

Desafíos y estrategias de los estudiantes universitarios en las clases de enseñanza media en inglés (EMI): un estudio de caso

Challenges and Strategies of University Students in English-medium Instruction (EMI) Classes: A case study

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RESUMEN

El inglés se ha convertido en la lengua franca del mundo actual. Como resultado, incluso los países europeos y asiáticos que no hablan inglés utilizan el inglés como medio de instrucción. A pesar de su gran diversidad lingüística y el urdu como idioma de instrucción a nivel escolar, el inglés siempre ha sido el medio de instrucción en la educación superior en Pakistán. Este estudio explora las perspectivas de los estudiantes universitarios sobre la instrucción en inglés medio, los desafíos que enfrentan en las clases de inglés medio y las estrategias que proponen para aliviar los problemas. Según los datos cualitativos adquiridos a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas, los estudiantes ven la instrucción en inglés como una ventaja para la educación superior, los trabajos y el pensamiento progresista. Sin embargo, la competencia en inglés de los profesores, el cambio de código, el vocabulario y las habilidades receptivas y productivas les crean algunos obstáculos. Creen que los profesores con conocimientos de inglés, el uso constante del inglés y el apoyo lingüístico de la universidad pueden ayudarlos a superar estos obstáculos.

Palabras clave:
Universidad,
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ABSTRACT

English has developed into the lingua franca of today's world. As a result, even non-English European and Asian countries use English as their medium of instruction. Despite its great linguistic diversity and Urdu as the language of instruction at the school level, English has always been the medium of instruction in higher education in Pakistan. This study explores university students' perspectives on English-medium instruction, the challenges they face in English-medium classes, and the strategies they propose to alleviate the problems. According to qualitative data acquired through semi-structured interviews, students see English-medium instruction as advantageous for higher education, jobs, and progressive thought. However, teachers' English competence, code-switching, vocabulary, and receptive and productive abilities create some obstacles for them. Besides, their confidence and participation are also gets affected in English-medium instruction classes. They believe that English-skilled teachers, constant English use, and university language support can all help them overcome these obstacles.

Key words:
University,
students,
challenges,
strategies,
English-medium
instruction.

Introduction

English has emerged as a world language of the modern-day world. It is used in various socio-economic settings such as tourism and travelling, business and commerce, entertainment and communication, teaching and learning, international diplomacy, science and technology. This paradigm shift is rising and has significant influence on policy-making on the language of instruction. Therefore, English has been adopted as the medium of instruction in higher education of several European and Asian countries like China (Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2019), Hong Kong (Lo and Lo 2014), South Korea (Kim et al., 2017), Italy (Costa & Coleman, 2013), Germany (Wannagat, 2007) and Spain (Aguilar, 2017). English-medium Instruction is defined as “providing teaching content in languages other than the language spoken by students” (Costa & Coleman, 2013; Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Dearden, 2018). As a result of this spread of EMI, it has been surveyed to a greater degree, hence, there is more and more EMI literature now (Soruç & Griffiths, 2018).

This extensive spread of EMI can be attributed to various socio-economic and historical reasons. Studies suggest that countries have adopted EMI in higher education either because of internationalization, economic gains, or colonial legacy. Marsh (2006) believes that the main reason behind this spread is the requirement of a shared medium in the wake of globalization and technological advancement. In the past, other languages had the chance to rule the socio-economic spheres, but now English seems to fulfill the requirements. Likewise, according to Dearden and Macaro (2016), internationalization and building up a global profile by attracting international students and thus getting revenue are two reasons for adopting EMI policies. Endorsing and adding to the idea of attracting international students and staff, Dafouz and Camacho-Miñano (2016) mention the development of trans-national research and networking as one reason for adopting EMI in European countries.

Globalization and internationalization are considered significant reasons for the recent increase in the adoption of EMI policies in higher education (e.g., the Bologna process in Europe). Conversely, the existence of EMI in the context of Pakistan is the outcome of a historical process, not a deliberate decision to globalize or internationalize its education system (Khan, 2013).

After independence of the country in 1947, the Ministry of Education of Pakistan followed in British colonialism's footsteps, recognizing its unequal and undemocratic education system (Rahman, 1998). As early as 1948, the national language Urdu was declared a primary language of instruction. At the higher level, English has been used as a language of instruction because of the lack of current scientific and academic knowledge in Urdu. Moreover, EMI programs are not designed for language education but engineering, business, medicine, and other disciplines (Khan, 2013). Mahboob (2002) remarked that since 1947, Pakistan's official (language) policy has been to promote English as a medium of instruction in higher education, as evidenced by all education policy and committees from 1957 to 2009. English is considered extremely important for higher education because there is no reading material available for universities. In addition, there are many factors affecting Pakistan's language policies and practices, such as multilingualism, cultural diversity and ethnic identity (Mahboob, 2017).

