

## Article

# Developing an English Preparatory Curriculum for International Students in the Hainan Free Trade Port

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**Abstract:** The internationalization of higher education has led to increasing global student mobility and the expansion of English-medium instruction in universities worldwide, thereby this study examines the role of English preparatory education in supporting international students studying in universities within the Hainan Free Trade Port, hence drawing on literature from higher education internationalization, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and academic literacy studies, hence and the paper analyzes the linguistic and academic challenges that international students encounter in English-medium higher education environments, and including difficulties related to academic vocabulary, disciplinary discourse conventions. Academic writing practices; and adaptation to unfamiliar academic cultures, and based on a synthesis of international foundation program models and EAP research. The study proposes a conceptual framework consisting of four interconnected components: Academic English development, Academic Skills training, Disciplinary Language orientation, thereby and Intercultural Academic Communication; together, these elements form an integrated preparatory model aimed at facilitating international students' academic transition into English-medium university programs.

**Keywords:** Hainan Free Trade Port; English Preparatory Curriculum; English for Academic Purposes (EAP); Higher Education Internationalization; Academic Literacy

## 1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of international student mobility has become one of the most visible manifestations of higher education globalization, and internationalization is widely understood as the process of integrating international, hence intercultural. And global dimensions into the purpose and delivery of higher education [1], thereby as English has become the dominant medium of international academic communication, thereby the expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) programs across non-English-speaking countries creates new language preparation demands [2]. For international students, the ability to engage with academic discourse is essential for participation and achievement, yet research in English for Academic Purposes highlights that academic success requires more than general language proficiency: students must develop discipline-specific literacy practices, including academic writing conventions. And critical reading strategies. And familiarity with the rhetorical structures of academic argumentation [3].

Consequently. Many universities have developed preparatory programs designed to bridge the gap between general language competence and academic requirements [4]; such programs have become well-established in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia; typically combining language instruction with academic skills training and disciplinary orientation, hence academic literacy research further emphasizes that students must also adapt to unfamiliar norms of argumentation. And evidence, thereby and knowledge construction, a process theorized as academic language socialization [5].

Within the national context of China, the Hainan Free Trade Port represents a particularly significant policy initiative, and with education identified as a key component

Received: 17 January 2026

Revised: 09 March 2026

Accepted: 22 March 2026

Published: 29 March 2026



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of building an international hub capable of attracting global talent [6]. China's approach to internationalization combines global engagement with national development goals; however, the rapid expansion of international education in emerging contexts raises challenges: language-related difficulties remain a major obstacle for international students in English-mediated environments, thereby and institutional support systems for language preparation may develop more slowly than recruitment policies [7].

Despite the growing importance of international education in the Hainan Free Trade Port. Research on language preparation frameworks for international students in this region remains limited, thereby against this background, this study explores how an English preparatory curriculum can be developed to support international students in universities within the Hainan Free Trade Port, hence addressing the question: how can universities in the region design preparatory programs that effectively support international students' academic integration?

## **2. Internationalization of Higher Education and Language Preparation**

The internationalization of higher education has transformed university systems worldwide through cross-border student mobility, transnational collaboration. And expanding global knowledge networks [8], thereby universities increasingly adopt internationalization strategies not only to enhance academic reputation but also to support national economic development, hence within this transformation, the adoption of English-medium instruction across non-English-speaking contexts reflects the central role of English in facilitating international academic exchange, though it simultaneously generates challenges: even students with strong general proficiency may encounter difficulties engaging with specialized academic texts, producing academic writing, or participating in classroom discussions [9].

The field of English for Academic Purposes provides the key theoretical foundation for language preparation. Thereby eap research establishes that academic language competence is context-specific and closely tied to disciplinary communication: academic writing and communication are forms of specialized discourse shaped by particular academic communities. Requiring students to master not only grammatical accuracy but also rhetorical conventions and epistemological assumptions of their disciplines [10], thereby academic literacy has been conceptualized as a set of socially situated practices involving the negotiation of institutional expectations and disciplinary norms, hence the process through which students acquire these competencies-through interaction with instructors. Peers; and texts-is described as academic language socialization.

