University Teachers' Challenges and Expectations in Bi/Multilingual Disciplinary Literacy Instruction: A Qualitative Cross-disciplinary Study

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Abstract

In today's linguistically diverse higher education contexts, teaching bi/multilingual disciplinary literacies (BMDLs) becomes more challenging when both teachers and students are non-native speakers of the language of instruction. This leads to university teachers' increased expectations for students' secondary education in disciplinary literacy (DL) development. Considerable BMDL studies [e.g. 1, 2] have focused on secondary education, yet challenges and demands in higher education settings remain significantly under-researched. This study explored university teachers' perspectives on the challenges they and their students face regarding BMDL practices. It also investigated teachers' expectations of both their students and the students' secondary education regarding BMDL development. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted across countries, disciplines, and languages of instruction, and were analysed both inductively and deductively. The participants were 41 university teachers from Türkiye (n=10), Albania (n=13), the Czech Republic (n=10) and Kuwait (n=8), who taught natural (12) and social sciences (29) in a language other than their first language. The languages of instruction were English, German and Arabic. While most participants encountered challenges adapting pedagogical strategies to meet their students' needs for BMDL development, some reported difficulties stemming from teaching in a foreign language. Perceived student difficulties involved aspects of DL comprehension, learning, and application, and these reported difficulties differed across disciplines. Findings demonstrated that expectations from secondary education reflected the challenges the participants experienced; however, they varied across disciplines, mostly centring on basic discipline-specific knowledge and skills, familiarity with concepts and analytical skills, and students' equipment with the necessary language skills. By identifying challenges university teachers face in bi/multilingual classrooms and shedding light on their expectations, this study contributes to a better understanding of current issues in BMDL instruction and offers valuable insights for future pedagogical practices and policy development in both secondary and higher education.

Keywords: *bi- and multilingual disciplinary literacies, disciplinary literacies, foreign language instruction, teachers' expectations, teachers' challenges, tertiary education*

1. Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has brought a widespread shift toward using second or foreign languages as media of instruction. In these contexts, both instructors and students must engage with complex academic content through a language that is not their first, foregrounding the importance of disciplinary literacies (DL), the capacity to think, communicate, and construct knowledge in discipline-specific ways [3, 4]. When DL must be developed across two or more languages, the concept extends to bi/multilingual disciplinary literacies (BMDLs), an integrated competence that involves the coordination of language, content, cognition, and semiotic resources [5].
Despite the scale of this shift, empirical research on BMDLs in higher education remains limited. Existing work has focused on secondary education [1], challenges in general English-medium instruction (EMI)

[6], or students' perspectives [2]. What looks largely absent in the related literature is a systematic examination of how university teachers experience BMDL challenges, particularly in relation to students' secondary education preparation. This study addresses this gap by investigating: (a) teachers' challenges in BMDL instruction, (b) their perceptions of student difficulties, and (c) their expectations regarding student preparedness and the role of secondary education. Drawing on interviews with 41 university teachers from four countries, across natural and social sciences taught through three different languages (i.e., English, German, Arabic), the study offers a cross-contextual account of how BMDLs are experienced in contemporary higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Challenges in BMDL Instruction

DL encompasses discipline-specific vocabulary, epistemological orientations, and modes of reasoning that go beyond general language proficiency [13]. In multilingual settings, this extends to BMDLs, navigating disciplinary meaning-making across multiple languages and semiotic resources. Dafouz and Smit's [2] ROAD-MAPPING framework illustrates how language, content, and institutional context interact in internationalised universities, and positions BMDLs as an integrated competence rather than an additive extension of language skills.

Empirical research in EMI contexts shows that teachers and students struggle to negotiate complex disciplinary meanings in a foreign language, limiting students` participation and knowledge construction [6]. Crucially, these difficulties are not reducible to language proficiency alone. Soruç et al. [6] demonstrate that language-related challenges are shaped by the interaction between English proficiency and disciplinary knowledge, while Kamaşak and Sahan [7] show that academic success reflects a combination of language proficiency, L2 attitudes, and prior disciplinary preparation. Students' struggles often reflect unfamiliarity with discipline-specific practices such as constructing arguments, interpreting evidence, and communicating in ways valued by academic communities rather than linguistic deficiency alone. Despite this growing understanding, comparatively few studies examine how university teachers navigate the interplay between disciplinary knowledge, language, and cognition, the perspective this study foregrounds.

