PAPER

English in higher education in the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan

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Abstract

In Central Asia, English is not only considered a language of intercultural communication, but it is also by far the most studied foreign language at schools and universities. The globalization and internationalization of education resulted in English becoming a medium of instruction in all levels of schooling. English functions as the language of research and academia. This article focuses on comparative research conducted on the role(s) of English in higher education institutions (HEIs) in three Central Asian republics – the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The main objective of this study was to explore the role(s) of English at HEIs to have a better evidence-based understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of English medium instruction (EMI) in these countries.

1 | INTRODUCTION

English is arguably the hegemon language of academic communication in many countries (Ferguson, 2007). Associated with the term 'linguistic imperialism,' proposed by Phillipson (1992), English also dominates as the language of instruction in education around the world. In the past, English was mostly associated with the language of colonized countries. However, at present, it functions as a language of broader communication and a key competency needed for getting access to a prestigious international education and finding better employment. Tollefson and Tsui (2004) stated that developing countries that strove to integrate into the global economy used English in education because it was associated with modernization, advancement, and development. Functioning particularly through student and faculty mobility, globalization and internationalization have both become the main drivers of integration into the global economy for developing countries (Coleman, 2006).

In recent years, English instruction has increased specifically in higher education because English medium instruction (EMI) is associated with prestige and high status (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Many students choose to study in English because they believe that it guarantees a brighter future and better employment (Shohamy, 2013). However, the way English is introduced and implemented in countries where it is a foreign language poses various challenges. Lack of English support for teachers and students at EMI universities, shortages of materials, and poor language proficiency are among these challenges (Alhabahba et al., 2016; Ng, 2016). Besides these constraints, there are other struggles for students and teachers. In settings where English is a foreign language, English requires more time from teachers and students both in terms of understanding materials and in terms of preparation for the class (Macaro et al., 2018). Additionally, Airey (2011) and Probyn (2006) reported that studying in a foreign language slows down content learning. Relatedly, students studying in EMI contexts participate less in classroom discussions than those who study in their native language (Kiliçkaya, 2006). Lower language proficiency, as a result, lowers students' general performance in class and affects classroom dynamics. It also makes students struggle with their studies (Choi, 2013; Tan & Ong, 2011).

Attitudes towards EMI and its practical use in higher education have been widely investigated in various contexts. Several studies in EMI higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world have investigated students' beliefs about content learning (Dearden, 2014; West et al., 2015), language learning (Belhiah & Elhami, 2014; Cho, 2012; Kang & Park, 2005), students' motivation for choosing EMI (Earls, 2016; Yeh, 2014), support (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012; Ghorbani & Alavi, 2014; Ismail et al., 2011), disapproval of its implementation (Cho, 2012; Hellekjær, 2017), and lecturers' perceptions of EMI (Airey, 2011; Başıbek et al., 2014; Doiz et al., 2014). The number of research studies on EMI from Central Asia has also been growing; however, the region remains under-researched and is generally limited to reports on the general state of EMI at the country-level (Liddicoat, 2019) or specific universities with EMI (Linn et al., 2020; Seitzhanova et al., 2015; Zenkova & Khamitova, 2018).

This article draws from a broader study that explored the experience of English in HEIs across three post-Soviet Central Asian countries – the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Examining students' and lecturers' opinions, this article conceptualizes the role of English following the relevant dimension in the ROAD-MAPPING theoretical framework proposed by Dafouz and Smit (2016). To contextualize the experience of English in multilingual HEIs in three Central Asian countries, the article provides background for each country and compares the findings drawing on several benefits and drawbacks associated with EMI in the region. The research findings reported in this article directly influence English language education policy in the countries of the Expanding Circle. The research contributes to a broader scholarship around world Englishes by drawing attention to the lived reality of English in three Central Asian countries and initiating a debate about the EMI practices in HEIs.

2 | BACKGROUND

Funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund of the UK Research and Innovation Council in the 2018–2019 academic year (AY), this study focused on three Central Asian countries listed as low- and middle-income countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD, 2019) Official Development Assistance list of developing countries. Table 1 provides a brief overview of each country's general statistics (World Bank, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

Language-related reforms were happening in the region before and after the countries' independence. The Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union's expansion into Central Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries affected not only the socio-political situation but also the linguistic landscape in the region and largely shaped its current state. Since 1991, because Russia and the Russian language experienced a backlash, many Russian speakers left the countries in the early years of independence. Following the de-Russification movement, in 1993 Uzbekistan shifted from a Cyrillic alphabet to Latin, while the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan still use the Cyrillic script. Despite this backlash, however, labor migration to Russia, the availability of an array of printed, online, and media resources in the Russian language, as well

TABLE 1 Overview of countries

	Kyrgyz Republic	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
Area	76,641 square miles	55,100 square miles	447,400 square miles
Population	6.3 million	9.1 million	32.9 million
GDP per capita (2018)	$US1,277	$US822	$US1,540
Borders	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China	Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, China	Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan

as the wider geopolitical situation are among the reasons why people have continued to study the Russian language. The Central Asian region has always had a rich language ecology. At present, apart from the use of titular languages and various dialects, many people still use Russian as a language of communication while beginning to implement English education. English is the most learned foreign language, and it is used as a medium of instruction at various institutions on all levels of education but especially in higher education. Not only are branches of foreign institutes opening their campuses in the region, but also local universities are implementing EMI to attract more international students. International students' motivation to study EMI in Central Asian countries is the relatively low school fees and the cost of living. To contextualize the research findings on the role of English in three countries, it is necessary to provide brief background information about each country's major educational developments. In the following section, the country descriptions are mostly related to English language development and particularly EMI HEIs.

