

PERCEPTIONS OF UNDERGRADUATES OF ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION: EXPLORATION OF CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT: The English language has grown to be a lingua franca of the present day world. Therefore, even non-English European and Asian countries have adopted English as a medium of instruction. Despite having a great linguistic diversity in the country and varied medium of instructions at different educational levels, English has continuously been the medium of instruction in the higher education of Pakistan. Although the attitudes of undergraduates have been studied in urban centers in the country on a smaller scale, very little attention has been paid to exploring specifically the challenges undergraduates face in universities located in small cities. Therefore, this study aims to explore undergraduates' perceptions about EMI, particularly the challenges they face in EMI classrooms and solutions they suggest for mitigation of their issues. The qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews reveal that students perceive EMI to be beneficial for higher education, employment and progressive thought. However, they face challenges related to teachers' English proficiency, code-switching, vocabulary and receptive as well as productive skills. They suggest that English-proficient instructors, continuous use of English, language support from university can help them overcome these challenges effectively. The study offers recommendations for further exploration of the research area in the context of Pakistan.

KEYWORDS: English medium instruction, perceptions, undergraduates, challenges, solutions, Pakistan, medium of instruction

1. 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, several European and Asian countries like China (Jiang, Zhang & May, 2019), Hong Kong (Lo & Lo, 2014), South Korea (Kim et al., 2017), Italy (Costa & Coleman, 2013), Germany (Wannagat, 2007) and Spain (Aguilar, 2017) have implemented English as a medium of instruction in higher education. 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 fulfil 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 the two reasons for adoption of EMI policies. Endorsing and adding to the idea of attracting international students and staff, Dafouz and Camacho-Miñano (2016) mention the development of transnational research and networking as one of the reasons for adoption of EMI in European countries.

Globalization and internationalization are considered as a major reason for the recent increase in the adoption of policies of EMI in higher education (e.g. the Bologna process in Europe) (Mahboob, 2017). Conversely, the existence of EMI in Pakistan was the outcome of a historical process, not a deliberate decision in the wake of globalization and internationalization (Khan, 2013).

After independence, the Ministry of Education of Pakistan followed in the footsteps of British colonialism, recognizing the country's unequal and undemocratic education system (Rahman, 1998). The national Urdu language was declared a primary language of instruction as early as 1948. Due to the lack of contemporary science and academic knowledge in Urdu, English was used as a language of instruction at the higher level. EMI programs were intended for engineering, industry, medicine and other sciences, not for language education. Mahboob (2002) remarked that as it can be seen in the

reports of all education policy and education committees (1957-2009), Pakistan's official language policy has been to maintain English as a medium of higher education instruction since 1947. English is considered to be extremely necessary for higher education since there is dearth of reading materials in vernacular for higher studies. In addition, many factors such as multilingualism, cultural diversity and ethnic identity influence the language policies and traditions of Pakistan.

Whatever the reasons might be behind the adoption of EMI policy in any country, Marsh (2006) says that in the 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 the students of a state university did. Besides, females considered EMI more useful than the male students of both universities did.

Likewise, studies in the available literature have shown that EMI courses are also considered beneficial because they offer undergraduates a chance to develop their English and express themselves better, thus making it easier to understand English 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 students' language skills and enhances chances to grab a better job or to study abroad. Likewise, Khan (2013) reported that Master's students felt positive about the role of EMI as it paves way for them in their professional life.

On the other hand, some participants in other contexts see the undesirable outcomes of EMI. For instance, studies conducted in Korean, Russian 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". Likewise, as reported by Seitzhanova, Plokhikh, Baiburiev, and Tsaregorodtseva (2015), students had 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 believed this further weakens the status of science education as EMI demands higher language proficiency. Some other research studies (Duman, 1997; Uysal, Plakans & Dembovska, 2007) offer insights that EMI is harmful to society because English secondary schools produce education heavily influenced by the cultural values of an English-speaking country, and therefore, 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 dearth of research in this research area in Pakistani context, this study intends to add to the existing literature by exploring perceptions of undergraduates about English medium instruction at a public sector university in Sukkur, Pakistan.