2.2 The Secondary-Tertiary Transition and Teacher Expectations

The secondary-tertiary transition is a critical juncture at which mismatches between expectations and preparedness become apparent. Students frequently enter university with limited disciplinary thinking, insufficient academic literacy, and underdeveloped critical abilities [7]. EMI research sharpens this picture: Aizawa and Rose [8] found that limited secondary-level English exposure significantly hampered university EMI transitions, and Rose et al.'s [9] systematic review confirmed that students from L1-medium secondary schools face greater challenges, particularly in academic writing.

McKinley [10] argues that higher education preparedness must encompass disciplinary knowledge, academic socialisation, and critical engagement, rather than merely language proficiency. Wollscheid et al. [11] provide complementary evidence by showing that both staff and students perceive academic literacy demands as discipline-specific and multidimensional. Consequently, university teachers often find themselves addressing foundational gaps such as vocabulary, concept review, and analytical skills that they expect from secondary education [12]. The underlying argument emerging from this literature is that BMDLs development should be understood as a continuous trajectory rather than a stage-specific outcome. By foregrounding teachers' perspectives on the relationship between instructional challenges and students' prior preparation, this study connects BMDL challenges to broader educational trajectories across multiple countries and disciplines.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Aims and Objectives

The study investigated the challenges tertiary teachers report in teaching BMDLs, as well as their expectations of their students and of secondary education regarding BMDLs. As the scope of this paper does not allow for a deeper cross-disciplinary analysis and exploration of differences among disciplines, the findings are presented for two broad disciplinary domains: the social and natural sciences. Two research questions were formulated to address the aim:

RQ1: What challenges do tertiary teachers report in teaching BMDLs?
RQ2: What are tertiary teachers' expectations of their students and their secondary education regarding BMDLs development?

3.2 Sample and Data Collection Method

The selection of countries and participants was guided by a combined purposive–convenience sampling strategy. Our qualitative study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews with university teachers (n = 41) with varying length of teaching experience representing social (n = 29) and natural (n = 12) sciences, four countries – the Czech Republic (n = 10), Turkey (n = 10), Kuwait (n = 8), and Albania (n = 13), and diverse institutional settings and linguistic backgrounds (see Table 1) following a survey instrument and interviewer guidelines designed and piloted within COST Action CA21114. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Boğaziçi University (ID no: 2025-27), and the ethical guidelines of the participating universities were thereafter followed. The teachers' languages of instruction were English (n = 38), German (n = 1) and Arabic (n = 2). The interviews were conducted online and in person over three months, from November 2024 to January 2025, and were recorded with participants' consent. Each participating teacher was assigned a code in this study (such as T4 or T11). The codes are used in the Findings section to cite interview extracts that illustrate the findings.

Table 1. Research Participants

Data holder (country_initials)	Code	Field	Language of instruction	Length of teaching experience in years	Programme level	Percentage of courses taught in a FL in %	Length of interview in minutes
Coder 1 (CZ_JZ)	T1	Literature	English	10–15	BA/MA	100	51
	T2	Literature	English	10–15	BA/MA	100	41
	T3	Literature	English	15+	BA/MA	100	44
	T4	Geography	English	10–15	BA/MA	0–25	31
	T5	Literature	German	5–10	BA/MA	51–75	43
	T6	History	English	10–15	BA/MA	0–25	44
	T7	Literature	English	10–15	BA/MA	100	33
	T8	Literature	English	15+	BA/MA	100	65
	T9	Geography	English	15+	BA/MA/PHD	0–25	50
	T10	Literature	English	15+	BA	100	43
Coder 2 (TR_SKD)	T11	Biomedical Engineering	English	1–5	BA	100	36
	T12	Physics	English	5–10	BA/MA/PHD	100	50
	T13	Chemical and Metallurgical Engineering	English	15	BA/MA/PHD	100	44
	T14	Psychological Counselling	English	5–10	BA	25	37
	T15	Environmental Engineering	English	5	BA/MA/PHD	100	35
Coder 3 (TR_ÖÇA)	T16	Sociology	German, English	1–5	BA/BSC	75	31
	T17	Biology	English	15+	BA/BSC/MSC	25	28
	T18	Economics	English	5–10	BA/BSC	25	30
	T19	International Trading	English	1–5	BA/BSC/MSC	76–100	32
	T20	Marketing	English	1–5	BA/BSC	25	28
Coder 4 (KW_ZBI)	T21	Business	English	10–15	BA/BSC	100	41
	T22	Business	English	1–5	BA/BSC	100	46
	T23	Education	English	15+	BA/BSC	100	40
	T24	Architecture and Design	English	1–5	BA/BSC	100	31
	T25	Business	English	1–5	BA/BSC	100	46
	T26	Architecture and Design	English	1–5	BA/BSC	100	32