2.1 | Kyrgyz Republic

In the past, the education system in the Kyrgyz Republic was often criticized for lack of quality and clarity. Merrill (2011) observed that because there were different institutions with various types of degrees, contact hours, and credit systems, the HE was disintegrated and messy. To tackle this issue in 2009, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education started the Bologna reform, which in AY2012–2013 resulted in the state universities changing to a bachelor's and master's degree structure and a credit-hour system. To further improve the overall education system in the country in 2006, 2009, and 2015, Kyrgyzstan participated in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). What also distinguishes Kyrgyzstan from other countries in the region is the fact that quality assurance of the state universities is now mostly done not by the Ministry of Education but by accredited attestation companies. However, even though the Kyrgyz Republic maintains its strong position of a country with a 'respectable level of access to education,' a scarcity of materials, poor facilities, and teacher-centered approaches to teaching have resulted in state institutions lagging behind other HEIs in the region (World Bank Report, 2018a). Since the economic market conditions in the country require knowledge of English, by the order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, the English language is integrated into the curriculum from grade three to 11 of secondary school.

There are 32 public and 33 private HEIs in Kyrgyzstan (Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2020). There are several private universities – American University of Central Asia (AUCA), University of Central Asia, OSCE Academy in Bishkek, International Alatoo University – and numerous state HEIs that are EMI. Turkish Manas University uses three languages to teach different disciplines: Turkish, English, and Kyrgyz. The EMI HEIs generally accept overseas students who find it cheaper to study in the Kyrgyz Republic than in their own countries. For example, many students from neighbouring Turkey come to pursue study at Manas University. Students from India and Pakistan predominantly study medicine at an EMI HEI at the Osh State University and medical universities around the country. AUCA accepts students from around the world and is a popular destination for students from Afghanistan.

Finally, the British Council and the US Embassy are two active organizations in the country that arrange teacher trainings, professional conferences, and projects where teachers of English and other subjects may participate. They provide libraries that both teachers and students may use free of charge to improve their English.

2.2 | Tajikistan

Tajikistan developed its education system mostly through the reforms in consultation with international donors. Lapham (2017) listed the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, UNICEF, USAID, and international non-governmental organizations as the main contributors of financial resources and expertise in the country's educational policy. Even though foreign aid to education makes a considerable contribution to the improvement of education quality, it is assumed that international organizations may carry hidden agendas that help to promote English education in the country.

Tajikistan has been promoting the English language in the country since 2004 when the President signed the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan for the period up to 2030 (Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2011), which stressed the importance of English language development. As in the Kyrgyz Republic, in Tajikistan English is taught at schools from grade three. The rapidly grown need for graduates with English language proficiency and the poor quality of higher education that did not meet international standards resulted in the opening of EMI private universities. One of the first EMI HEIs – the University of International Relations – was opened in 2003 but was closed soon after for political reasons. The sole EMI HEI in-country is the University of Central Asia in Khorog. This university was established in 2017 after the opening of its sister branch in Naryn (Kyrgyz Republic). It is funded by the Aga Khan Foundation. However, some local universities in the country – Tajik State Pedagogical University named after S. Aini, Avicenna Tajik State Medical University, Russian-Tajik Slavonic University, Technological University of Tajikistan, and the Institute of Economy and Trade under the Tajik State University of Commerce – also teach several programs of study in English. Similar to the Kyrgyz Republic, some international students go to study in Tajikistan because it is cheaper. International student enrolment data for AY2014–2015 in Tajikistan showed that there were around 900 students mostly from neighbouring Afghanistan, Iran, and India (DeYoung et al., 2018).

Even though the country seems to be open to the development of English, not many resources have been allocated to this area. Since there is no British Council headquarters in Tajikistan, English language development is mostly coordinated by the US Embassy. Moreover, there are generally not many opportunities for people to practice their English language skills outside formal classes except at the growing number of private language centers that teach English for a fee, organize language clubs, and prepare students for IELTS or TOEFL.

2.3 | Uzbekistan

According to the World Bank (2018b), in 2017, the government of Uzbekistan spent more than 6 per cent of its GDP on education, with more than half of this money (56%) spent on the secondary education sector. In comparison, in 2017, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan spent 2.8 per cent and 5.2 per cent of their GDP, respectively (World Bank Report, 2018b). Since 1991, Uzbekistan introduced a series of national reforms in education, a number of which were connected to foreign language. According to the Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2012), this regulation highlighted the importance of foreign language learning. Starting from AY2013–2014 then, all schoolchildren began to learn English from the first grade. In 2013, the Cabinet of Ministers adopted standards of continuous education and aligned the state requirements to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2013). In 2017, President Mirziyoev signed a decree which

resulted in the English for Academics program implemented by the British Council. This program prepared teachers from different disciplines to develop skills for effective study abroad. In 2018, a group of successful program graduates were sent abroad for short-term courses, master's, and PhD degree studies (British Council-Uzbekistan, 2020). Also, in 2018, IELTS and/or TOEFL test scores were accepted as an alternative for the English language section of the national standardized test that students take to enter the HE institutions.

Uzbek English language teachers are often involved in in-service training courses provided by the Uzbekistan Teachers of English Association, the British Council, the Regional English Language Office of the US Embassy, and various foreign universities. Additionally, to support students' English language skills development, the US Embassy opened several 'American Spaces' in main libraries in the capital and big cities where students may study English and use up-to-date materials. In terms of higher education, back in AY1988–1989, there were 43 HEIs in Uzbekistan (Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018). The total number of HEIs at the beginning of 2020 was 113 (Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education, 2020). Out of the 113 HEIs, 21 were listed as international branch campuses. In 2018, three universities – University of Journalism and Mass Media of Uzbekistan, International University of Tourism 'Silk Road,' and a branch of Puchon University in Tashkent – were established. The following year, the country opened its doors to Webster University, campuses of six affiliated Russian universities, as well as the Malaysia University of Technology and Indian Amity University. Except for the Russian affiliates, most of these universities are EMI. However, in addition to these international branch campuses, state universities have started running special programs in English. For example, the faculties of International Relations and World Politics under the University of World Economy and Diplomacy partly run their subjects in English. The Uzbek State World Languages University also prepares future English language teachers and translators through EMI.