Recognizing these challenges, and universities in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia have established structured preparatory programs for international students, commonly referred to as foundation programs. Pathway programs. Or pre-sessional courses [11]. And foundation-year programs combine academic English instruction with academic study skills and introductory disciplinary subjects before students' progress to degree programs. Pathway programs delivered through university-affiliated colleges provide integrated language and academic instruction, with research indicating they play an important role in reducing linguistic barriers. Thereby in addition to language development. These programs support cultural and academic adjustment by introducing students to unfamiliar conventions regarding argumentation, citation. And academic integrity.

Despite the widespread adoption of such programs in established international education systems; their development remains uneven across emerging hubs [12], thereby in contexts where universities are rapidly expanding international recruitment. Institutional support systems may develop more slowly than policy ambitions; as Hainan seeks to establish itself as an international education hub, effective language preparation programs will be essential for ensuring that international students can successfully participate in English-medium academic programs.

### 3. English Preparatory Programs in International Higher Education

English preparatory programs serve as transitional educational structures bridging secondary education and university-level academic study [13]; beyond the structural design of these programs, their pedagogical foundation is closely tied to EAP, thereby this emphasizes that language instruction for university study should focus on the communicative practices and discourse conventions of academic communities [14]. A key concept in this scholarship is disciplinary discourse: academic communication varies significantly across disciplines, reflecting differences in epistemological traditions and rhetorical structures, hence so preparatory programs incorporating disciplinary language training help students develop the communicative competence required for subject-specific content [15].

Preparatory programs typically incorporate instruction in academic study skills alongside language development, and these skills-critical reading, thereby note-taking, and research methods, academic writing strategies, citation practices. And academic integrity-are essential for students entering university environments where independent learning and critical analysis are expected [16], hence the integration of language instruction with academic content is further supported by Content and Language Integrated Learning approaches; this emphasize the simultaneous development of subject knowledge and language competence.

Academic literacy research demonstrates that effective participation in higher education requires students to engage with complex forms of knowledge production. Academic writing requires constructing arguments supported by evidence, critically evaluating existing scholarship, thereby and situating ideas within disciplinary debates-practices that may differ substantially from writing in students' prior educational contexts. At the same time, students must navigate cultural differences in classroom interaction styles; expectations for independent learning, thereby and norms surrounding academic argumentation; preparatory programs therefore serve as sites where students develop both the linguistic and cognitive competencies and the sociocultural awareness required for academic participation [17].

For emerging international education hubs such as the Hainan Free Trade Port, designing effective preparatory programs requires careful consideration of both global models and local educational contexts. Universities in the region must design preparatory curricula that integrate international academic practices with the institutional realities of Chinese higher education, addressing not only general language proficiency but also academic literacy, disciplinary discourse competence. And cross-cultural communication skills.

### 4. Challenges for International Students in Chinese English-Medium Instruction Contexts

The rapid expansion of English-medium instruction in China has generated significant pedagogical and linguistic challenges, and research has shown that language proficiency remains one of the most significant obstacles for international students in English-mediated environments: even students meeting formal language entry requirements may experience difficulties engaging with complex academic discourse. Understanding lectures, hence and producing discipline-specific assignments. In Chinese universities, EMI implementation faces additional complexities related to instructor preparedness and institutional support.

A central challenge concerns the distinction between general English proficiency and academic language competence, and standardized tests such as IELTS or TOEFL assess general communicative ability rather than specialized academic literacy skills, yet university study requires interpreting complex academic texts, hence synthesizing information from multiple sources, hence and constructing evidence-based arguments-forms of communication requiring disciplinary discourse familiarity not captured by general proficiency assessments, thereby academic vocabulary presents a related

challenge: academic texts contain specialized lexical items and discourse markers whose mastery is essential for reading research literature. Understanding lectures, thereby and completing written assignments.

