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POSITIONING THEORY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK IN ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION: INSIGHTS FROM EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract: Positioning Theory has increasingly been adopted in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) research to explore how teaching and learning practices are discursively constructed and negotiated in higher education contexts, yet its empirical application remains relatively limited. This review highlights that Positioning Theory offers a robust socio-constructivist theoretical framework for EMI research, which is capable of capturing the complex interplay of language, identity, power, and pedagogy in EMI classrooms. After providing a brief overview of Positioning Theory, the article synthesizes empirical research utilizing Positioning Theory to investigate EMI educational settings. Drawing on five studies conducted in Vietnam, New Zealand, Spain, Russia, Hong Kong, and Australia, the review identifies three major themes: (1) positioning, teacher identity and teacher agency; (2) institutional and policy positioning; and (3) positioning, multilingualism, and the negotiation of language expertise. Informed by the findings, the paper proposes a multi-level EMI positioning framework that integrates macro-level policy discourses, meso-level institutional structures, and micro-level classroom interactions with the purpose of providing a more holistic understanding of EMI rather than purely linguistic or pedagogical models.

Keywords: EMI, Positioning Theory, theoretical framework, teacher identity, teacher agency

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LÝ THUYẾT ĐỊNH VỊ TRONG NGHIÊN CỨU GIẢNG DẠY CHUYÊN NGÀNH BẰNG TIẾNG ANH: TỔNG QUAN TỪ CÁC NGHIÊN CỨU THỰC TẾ

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Tóm tắt: Lý thuyết Định vị (Positioning Theory) ngày càng được sử dụng trong nghiên cứu về giảng dạy chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh (English as a medium of instruction – EMI) nhằm tìm ra cách thực hành dạy và học được kiến tạo và đàm phán thông qua diễn ngôn trong bối cảnh giáo dục đại học. Tuy nhiên, việc ứng dụng lý thuyết này trong các nghiên cứu vẫn còn tương đối hạn chế. Bài tổng quan chỉ ra rằng Lý thuyết Định vị cung cấp một khung lý thuyết mang tính kiến tạo xã hội (socio-constructivist) vững chắc cho nghiên cứu EMI, cho phép lý giải sự tương tác phức hợp giữa ngôn ngữ, bản sắc, quyền lực và sự phạm trong lớp học EMI. Sau khi trình bày khái quát những nền tảng cốt lõi của Lý thuyết Định vị, bài báo tổng hợp các nghiên cứu thực tế đã sử dụng lý thuyết này trong các bối cảnh giáo dục EMI. Dựa trên việc phân tích năm nghiên cứu được thực hiện tại New Zealand, Việt Nam, Tây Ban Nha, Nga, Hồng Kông và Úc, nghiên cứu nêu bật ba chủ đề: (1) định vị và sự kiến tạo bản sắc nghề nghiệp cũng như năng lực hành động của giáo viên; (2) định vị ở cấp độ thể chế và chính sách; và (3) định vị, đa ngữ và sự thương lượng về ngôn ngữ. Trên cơ sở những kết quả này, bài viết đề xuất một khung định vị EMI đa tầng, tích hợp các diễn ngôn chính sách ở cấp độ vĩ mô, các cấu trúc thể chế ở cấp độ trung gian và các tương tác lớp học ở cấp độ vi mô, nhằm mang lại một cách hiểu toàn diện về EMI hơn là các mô hình thuần túy ngôn ngữ hoặc sự phạm.

Từ khoá: giảng dạy chuyên ngành bằng tiếng Anh, lý thuyết định vị, khung lý thuyết, bản sắc nghề nghiệp của giáo viên, năng lực hành động của giáo viên

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the adoption of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has rapidly expanded in higher education worldwide, especially in non-Anglophone contexts seeking internationalization, global competitiveness, and access to global knowledge communities. Undeniably, EMI has become a widely adopted a pedagogical strategy in higher education and beyond, yet much of the EMI research to date has focused narrowly on language-proficiency issues, learning outcomes and perceived benefits or challenges from stakeholders during the implementation process. Despite its value, such approaches tend to overlook deeper social, institutional, and identity-related processes that shape EMI realities. Several issues have been raised concerning the power, position of teachers and students in EMI classrooms, i.e., the roles of EMI teachers in EMI classrooms as either content expert, language expert, or global English norm. Also, the issues of how teachers and students negotiate their identities as content specialists, non-native English speakers, or global citizens together with the influence of institutional policies, cultural expectations, and power hierarchies on pedagogical practices have attracted the attention among scholars recently. Within this emerging body of work, Positioning Theory, originally proposed by Davies and Harré (1990), then elaborated by Harré and van Langenhove (1999) emphasizes how people continuously position themselves and others through discourse, thereby negotiating rights, duties,

obligations, and identities. Such a perspective is particularly relevant to EMI contexts where educational stakeholders often navigate competing expectations related to language, content, and professional expertise.