3 | METHODOLOGY

Since the goal of the broader study was to explore the experience of English in HEIs in the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the following research questions were explored:

1. What is the lived reality of English for staff and students at HE institutions in the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan?
2. What differences and similarities can be observed in the roles of English at universities in three countries?

This paper draws from a broader study and focuses on the roles of English in HEIs with EMI. Exploring the experience of staff and students with English, this study aims at getting a better understanding of the lived reality of English in academia, particularly in teaching and learning.

The data was collected at EMI international institutions as well as state institutions with separate programs taught in English. Study participants were from both universities – larger educational institutions that offer undergraduate and graduate courses in various disciplines – and institutes – educational institutions that focus on a specific area of study. There were two data collection instruments – a questionnaire and focus group discussions. Both were organized around three central themes – the context of English language use, the experiences of students, teachers, and administrators with English, and views and attitudes towards the use of English at HEIs, both within and beyond the classroom. The questionnaire was designed in English. English was also the language of communication during the interviews. The data collection instruments were adapted from a study on language policy development at Westminster International University in Tashkent (Linn et al., 2020). The questionnaire also included several sections of the survey by Bolton and Kuteeva (2012) that was initially conducted at Stockholm University.

The questionnaires were digital, and the links were sent out to HEIs in all three countries through the administration, faculty members, and students. To get more responses, we have also prepared paper-based copies and distributed them during field visits. Even though there is Internet connectivity in all three countries, most HEIs did

TABLE 2 Overview of questionnaires and interviews conducted

Country/Tools	Students	Staff	Total
Kyrgyz Republic			
Questionnaires	209	92	134
Interviews	<140	26	<166
Tajikistan			
Questionnaires	134	53	187
Interviews	<120	24	<144
Uzbekistan			
Questionnaires	240	54	294
Interviews	<70	35	<105

not have university-wide Wi-Fi and filling out the paper questionnaires was more convenient for the participants. This generated more responses and made data collection inclusive. Overall, 793 questionnaire responses were recorded, but after eliminating all the outliers, the final number of the analyzed responses was 782. In total, 583 students and 199 faculty members from 58 HEIs completed the questionnaire. The data was then analyzed using SPSS software. The fieldwork visits took place in Bishkek (the Kyrgyz Republic), Dushanbe and Khujand region (Tajikistan), as well as in Tashkent and Syrdarya region (Uzbekistan). The main purpose of these visits was to carry out interviews and focus group discussions at the HEIs. The visits were held not only in the economically developed capitals with a number of universities but also in the other regions. This was done to be inclusive of different participant bodies. In total, 85 faculty members and 330 students from all three countries took part in the interviews and focus group discussions (Table 2).

During the fieldwork visits, focus group interviews included eight to 12 students or faculty members at a time. Students were interviewed separately from their lecturers to hear unbiased opinions. The interviews with the administrative staff were held individually for the same reason. This allowed us to minimize power-relationship bias and made interviews as comfortable for everyone as possible. The interview questions and all collected responses were in English. Group interviews with lecturers and students were transcribed and later analyzed using NVivo software. The universities visited during the field trips are indicated in bold font in Table 3.

The majority of the respondents from the Kyrgyz Republic were from Bishkek Humanities University (26.2%), Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University (19.6%), and Kyrgyz National University (11.3%). From Tajikistan, the majority of participants were from Avicenna Tajik State Medical University (28.2%), Institute Economy and Trade TSUC (19.7%), and Russian Tajik Slavonic University (15.4%). From Uzbekistan, the majority of participants were from Gulistan State University (15.6%), Webster University (11.2%), and the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (10.5%).

Overall the questionnaire response rate and the interest towards this study was rather high in the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan, which might have been due to relatively easy access to HEIs, more developed Internet connection, and support from fellow teachers in the data collection process. However, access to the Tajik respondents was challenging largely due to Internet-use restrictions in the country.

3.1 | Theoretical framework

To provide a theoretical foundation for this study, the article utilizes the ROAD-MAPPING framework proposed by Dafouz and Smit (2016). Originating from sociolinguistic, ecolinguistic, and language policy research, ROAD-MAPPING framework includes wider research agendas and particularly focuses on tertiary level education

TABLE 3 Institutions that took part in the study

Country	Institution type	Participant Institutions
Kyrgyz Republic	Universities	1. **American University of Central Asia** 2. **Bishkek Humanities University** 3. International University of Central Asia 4. Issyk-Kul State University 5. **Kyrgyz National University** 6. **Kyrgyz- Russian Slavic University** 7. Kyrgyz State Technical University 8. **Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University** 9. Osh State University 10. Taras State University
	Institutes	Not applicable
Tajikistan	Universities	1. **Avicenna Tajik State Medical University** 2. Khatlon State Medical University 3. Khorog State University 4. Khujand State University 5. **Russian Tajik Slavonic University** 6. Tajik Agrarian University 7. Tajik National University 8. **Tajik State Pedagogical University** 9. **Tajik State University of Commerce** 10. **Tajik Technical University** 11. The Tajik State University of Law, Business, and Policy 12. University of Central Asia 13. University of Steel and Alloys in Dushanbe
	Institutes	1. Institute of Energy of Tajikistan 2. Khujand Polytechnic Institute of Tajik Technical University 3. Kulob Institute of Technology and Innovation Management 4. Tajik State Institute of Languages 5. **The Institute Economy and Trade TSUC**
Uzbekistan	Universities	1. Andijan State University 2. Bukhara State University 3. Ferghana State University 4. **Gulistan State University** 5. Inha University 6. Karakalpak State University named after Berdakh 7. Namangan State University 8. National University of Uzbekistan 9. Russian Economic University named after G. V. Plekhanova 10. Russian State University of Oil and Gas named after I. M. Gubkin 11. Samarkand State University 12. Tashkent State Agrar University 13. Tashkent State University of Economics 14. Tashkent State University of Law 15. Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature 16. Tashkent University of Information Technologies 17. Turin Polytechnic University in Tashkent 18. **University of World Economy and Diplomacy** 19. Urgench State University 20. **Uzbek State World Languages University** 21. Webster University

