

## CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH-MEDIUM INSTRUCTION AND THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN FACILITATING LEARNING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SINDH

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### Abstract

English Medium Instruction (EMI) has increasingly been adopted as a key educational policy in non-English-speaking contexts, including Sindh, Pakistan. While EMI is often associated with improved academic and professional opportunities, its classroom implementation presents significant challenges for secondary school students. This qualitative study explores the linguistic and instructional difficulties experienced by students in Grades 9 and 10 within EMI classrooms and examines the role of teachers in facilitating learning under these conditions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty secondary school students and five subject teachers from a secondary school in Sindh. Thematic analysis revealed that limited English proficiency, unfamiliar academic vocabulary, and variations in teachers' pronunciation and instructional styles posed major barriers to students' comprehension, particularly in science subjects. These challenges frequently resulted in increased reliance on rote memorization rather than conceptual understanding. The findings further indicate that teachers play a critical mediating role in addressing these difficulties through strategies such as controlled code-switching, simplified language use, repeated explanation, and individualized academic support. The study recommends targeted professional development for EMI teachers, the formal integration of bilingual instructional strategies, and improved access to language-support resources to enhance EMI effectiveness. By highlighting student and teacher perspectives, this research contributes context-specific insights into EMI implementation in secondary education and underscores the need for balanced language policies that promote academic achievement while respecting linguistic diversity in Sindh.

### INTRODUCTION

The adoption of English Medium Instruction (EMI) has emerged as a prominent global trend in education, particularly in countries where English is not the first language. EMI refers to the use of English as the primary language of instruction for teaching academic

subjects such as science, mathematics, and social studies in non-English-speaking contexts. Over the past few decades, EMI has expanded rapidly due to the increasing role of English as a global language of communication, trade, higher education, and

research (Iliieva & Peak, 2017). This expansion shows no clear signs of decline, as English continues to dominate international academic and professional domains (Dearden & Macaro, 2016).

The global spread of English has often been explained through Kachru's (1985) three-circle model, which categorizes English use into the inner, outer, and expanding circles. The inner circle includes countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, where English is spoken as a native language. The outer circle comprises countries with historical ties to British colonialism, where English functions as an official or institutional language, including Pakistan, India, and Nigeria. The expanding circle refers to countries such as China, Japan, and Brazil, where English is recognized as an important international language despite having no colonial history (Crystal, 1987). Pakistan is situated within the outer circle, as English has maintained its status as an official language and continues to play a central role in education, governance, and professional life.

In Pakistan, the growing preference for EMI has been largely driven by the perception that English proficiency is essential for academic success, socioeconomic mobility, and access to better employment opportunities. Since independence, English has remained a dominant language in higher education and in disciplines such as science and technology (Rahman, 2002). As a result, both public and private educational institutions have increasingly adopted EMI policies, particularly at the secondary level, with the aim of improving students' linguistic competence and global competitiveness. However, the implementation of EMI has proven to be complex, especially in regions where students and teachers have limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

Sindh presents a linguistically diverse educational context in which the implementation of EMI poses particular challenges. Sindhi is the most widely spoken language in the province, while Urdu and English are commonly used in formal and academic settings. In addition, several regional languages, including Balochi, Brahui, Saraiki, and Pashto, are spoken across different communities. This multilingual environment creates a rich cultural landscape but also complicates the use of a single instructional language. As Rahman (2002) notes, in

multilingual societies, imposing one dominant language as the medium of instruction can negatively affect learners' confidence and comprehension, particularly when the instructional language differs from students' home languages.

At the secondary school level in Sindh, many students experience considerable difficulty when academic content is delivered exclusively in English. The gap between students' first languages and the language of instruction often hinders their understanding of subject matter, particularly in concept-heavy disciplines such as physics, chemistry, and biology. These linguistic challenges can lead to surface learning strategies, including memorization, rather than meaningful conceptual understanding. In such contexts, teachers play a crucial role in mediating learning by adapting instructional practices, providing language support, and facilitating comprehension through alternative strategies.