Research Question

How do the undergraduates perceive EMI?

Sub Questions

What challenges do the undergraduates face in an EMI classroom?

What solutions do they suggest for mitigation of their challenges?

2. Methodology

The study used case study approach to explore perceptions of undergraduates about EMI. 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. There were interviews with six participants: two females and four males. The interviews were conducted and recorded after obtaining the consent of the respondents.

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. The thematic analysis approach is used to define, evaluate and report trends emerging from the data (Gavin, 2008).

3. 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.

3.1 Perceptions about EMI

1. **Necessary for higher studies:** Findings show that students believe English is very important for higher studies. When participants expressed their views about higher education, they said they need English to study abroad and obtain a foreign visa.

Our graduates have gone abroad, they must follow the English language. (3EEM)

Right from the beginning of the profession, English proficiency is required. They must pass IELTS and other English exams if students wish to go abroad. (6EF)

2. **Future career:** English is considered to be useful for reasonable work and a future career. Respondents said,

Without good English, we will not be able to pass any interview and public service exams in Pakistan. (2BAM)

English speaking applicants get good jobs than those who don't know English but also have knowledge and ability. (4MM)

If we know no English, getting a job will be very hard. (5CSF)

4. **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 latest ideas.

We can create the image of progressive democracy through English... Social justice will be done if we study English in the classroom and the thinking of students is influenced from a global point of view. (5CSF)

English is everywhere from offices to army so it should be in universities too (4MM).

3.2 Challenges

1. Difficulty in mastering technical terms in lectures: Students have difficulty understanding content in EMI courses when they do not grasp basic technical words or academic vocabulary.

The difference between English business vocabulary and common English vocabulary is difficult to understand. (1BAM)

I get nothing out of the subject unless I know the keywords or phrases related to the subject. (6EF)

2. Trouble in understanding instructors' language: The instructor's language level also causes difficulties sometimes.

Sometimes it is difficult to attend EMI courses because some instructors are not English-speaking enough to offer EMI courses. So some teachers teach in Urdu or Sindhi but ask questions in English. (3EEM)

In order to keep up with the lecturer's study, my study is twice as difficult as that of the average student. Sometimes it is caused by the lecturer's English proficiency. (2BAM)

The main problem is that the lecturer doesn't speak English well. Therefore, because of the use of simple words rather than academic words, it creates a simplicity in the course. In a university-level education, it's really sad. (5CSF)

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 means of communication in the classroom.

In one course taught in English, when a friend of ours asked a question in Urdu, the professor spoke in Urdu instead of English for a long time, in fact for most of the time during the course, which was very challenging for most of us. (2BAM)

Some [of our] teachers don't speak English well. It's strange that the lecturer teaches in Urdu and takes the exam in English. (5CSF)

For me, understanding lectures is not a problem. The only problem with me is that a number of [our] teachers abruptly shift from English to Urdu which breaks my concentration, and once I'm disconnected from the lecture, I don't become able to continue the rest of the lecture. (1BAM)

4. Hearing and speaking difficulties: Students cannot speak or express themselves comfortably; therefore, they face problems in EMI classrooms.

I can't say properly what I think and want to say, so I feel lonely in the class. (1BAM)

Sometimes, when the teacher speaks quickly, I don't understand. (2BAM)

I do not attend the lecture sometimes. Because, I don't think I can talk. (6EF)

If I cannot pronounce it in a correct way, I feel embarrassed or shy. (4MM)

5. Listening and writing are difficult at the same time: Some students say that they cannot listen to lectures on the one hand, and they cannot take notes. It is difficult for them to do both things simultaneously.