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Country	Institution type	Participant Institutions
	Institutes	1. Andijan Machine Building Institute 2. Bukhara State Medical Institute 3. International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan 4. Military Customs Institute 5. Navoi State Mining Institute 6. Navoi State Pedagogical Institute 7. Nukus State Pedagogical Institute 8. Tashkent Chemical-Technological Institute 9. Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies

Note: Bolded institutions indicate participant institutions.

in multilingual university settings. This framework integrates different perspectives that capture the multi-layered nature of EMI. The name of the framework is based on the first letters of its six dimensions – Roles of English, Academic Disciplines, Management, Agents, Practices and Processes, and Internationalization and Glocalization – and the driving concept of the framework is 'English Medium Education in Multilingual University Setting' (EMEMUS). In EMEMUS, the concept of EMI is substituted with a broader notion of EME that helps to explain the complex nature of EMI-based education (Dafouz & Smit, 2016). The main point of access to all dimensions is the discourse of social written and spoken origin that include policy documents, English language practices, discussions about English language use, and so on.

Even though English in EMI HEIs serves in various roles ranging from being a gatekeeper in students' and lecturers' intake to disseminator of scientific ideas, in all three countries, English neither has a recognized status nor does it function as a language of wider communication. Therefore, from a macro-level perspective, in the context of this study, English is considered a foreign language (EFL). It is also important to note that this article does not cover all dimensions of the framework. Since the aim of this article was to examine the lived reality of English and roles and functions it carries in EMI HEIs, only the first dimension of the framework, namely 'Roles of English,' is used to synthesize the findings. Reflecting the ecological perspective of Spolsky's framework (2004), this dimension allows studying the functional breadth of English on institutional and national levels. Therefore, considering the factors relevant for the dimension of Roles of English, Dafouz and Smit (2017, 2020) cover both macro- and micro-levels of language use and subdivide the dimension in the societal, institutional, pedagogical, and communicational sub-dimensions. The article follows these four functions in the analysis of the results and discussion of the findings. In the first sub-dimension (that is, societal), English functions outside the educational institution and as a 'foreign language, language of environment, and language in (inter)national relations' (Dafouz & Smit, 2017, p. 299). Explaining institutional sub-dimension, Dafouz and Smit listed teaching, research, and administration as the main areas of English language use. In this sub-dimension, English is viewed as a subject, medium of instruction, and means of internal and external communication. The authors regarded the English language as an 'explicit or implicit learning aim or assessment criterion' in the pedagogical sub-dimension (p. 299). They also included online and printed teaching resources in this sub-category. Since the ROAD-MAPPING framework considers the use of languages other than English, the communicational sub-dimension covers the aspects of multilingualism and bilingualism. It also focuses on communicational purposes, language skills, and proficiency. Because in these four sub-dimensions the roles of English are identified through the collected data on instruction, delivery, teaching, and learning of academic subjects in different disciplines, the article uses the concept of EMI and not EME with its broader focus on English medium education. In this article, EMI is defined as 'the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English' (Macaro, 2019, p. 19).

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Societal roles

Dafouz and Smit (2020) defined the societal function of English as the use of languages in a broader environment outside the institution. The interview data showed that, on a societal level, knowing English is seen as trendy and prestigious. The main reason for this kind of thinking is connected with internationalization, which is often associated with the English language. In addition to this, Kyrgyz lecturers and the Uzbek teachers and students accentuated the parents' involvement in their children's lives. Parents were the decision-makers who encouraged, supported, and funded their children to learn English.

(1) LKG1[1],[2]: We have many new international schools and universities where students can study in English and many parents want their kids to study there because it is prestigious.
LUZ: The pressure [to study through EMI] comes from the parents who want their children to know English and students themselves realize the importance of English.
LKG: Students feel privileged to have classes in English; some of their friends who study at local universities do not have this opportunity.
SKG: It is now trendy to speak English and we are following the trend.
SUZ: My parents wanted me to study English thinking about my future. After several years I understood it was a smart decision.

As seen in excerpt 1 above, while the Tajik lecturers and students did not associate the English language with prestige, most of them emphasized the importance of knowing English to get an opportunity for better qualifications, more employment perspectives, and an affluent lifestyle. These beliefs were consistent across all three countries. Handling international business deals, travelling, studying, and growing professionally were the most popular associated benefits that English can bring about (excerpt 2 below).

(2) LKG: English learning is becoming popular because of the necessity of getting better jobs and improving lifestyle.
STJ: A person who knows English can work in the international finance sectors.
LTJ: Thanks to my English I could travel around the world easily. I have been to the US, UK, Scotland and many other countries.
LUZ: Knowing English gives an opportunity to work on international projects.

Although Kyrgyz and Uzbek participants in excerpt 2 highlighted the prestige of English in their countries, during the interviews most students confessed that they rarely used English outside the university. This was true among students in Tajikistan as well. The questionnaire results showed that in their spare time, however, students seemed to use English more than staff. The numbers for 'no English in spare time' and 'all in English in spare time' were rather low, ranging from 2 per cent to 10 per cent.