	T27	Business	English	5–10	BA/BSC	100	37
	T28	Arts Sciences	English	15+	BA/BSC	100	31
Coder 5 (AL_ES)	T29	Linguistics	English	1–5	BA	100	37
	T30	Management	English	15+	BA/MSC	75	29
	T31	Computer Science	English	1–5	BSC	100	32
	T32	Psychology	English	1–5	BA/BSC	100	31
	T33	Economy	English	5–10	BA	100	39
	T34	Oral medicine	English	1–5	BSC/MSC	100	30
	T35	Dentistry	English	1–5	BSC/MSC	100	33
	T36	Medicine	English	1–5	BSC	100	30
	T37	Computer Science	English	1–5	BSC	76–100	31
	T38	Psychology	English	10–15	BA/MSC	76–100	30
	T39	Psychology	English	10–15	BA/MSC	51–76	33
	T40	Theology	English, Arabic	1–5	BA	100	29
	T41	Theology	English, Arabic	1–5	BA	100	32

3.3 Data Processing and Analysis

The recordings were transcribed with the help of AI tools, proofread for accuracy and analysed using thematic analysis [13]. The data coding process involved all six stages [13] and employed both deductive and inductive approaches. An initial version of a coding manual was drafted using the deductive approach, with additional codes added through inductive coding and expert discussions. As the manual included high-inference categories, validation was conducted by five coders, each of whom independently coded one full interview. The acceptable level of inter-coder reliability was set at 80% agreement, and this was achieved across all coders in two rounds of coding. The main issue that needed to be addressed during this process was the density of codes, which was lower with two of the coders but was resolved via expert discussions, after which the codes were refined, and all of the interviews were coded using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (compatible versions 14 and 15). The final coding manual included detailed examples of the research participants' utterances for each of the codes and comprised 56 A4 pages divided into two sections: (1) DL, and (2) language aspects of DL. This paper focuses on the interpretation of data collected across both sections, specifically on teachers' and students' challenges in teaching DL, the language aspects of DL, and their expectations of their students and their secondary education in both areas (see Table 2).

Table 2. Themes and Codes

Themes	**Codes**
Teachers' challenges	Challenges in teaching disciplines Challenges in teaching in a foreign language Challenges in teaching critical thinking Challenges in cultural perspectives
Perceived students' challenges	Comprehension of disciplinary literacies Learning and applying DL
Teachers' expectations of students	Coherence in writing/speaking Ability to read in a foreign language Understanding and speaking in a foreign language Knowing how to use technological tools Variety/diversity among students Analytical thinking skills Familiarity with concepts Basic disciplinary knowledge and skills Academic writing skills Awareness and basic knowledge of the field

Teachers' expectations of the students' secondary education teachers	Promoting (critical) thinking Teaching discipline-specific knowledge and practising Encouraging students to read Promoting interdisciplinary group work Teaching soft skills Promoting argumentation Designing student-oriented tasks Teaching learning strategies Curricular demands alignment Cooperation among teachers from various disciplines

4. Findings

The analysis revealed four themes: teachers' own challenges, perceived student challenges, expectations of students, and expectations of secondary education teachers. These themes demonstrate that classroom difficulties are shaped by both students' pre-university preparation and systemic factors in secondary education.

4.1 Teachers' Challenges

Teachers reported difficulties that centre on teaching subject content in a foreign language and promoting critical thinking. Many struggled to explain disciplinary terminology, attributing this to the abstract nature of the concepts or to their own unfamiliarity with the terms in the language of instruction. Others emphasised challenges arising from students' language proficiency, leading to insufficient content comprehension and limited classroom engagement. A Kuwaiti business teacher illustrated the dual burden: "You're doing dictionary work, as well as teaching the concepts – the students have to first understand what the key concepts mean in English, before they understand the application" (T27).
Additional challenges included institutional and curricular constraints, particularly limited resources and textbooks and student diversity in disciplinary backgrounds, learning experiences, and cultural orientations. Natural science teachers more frequently emphasised gaps in terminology and procedural knowledge, while social science teachers highlighted difficulties with argumentation and critical engagement.