Whatever the reason might be behind the adoption of EMI policy in any country, Marsh (2006) states that in developing countries, these policies are a result of practical and political decision making. But, the effectiveness of EMI policy can only be judged through the perceptions of stakeholders such as teachers and students.

A brief literature review on perceptions of students reveals that in many countries, students have quite positive perceptions about EMI, but these perceptions are subject to culture, study year group, gender, and other variables. For instance, participants of a Turkish technical university in the study of Ekoç (2018) favored EMI because of employability, prestige, confidence, and access to their future destinations. Similarly, it was found in the study of Macaro and Akincioglu (2018) that students of a private university perceived EMI more beneficial than did the students of a state university. Besides, females considered EMI more useful than did the male students of both universities.

Likewise, studies in the available literature have shown that EMI courses are also considered beneficial because they provide students with the greatest opportunity to develop their English and express themselves better, thus making it easier to understand Eng-

lish textbooks and reference data. Selvi (2014) highlights the positive impact of EMI on the attitude of college students towards English culture. Sert (2008) found that some professors believed that using English in an academic setting facilitates the development of student's language skills and enhances chances to grab a better job or to study abroad.

On the other hand, some participants in various other contexts see the undesirable outcomes of EMI. For instance, studies conducted in Korean, Kazakhstan, and Arab contexts portray a dismal picture of perceptions about EMI. For instance, Korean students of three major engineering universities considered EMI to be problematic and expressed willingness to study through Korean-medium instruction (Kim et al., 2017). Adding to that, Qatari and Saudi Arabian students in the study of Ahmadi (2017) considered it to be "a waste of time and even a threat of their mother-tongue." (p. 14) Likewise, as reported by Seitzhanova, Plokhikh, Baiburiev, and Tsaregorodtseva (2015), students had a negative attitude towards EMI in the context of Kazakhstan.

Similarly, for example, Dogancay-Aktuna (1998) opines that some educators and scientists disagree with the idea of university education through English because they believe this further weakens the status of science education as EMI demands higher language proficiency. Some other research studies (Duman, 1997; Uysal, Plakans, & Dembovskaya, 2007) offer insights that EMI is harmful to society because English secondary schools produce education that incorporates the cultural values of the English-speaking country, and therefore, the learners become separated from the reality and problems of their own countries.

What may be inferred from the above studies is that the technicality of discipline and the culture of a country also influence the perceptions about EMI. Keeping in view the varied perceptions of undergraduates about EMI and the lack of undergraduates' voice in the available literature in the Pakistani context, this study aims to explore the perceptions of undergraduates about English medium instruction at a public sector university in Sukkur, Pakistan.

Research Questions and Sub-questions

1. What are the perceptions of university students about English-medium instruction?
 - a. What are the challenges for university students in an EMI classroom?
 - b. What remedies do they propose for dealing with their problems?

Methodology

Case study approach was used to explore the perceptions of university students about EMI. Special focus was given to explore their challenges in EMI classes and the remedies they suggest for their problems. The case study approach facilitates systematic, multi-faceted analysis of complex problems in their real-life environments (Crowe et al., 2011). The context of the study is a public sector university in Sukkur, Pakistan, which provides academic knowledge in English. Detailed qualitative data was collected from participants using semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is an instrument that allows the researcher, by asking predetermined questions, to interview the participant(s) to extract information from them. This enables the participants to illustrate the concerns that are of concern to them (Longhurst, 2003). The interview guide consisted of two parts, with 10 questions in total. The first part inquired participants about their native language and how they had learned English over the years. The second part comprised four questions which explored their views on EMI. Two girls and four males participated in the interviews. After gaining the respondents' permission, the interviews were conducted and recorded.

The total of six students were selected for the interview using purposive sampling strategy, as it requires the selection of rich information yielding cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2002). Duff (2012) proposes that a number of three to six participants is adequate for a multiple case study. The students belonged to Business Administration Department (n2), Electrical Engineering (n1), Mathematics (n1), Computer Science (n1) and Education (n1). The participants were coded on the basis of their department, gender and their turn for interviews.

Another key consideration was to attract participants from different types of (primary or secondary) schools such as public or private

because the learning background is considered to have impact on the ability of university students to adapt to the requirements of English medium learning. Although most of the participants learned English in the middle school, their learning experiences were far from homogenous.

The researchers conducted interviews, recorded, transcribed and translated them from Urdu (national language) and Sindhi (regional languages) to English to ensure that a comprehensive record of the discussions remains available for future reference. Thematic analysis of all interviews was carried out to make meaning of the available data. A the thematic analysis approach is used to define, evaluate and report trends emerging from the data (Gavin, 2008).