Despite the growing adoption of EMI in Pakistani secondary schools, there remains a limited body of empirical research examining how students and teachers experience EMI in linguistically diverse regions such as Sindh. Much of the existing literature focuses on higher education or urban elite institutions, leaving a gap in understanding EMI implementation at the secondary level, particularly in non-elite and multilingual settings. Addressing this gap is essential for informing language-in-education policies and improving classroom practices.

The present study aims to explore the real-world challenges faced by secondary school students in EMI classrooms and to examine the role of teachers in facilitating learning under these conditions. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

(1) What challenges do Grade 9 and 10 students face in understanding academic content taught through English?

(2) How do teachers support students in overcoming language-related difficulties in EMI classrooms?

By addressing these questions through qualitative inquiry, this research seeks to contribute context-specific insights into EMI practices in Sindh's secondary schools. The findings are expected to inform educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers by highlighting practical strategies for

improving EMI effectiveness while maintaining sensitivity to the region's linguistic diversity.

## Literature Review

The medium of instruction plays a central role in shaping teaching practices, learner engagement, and academic achievement. In Pakistan, the choice of instructional language has remained a contested issue since independence, with shifting policies reflecting political, social, and economic priorities (Rahman, 1996; Mahboob, 2002; Mansoor, 2005). While Urdu has traditionally been promoted as the medium of instruction in public-sector primary schools, English has increasingly dominated private education and higher levels of schooling. This dual-language system has contributed to educational stratification and unequal access to linguistic capital, particularly for students from non-elite and multilingual backgrounds.

In recent years, English Medium Instruction has gained prominence globally as part of the internationalization of education. EMI is often justified on the grounds that it enhances students' access to global knowledge, improves English proficiency, and increases academic mobility (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2020). However, research has consistently shown that the successful implementation of EMI depends not only on policy decisions but also on classroom-level language practices and teacher preparedness. EMI classrooms are inherently complex, as they require the simultaneous negotiation of content learning and language development.

A substantial body of literature highlights that language-related challenges are among the most significant barriers to effective EMI implementation. Studies conducted in diverse contexts have reported that students frequently struggle with limited English proficiency, unfamiliar academic vocabulary, and difficulty understanding extended explanations delivered in English (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Taguchi & Naguma, 2006). In South Korea, for example, Kim (2017) found that a majority of students were unable to comprehend a large portion of EMI lectures, which negatively affected their academic confidence and performance. These findings suggest that EMI may place excessive cognitive demands on

learners when adequate linguistic support is not provided.

Research also indicates that EMI-related challenges are discipline-specific. Science and technical subjects, which rely heavily on specialized terminology and abstract concepts, are often reported as particularly difficult for students in EMI settings. Evans and Morrison (2011) argue that students' lack of discipline-specific academic vocabulary significantly restricts their ability to engage meaningfully with content, leading to surface-level learning and increased dependence on memorization. Such challenges are especially pronounced at the secondary level, where conceptual complexity increases but students' academic English proficiency may still be developing.

The role of teachers has been identified as a critical factor in mediating the challenges associated with EMI. Several studies emphasize that content teachers often perceive language teaching as outside their professional responsibility, focusing primarily on subject matter rather than linguistic support (Airey, 2012; Costa, 2012). This separation of language and content can limit students' opportunities to develop academic English within subject classrooms. Lasagabaster (2018) and Cammarata and Ó Ceallaigh (2018) argue that effective EMI requires an integrated approach in which teachers consciously address both content and language learning objectives.

In the Pakistani context, teacher language proficiency presents an additional challenge. Mansoor (2003, 2005) observes that many teachers themselves possess limited English proficiency, a situation that perpetuates a cycle of linguistic inadequacy within the education system. Teachers who were educated in similar EMI environments may replicate instructional practices that prioritize textbook completion over meaningful interaction. Shamim (2008) further notes that non-elite private schools often struggle to maintain English as the medium of instruction due to a shortage of teachers with sufficient spoken English competence, resulting in inconsistent and fragmented EMI practices.

Empirical studies conducted by the British Council (2013) reveal that many school teachers in Pakistan are inadequately prepared to teach through English, particularly in science subjects. Language functions as a fundamental tool for thinking, reasoning, and

conceptual development (Aziz, 2003), and deficiencies in teachers' English proficiency can significantly affect classroom communication and student comprehension. Pandian (2002) and Dar, Zaki, and Kazmi (2010) emphasize that teachers' oral communication skills directly influence students' engagement and learning outcomes, especially in EMI contexts.