This review aims to synthesize empirical studies that employed Positioning Theory in EMI contexts. Through this synthesis, the paper argues that Positioning Theory offers unique insights into the interconnected processes of identity construction, agency enactment, and institutional positioning within EMI. Furthermore, the review proposes a conceptual framework that can guide future investigations of translanguaging and multilingual pedagogies in EMI classrooms.

2. Positioning Theory and Its Relevance to EMI Research

Positioning Theory is rooted in various basic theories, including post-structuralism, feminism (Harre & Slocum, 2003), discursive psychology (Harré et al., 2009), and social constructionism (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), which emphasizes that meaning, identity, and power are negotiated through language use. Central to this theory are three interrelated constructs, including positions, speech acts/ acts, and storylines, which create the positioning triangle. Harré (2012) defined a position as “a cluster of short-term disputable rights, obligations, and duties” (p. 193). Positions are said to be generally natural and implicit in daily interactions as they are embedded in individuals’ habitual ways of speaking and engaging with others (Deppermann, 2015). Harré and Slocum (2003) indicated three aspects of positions, including patterns of acts or expectations, shared presuppositions, and a system of beliefs. An action is understood as “a meaningful, intended performance (speech or gesture), whereas an act is “the social meaning of an action” (Harré, 2012, p. 198). Positioning Theory aims to investigate the meanings of actions through social acts (Harré & Slocum, 2003). Harré and Slocum (2003) also denoted that there were three types of actions, known as “(1) those that one has done, is doing, or will do; (2) those that one is permitted or encouraged to do; and (3) those that one is physically and temperamentally capable of doing” (p. 125). Positioning Theory focuses on the relationships between “what one believes one has or lacks a right to perform and what one does in the light of that belief through studying one’s lexical choices” (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 125). The third component, storylines, is defined as “the contexts of acts and positions” (Slocum & van Langenhove, 2003, p. 225) or “a working hypothesis about the principles or conventions that are being followed in the unfolding of the episode that is being studied” (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 9). Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) stressed that in a conversation, storylines and positions were co-constructed by participants rather than being freely constructed.

Positioning Theory has become a valuable analytical framework for examining a wide range of issues in research contexts where English is used as an additional language. Several key questions emerge from this broader context concerning what ways students and teachers position themselves or are positioned by others, who has authority and power (Bourdieu, 1986), and who is marginalised. In multilingual contexts, language teaching and learning are not considered as neutral processes yet are deeply entangled with key concerns of race, ethnicity, culture, and broader socio-political dynamics. When educators deliberately engage with and seek to understand their students’ identities, they are better positioned to address learners’ needs, tailor instructional support, and cultivate learning environments that promote student agency. Similarly, when teachers critically reflect on their own identities in shaping their assumptions and pedagogical choices, they may identify areas for professional growth and enhance their capacity to support students’ identity development as well as sense of membership within the classroom community (Kayi-Aydar & Steadman, 2021).