Findings

The qualitative analysis of the obtained data produced the following concepts which related to the general perceptions of undergraduates about EMI, challenges of undergraduates in EMI classrooms and the solutions participants suggested for alleviation of their problems. In order to maintain the originality, words of the participants are provided

Perceptions about EMI

- 1. Necessary for higher education:** The results show that students think that English is very important for higher education. When participants expressed their views about higher education, they said they needed English to study abroad and obtain a foreign visa. One participant coded as 3EEM said, *“Our graduates have gone abroad; they must follow the English language.”* Another participant (6EF) was of the view that *“English proficiency is required right from the beginning of the career. If students wish to go abroad, they must pass IELTS, and other English exams.”*
- 2. Future career:** English is considered to be useful for reasonable work and a future career. One respondent coded as 2BAM said, *“Without good English, we will not be able to pass any interview and public service exams in Pakistan.”* Regarding that participant 4MM noted, *“English speaking applicants get good jobs, and those who don't know English cannot although they also have knowledge and ability.”*

- 3. Progressive thought:** It is worthy of mention that the evidence shows that undergraduates think that learning English in Pakistan symbolizes progressive thinking and helps to adopt the latest ideas. In this respect, the point of view of respondent 5CSF is important. She said, *“Through English, we can build the image of a progressive democratic country. If we learn English in the classroom and students’ thinking is shaped from a global viewpoint, social justice can be achieved.”*

Challenges

1. Difficulty in mastering technical terms in lectures: When students don’t comprehend key technical terms or academic jargon, they struggle to understand the content of EMI courses. In this regard, a participant coded as 1BAM said, “The difference between business English vocabulary and common English vocabulary is difficult to understand.” Another participant coded as 6EF remarked, “I get nothing out of the subject unless I know the keywords or phrases related to the topic.”
2. Trouble in understanding instructors’ language: The instructor’s language level also causes difficulties sometimes. For example, participant 3EEM pointed out that “Sometimes it isn’t easy to attend EMI courses because some instructors are not good at speaking English. So some teachers teach in Urdu or Sindhi but ask questions in English.” Adding to that, participant coded as 2BAM stated, “My study becomes twice as difficult as that of the average student. Sometimes it is caused by the lecturer’s English proficiency.” Likewise, 5CSF was of the opinion that “The main problem is that the lecturer doesn’t speak English well. Therefore, because of simple words rather than academic words, it creates simplicity in the course. In a university-level education, it’s unfortunate.”
3. Problems due to code-switching: Students are confused when the instructors’ presentation language is irregular. In other words, when the instructor inconsistently uses English or national or a regional language as the medium to communicate in the classroom. Participant 2BAM answered that “In one course of EMI, when a friend of ours asked a question in Urdu, the professor spoke in Urdu instead of English for a long time, [...]this becomes frequent sometimes.” Moreover, participant 5CSF expressed that “Some [of our] teachers

don't speak English well. It's strange that a lecturer teaches in Urdu and takes the exam in English." Referring to another problems regarding this, participant 1BAM noted, "For me, understanding lectures is not a problem. The only problem with me is that [our] several teachers abruptly shift from English to Urdu, which affects my concentration. Once I'm distracted from the lecture, I am unable to continue the rest of the class."

4. **Hearing and speaking difficulties:** Students cannot speak or express themselves comfortably; therefore, they face problems in EMI classrooms. A participant 1BAM said, "*Sometimes, I feel lonely in class because I can't articulate what I'm thinking or want to express.*" Regarding speaking problem attributed to the teacher, participant 2BAM noted, "*Sometimes, when the teacher speaks quickly, I don't understand.*"
5. **Effect on confidence and participation:** EMI seems to affect the students' participation as well. For instance, participant 6EF remarked, "*I do not participate in the lecture sometimes, because I don't think I can talk.*" Likewise, participant 4MM expressed, "*If I cannot pronounce something correctly, I feel embarrassed or shy.*"
6. **Simultaneous listening and writing are difficult:** Some students say that they have to listen to lectures as well as note down the key ideas. They report difficulty in doing both things simultaneously. Respondent 6EF opined that "*I cannot listen attentively when I take notes.*" Referring to his ordeal, participant 1BAM pointed out that "If a point is missed *when I am making notes, I barely keep up with the instructor then.*" Similarly, participant 3EEM said, "*It is difficult to understand the content of the speech when taking notes.*"

Solutions

Although analysis of data showed that EMI classrooms pose challenges to students, the data also revealed some exciting solutions which participants thought could work for them. They came up with different ideas that are listed below.

1. **Instructor skilled at English:** As per the stated difficulties in understanding the lecturer's language, students believe that they need teachers to be proficient in English to teach an EMI course.