Students also stated that they felt uncomfortable using English outside the classroom and university because other peers accused them of boasting about their English skills. Thus, communication in English outside the universities was limited. However, as seen in excerpt 3, students could practice their English by participating in various extracurricular clubs, doing their assignments, socializing with tourists, surfing the Internet, and so on.

(3) SKG: There is not much opportunity to speak English; only if students attend American Corner or speaking clubs for free.
STJ: Outside the university I only read some scientific articles, books or chat with friends.

SUZ: We have some assignments which require us to communicate with people outside of the class and include their ideas in the assignments. These activities helped us to improve our English.

Excerpt 4 shows that the English language was considered a useful resource that helped Central Asian students and lecturers to improve their language skills and knowledge of subject content. For these participants, English was a resource that provided an opportunity for professional and personal development.

(4) LKG: International organizations, where English is a working language, invite teachers to attend seminars, conferences that are very useful.

STJ: Most sources are in English, and if students want to learn about their field in-depth they have to know English.

SUZ: English gives more opportunity to study my major in more depth.

LUZ: English is promoted among Uzbek doctors, lawyers and engineers to update their knowledge of their speciality.

The respondents were also asked if they considered English to be a threat to their native languages (excerpt 5). Since governments of all three countries have strengthened the role of titular languages – the languages of the majority ethnolinguistic group – the general response to this question was negative. However, most study participants did consider Russian to be a threat to the titular languages. This is striking since Russian is by far the most popular foreign language to study in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, while in the Kyrgyz Republic it has official language status.

(5) LKG: In the Kyrgyz Republic, many people do not speak Kyrgyz but speak Russian, so English is not a threat.

STJ: I am very hesitant about that [English is a threat to titular languages] because there is Russian which is widely spoken in this region.

SUZ: English will not influence Uzbek because Russian has its unofficial status of the language of communication.

During the interviews, it also became clear that Russian is used by the representatives of all age groups, while English is used mostly for educational and professional purposes among the younger generation.

To summarize, on a societal level, English is considered to provide opportunities to thrive both professionally and personally, despite its limited use outside universities. English, with its growing popularity as a foreign language, has also become the main competitor of Russian, which is viewed as a threat to the development of national languages.

4.2 | Institutional roles

The questionnaire results showed that there was diverse language ecology at HEIs in the three Central Asian republics. On an institutional level, in the participant institutions, English generally coexisted with at least one other language. Over 37 per cent of the respondents signified that they used three languages at their universities. Russian was the most frequently used language after English. Since the Russian language has official status in the Kyrgyz Republic, it was used there more than in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Table 4 provides an overview of the most frequent language combinations among participant HEIs from each country.

During the interviews, both faculty members and students also referred to different international organizations – the US Embassy, the British Council, and other NGOs – which have provided generous support in developing facilities, organizing teacher training sessions, and funding visits of foreign professionals. For instance, the US Embassy actively supported students and lecturers in the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan. In Uzbekistan, the British Council worked collaboratively with the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education. Nevertheless, faculty participants in all three countries highlighted a need for professional development to improve their methodology in EMI teaching and

TABLE 4 Combination of languages used at universities (%)

Country	Language practices at universities (%)		
	Official/dominant languages + English	Official/dominant language + English	Other
Kyrgyz Republic	Kyrgyz, Russian, English (43.2)	English, Russian (23.3)	Kyrgyz, Russian, English, Turkish (8)
Tajikistan	Tajik, Russian, English (38.3)	English (24.4)	Tajik, Russian (11.1)
Uzbekistan	Uzbek, Russian, English (37.1)	Uzbek, English (13.6)	English (10.2)

developing materials. They also stated that more support was needed from the administration of the HEIs in conducting research and writing articles.

It is impossible to discuss the role of English on the institutional level without any mention of students' transition to the HEIs from schools and colleges in these three countries. The main issue identified during the focus group discussions with students and lecturers was insufficient English provision at secondary schools. As seen in excerpt 6, students blamed their secondary school education for their insufficient knowledge of English, specifically noting inadequate English teaching hours, a grammar-focused curriculum, teachers' low levels of English proficiency, and lack of teaching materials. To prepare for the university entrance exams, students had to take additional English classes that usually cost much money.

(6) STJ: English taught at schools was not enough to enter the university and I had to take additional English lessons. But not everyone can afford it.

SKG: English at school only focuses on grammar rules, but it is not enough.

LUZ: Teachers are doing their best to teach English at schools, but gaps still exist because of bureaucracy and lack of resources.

However, even after students are admitted to the universities, they felt they were not provided with enough language support. Those students who studied in EMI programs at state HEIs did not have access to foundation level courses that could prepare them for further studies in their specialized subjects. Students, as well as lecturers, felt that they were not trained to function in EMI settings. As a result, different stakeholders described EMI as generally challenging in the Central Asian context. Although EMI has been widely 'implemented' throughout the Central Asian region, it has many shortcomings on an institutional level which should be addressed to improve the quality of the education in EMI programs.

4.3 | Pedagogical roles

On a pedagogical level, English functions as a language of teaching. In the questionnaire, the status of English at HEIs in all countries was evaluated as either 'used for teaching' or 'studied as an academic subject.' Participants from business, medical, polytechnic, information technology, law, and English translation departments identified English – not only as a subject, but also a language of instruction – for specific disciplines.

The focus group discussions revealed students' views on their teaching and learning experience in EMI programs at state HEIs (excerpt 7). For example, Uzbek students highlighted the effectiveness of communicative teaching methods, group work, and interesting materials, which made classes interactive and motivating. While most Uzbek students were satisfied with the way they were taught, Kyrgyz and Tajik students were generally demotivated to study. Their

main complaints were regarding traditional methods of teaching and old resources – which were considered boring, theoretical, and aimless. In contrast, in all three countries, students in the international branch campus HEIs were very satisfied with the quality of classes. Motivation to study through EMI also depends on the teachers' role.

