

ENGLISH IN THE EARLY YEARS: EXPLORING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION (EMI) IN A PRIVATE SCHOOL IN DENPASAR

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Abstract

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Indonesia has reached the primary level of education, where students face challenges in mastering academic content using a language they do not fully comprehend. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyse the implementation of EMI in one of primary schools in Denpasar, Bali. Besides, this study also explores teachers' perceptions regarding its effectiveness in the process of learning and teaching. The data of this study were obtained from semi-structured interviews with eight selected teachers which were met the criteria as participants. Non-participant observation classroom and document analysis of existing international-based curricula like Cambridge textbooks were considered as supporting data. The results show that a flexible bilingual approach (translanguaging) strategy conducted by the teachers, where *Bahasa Indonesia* is used as a scaffolding tool to ensure students' comprehension of complex ideas is more effective, rather than following a rule to only use English during the learning activities. Teachers are able to overcome the gap in language barriers by using multimodal strategies, creatively adapting international materials to fit the students' level of proficiency, and using visual aids and digital media. Moreover, teachers who have high positive perceptions toward EMI, knowing it as a tool that is beneficial for both the acquisition of language and the mastery of subjects, despite admitting the constant cognitive difficulties for students.

Keywords: Bilingual Classroom, EMI, EYL, Primary School, Translanguaging

INTRODUCTION

The global expansion of English as a medium of Instruction (EMI) has contributed to the development of research into the pedagogical affordances and constraints throughout various educational levels (Chang, 2021; Curle et al., 2024; Wu & Tsai, 2024). Experts argue that EMI is able to support internalization objectives and grow the number of learners' access to global knowledge resources, but the effectiveness of EMI also depends on the policy applied by the government and institutions, teachers' preparedness, and its applications (Lai & Idris, 2025; Lasagabaster, 2022; McKinley & Rose, 2022; Tejada-Sanchez & Molina-Naar, 2021). Recent surveys and reviews of EMI in Indonesian higher and primary education underscore both the rapid uptake of EMI policies in private and international schools and the complex difficulties faced by the implementation, like inconsistent language policy, limited proficiency of the teachers, and uneven instructional materials (Al Hakim, 2021; Handayani et al., 2022; Simbolon, 2021; Sukmawati & Pujiani, 2024). Since the use of EMI in Indonesian schools mostly implemented in private and international schools, this is needed to be explore deeper about how the implementation is.

Furthermore, the rapid expansion of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) for students of non-English speakers has been associated with the national policy (Macaro, 2020; Rahman & Hu, 2025). While EMI is usually associated with higher education levels, its implementation has spread through primary education levels, like English for Young Learners (EYL), as Khasbani (2019) mentioned that the selection of instructional language is an important determinant of educational results, as it functions as the main aspect for knowledge transfer and classroom interaction. The integration of EMI in Indonesia is often driven by parental demand and the perceived necessity of early English acquisition for global competitiveness in the future (Maharani et al., 2024). Therefore, it is needed to explore the implementation of the EMI in Indonesian context especially in primary school levels.

In addition, the implementation of EMI, however, gives unique pedagogical challenges that differ from adult instruction (Miya, 2022). EMI implementation in primary schools often involves a tension between narration by using only English and the practical reality in the classroom (Ernawati et al., 2021; Ghimire, 2024). Young learners are in a crucial stage of cognitive and linguistic development, where they are seeking meaning and understanding, and concepts are prioritized over grammatical accuracy (Cameron, 2001). A specific approach is required for EYL teaching within the implementation of EMI. Simbolon (2021) stated that EMI transition in Indonesia requires teachers to elaborate on both content delivery and managing the language limitations of the students. Moreover, Sari & Wardani (2019) noted that teachers often face barriers related to the limitation of the students' vocabulary and their own confidence. The use of the first language (L1) as a tool for scaffolding becomes unavoidable (Cho & Kim, 2017; Colina & Mayo, 2009; Zulfikar, 2019). This suggests that teaching EYL in the EMI implementation is not only about the language immersion but also involves multiple delivery and strategic code-switching to ensure students' understanding (Khaerunnisa, 2016; Miya, 2022). These challenges should be explored to give insight for bilingual primary schools or EMI.