Adopting Positioning Theory in EMI contexts is particularly beneficial for understanding simultaneous complexities of content knowledge acquisition and the use of English as a *lingua franca*. While initially conceptualized as a means to enhance English proficiency and global competitiveness, EMI now involves complex layers of relationship among content, language, participants and institutional expectations (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013; Macaro, 2018). In such bi-/multi-lingual classrooms, interactions are shaped by not only linguistic competence but also by institutional demands, cultural expectations, and professional identities, thus generating constant negotiation of roles. Specifically, EMI classrooms require teachers and students to navigate dual responsibilities of content mastery and English competency, which leads to a negotiation of their authority and participation rights. Teachers may position themselves either as subject specialists with disciplinary authority or the language gatekeeper enforcing standards of academic English. For instance, Block and Moncada-Comas (2019, p. 13) showed that STEM teachers were reluctant to position themselves as English language teachers, viewing language explanation and/or correction as outside their duties of discipline-bound specialists. Such a view creates a tension between institutional expectations and individual professional choices. Students, similarly, may be positioned as either novices or capable discipline learners yet linguistically deficient if they struggle to articulate knowledge in English (Doiz et al., 2013). Those perceptions are of great importance as they influence the ways of their engagement. A student positioning himself as linguistically weak may avoid participation, despite having strong content knowledge. Likewise, a teacher who positions his students as passive listeners might restrict opportunities for collaborative meaning-making. Additionally, EMI instructors may impose forced positions on students based on assumptions about their prior experiences and anticipated future trajectories. Airey (2012) reported that in Sweden, EMI lecturers at smaller institutions tended to use less English under the assumption that their students enjoyed fewer opportunities for English use. In contrast, lecturers at larger institutions were more inclined to teach in English, positioning their students as future members of the international academic community. Such underlying assumptions simultaneously enabled and constrained the positions available to students, directly influencing their access to English-medium education, thus potentially limiting their future professional opportunities.

To address the aforementioned issues, through analysis of speech acts such as questioning, correcting, or turn allocation, Positioning Theory identifies the discursive mechanisms that facilitate or hinder stakeholders' agency. Furthermore, Positioning Theory is also instrumental in examining experiences of conflict or frustration when teachers are subjected to forced positions (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Therefore, moving beyond static roles and focusing on the discursive co-construction of identity, Positioning Theory allows researchers to unpack the sources of conflict, tension, and power imbalances within the classroom and across broader institutional contexts. The next section, therefore, is going to review empirical research employing Positioning Theory to strengthen its suitability in the field of EMI research.

3. Empirical Research Review

3.1. Selection Method

Although the reviewed studies were identified through a targeted and iterative literature search rather than a full systematic review, in order to provide a focused synthesis of empirical studies utilizing Positioning Theory in EMI, a structured review procedure was adopted. Key terms of initial searches with the support of major academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, included combinations of “*English-medium instruction*” (“EMI”), “*Positioning*

Theory”, “*teacher/ student positioning*”, “*teacher identity*”, and “*teacher agency*”.

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) they explicitly utilized Positioning Theory as a primary or supporting theoretical framework; (2) they focused on EMI, bi-/ multi-lingual contexts; (3) they were empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals; and (4) they examined issues related to identity, agency, or educational positioning. Conceptual papers, book reviews, conference abstracts, and studies not engaging with positioning concepts were excluded.

Following an initial screening of titles, abstracts, and keywords, full-text articles were reviewed for relevance and theoretical alignment. The final corpus, therefore, consisted of five empirical studies conducted across diverse educational contexts, including New Zealand, Vietnam, Spain, Russia, Hong Kong, and Australia, forming the basis for the thematic synthesis presented in this review. Among the five selected studies, Trent (2022) did not explicitly employ Positioning Theory as its theoretical framework. Nevertheless, its discourse analysis, informed by Bakhtin’s dialogism, revealed how lecturers positioned themselves and were positioned within the discourse. This inclusion is justified because Bakhtinian dialogism and Positioning Theory are epistemologically aligned in the sense that both frameworks view identity not as a fixed trait, but as a dynamic, discursively negotiated construct shaped through interaction with social voices.

Table 1

Reviewed Articles

Study	Context	Participants	Methodology	Main focus
Vu & Doyle (2014)	Vietnam-New Zealand	University students	Narrative inquiry	Student positioning
Block & Moncada-Comas (2019)	Spain	STEM lecturers	Qualitative	EMI identity
Trent (2020)	Russia	EMI instructors	Qualitative	Institutional positioning
Trent (2022)	Hong Kong	Content teachers	Qualitative	Discursive positioning
Nguyen et al. (2023)	Australia	Preservice teachers (English language & content)	Qualitative	Collaborative positioning