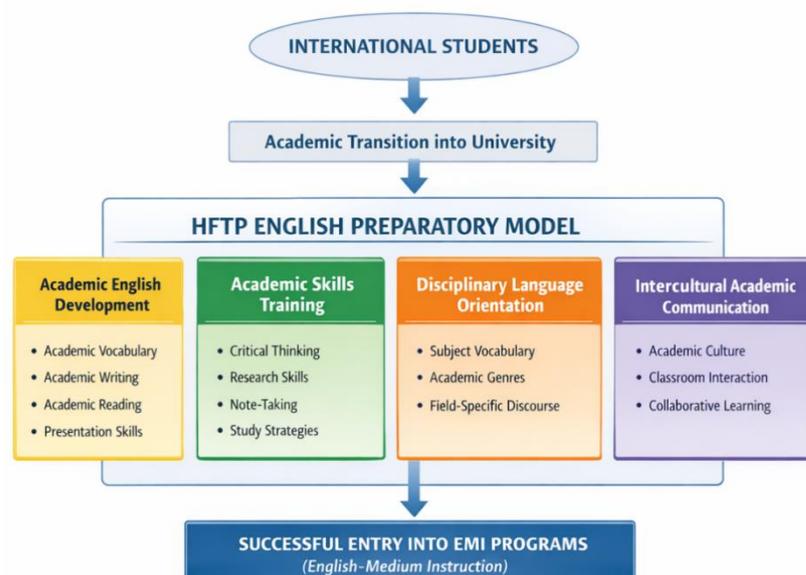
International students must also adapt to unfamiliar academic cultures. Studies of academic literacy have shown that students must learn to navigate institutional expectations regarding argumentation, evidence. Hence and disciplinary authority. Many Western academic traditions emphasize critical thinking and independent analysis that may be unfamiliar to students from different pedagogical backgrounds. Academic writing conventions-structured arguments supported by evidence, disciplinary citation practices, hence integration of scholarly literature-also present difficulties for students who have not previously received formal instruction in academic discourse practices, thereby classroom interaction poses additional challenges: following lectures delivered at pace with specialized terminology; and participating in discussion with limited language confidence. Can restrict students' opportunities to engage actively in learning processes and affect academic performance.

In China specifically, international students may encounter multilingual environments where English-medium programs coexist with Chinese-language administrative and social contexts. This creating navigation challenges for those unfamiliar with the local linguistic environment; these challenges collectively highlight the importance of systematic language preparation structures that can support international students during their transition into English-medium academic environments.

### 5. Framework for an English Preparatory Curriculum for Universities in the Hainan Free Trade Port

The analysis in the preceding sections highlights the importance of structured language preparation for international students entering English-medium higher education. Rather than focusing solely on general English proficiency, effective preparatory curricula must address multiple dimensions of academic readiness. Drawing upon EAP research and academic literacy to conceptualize language preparation as a multidimensional process combining linguistic development with academic socialization.

The proposed preparatory curriculum is structured around four interconnected components: Academic English development, Academic Skills training, Disciplinary Language orientation; and Intercultural Academic Communication, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** HFTP English Preparatory Curriculum Model

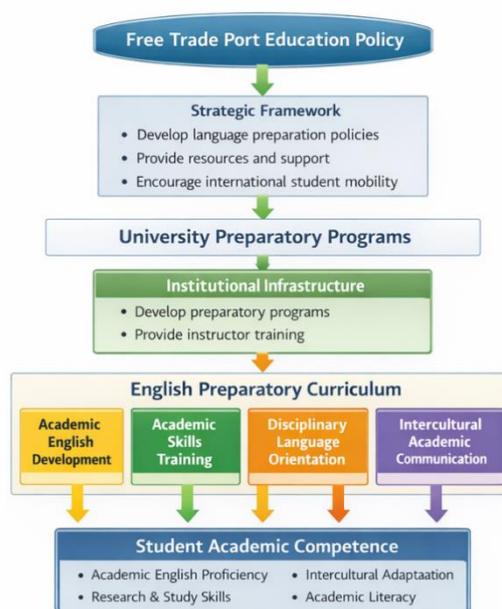
The first component, Academic English development, builds students' proficiency in the language forms of academic communication: academic vocabulary, reading strategies, academic writing structures. Thereby and presentation skills. Research in EAP establishes these competencies as essential for students' successful participation in academic discourse communities, and explicit instruction in academic vocabulary-the high-frequency academic lexical items appearing across disciplinary texts-forms a core element, enabling students to interpret research articles. Understand lectures. And produce structured written arguments.