A study by Jaworska et al. (2026) revealed that EMI can be acquired when English is used as a practical tool for academic growth rather than a form of replacement of culture. Nashaat-Sobhy & Morton (2026) revealed that sequencing choices shaped the pedagogic trajectory through a series of meanings, and how the strategies contribute to making complex ideas more accessible to students in EMI settings. A study by Simbolon (2021) highlighted that EMI adoption is an effort to internationalize campuses, while Huang & Curle (2021), Khalizah & Damanik (2024), and Talaue & Kim (2020) studies unveiled that EMI is also beneficial for students' careers in higher levels of education.

Another study by Astiani and Widagsa (2021). They investigated teachers' beliefs about the implementation of EMI in Indonesian schools using a survey and interview approach, where they found that teachers commonly see EMI is beneficial for students' future academic and careers, while the teachers also have concerns about students' language limitations and readiness. Suwanaroa and Polerk (2024) mentioned that the implementation of EMI faces several challenges, which are the teachers' readiness and requirement to master English itself, and the double burden of the students to simultaneously master multiple concepts. Thus, this study explores the implementation of EMI in primary school's levels.

Romadhoni et al. (2025) and Noviani (2024) noted the trial to institutionalize EMI arose through the *Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional* (RSBI) program in 2006 under the authority of Article 50, Paragraph 3 of Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, as the aim of RSBI is to inspire public schools to follow a globalized standard. These schools were chosen to apply the National Education Standard (SNP) alongside standardized international curriculum elements from other developed countries, which commonly use English as the primary language to deliver teaching materials. The program was further canceled due to the perception that it threatens the national identity of using the national and local languages.

The gap regarding EMI at the primary school level in Indonesia has been found based on previous studies. While previous research explored EMI in the context of university-level and higher education, this research is situated at the elementary school level within the context of English for Young Learners, where students' cognitive and linguistic capacities are still foundational and require different instructional considerations. There is a lack of empirical data on what occurs in elementary schools, where recent studies are frequently unable to provide structured insights into the daily communications between teachers and students or how international frameworks are adapted to lower the linguistic gaps.

In addition, the methodological gap is present based on the previous studies, which tend to focus merely on the perception of teachers or students in general, without exploring deeper into the instructional strategies. This study aims to fill the existing gaps by exploring EMI implementation in elementary schools in Denpasar, Bali, where it offers a unique instructional setting where the international curricula and the local educational frameworks face each other. Besides, how teachers overcome the barriers in using English and *Bahasa Indonesia* in Science and Mathematics classes with standardized Cambridge textbooks were observed, as well as the strategies that the teacher used.

In contrast with many perception-based studies that rely on surveys or general opinions from teachers or students, this study provides an in-depth qualitative exploration of actual classroom practices, specifically investigating how Cambridge textbooks for Science and Mathematics are implemented and modified to aid students with limited English vocabulary. It is also different from prior EMI literature by highlighting the use of hybrid instructional strategies, where teachers do not strictly adhere to an English-only policy but strategically employ Indonesian as scaffolding to make essential concepts clear. Through the result of this research, it is expected that the teachers' strategies, the use of textbook, and teachers' perceptions on them give new insight and new references for teacher especially who implement EMI in their schools.

Therefore, two research questions are formulated based on the gap and previous studies, which are: (1) How is English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) implemented in classroom practices at the primary level in a private school in Denpasar? And (2) What are teachers' perceptions of the use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in the teaching and learning process?

METHOD

Qualitative research design proposed by Creswell (2017a) with a case study approach is chosen for this study, which allows for naturalistic observation of the English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) implementation, focusing on gaining a deeper and contextualized understanding of the learning processes and the subjects' experiences instead of measurable statistical results. As proposed by Sugiyono (2013) which qualitative research functions as a naturalistic study, where the data are obtained through the real-life settings as they occur without structured interventions.

Aligned with these characteristics, this study employs a qualitative research design to comprehend how EMI was applied in the classroom, how students experienced participating in EMI, and how they view the value of learning English apart from the class. A deeper exploration of students' meaning, experiences, and interactions is required, as they cannot be captured through quantitative methods. Therefore, a qualitative approach was considered the most suitable to examine EMI practices and the learning experiences of the students in their educational field.