3.2. Major Themes of the Reviewed Studies

3.2.1. Positioning, Teacher Identity and Agency in EMI Contexts

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the reviewed studies concerns the role of positioning in the construction and negotiation of teacher identities and agencies. Within EMI-specific contexts, identity construction becomes even more complex due to the relationship between language and disciplinary expertise. Block and Moncada-Comas (2019) reported that STEM lecturers teaching through English frequently positioned themselves as disciplinary experts while actively resisting identities associated with language teaching. Participants consistently emphasized their expertise in engineering, veterinary science, or other disciplinary fields while rejecting the view that EMI transformed them into English language teachers. Moreover, the lecturers’ positioning reflected broader assumptions that within higher education, content knowledge and language teaching were often conceptualized as separate domains of expertise. Similarly, Trent (2022) found that EMI teachers in Hong Kong were

positioned by multiple and often competing discourses. English was associated with prestige, social mobility, and educational success at the macro level whereas at the institutional level, EMI was promoted as a marker of quality and international competitiveness. Within classroom practices, however, teachers were expected to support both content learning and English-language development. As teachers negotiated these overlapping expectations, they occupied complex and sometimes conflicting professional identities, which are constructed through active interactions with students, colleagues, institutions, policies, and broader societal discourses. Accordingly, teachers were not passive recipients of these positionings, which in turn shaped teachers' capacity to act within educational contexts.

3.2.2. Institutional and Policy Positioning in EMI

Reviewed studies showed that Positioning Theory has increasingly been used to examine how EMI policies and institutional discourses position educational stakeholders within broader systems of power, which represents an important shift from micro-level analyses of classroom interactions toward more critical examinations of educational structures.

Drawing on Positioning Theory, one main argument of Trent's study (2020) concerns the effects of EMI adoption on stakeholders in the way that some instructors felt marginalized or burdened by EMI demands (losers), while others saw EMI as an opportunity for prestige (winners), depending on how they were positioned by their institutions. EMI, therefore, functioned not only as a language policy but also as a mechanism through which power and privilege were distributed. Similarly, Trent (2022) demonstrated that EMI teachers were simultaneously positioned by community, institutional, and professional discourses. Such multiple layers of positioning shaped how teachers understood their roles, rights, duties and what forms of practice were considered legitimate. Also, the study highlighted the importance of examining EMI as both a pedagogical phenomenon and a discursive process. Block and Moncada-Comas (2019) extended this perspective through their discussion of the EMI gaze and the ELT gaze. More specifically, the authors found that while lecturers generally accepted institutional expectations associated with EMI and internationalization and the positioning of themselves as content specialists teaching through English, they resisted attempts to position them as language teachers responsible for students' language development. This resistance might illustrate that although institutional positionings were not automatically accepted, they were likely to be contested and renegotiated by educational actors.

3.2.3. Positioning, Multilingualism, and the Negotiation of Language Expertise

The last theme concerns the relationship between positioning and multilingualism, which addresses how positioning shapes the understandings of language expertise and multilingual practices.

Nguyen et al. (2023) did not directly investigate the positioning of content teachers; instead, they focused on how pre-service English language teachers (PSTs) positioned themselves and were positioned by content-area counterparts during language-content teacher collaboration. Through their distributed knowledge-based framework, the authors demonstrated that English language PSTs played a productive supporting role in both language-related and content-related domains. In language-content teaching, it is necessary to reposition the content teacher professional roles, which requires a distributed knowledge base among both language and content teachers. In a similar vein, Block and Moncada-Comas (2019) found that EMI lecturers differed in how they understood their language-related responsibilities. While they were willing to teach disciplinary terminology, they generally rejected broader responsibilities for students' language

development, thereby establishing boundaries around their professional roles. From students' views, Vu and Doyle (2014) offered a complementary perspective by examining students' positioning within multilingual and intercultural educational contexts. When students transitioned from Vietnam to New Zealand, they gradually repositioned both themselves and their teachers. This process involved changing understandings of language use, learner autonomy, and educational relationships, demonstrating that positioning played a central role in intercultural adaptation.

3.3. Limitations in Existing EMI Positioning Research

Despite the growing contribution of Positioning Theory to EMI research, the reviewed studies reveal several conceptual, methodological, and contextual limitations. While existing research has significantly advanced understanding of teacher identity, agency, and institutional positioning, important dimensions of EMI remain underexplored. Thus, identifying these gaps is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of positioning processes within increasingly multilingual and internationalized educational environments.

3.3.1. The Predominant Focus on Teachers

One of the most noticeable characteristics of the current body of research is its strong focus on teachers as the primary subjects of investigation. Most studies employing Positioning Theory have examined how teachers constructed professional identities, negotiate responsibilities, and exercise agency within educational settings (Block & Moncada-Comas, 2019). In the case of Trent's study (2022), although it did not explicitly adopt Positioning Theory as its formal framework, its utilization of Bakhtin's Dialogism demonstrated that the ways lecturers positioned themselves and were positioned within the discourses were inherently dialogic processes. This focus has generated valuable insights into teachers' experiences and perspectives, particularly in relation to the challenges associated with EMI implementation. However, the emphasis on teachers has resulted in comparatively limited attention to other stakeholders including students, administrators, policymakers, curriculum designers, and institutional leaders. Yet these actors have participated actively in the construction of EMI realities and contributed to the positioning of teachers and learners.