The second component, Academic Skills training, develops the study skills associated with university learning: critical reading, hence note-taking, research methods, time management, independent learning strategies; and academic integrity, thereby for international students who may not have encountered these expectations previously, explicit instruction in academic study skills is crucial for facilitating academic adaptation. Training in citation practices and referencing ensures students can integrate scholarly literature responsibly into their writing.

The third component, Disciplinary Language orientation, thereby addresses the significant variation in academic communication practices across fields; research in genre analysis has shown that academic writing and communication are shaped by the epistemological traditions of specific communities; preparatory programs can introduce students to the language conventions of their intended fields through subject-specific terminology, introductory disciplinary texts, thereby hence and writing tasks simulating common academic genres-such as case analysis reports for business students or technical problem-solving explanations for engineering students.

The fourth component, Intercultural Academic Communication, prepares students to navigate unfamiliar norms of classroom interaction, collaboration, and academic discussion. This includes developing collaborative learning skills-participating in group discussions, expressing ideas clearly, responding constructively to peers' perspectives-that enable international students to integrate effectively into academic communities. Such intercultural competence is increasingly recognized as integral to academic literacy rather than a peripheral addition.

Figure 2 Illustrates the implementation pathway across three interconnected levels.



**Figure 2.** Implementation Pathway of English Preparatory Programs in the Hainan Free Trade Port

At the macro level, Free Trade Port education policies establish the strategic framework for international education development, thereby at the institutional level, universities design and implement preparatory programs and provide academic support systems, and at the curriculum level; the preparatory program develops students' Academic English competence. Disciplinary communication skills. And intercultural academic literacy, and ultimately enabling their successful transition into EMI programs, thereby this alignment ensures that language preparation is embedded within, rather than peripheral to, the broader internationalization strategy, thereby individual universities may adapt the framework according to institutional goals, disciplinary priorities. And student demographics; while the four-component structure provides a coherent foundation for addressing the linguistic, and academic, and cultural challenges identified in the preceding analysis.

## **6. Practical Implementation and Contextualization within the Hainan Free Trade Port**

While the four-component framework provides a robust conceptual foundation, its successful application requires careful contextualization within the specific institutional and economic landscape of the Hainan Free Trade Port (HFTP). The strategic development of the HFTP, particularly through initiatives like the Lingshui Li'an International Education Innovation Zone, presents a unique environment for operationalizing this preparatory curriculum; to move from theory to practice, universities in the region must align the curriculum's delivery with both local strategic educational goals and the practical realities of international student cohorts.

### *6.1. Structuring the Preparatory Timeline and Pedagogy*

Implementing the proposed model requires a dedicated structural timeline, thereby typically organized as an intensive one-semester (15 to 18 weeks) or full-year foundation program, depending on the students' entry proficiency levels, hence in a standard one-semester model, hence and instructional hours must be strategically distributed, and academic English Development and Academic Skills Training should dominate the first half of the semester, establishing a baseline of linguistic and cognitive readiness. As the semester progresses, the weighting should shift toward Disciplinary Language Orientation and Intercultural Academic Communication, hence this phased approach ensures that students are not overwhelmed by complex disciplinary discourses before they have mastered fundamental academic vocabulary and reading strategies, and furthermore. Implementing a co-teaching model-where English for Academic Purposes (EAP) specialists collaborate with subject-specific faculty-can significantly enhance the authenticity and practical relevance of the disciplinary language component.