In addition, this qualitative study was designed to explore the implementation of EMI as a contextual and holistic classroom practice, surrounding pedagogical strategies, teacher-student interaction, classroom activities, and the learning process, rather than viewing EMI merely as the use of English as the instruction language. This perspective enabled the researcher to understand how EMI is applied in everyday teaching and learning activities.

Participants

The participant of this study where eight teachers were chosen as the participants in this study from an elementary school in Denpasar, Bali, based on their involvement in the EMI application in teaching main subjects like Science and Mathematics. The teachers regularly used English as their main instruction in the classroom and were responsible for teaching the main subjects to young learners. The teachers were selected using purposive sampling based on three standards: they taught in lower levels, and they consistently implemented EMI in their teaching activities. The selected participants in this study were teachers as the primary stakeholders, as they were directly responsible for planning and implementing EMI in early years classrooms. Detail information about participants can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants Detail Information

Initial name	Gender	Teaching experience	Teaching using EMI	Subject(s) taught	English proficiency
T1	Female	1 year	1 year	Science	Intermediate
T2	Male	10 years	1–3 years	Math	Intermediate
T3	Female	22 years	4–6 years	Science	Intermediate
T4	Female	12 years	4–6 years	Science	Intermediate
T5	Female	2 years	1 year	Math	Basic

Initial name	Gender	Teaching experience	Teaching using EMI	Subject(s) taught	English proficiency
T6	Female	15 years	1–3 years	Science	Intermediate
T7	Male	3 years	1–3 years	Math	Intermediate
T8	Female	10 years	4–6 years	Science & Math	Intermediate

Teachers were therefore considered key informants because they possessed first-hand knowledge of instructional decision-making, classroom interaction, and pedagogical strategies used to support young learners through EMI. The selection of teacher participants was also closely aligned with the research questions, which focus on how EMI is implemented in early years classrooms and how teachers perceive its role in supporting students’ English learning beyond formal English lessons. Accordingly, the choice of participants enabled the study to directly address its research objectives by providing in-depth insights into EMI practices from those most actively involved in the teaching and learning process (Creswell, 2022).

Data Collection

Three main methods were used to collect the data in this study to certify the result: (1) Semi-structured interviews, proposed to discover the teachers’ direct experiences, motivations, and perceptions. (2) Three to five classroom sessions, observation as an external observer to see the patterns during the teaching practices. (3) Document analysis of Cambridge textbooks, lesson plans, and EMI schedules to support the data of this study. The data collection procedures in this study were designed to obtain comprehensive and credible qualitative evidence concerning English learning beyond the classroom through the implementation of EMI in early years classrooms at a private school in Denpasar. In qualitative inquiry, data collection is conducted in natural settings and focuses on participants’ experiences and the meanings they attribute to social practices (Creswell, 2017a). Accordingly, this study employed three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis.

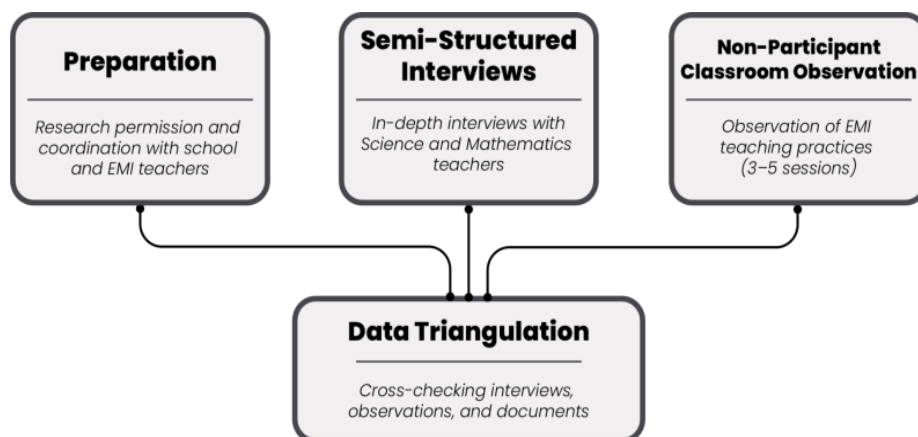


Figure 1: Procedures and Techniques of Data Collection

A preparation was taken before the data collection. Formal permission, coordination with the school principal, and EMI teachers were obtained in this stage to conduct the observation and interview schedules. To ensure alignment with the research objectives and research questions, the researcher also prepared the research instruments, such as interview guidelines and observation protocols.

