic, and indirect communication strategies into EMI classrooms offers more than just a toolkit—it offers a pedagogical shift. Together, these methods provide a framework that meets both the cognitive and linguistic demands of higher education by putting questions, dialogue, and student thinking at the heart of the learning process. What brings these methods

together is not just theory, but their shared capacity to make the classroom more human— where students learn to speak, think, and engage in meaningful ways, even across languages.

Designing a Dialogic Learning Sequence

A dialogic lesson sequence begins with a compelling, open-ended topic—something students can respond to from multiple perspectives, such as artificial intelligence in education, environmental responsibility, or cultural identity in media. The teacher then structures the lesson to move through four stages: creative expression (Indirect Communication), personal reflection (Maieutic), critical analysis (Socratic), and structured academic practice (EMI).

For example, a class on *AI in education* might begin with an indirect prompt: students respond to a symbolic image (e.g., a robot reading a bedtime story to a child), create a metaphor-based skit, or write a short allegory. These activities allow for ambiguity and interpretation—drawing students into content while expanding their expressive range in English.

Next comes the maieutic reflection, where students are asked, "*What do you already believe about AI's role in your learning process?*" Working in pairs or small groups, students write or speak their responses, supported by language scaffolds. These conversations center the learners' own ideas, validating what they bring to the classroom while encouraging metacognitive awareness.

In the third stage, the teacher facilitates Socratic dialogue using tiered, open-ended questions like: "*If AI can personalize instruction better than a human teacher, do we still need educators?*" "*What assumptions are we making about what it means to learn?*" Such questions stretch students' critical thinking and academic language use—modality, conditionals, and cause-effect reasoning all come into play.

Finally, students complete a structured EMI task, such as a group presentation or written reflection, where they apply both the content knowledge and language skills they have developed. The teacher now acts as a dialogue facilitator, guiding interaction rather than delivering answers.

Assessment follows suit. Instead of focusing only on correct answers, teachers can evaluate clarity of reasoning, quality of questioning, responsiveness to peers, and growth in academic English. Reflective journals, peer feedback, and simple rubrics can track both thinking and language development. Below is a sample breakdown of how different themes can be explored through the four-part sequence:

Table 1. Sample Class Themes by Method

Theme	Indirect Communication	Maieutic Reflection	Socratic Dialogue	EMI-Style Application
<i>Friendship</i>	Watch a fable or short film where friendship is tested	"Describe your best friend and what makes them special."	"Can someone who lies still be a good friend?"	Vocabulary: loyal, honest, dependable; Grammar: present simple
<i>Leadership</i>	Read a parable about a wolf and a lion leading a group	"What does a good leader look like in your experience?"	"Can a leader be selfish and still be effective?"	Vocabulary: lead, inspire, delegate; Research good vs. bad leaders
<i>Teamwork</i>	Watch a video of a failed team effort; analyze what went wrong	"When have you worked in a good team?" "What made it successful?"	"Is working in a team better than working alone?"	Vocabulary: collaborate, conflict, compromise; Team challenge task

A Practical Model for EMI Teachers

This four-step model offers a flexible approach for EMI teachers:

- Start with an indirect stimulus (a story, image, or metaphor) to open space for interpretation.
- Use maieutic questioning to invite personal connection and activate prior knowledge.
- Engage in Socratic dialogue to challenge thinking and promote clarity.
- Conclude with task-based EMI activities that integrate academic language and subject content.

This is not about throwing out existing EMI curriculum—it is about layering intention. By centering the art of the question, EMI classrooms become more than places for content delivery. They become places where language, thinking, and identity meet—where students are invited not just to speak English, but to think and live through it.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how four complementary pedagogical approaches—intentional teacher questioning, indirect communication, the Maieutic Method, and the Socratic Method—can deepen participation, enhance linguistic competence, and foster critical thinking in EMI classrooms. Each method brings its own strength: indirect communication encourages interpretation and reflection; the maieutic method guides students to discover meaning for themselves; the Socratic method sharpens reasoning and dialogic precision; and teacher questioning weaves these elements together into a dynamic, inquiry-rich learning environment.

Together, these approaches do more than support bilingual learning—they support bicognitive learning: helping students think in and through another language, not just translate information. They also invite a bi-dialogic classroom culture, where communication is mutual and meaning is co-

constructed between teacher and student. In this environment, knowledge is not transmitted, but built—through layered questioning, shared inquiry, and deep listening.

Importantly, this synthesis of methods is not just theoretical. It offers concrete tools for designing EMI lessons that are both linguistically accessible and intellectually rigorous. When teachers intentionally sequence indirect, maieutic, and Socratic questioning across a lesson or unit, they create space for students to engage with content from multiple angles—emotionally, logically, and experientially. This flexible, inquiry-based approach recognizes the realities of teaching in a second language and empowers educators to meet learners where they are, while still guiding them toward academic growth. It transforms the classroom from a place of content delivery into a space of curiosity, dialogue, and discovery.

In the end, when EMI teaching becomes a practice of *asking well*—with purpose, with humility, and with curiosity—it unlocks not only language development but deeper thinking, greater confidence, and a more human form of education. In this way, EMI classrooms can prepare students not only for academic success, but for participation in a global conversation that values thoughtfulness, perspective, and voice.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The study relies on researcher-generated notes and informal student feedback. Future research should seek to build on these exploratory findings through more systematic and comparative designs, using longitudinal or mixed-method studies across multiple EMI classrooms and in diverse EMI contexts.

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