4.2 Perceived Student Challenges

Teachers noted that students faced difficulties with comprehension, acquisition, and application of DL. Many students struggled to understand complex discipline-specific texts, limiting their ability to deepen disciplinary knowledge and participate in classroom discussions. Teachers attributed these challenges to limited language proficiency, weak academic language skills, and short attention spans. Students also lacked analytical, argumentative, and critical thinking skills needed for meaningful disciplinary engagement.
Notably, even students with reasonable disciplinary knowledge often could not transfer it to practical tasks. A Czech geography teacher explained: "Geography is a practical discipline, and that's the biggest challenge for them to apply the knowledge and skills in real life. We really teach practical things… It's about understanding, not about learning facts" (T4). Teachers attributed these difficulties to insufficient secondary education preparation and gaps in prior knowledge, and reported spending additional class time that might facilitate comprehension and skill application.

4.3 Expectations of Students

Teachers expressed clear expectations regarding students' secondary school preparation across three dimensions. First, students should possess foundational disciplinary knowledge, such as familiarity with discipline-specific concepts and the ability to use relevant technological tools. Second, they should bring adequate academic skills and language proficiency, as well as the ability to understand academic discourse and communicate effectively in oral and written forms. Third, students should have well-developed cognitive and higher-order thinking skills. As a Turkish biomedical engineering teacher stated: "My main expectation is an analytical thinking structure – to be able to take an idea and synthesise it and produce new ideas… when that analytical intelligence is not formed, the thing cannot be formed successfully" (T11). Despite these expectations, teachers consistently reported that many

students failed to meet these criteria upon university entry, resulting in a mismatch that affects both teaching and learning.

4.4 Expectations of Secondary Education

Participants articulated expectations for secondary education teachers' roles in university preparation. They stressed the importance of developing discipline-specific knowledge and terminology, promoting critical and analytical thinking, and building learning and study skills alongside soft skills. Teachers also highlighted the need for disciplinary cooperation that would enable students to transfer knowledge across subjects. Some suggested discipline-specific additions to secondary curricula: "If in the secondary school curricula, they implement some managerial skills – at least how students can manage their time, their self, their career – that would facilitate the situation" (T33). An oral medicine teacher proposed including Latin for prospective medical students (T34).
These expectations point to an anticipated disconnect between university demands and secondary education practices, positioning pre-university education as a critical but insufficiently aligned phase of BMDL development.

5. Discussion

Three cross-cutting arguments emerge from the findings, each of which connects to and extends the existing literature.

5.1 Preparedness as a Multidimensional and Unevenly Developed Construct

The data indicate that teachers conceptualise student preparedness not as a single variable, typically language proficiency, but as an interconnected set of linguistic, disciplinary, and cognitive competencies expected to develop in tandem before university entry. This aligns with Hyland [14], who argues that academic success depends on engaging with discipline-specific practices rather than general language proficiency, and with McKinley's [10] framework, which positions higher education preparedness as encompassing disciplinary knowledge, academic socialisation, and critical engagement. This study adds that these dimensions are not only multiple but also unevenly developed. Teachers report students who possess reasonable language skills but lack disciplinary thinking, or who have content knowledge but cannot articulate it in the language of instruction. This unevenness, rather than any single deficit, is what generates classroom difficulty.
Importantly, the specific configuration of this unevenness is shaped by disciplinary orientation. Natural science teachers in our sample more frequently identified gaps in procedural and terminological knowledge in students who could not work with formulae, laboratory protocols, or technical vocabulary in English, while social science teachers emphasised deficits in argumentation, critical evaluation of sources, and the ability to construct disciplinary arguments in writing. This pattern suggests that "preparedness" is not a uniform construct but is refracted through the epistemological and communicative demands of each discipline. Kamaşak and Sahan [7] similarly found that the interaction between language proficiency and disciplinary knowledge shapes academic outcomes, but their analysis did not differentiate between disciplinary domains. Our findings extend this work by showing that the weight assigned to linguistic, cognitive, and content-related dimensions of preparedness varies systematically across the natural and social sciences, with practical consequences for how teachers allocate instructional time and adapt pedagogical strategies.