Research Instruments

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection for early years teachers implementing EMI. This format allowed the researcher to explore participants' perspectives in depth while maintaining flexibility to examine raised issues during interviews. Interviews focused on teachers' experiences of implementing EMI, instructional strategies for teaching Science and Mathematics through English, perceived challenges, and their views on students' learning and engagement. Semi-structured interviews are particularly effective for eliciting participants' lived experiences, beliefs, and interpretations of educational practices (Creswell, 2017a).

The second technique involved non-participant classroom observations. During EMI lessons, the researcher observed the teaching and learning activities without being directly involved. The observations focused on students' participation, interaction patterns, classroom communication, and the use of English during teaching and learning activities. This approach enabled the researcher to capture naturally occurring behavior, authentic learning processes, and non-participant observation helps reduce researcher interference and allows classroom phenomena to happen naturally (Sugiyono, 2013). All observational data were systematically recorded in detailed field notes, documenting classroom atmosphere, instructional practices, and students' engagement.

The third technique was document analysis. Relevant documents were reviewed to provide contextual background and to support the interpretation of interview and observation data, such as EMI schedules, lesson and activity plans, attendance records, and school guidelines related to EMI implementation. Document analysis gives a deeper understanding of structures, institutional intentions, and strengthens qualitative interpretation through the use of official records (Bowen, 2009).

Data Triangulation

Methodological triangulation was used by comparing and cross-checking information gained from interviews, observations, and documents. Triangulation is a leading strategy for strengthening credibility in qualitative research (Creswell, 2017b; Denzin & Giardina, 2024). By combining multiple data sources and techniques, this study developed a comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of how EMI was implemented and how English learning was supported through classroom practices.

All the data were recorded via audio where appropriate and transcribed verbatim and systematically organized before the analysis. Ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed throughout the research process to ensure that data collection was conducted responsibly and in accordance with qualitative research standards.

A six-step iterative process, involving organization of the data, data reduction, coding, data display, findings interpretation, and conclusion, to ensure the credibility of the data as proposed by Creswell (2017b) and Denzin & Giardina (2024), by cross-checking the obtained information through the interviews, observations, and documents. Prolonged engagement and expert judgment from English lecturers are also used to validate the method used.

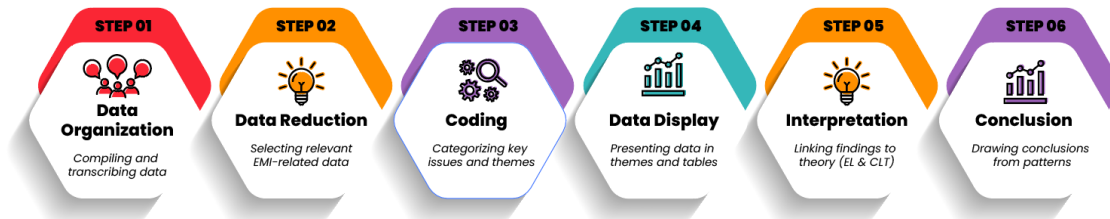


Figure 2: Data Analysis

The teachers' interviews provided an in-depth insight into their beliefs, perceptions, and rationales behind their decisions. The classroom observations allow us to directly observe how EMI is implemented during the teaching activities. Further, we analyze the documents used in EMI implementations, specifically Cambridge textbooks for Science and Mathematics, worksheets, and visual aids to provide credible evidence of how international curricula were modified to overcome the linguistic barriers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Implementation of EMI In Classroom Practices At The Primary Level In a Private School In Denpasar

Beyond formal instruction, EMI is also implemented through learning activities such as games and vocabulary-based tasks. Teachers reported using English when students play games and when they are asked to memorize or practice new vocabulary. These activities provide opportunities for students to directly practice English in meaningful and enjoyable contexts. Such settings allow students to listen to and use English while focusing on task completion rather than language accuracy alone. As a result, students are encouraged to speak and respond in English through "listening and doing" activities. This suggests that learning beyond EMI in the classroom occurs through activity-based interaction that promotes natural language use. This finding is in-line with research conducted by Simbolon (2021), Talaue and Kim (2020), where it is presumed that students possess adequate English competence to comprehend subject matter.