I won't listen when I take notes. (6EF)

When I miss a point while taking some notes, I barely keep up with the instructor then. (1BAM)

It is difficult to understand the content of the speech when taking notes. (3EEM)

I feel problem when teachers write formulas on the board and speak at the same time in English. I sometimes focus on noting and so I cannot understand what teacher said. (4MM)

3.3 Solutions

Although the analysis of the data showed that EMI classrooms pose challenges to students, the data also revealed some interesting 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.

Some teachers should do English proficiency courses. (5CSF)

University should hire instructors who are able to teach courses in EMI. (5CSF)

I believe we should have at least two or three lecturers of foreign language in all departments of university. (2BAM)

Instructors should pay attention to their pronunciation knowledge. (3EEM)

2. **Use English regularly in EMI courses:** Students expect their instructors to use English throughout the course.

It would be better if teachers start and finish their presentations in English, but that doesn't happen. (2BAM)

In EMI classrooms, our instructors should usually speak English instead of Urdu or Sindhi. (6EF)

3. **Need to Learn Technical Vocabulary:** Students say they need to continuously increase their vocabulary.

Your vocabulary should be good enough to understand technical subjects. (3EEM)

Because if you do not have basic English vocabulary, you can't understand a lot of technical and theoretical information. (3EEM)

Learning all the technical expressions is tough, and I will not comprehend the course if I do not. (6EF)

Also, teachers should interpret these terms. (6EF)

4. **Ongoing production-based teaching:** Just as a practice-based teaching is required in every course, by organizing various discussions and presentations, students also want their subject instructor / EMI teacher to offer more opportunities to use English in the EMI courses.

In EMI courses, we need more practice in speaking particularly. (4MM)

We should be encouraged by our subject teachers to speak English in all course classes because of EMI. (2BAM)

5. **Aid in Language Learning:** Students said that a special English-based course for a specific academic purpose can prove very supporting in their language proficiency within four years.

We may take a few courses to develop or polish our skills. (4MM)

When we are in class, English classes should continue, even compulsory. (5CSF)

Institutions should develop policies that result in support and improvement of our language level and skill. (1BAM)

4. Discussion

The perceptions students have about EMI, despite having remained mixed, are that they are more tilted towards EMI because of future prospects in terms of education and employability. For a variety of factors, like higher studies, having jobs, and accessing the corridors of power through joining the armed forces, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and multinational corporations, English proficiency is considered crucial. It is thus regarded as an essential instrument for social and economic mobility.

Similar findings such as prestige and gateway to higher studies have been reported by Ekoç (2018). One of the recognized challenges for EMI students is understanding technical terms (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Kirkgöz, 2014; Sert, 2008), and the level of a teacher's English proficiency has been

commonly known as one of the main factors that negatively affected it in many EMI environments (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 relationship 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 the non-proficiency of English as noted by Kirkgöz (2014). Although EMI presents recognized opportunities, such as internationalization (Macaro, 2015) or the possibility of sharing educational books, articles and journals in the English language (Zare-ee & Gholami, 2013), this difficulty has led some teachers to seriously doubt the advantages. 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 first language (mother-tongue). In the words of Jensen and Thøgersen (2011), while fresh Danish teachers seem to prefer EMI, they still express their concern of EMI being an obstacle for teachers when they try and spread the content knowledge.

Regarding the solutions, according to the students’ statement in this study, given the academic needs of EMI students and their typical 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. This will make learning more productive and make them more autonomous. Yet, another interesting theme that arose in the qualitative analysis is that EMI students should be given language support as much as possible 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).

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

There are still many unresolved issues in the EMI field. Given the speed of transmission, these questions are of some urgency, as the answers may affect a large number of undergraduates and their future. The issues are the following:

1. A valuable follow-up to this analysis may be to survey more students from various backgrounds.
2. The research was conducted in a public-sector university context in Pakistan. But, it is important to see if EMI students face the same, similar or slightly different obstacles in diverse environments.
3. Future studies should examine the difficulties and needs of different students from different types of universities in the EFL context (English is a foreign language).
4. Another important way to further explore the difficulties and needs that EMI instructors consider since English is not necessarily their native language.

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