5.2 Systemic Misalignment between Expectations and Preparation

A persistent mismatch between what teachers expect and what students bring structures both teaching practices and learning experiences. Teachers' retrospective expectations of secondary education closely mirror the challenges they report in their own classrooms, suggesting that these challenges are not merely individual or pedagogical but reflect structural discontinuities between educational levels. This aligns with Yusupova et al. [15] and Pitera and Bush [12] on expectation-preparedness gaps and extends them by demonstrating that the pattern holds across four countries, two disciplinary domains, and three languages of instruction. Furthermore, Soruç et al.'s [6] student-focused data showed that language-related challenges interact with disciplinary knowledge; our teacher-focused data reveal a complementary perspective: these same interactions shape how teachers organise instruction, allocate time, and define pedagogical priorities.

What is particularly striking is the circular quality of this misalignment. Teachers reported spending considerable class time on vocabulary work, concept review, and foundational thinking skills, activities they explicitly framed as belonging to secondary education. This compensatory labour not only reduced the time available for advancing disciplinary knowledge but also reshaped instructional goals: several participants described shifting from discipline-building to remediation as their de facto classroom mode. Aizawa and Rose [8] documented a similar dynamic in Japanese EMI contexts, where limited secondary-level English exposure constrained university learning. Our cross-national data suggest that this is not confined to a single educational system but constitutes a recurrent structural feature of BMDL settings. The implication is that the misalignment is not only an inconvenience but a mechanism through which gaps in secondary preparation are reproduced at the tertiary level, as teachers must repeatedly revisit skills that were expected to have been developed earlier.

This finding underscores the need to reconceptualise BMDL development as a continuous trajectory rather than a stage-specific outcome. If preparedness is understood as something achieved by a particular educational threshold and then maintained, the burden falls entirely on secondary education. However, if it is understood as a cumulative, ongoing process, then the secondary-tertiary interface becomes a site of shared responsibility requiring coordinated curricula, shared expectations, and cross-level professional dialogue. Rose et al.'s [9] systematic review confirmed that students from L1-medium secondary schools face greater difficulties at university, particularly in academic writing; our data complement this by showing that teachers at the receiving end of this transition perceive the same discontinuity and respond to it with adaptive, but often unsustainable, instructional strategies.

5.3 The Limitations of Teacher Perception

It is important to recognise that these findings are based on teachers' perceptions, which may reflect normative expectations about adequate preparedness rather than objective measures of student ability. Teachers' accounts are inevitably shaped by disciplinary conventions, institutional demands, and idealised notions of what a "prepared" student looks like. From this perspective, the identified mismatch can also be interpreted as a gap between institutional expectations and diverse student trajectories, rather than solely as a deficit in student preparation. This interpretive caution aligns with Wollscheid et al. [11] in the sense that perceptions of academic literacy demands vary across disciplines and stakeholder positions.

Nevertheless, several features of the data work against a purely constructivist reading. First, the consistency of themes across four distinct national and institutional contexts, such as Türkiye, Albania, the Czech Republic, and Kuwait, suggests that the pattern captures a structurally real aspect of the secondary-tertiary interface rather than reflecting idiosyncratic institutional cultures. Second, teachers' accounts were not uniformly deficit-oriented; many participants acknowledged the constraints of their own pedagogical repertoires and the role of institutional factors, which suggests a degree of reflexivity that tempers the risk of one-sided attribution. Third, the specificity of teachers' expectations, their emphasis on particular skills such as argumentation, disciplinary vocabulary, and analytical thinking rather than vague complaints about "student quality", indicates that their perceptions are grounded in concrete classroom experiences rather than generalised dissatisfaction. Taken together, while the perceptual nature of the data warrants interpretive caution, the cross-contextual robustness and specificity of the findings support their value as evidence of a systemic pattern in BMDL instruction.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to BMDL research by bringing together data from four countries, two disciplinary domains, and three languages of instruction to offer a cross-contextual, teacher-centred perspective on BMDL challenges. By connecting teachers' instructional difficulties to their retrospective expectations of secondary education, it highlights a dimension, the secondary-tertiary transition, that has been underexplored in the BMDL literature.The findings also carry several implications. First, secondary education should integrate DL, academic language, and critical thinking more systematically into curricula and develop these competencies progressively rather than abruptly introducing them at university. Second, universities should provide structured transition support such as bridging courses, academic literacy programmes, and discipline-specific language support to complement, not replace, secondary-level preparation. Third, greater alignment between secondary and tertiary education is essential, facilitated through coordinated curricula, shared expectations, and cross-level professional dialogue. Finally, blended professional development programmes engaging educators across levels could support a more coherent and continuous approach to BMDL development.

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