### *6.2. Aligning Disciplinary Language with HFTP Pillar Industries*

A key differentiator for preparatory programs in Hainan is the opportunity to align the "Disciplinary Language Orientation" component with the HFTP's strategic economic pillars: tourism. Modern services. And high-technology industries. Instead of utilizing generic academic texts; curriculum designers can source authentic materials directly related to these dynamic sectors. For instance, international students intending to enter business or hospitality management EMI programs can analyze case studies on tropical tourism development, international trade policies within the free trade zone, or cross-border e-commerce operations. Students entering STEM fields can engage with literature on marine sciences, tropical agriculture, or ecological conservation-areas in which Hainan institutions have distinct research strengths, thereby by embedding local industrial and academic contexts into the language preparation phase, the curriculum not only develops linguistic competence but also enhances students' understanding of the regional economic landscape. This thereby increasing their future employability and alignment with China's regional development goals.

### 6.3. *Cultivating Intercultural Communication in a Multilingual Hub*

The demographic profile of international students in Hainan-often featuring a strong representation from Southeast Asian countries and Belt and Road Initiative partner nations-creates a highly diverse; multilingual campus environment; the "Intercultural Academic Communication" module must therefore transcend standard East-West cultural dichotomies. Pedagogical activities should involve collaborative problem-solving tasks that require students to negotiate meaning across multiple cultural perspectives. Role-playing seminars, peer-review writing workshops. And simulated academic conferences can provide safe spaces for students to practice expressing disagreement respectfully, claiming academic authority. And navigating the implicit rules of classroom participation. Additionally. While the primary focus is on English-medium instruction, acknowledging the surrounding Chinese linguistic and cultural context is vital, and integrating basic socio-cultural orientation into the intercultural module can help alleviate the isolation that international students often experience, hence this fostering a more inclusive and supportive campus climate.

### 6.4. *Assessment Strategies and Quality Assurance*

Finally. The implementation of this curriculum necessitates a comprehensive, formative assessment strategy, thereby and traditional standardized language tests are insufficient for measuring academic literacy and disciplinary readiness, hence and instead. Universities should adopt portfolio-based assessments that evaluate students' progress across all four framework components. Assessment tasks might include the submission of a progressively drafted research essay (testing Academic English and Skills), thereby an oral presentation on a subject-specific topic (testing Disciplinary Language and Intercultural Communication). And reflective journals documenting their academic socialization process. By implementing rigorous tracking mechanisms to monitor students' academic performance during their first year of EMI degree studies. And institutions can gather vital feedback, thereby this data-driven approach allows for the continuous refinement of the preparatory curriculum, ensuring it remains highly responsive to both student needs and the evolving academic standards of universities within the Hainan Free Trade Port.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has examined the role of English preparatory education in supporting international students within the Hainan Free Trade Port. Arguing that language preparation programs should be understood as structured transitional mechanisms that facilitate entry into academic discourse communities rather than simply remedial language instruction; effective preparatory programs must address multiple dimensions of academic readiness: language competence, disciplinary discourse awareness, academic study skills. And intercultural communication.

The proposed four-component framework-Academic English development, Academic Skills training, Disciplinary Language orientation. And and Intercultural Academic Communication-provides a conceptual model for designing programs that support both linguistic and academic socialization. Thereby its implementation within the three-level macro-institutional-curriculum pathway ensures alignment with the broader internationalization goals of the Free Trade Port.

The present study remains conceptual in nature; future research should empirically test the framework through curriculum implementation studies, student learning outcome analyses. And longitudinal investigations of whether preparatory participation correlates with improved academic integration, thereby research might also explore how digital learning environments and interdisciplinary teaching models can be incorporated into preparatory program design as higher education continues to evolve globally.

In conclusion. The internationalization of higher education requires not only institutional openness to global student mobility but also academic support systems that

facilitate students' successful participation in university environments; by designing structured preparatory curricula integrating academic language development, disciplinary orientation, thereby and intercultural communication training. Universities in the Hainan Free Trade Port can strengthen their capacity to support international students and contribute to the broader internationalization of higher education in China.

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