(7) LKG: It [EMI] is not difficult, but it all depends on the teacher; if the lesson is interesting and the methodology is proper, then students are motivated to study in English.

   LKG: Some teachers make it very interesting to study in English.

   SUZ: My teacher motivates me to work harder on my English through different class activities.

   SKG: Teachers use old Soviet books and teaching methods which make the lessons so boring.

Faculty members also admitted that they experienced difficulties teaching through EMI (excerpt 8). Low language proficiency and mixed-ability classes often make teaching and learning challenging and create more confusion about language use. For the lecturers without any proper training on these matters, the teaching process was very frustrating and stressful, as seen in excerpt 8.

(8) LTJ: Students struggle understanding lectures and reading academic books.

   LKG: Since students' language skills vary, teachers have to deal with multilevel classes switching from English to either Russian or Kyrgyz.

   LUZ: I have students with different levels of English and I have no idea what to do with students who have very low proficiency in English.

   LUZ: Teaching in English is challenging especially when teaching ESP (legal terminology) to students with a low level of general English

   To overcome these difficulties, lecturers and students tried to find ways of making teaching and learning more effective (excerpt 9). Allowing for code-switching was by far the most widespread practice. To make explanations clearer, lecturers were sometimes encouraged by students to switch from English into other languages. Such instances were normally accepted by Kyrgyz and Tajik students; however, Uzbek students expressed their dissatisfaction with the lecturer's code-switching. Therefore, some lecturers do this willingly, while some were very hesitant. Students, on the contrary, were discouraged when changing codes and many lecturers encouraged them to use English all the time when in class. However, during the interviews, students confessed that when doing pair or group work, they often switched to non-English languages to make the discussion more effective and less time-consuming.

(9) SKG: Teachers should sometimes switch into Russian or Kyrgyz to explain something that is not clear to students.

   STJ: We usually translate terminologies into Tajik to understand them better.

   SUZ: Speaking in English is challenging, especially when teaching Law to students with a low level of English. It is also hard for students to study in English, so they code-switch.

   Another important finding was regarding dissatisfaction with the study resources in the HEIs' libraries. International branch campus universities with better funding opportunities did not experience such issues, while at the state institutions, this was a critical problem (excerpt 10). Students and faculty members confessed that they often breached copyright law and shared e-books illegally downloaded from the Internet. Therefore, at the state HEIs, students often used e-books which were provided either by lecturers or upper-level students. Although this issue was not pointed out by Tajik lecturers and students, this might be a reality for them as well.

(10) SKG: It is expensive to support students' learning, and the university does not have funds for that; there is a great need for books.

TABLE 5 English proficiency and needs at university (%)

Country	Very well	Well	Acceptable	Don't know	Poor	Very poor
Kyrgyz Republic	29.2	43.9	16.3	5.3	5.0	0.3
Tajikistan	29.41	39.04	17.65	3.21	4.28	6.42
Uzbekistan	23.5	42.2	22.1	7.1	6.42	2.4

TABLE 6 English proficiency level (%)

Country	Advanced	Upper-Intermediate	Intermediate	Pre-Intermediate	Elementary	Beginner
Kyrgyz Republic	24.92	35.22	24.58	10.63	3.99	0.66
Tajikistan	25.67	19.79	23.53	16.58	9.63	4.81
Uzbekistan	23.47	45.24	22.11	7.14	2.04	0

SUZ: We need a library full of English resources such as books for different subject areas, DVDs and newspapers.

No matter how challenging, exhausting and discouraging studying/working in an English-medium program may be in a foreign context, students and lecturers were working hard to find books and to pay for extra lessons to improve their language skills to make it a fruitful experience.

4.4 | Communicational roles

There was often a mismatch between students' expectations of EMI at state universities and the realities of students' frustration. For example, lack of university-wide policies made it difficult for students to speak English not only inside but also outside the classroom (excerpt 11).

(11) LKG: English is not a medium of instruction university-wide, so students always switch into Russian or Kyrgyz outside classroom.
SKG: When students just entered the university they expected that all subjects will be in English and this motivated them to enter, but in reality, there is a lot more Russian and Kyrgyz (especially during the first two years).

Even though the interview data show that there are certain expectations that students carry regarding the use of languages other than English in EMI HEIs, their general frustration with the lived reality was not the only reason for code-switching. The comparative survey data illustrate that English language proficiency, absence of language policies, and lack of English language support in HEIs were among the reasons for both complementary and conflicting communicative role of English HEIs. When respondents were also asked to evaluate how well their proficiency (language skills) in English meets their needs at their university, the responses were mostly positive with 40 per cent and over for 'well' and from 23 per cent to 30 per cent for 'very well' (Table 5). The exception was the respondents from Tajikistan, who rated their English proficiency as 'very poor' (6.42%). The other answers, however, were rather consistent across most categories.

Another finding showed that most respondents in the three countries generally evaluated their level of English to be rather high with advanced, upper-intermediate, and intermediate levels (Table 6). However, the percentage for lower levels (beginner and elementary) was still around 9 per cent to 10 per cent in Tajikistan and 3 per cent to

TABLE 7 English language proficiency tests (%)

Country	Yes	No
Kyrgyz Republic	24.25	75.75
Tajikistan	25.53	47.47
Uzbekistan	42.68	57.14

TABLE 8 Ability to discuss academic/professional interests in English (%)

	Kyrgyz Republic		Tajikistan		Uzbekistan	
	Students	Staff	Students	Staff	Students	Staff
Equally able in both languages	36.4	55.4	37.3	50.9	36.7	51.9
Much more able in English	8.1	4.3	13.4	7.5	13.8	18.5
More able in English	15.8	15.2	25.4	22.6	7.9	16.7
More able in non-English	28.7	13	11.9	9.4	34.6	11
Much more able in non-English	8.1	6.5	8.2	3.8	6.7	1.9
Does not apply	2.9	5.4	3.7	5.7	0.4	0

4 per cent in the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan, which signified either low self-esteem or significantly poor command of English.