The inclusion of students as participants is shown in Vu and Doyle's study (2014), which demonstrated that students continuously positioned themselves and their teachers during educational transitions. Similarly, Trent's (2020) analysis of EMI policy implementation suggested that institutional leaders and policymakers exerted considerable influence on how educational actors are positioned within systems of power and opportunity. Nevertheless, such perspectives remained exceptions rather than the norm.

3.3.2. Limited Attention to Translanguaging and Multilingual Practices

The majority of reviewed studies focus on language ideologies, language-teacher identities, or English-language proficiency rather than on actual bi-/multi-lingual practices from the positioning literature. Block and Moncada-Comas (2019) explored how EMI lecturers positioned themselves in relation to language teaching while Nguyen et al. (2023) examined the distribution of language-related expertise within collaborative educational settings. However, neither study directly delved into how teachers and students negotiated bi-/multi-lingual practices through positioning processes. Such a gap represents a particularly important opportunity for future EMI research on translanguaging practices within EMI programmes, which are recognized as a pedagogical resource supporting meaning-making, knowledge

construction, and learner participation in bi-/multi-lingual classrooms. Moreover, little is known about how teachers/ students position themselves or are positioned when engaging in translanguaging practices within EMI environments. Future studies could, therefore, make significant contributions by investigating the positioning of translanguaging practices and the identities associated with them.

3.3.3. Methodological Limitations

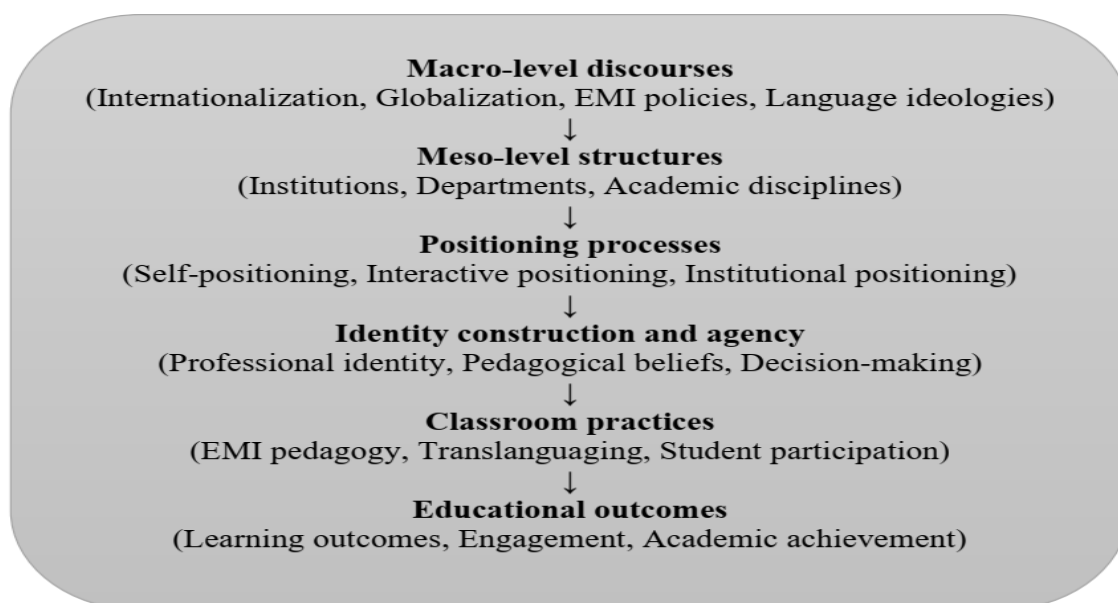
The third limitation concerns methodology of the existing research, one of which is overreliance on interviews and other forms of self-reported data, except Nguyen et al.'s study (2023) when they combined interview data with observations or recordings of actual interactions. While interviews provide valuable insights into participants' perspectives and experiences, they primarily capture retrospective accounts rather than naturally occurring social interactions. Positioning Theory conceptualizes positioning as something emerging through discourse and interaction. Consequently, utilizing primarily interview data may obscure important aspects of positioning that occur in everyday classroom practices.