Despite growing scholarly interest in EMI, much of the existing research in Pakistan has focused on higher education or elite urban institutions. There remains a notable lack of qualitative studies examining EMI implementation at the secondary school level, particularly in linguistically diverse regions such as Sindh. Moreover, few studies have explored EMI through the combined perspectives of students and teachers, which is essential for understanding classroom realities. This gap underscores the need for context-specific research that examines how EMI is experienced, negotiated, and supported within secondary school classrooms.

The present study seeks to address this gap by exploring the challenges faced by Grade 9 and 10 students in EMI classrooms in Sindh and by examining the strategies teachers employ to facilitate learning. By situating student and teacher experiences within the broader EMI literature, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of EMI implementation in multilingual educational contexts.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the challenges associated with English Medium Instruction (EMI) and the role of teachers in facilitating learning at the secondary school level. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for investigating participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes within real classroom contexts. Rather than measuring variables statistically, this approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how EMI is experienced and negotiated by students and teachers. As Dey (1993) argues, qualitative inquiry enables researchers to examine social phenomena in ways that capture complexity, meaning, and context.

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, a qualitative design was considered suitable

for examining language-related challenges and instructional practices in EMI classrooms. This approach facilitated the collection of rich, descriptive data that could reveal patterns and themes emerging from participants' narratives.

### **Research Tools and Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which served as the primary research instrument. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore predetermined areas of inquiry while also providing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. This format was particularly useful for eliciting detailed insights into classroom practices, language difficulties, and teacher support strategies. As Gillham (2000) notes, open-ended questions encourage deeper reflection and discovery by allowing participants to express their views in their own words.

Separate interview protocols were designed for students and teachers, focusing on their experiences with EMI, perceived challenges, and strategies used to support comprehension. All interviews were conducted in a supportive environment to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their views. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded using mobile recording devices to ensure accuracy. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### **Research Setting**

The study was conducted in the secondary section of a reputable school in Sindh, Pakistan, where English is used as the primary medium of instruction for most academic subjects. The school represents a typical EMI setting in the region, catering to students from diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. Conducting the study within this context allowed for an authentic examination of EMI classroom realities at the secondary level.

### **Participants**

A total of twenty-five participants took part in the study. Of these, twenty participants were students enrolled in Grades 9 and 10, while five participants were subject teachers, including teachers of English and science subjects. Students were selected using random sampling to ensure representation from

different academic backgrounds and genders. The teacher participants were selected based on their involvement in EMI classrooms and their teaching experience at the secondary level.

All participants were contacted in advance and informed about the purpose of the study. Each interview lasted approximately eight to ten minutes. Participants' consent was obtained prior to data collection, and they were assured that their participation was voluntary.

### Research Duration

The data collection process was carried out over a period of two weeks. Interviews were scheduled during school hours at times convenient for participants to minimize disruption to academic activities. Following data collection, the remaining time was devoted to transcription, organization, and preliminary analysis of the data in relation to the research questions.

### Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data. The analysis involved multiple stages. First, interview transcripts were read carefully to achieve familiarity with the data. Next, meaningful segments of text were coded, and related codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting recurring patterns across participants' responses.

Key themes included language-related barriers, subject-specific challenges, teacher mediation strategies, and perceptions of EMI effectiveness. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to capture both shared experiences and variations in participants' perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of EMI implementation in the selected context.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. Prior permission was obtained from the school administration before data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were made aware of the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study. Participants were informed of

their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, no identifying information was included in the transcripts or research report. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

### Findings and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the findings derived from the thematic analysis of interviews conducted with secondary school students and teachers. The analysis revealed several interconnected themes related to students' experiences with English Medium Instruction (EMI), the nature of linguistic challenges they face, and the role of teachers in facilitating comprehension and learning. These findings are discussed in relation to existing literature on EMI to situate the results within broader scholarly debates.