One participant coded as 5CSF suggested, *“Some teachers should do English proficiency courses.”* Besides, she added that *“University should hire instructors who can teach classes in EMI.”* Giving a rather over-ambitious suggestion, participant 2BAM remarked, *“I believe we should have at least two or three lecturers of foreign language in all university departments.”*

2. **Use English regularly in EMI courses:** Students expect their instructors to use English throughout the course. Participant 2BAM noted, *“It would be better if teachers start and finish their presentations in English.”* Participant 6EF commented, *“In EMI classrooms, our instructors should always speak English instead of Urdu or Sindhi.”*
3. **Need to Learn Discipline-specific Vocabulary:** University students were all well-aware of the importance of continuous improvement of and increase in their vocabulary. In this regard, participant 3EEM said, *“Your vocabulary should be good enough to understand technical subjects.”* Additionally, he said, *“Because if you do not have basic English vocabulary, you can’t understand a lot of topics that are either technical or theoretical.”* Participant 6EF expressed that *“Learning all the technical expressions is tough, and I will not comprehend the course if I do not.”*
4. **Continuous production-based teaching:** Every course requires practice-based instruction, which can be done by organizing various discussions and presentations; students also want their subject instructor / EMI teacher to offer more opportunities to use English EMI courses. Respondent 4MM reflected that *“In EMI courses, we need more practice in speaking mainly.”* Likewise, participant 2BAM noted that *“We should be encouraged by our subject teachers to speak English in all course classes because of EMI.”*
5. **Aide in Language Learning:** Students said a particular English-based course for a specific academic purpose can prove very supportive in their language proficiency within four years. Participant 4MM was of the view that *“We may take a few courses to develop or polish our skills.”* Participant 5CSF remarked, *“When we are in class, English classes should continue, even compulsorily.”* Touching upon the university policies, participant 1 BAM suggested, *“Institutions should develop policies that result in support and improvement of our language level and skill.”*

Discussion

The perceptions of students about EMI have remained mixed. However, they are more tilted towards EMI because of prospects in terms of education and employability, as mentioned by Ekoç (2018). One of the participants in the study of Mahboob (2002) stated that “no English, no future” (p.31), which eventually became the title of his paper. The participants also expressed their fear of being left behind if they did not learn English. Apart from the prospects, one of the recognized challenges for EMI students is understanding technical terms (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Kirkgöz, 2014; Sert, 2008). Moreover, writing in English has also been reported problematic for students in Pakistani context (Siddiqui, 2020). Besides, the level of a teacher’s English proficiency has also been commonly known as one of the main factors that negatively affected understanding technical terms in many EMI settings (Chang, 2010; Mellion, 2008). For example, according to commentary on the Indonesian context by Jusuf Ibrahim (2001), the lack of teacher proficiency is ‘threatening’ to communication disruptions, poor relationships, and inadequate classroom conversation. A review by Manh (2012) in Vietnam shows that many lecturers lack sufficient oral expression skills, and Williams (2015) reviews of articles and book chapters published since 2000 show that teachers do not go for enough language learning. The code-switching is frequent due to teachers’ non-proficiency in English, as noted by Kirkgöz (2014). In the context of this study, the problem of frequent code-switching can be attributed to ineffective training of teachers (Siddiqui et al., 2021). Although EMI presents recognized opportunities, such as internationalization (Macaro, 2015) or the possibility of sharing academic books, articles, and journals in English (Zare-ee & Gholami, 2013), this difficulty has led some teachers to doubt the advantages seriously. For example, Kim (2011) discovered that Korean lecturers dislike EMI because it impedes the depth of understanding and learning of students, so they promote the use of their mother tongue. According to Jensen and Thøgersen (2011), while young Danish teachers seem to prefer EMI but they still express their concern of EMI being an obstacle for teachers when they try and spread the content knowledge.

Regarding solutions, according to the student’s statement in this study, given the academic needs of EMI students and their ordinary

English language skills, the development of an English preparatory course can produce positive results in the EMI environment. The students also reported that they should be given more challenging materials. Such reading materials will make learning more productive and make them more autonomous. Yet another interesting theme that arose in qualitative analysis is that EMI students should be given language support as much as possible. The assistance can be provided in the form of help to acquire common communication skills (Evans & Morrison, 2011), develop oral English expression skills (Chang, 2010), and employ oral expression strategies (Soruç, Dinler, & Griffiths, 2018).

Conclusion and Future Directions

There are still many unresolved issues in the EMI field. Given the spread of EMI, these questions are of some urgency because the resolution of such issues will positively affect a large number of undergraduates and their future. The study recommends:

- A valuable quantitative follow-up to this analysis a large number of students can be surveyed.
- This present study was conducted at a public-sector university environment in Pakistan. Still, it's essential to see if EMI students face similar or slightly different obstacles in different cities or educational settings in Pakistan and other similar contexts.
- Future studies should examine the challenges and strategies of different students from different universities in the EFL context (English is a foreign language).
- Another important area to explore is the difficulties and needs of EMI instructors for whom English is not the native language.

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