The data further show that EMI is implemented across different subject areas, particularly in science and mathematics, where teachers introduce concepts and terminology in English. However, because these subjects involve many abstract and unfamiliar concepts, teachers often combine English with *Bahasa Indonesia* to ensure students' understanding. Translation and clarification in *Bahasa Indonesia* are provided when students do not understand instructions, vocabulary, or explanations. This practice demonstrates that learning beyond EMI includes continuous adjustment of language use to support comprehension. This finding support Simbolon (2021) that argue the important thing is understand the instruction. Translating the language also used by the teacher, this finding is similar to Cho & Kim (2017) that stated translating is one of ways in making

clear instruction. Teachers view English as a complementary instructional language, while *Bahasa Indonesia* remains the primary language for ensuring conceptual clarity. Therefore, the implementation setting of EMI extends to flexible bilingual interaction during content learning. Teachers consistently prioritize students' understanding of Science and Mathematics concepts and flexibly adjust their language use when learners experience difficulty. This practice corresponds closely with Cameron's (2001) view that young learners prioritize meaning and conceptual understanding over linguistic accuracy. The present study therefore confirms that EMI in early years classrooms cannot be implemented in the same way as in higher education settings, where students generally possess higher linguistic readiness.

In addition, EMI beyond the classroom lesson is reflected in teachers' efforts to build long-term learning habits and institutional practices. Teachers emphasized that EMI should start from lower grades, especially grade one and two, to build early familiarity with English. This finding is in line with Colina, & Mayo, (2009). They also highlighted the importance of consistent implementation by all teachers, not only English teachers, in order to create a supportive school-wide environment. Through continuous exposure, students are expected to recognize and understand common instructions in English and gradually increase their active use of the language. Teachers further believe that this extended EMI environment contributes to students' vocabulary development, pronunciation, and listening skills (Astiani & Widagsa, 2021). Overall, learning beyond EMI in the classroom is shaped by routine use, cross-subject application, and collective teacher commitment.

Based on the observation, a flexible bilingual approach, often referred to as translanguaging, is the key aspect in the EMI implementation in the school environment. This refers to some strategies used by the teachers. The strict rule of using English to clarify complex academic ideas in subjects like Science and Mathematics is not used by the teachers. Instead, they use *Bahasa Indonesia* and English simultaneously as a bridge to ensure the students' comprehension without linguistic barriers. To pass the challenge of the double burden to comprehend new materials and a new language simultaneously. Strategies used in Table 2.

Table 2: Instructional Strategies Used by Teachers

Strategy Used	Observation Result
Systematic vocabulary preparation	Teachers introduce complex terms before the class begins, they use games based on vocabulary, like science word guessing, and ask the students to recognize new words.
Multimodal delivery	Teachers use visual and digital media. For instance, PowerPoint, Canva, videos from the Internet, flashcards, and physical gestures, to ensure the comprehension of the student in learning English.
Material adaptation	International-based curricula, specifically textbooks from Cambridge, are modified to adapt to the students' abilities. Teachers simplify the use of language, provide familiar examples, and translate the main academic terms to adapt to the students' level of English.

EMI implementation goes beyond the classroom into daily activities. The use of English for greetings, classroom commands, and games creates a natural environment to learn the language. This creates a natural environment that normalizes the use of English through exposure and repetition as in Ernawati, et al.,(2021) and doing translation from L2 to L1 as a positive way to make clear instruction (Cho & Kim, 2017).