Another way of assessing English language access was to see how many participants had taken an international English language assessment like the IELTS or TOEFL exams (Table 7). As seen in Table 7, in the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, there were fewer respondents with IELTS or TOEFL in comparison to Uzbekistan. The reason for such popularity of proficiency tests in Uzbekistan may be due to the recent decree, signed in 2018, that allows these tests to replace the official entrance state exams in English (Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018). The question about the respondents' language ability to discuss academic and professional interests revealed that most Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek participants thought that they were equally able to discuss their interests in both English and native languages, which requires a high perceived proficiency level in English. However, 28.7 per cent of students in the Kyrgyz Republic, 11.9 per cent in Tajikistan, and 11 per cent in Uzbekistan thought that they were more able to do so in their native languages (Table 8). Even though the questionnaire data showed that the participants consider their English to be generally high, as mentioned above, code-switching often took place. Since there was no specific 'English only' language policy at the universities, lecturer and students maintained flexibility in switching languages. During the focus group discussions, participants said that faculty members and students usually had a negotiated informal agreement to use only English in EMI classes unless there was a necessity to code-switch. For everyday conversations, students were also encouraged to use English, but that was rarely the case. The questionnaire results in all three countries showed that the respondents were interested in additional professional English language support if this support was offered at the university. Additionally, more than 60 per cent of respondents in each country stated that they had taken English language courses to develop their language skills since they have started to either study or work at the university. During the interviews, students confessed that they continued taking additional English classes and they would likely take part in free language courses if the university offered any.

Finally, questionnaire results showed that the respondents in all three countries preferred British English over the other varieties of English. During the interviews, most Kyrgyz and Uzbek respondents showed no specific preference for either British or American English varieties, in contrast to the survey results. However, in Tajikistan preference was clearly British English. It also became apparent that the English variety preference depended on various factors such as teachers' values and beliefs about the United States or the UK, available resources, and political views (excerpt 12).

(12) LUZ: The choice [of English variety] depends on the course not the teachers' decision.

SKG: Preference depends on teachers and students' beliefs; most students do not care much about the difference.

STJ: British English is a standard dialect of the English language.

Overall, on a communication level, most lecturers and students expressed their satisfaction with their English language skills; however, in reality, they used their full linguistic repertoire whenever needed.

5 | DISCUSSION

The findings raised key issues within the societal role of English in the HE system of these three countries, where English was used, not only at the international universities with EMI, but also in separate programs at state institutions. First of all, since most students came to EMI HEIs from secondary schools where other languages were the medium of instruction, the transition to an EMI setting took time and effort. Even though the government of all three countries implemented English classes from grade one and three of primary schools, by the time students entered HEIs, they did not have enough English language skills. Therefore, many students admitted that they had to take additional tuition-based classes to enter the university. Further evidence for this interest was the growing popularity of English language proficiency tests like the IELTS and TOEFL exams. Because a certain level of language proficiency was often one of the entrance requirements to EMI HEIs, the demand for these tests continues to grow among students. For instance, in Uzbekistan, students are required to have B1 CEFR level (that is, independent users of English with inter-mediate and upper-intermediate level of proficiency) to enter state HEIs that have EMI programs of study (Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2013). The Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, however, do not have any official language requirements that could substitute the state entrance exams to the universities. In addi-tion, it is important to note that language tests are also popular, not only among students but also lecturers who are sometimes required to show proof of their proficiency at work. In Uzbekistan, for example, the lecturers with the test certificate that proves their high English proficiency (as in C1 CEFR level or higher) are qualified for additional perks and promotion in the career ladder (Order of the Director of the State Test Centre under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2013). The perks also include fully paid professional development opportunities abroad including master's and doctoral studies.

The societal situation of English directly affected its role in various institutions. The findings of this study revealed that English was often viewed as a powerful tool for future development and improvement in every aspect of par-ticipants' lives. English was being promoted at and by HEIs as equipping students not only with subject knowledge but also English language competency, which was believed to be important to get a better job after graduation. While international branch campuses had more funds because they have other funding streams, state universities depended on government funding, which was often limited. Limited funds resulted in poor facilities and shortage of resources, which was particularly the case for Kyrgyz and Uzbek students. For all three countries, a lack of funding resulted in the absence of special EMI training that was needed for both students and teachers. In addition to this, at state universi-ties, EMI was imposed on students and lecturers in a top-down manner, which was both challenging and frustrating. To what extent this objective is achieved, however, often depended on students and lecturers themselves.

The lived reality of English in three countries was that it functioned at HEIs without any overt policies that regulated language use. The state HEIs followed a covert EMI policy based on top-down policies, while international universities were EMI by default. From the faculty members' perspective, EMI classes took more time for preparation and expla-nation. Students stated that they often spend more time understanding the subject matter or refer to their native language sources for additional explanation and support. These findings were supported by Hellekjær and Wilkinson (2001), who found that students studying EMI subjects spent 10 per cent to 25 per cent more free time on self-study than on subjects with their first language. There was also a demand for additional language support from the HEIs and

clear evidence that both lecturers and students spent their funds on the development of English competencies. The interview data showed that both students and lecturers often initiated or organized additional extracurricular activities to improve their English, which showed great motivation to study.