Moreover, the majority of reviewed studies investigated the positioning of stakeholders at a single point in time, providing only snapshots of their experiences and identities whereas positioning is dynamic and subject to continuous negotiation. One exception is addressed in Vu and Doyle's (2014) study of Vietnamese students transitioning from Vietnam to New Zealand, whose findings demonstrated how positioning changed over time as individuals adapted to new educational cultures and experiences. Specifically, students initially positioned lecturers as distant and unsupportive but later repositioned them as helpful facilitators while simultaneously redefining themselves as autonomous learners (Vu & Doyle, 2014).

3.3.4. Limited Geographical and Contextual Diversity

Reviewed EMI positioning research remains scarce in regions which have witnessed substantial growth in EMI programmes such as Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Middle East. Countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia provide fertile educational contexts for examining how teachers and students negotiate multilingual identities, local language policies, and internationalization agendas. Positioning Theory, therefore, could offer valuable insights into how EMI stakeholders navigate these complex linguistic and ideological landscapes.

Due to such limitations in existing studies, important relationships between policy, institutional structures, classroom interactions, and individual agency often remain insufficiently explored. For example, teachers' classroom practices may be influenced simultaneously by national EMI policies, institutional expectations, disciplinary cultures, and personal beliefs. Accordingly, addressing these gaps proposes a multi-level conceptual framework that is capable of connecting macro-level discourses, meso-level institutional structures, and micro-level classroom interactions. Such integration would enable researchers to develop more comprehensive explanations of how positioning operates across educational systems.

Figure 1*Multi-Layer Conceptual Model for Future EMI Positioning Research*

The above model emphasizes that positioning is not an isolated psychological process but a dynamic mechanism connecting broader social structures with classroom practices and educational outcomes. As illustrated, it explicitly not only connects positioning with agency and pedagogical practice but also extends positioning research beyond identity construction by incorporating bi-/multi-lingualism and translanguaging. Such an approach has the potential to reposition EMI teachers not simply as content experts or language instructors but more importantly, as multilingual mediators who strategically mobilize linguistic resources to facilitate learning and participation. In this sense, Positioning Theory offers not only a framework for understanding current EMI practices but also a lens through which future bi-/multi-lingual pedagogies can be investigated. In addition, the conceptual model provides a foundation for future studies focusing on stakeholders' perspectives to investigate how policy-makers, teachers, students, and program coordinators negotiate identities, responsibilities, and language practices within increasingly complex EMI environments. Accordingly, the review also highlights the need for longitudinal studies employing greater methodological diversity with greater use of classroom discourse analysis, interactional ethnography, conversation analysis, and multimodal approaches to provide richer insights into how positioning is enacted rather than merely described.

4. Conclusion

This current review has demonstrated that Positioning Theory provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding how educational stakeholders negotiate identities, responsibilities, and practices within EMI contexts by foregrounding the dynamic, relational, and discursive nature of identity construction and social interaction.

The synthesis of five empirical studies reveals three major contributions of Positioning Theory to EMI research. Firstly, the framework has enabled researchers to move beyond static conceptualizations of teacher identity by highlighting how teachers continuously position and reposition themselves within complex educational contexts. Along with identity, positioning

research has contributed to a deeper understanding of teacher agency by demonstrating how professional self-positioning shapes pedagogical decision-making and responses to institutional expectations. Moreover, studies adopting a positioning perspective have shed light on the influence of institutional and policy discourses on EMI implementation, revealing how stakeholders are positioned within broader systems of power, opportunity, and constraint. Finally, reviewed research suggests that Positioning Theory holds considerable potential for investigating bi-/multi-lingualism, language ideologies, and collaborative expertise within EMI settings.

Despite these contributions, the review has identified several limitations in the current literature concerning the limited diversity of participants, methodology and educational contexts, all of which suggest a need for more integrated, interaction-oriented, and bi-/multi-lingual perspectives in future EMI research. Through connecting positioning to identity construction, agency enactment, pedagogical practices, and educational outcomes, the framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of how EMI is experienced and enacted in diverse educational contexts. As EMI continues to expand globally and bi-/multi-lingual pedagogies gain increasing recognition, positioning-oriented research is well positioned to make important contributions to EMI research field.

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