In sum, teachers used English as the primary instruction while using Indonesian as a tool for scaffolding to make sure students understand the key concepts of the subject taught, specifically Science and Mathematics using Cambridge textbooks. Moreover, teachers consistently adjust the materials they taught. By doing simpler explanations, adding more examples, translating important vocabularies, and using media such as videos and flashcards, teachers implement strategies to bridge the proficiency gap in an EMI classroom through a bilingual approach.

Teachers’ Perceptions of The Use of EMI In Teaching Learning Process

In response to the second research question, the questionnaire data confirmed that teachers hold very positive views about the implementation of EMI. The Likert-scale items showed scores above the neutral point of 3.0, indicating agreement that EMI supports language acquisition and subject mastery at once. Teachers showed strong commitment to scaffolding pedagogically (M = 4.5) and convinced that EMI effectively presents as dual educational purposes (M = 4.25). They also prized the Cambridge textbooks as instructional tools (M = 4.0), although they acknowledged a bit of gap between the book’s language level and students’ proficiency level (M = 3.6). Lastly, teachers reported confidence in delivering instruction using English and applying EMI consistently (M = 3.8). detail teachers’ perception can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers’ Perceptions On The EMI Implementation In Classroom

Statements	Responses				
	5 (strongly agree)	4 (agree)	3 (neutral)	2 (disagree)	1 (strongly disagree)
I use English as the main language of instruction.	25%	38%	38%	0%	0%
I use strategies (bilingual explanation, visuals, or simplification) to help students understand.	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
EMI improves students’ English and subject learning.	50%	25%	25%	0%	0%
I feel confident teaching using full English.	0%	88%	13%	0%	0%
Cambridge textbooks are appropriate for students’ English level.	38%	13%	25%	25%	0%

Statements	Responses				
	5 (strongly agree)	4 (agree)	3 (neutral)	2 (disagree)	1 (strongly disagree)
Cambridge textbooks effectively support both English and content learning.	50%	25%	0%	25%	0%

From Table above it can be concluded that teachers' perception toward the implementation of EMI in non-English subject is good. The obtained data from the Likert scale indicates that teachers have highly positive perceptions toward EMI, from all the indicators, which score above the neutral point of 3.0, as shown in Table 2.

Table 4. Teachers' Perceptions

Teachers' Perception	Likert-scale	Explanation
Scaffolding commitment	4.5	This score was the highest-rated aspect, indicating very strong agreement that providing support for instruction to bridge the comprehension gap.
Dual-Purpose Effectiveness	4.25	EMI is perceived by teachers to effectively facilitate both language acquisition and the mastery of subject matter.
Instructional Confidence	3.8	Despite the teachers' confidence in their ability to teach using English as the main language, they also recognize a slight misalignment (Mean = 3.6) between the well-structured language used by the provided Cambridge textbooks and their students' proficiency level.

In summary, the study found that EMI is most effective when functioning as a supportive and context-sensitive model for students that prioritizes meaning-making and clarity of concept over total use of English.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) implementation in Indonesia for early years of learning does not follow a strict policy to only use English in its process. Instead, teachers' flexible method by using translanguaging strategies, where Bahasa Indonesia is simultaneously used alongside English as a tool to ensure complex academic concepts. This is important in abstract subjects and materials like Science and Mathematics, where the proficiency of language is still at the development and fundamental level. These findings suggest that EMI prioritizing in primary level in comprehension of contents over total immersion in English.

This study furthermore underscores that the success of EMI is achieved through the implementation of multimodal delivery to bridge the linguistic gap. Through the

integration of visual aids like videos, flashcards, and game activities, teachers create a supportive environment that makes the academic process less cognitively overwhelming and more accessible for students. In addition, international standard teaching materials, precisely Cambridge textbooks, are not applied in a strict, formal manner, but are required to be modified creatively to adapt to the actual students' readiness in a realistic setting.

Apart from the teachers' positive perceptions toward EMI, they recognize that the double burden is still a challenge, which might lead to a comprehension gap if scaffolding is ineffectively used. EMI succession is essentially based on the pedagogical flexibility, the awareness of teachers, and balanced strategies between the exposure of language and the mastery of concepts. Furthermore, schools are recommended to develop technical guidelines and give constant professional development, while future research can conduct longitudinal studies to observe the academic effects of early EMI development in the long-term.

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