On a pedagogical level, English also functioned but not without its drawbacks. A strong association of EMI with modern teaching methods and communicative approach to teaching was one of the primary motivations for students to study in EMI programs. The findings suggested that students at state universities were dissatisfied with the way they were taught. Claiming that teachers' main concern was attendance rather than learning, students were not motivated to study. Boring lectures, heavy focus on theory and absence of practice, and no articulated learning objectives were students' main complaints. The greatest levels of dissatisfaction were voiced by Kyrgyz and Tajik students, who claimed that traditional and teacher-centred pedagogy made classes boring and did not develop their professional and language skills. From teachers' perspectives, teaching through EMI at state universities was particularly difficult due to lack of materials and training. At international universities, the situation was the opposite. A wide variety of tasks and modes of delivery along with up-to-date materials resulted in general satisfaction with the quality of teaching.

In terms of preferences, since there was no explicit policy that would prioritize one variety of English over another, the preferences for British or American varieties of English were strictly personal or depended on available resources. The interview results illustrated that the books that lecturers used usually define the use of a particular variety of English. Some lecturers and students could not explain why they preferred a certain variety or admitted that they are biased about the country of its origin (usually the United States or the UK). Whether English development requirement was explicitly included in the curriculum or not did not emerge in this study. However, it is assumed that this is a requirement at least for the students of English translation and English linguistics faculties in Uzbekistan since it was the only one of the three countries that had aligned all of its study objectives to the CEFR in English language-focused degrees. However, language development is an independent learning aim for most of the students and lecturers. As mentioned above, they invested in their self-improvement.

Finally, the role of English on a communicative level largely depended on the language proficiency of its users. Across all three countries, the findings suggested similarity in this matter. Even though participants generally considered their English to be sufficient enough to operate in higher education, there was a great interest in English proficiency development. It is worth noting that around 20 per cent of students and faculty members in all three countries responded that they rated their proficiency in English as acceptable, which showed the awareness and justified the need for language improvement. For EMI lecturers in EFL settings, poor language proficiency may affect teaching and result in problems with rapport with their students. However, English was not the only language used at universities and other languages also played a significant role in different aspects of university life. The data showed that apart from informally or formally assigned EMI, most students and academic staff used Russian and their national language during classes, in training, and in daily communication. The main reason for this was the natural inclination for multilingual people to communicate in the language or languages in which they feel safe and comfortable. Moreover, students' and lecturers' admitted lower English proficiency levels might have resulted in a preference for native language use over the use of English. Although in the survey students and faculty members generally evaluated their English proficiency rather highly, during the interviews they stated that they code-switched during the lessons. Most research studies report that code-switching mainly happens when there is a misunderstanding or for the necessity to clarify certain points (Baker & Hüttner, 2018; Macaro et al., 2018; Tarnopolsky & Goodman, 2014). Both aspects were evidenced in the findings of this study as well.

6 | CONCLUSION

This article investigated the experience of English and the societal, institutional, pedagogical, and communicational roles it plays in EMI HEIs in three Central Asian countries. Since English in such HEIs does not exist in isolation

from the titular languages and Russian, the ROAD-MAPPING framework – and specifically the four aforementioned sub-dimensions – that focuses on English in multilingual settings was used for the analysis and interpretation of findings. The use of this framework allowed grounding the findings in a broader scholarship of EMI research in the context of three Central Asian countries. This study was a pioneering attempt to examine the experience of English, as well as the roles it plays in HEIs and in wider Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek societies. It also contributes to a broader scholarship around world Englishes because it highlights the lived reality of English in three countries of the Expanding Circle. The findings revealed that both academic staff and students viewed English as an opportunity for a brighter future. Study participants were motivated to improve their language proficiency in English, but they needed more support from the administration of HEIs and the government. Among the other shortcomings associated with English in all countries were limited funds, shortage of materials, and lack of professional EMI training.

What became apparent in this study was that the roles of English are interrelated and intricately connected one to another. Tackling the issues on the societal level is impossible without dealing with the challenges faced in teaching and learning in pedagogical and institutional domains. Thus, the experience of English in the three countries was uneven. Subsequently, EMI HEIs, even though positively welcomed, should address various issues to be both effective and enjoyable for the participants. Therefore, drawing on the research findings, the HEI administrations, Ministries of Education, and countries' governments are encouraged to consider the following:

- English language teaching curriculum at schools and lyceums should align with the CEFR to ensure that students are equipped with the required level of English language proficiency by the time they enter the university.
- More attention should be paid to the transition period from secondary schools to EMI HEIs through foundation level courses on core subjects or providing ongoing EAP or ESP support.
- Both students' and lecturers' lower language proficiency impedes learning and teaching and, thus, their language development should be better supported at institutional and state levels.
- HEIs should have sufficient funding to update their materials, invest in teacher training with the focus on EMI pedagogy, and support language development initiatives.
- The challenges that faculty members and students experience in EMI settings in and out of the classrooms should be freely discussed with the administration and addressed.
- HEIs with EMI should consider having an explicit language policy that would celebrate linguistic diversity on campus and clearly define the areas of English language use.

The scope of the findings suggests many avenues for further research in the region. Future research may focus on the transition between educational non-EMI and EMI schools, the impact of EMI on social equality in the region, inadequate English language proficiency at schools, EMI management and policy, as a few examples. These findings may initiate the debate and engage all EMI stakeholders to work on improving the experiences of all stakeholders.

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Notes

[1] B2 and C2 refer to the proficiency scales described by the Common European Framework of Reference. Council of Europe, Council for Cultural Co-operation, Education Committee, & Modern Languages Division. (2001). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from https://www.coe.int/en/web/portfolio/the-common-european-framework-ofreference-for-languages-learning-teaching-assessment-cefr

[2] Participants are identified by the role (L = lecturer and S = student) and country (KG = Kyrgyz Republic, TJ = Tajikistan, UZ = Uzbekistan).

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