### Students' Experiences with English Medium Instruction

Overall, students expressed a generally positive attitude toward EMI, viewing English as an important language for future academic and professional success. Many participants perceived EMI as beneficial because it exposed them to English in everyday classroom interaction and encouraged communication in a global language. Students reported that classroom discussions conducted in English helped improve their speaking skills and confidence over time. These perceptions align with previous research suggesting that students often associate EMI with enhanced opportunities for higher education and employment (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013).

However, despite this positive orientation, students acknowledged that their experiences with EMI were not uniformly smooth. Several participants described initial confusion and difficulty, particularly when transitioning from non-EMI backgrounds or government primary schools to English-medium secondary education. This finding supports earlier studies indicating that students' prior exposure to English significantly influences their ability to cope with EMI environments (Taguchi & Naguma, 2006).

**Subject-Specific Challenges in EMI Classrooms**

A prominent theme emerging from the data was the subject-specific nature of EMI-related difficulties. Students consistently identified science subjects—particularly physics, chemistry, and biology—as the most challenging when taught in English. Participants explained that these subjects involved complex terminology, abstract concepts, and lengthy explanations, which became difficult to understand through a non-native language. In contrast, very few students identified English as the most challenging subject, largely because English teachers were perceived as providing clearer explanations and additional language support. These findings resonate with earlier research suggesting that EMI challenges are more pronounced in content-heavy disciplines that require specialized academic vocabulary (Evans & Morrison, 2011). When students struggle to understand the language used to explain concepts, their focus shifts from meaning-making to surface-level comprehension, often resulting in memorization rather than conceptual understanding. This pattern was evident in participants' accounts of relying on rote learning strategies to cope with examination demands.

**Linguistic Barriers and Academic Performance**

Participants identified several linguistic barriers that hindered their learning in EMI classrooms. Limited English proficiency, unfamiliar vocabulary, grammatical complexity, and variations in teachers' pronunciation and accent were frequently mentioned. Students reported that inconsistent pronunciation across different teachers often led to confusion, particularly when encountering new technical terms. These challenges were perceived to have a direct impact on students' academic performance, especially in written assessments where precise language use is required.

Students also described emotional responses to these linguistic difficulties, including anxiety, hesitation, and reduced confidence in class participation. Such affective factors have been highlighted in previous studies as critical components influencing students' engagement in EMI settings (Kim, 2017). Teachers acknowledged that language barriers could slow down students' learning processes but differed in their views on the severity of these challenges. Some teachers emphasized the importance of sustained exposure to

English, arguing that reduced reliance on local languages would better prepare students for future academic demands.

**Teacher Mediation and Instructional Strategies**

The findings underscore the central role of teachers in mediating EMI-related challenges. Both students and teachers reported the use of instructional strategies aimed at enhancing comprehension, including simplified language, repetition, and contextual explanation of difficult terms. One of the most frequently mentioned strategies was controlled code-switching, whereby teachers temporarily shifted to Urdu or Sindhi to clarify complex concepts before returning to English.

Students generally viewed code-switching as a supportive practice that reduced confusion and facilitated understanding, particularly in science subjects. This finding aligns with research advocating for flexible bilingual practices in EMI classrooms to support learning without undermining exposure to English (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2018). Teachers also reported using multimedia resources, such as videos, images, and online materials, to maintain student interest and reinforce understanding.

Despite these efforts, the data suggest that teachers' own English proficiency and pedagogical training significantly influence the effectiveness of EMI. Teachers with stronger language skills and greater teaching experience were perceived as more capable of balancing content delivery and language support. This observation supports earlier findings that highlight teacher preparedness as a key determinant of EMI success (Shamim, 2008; British Council, 2013).

**Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of EMI Effectiveness**

Both students and teachers expressed largely positive perceptions of EMI's long-term value. Students believed that learning through English would benefit their higher education prospects and improve their employability in a competitive job market. Teachers similarly viewed EMI as essential for preparing students to engage with global knowledge systems. However, participants emphasized that EMI effectiveness depends on appropriate instructional strategies, supportive classroom environments, and

realistic expectations regarding students' language development.

Notably, students demonstrated nuanced attitudes toward language choice, with some advocating for exclusive English use and others preferring a balanced multilingual approach. This variation reflects the complex realities of EMI implementation in multilingual contexts and highlights the need for flexible, context-sensitive language policies.

### Discussion Summary

Taken together, the findings reveal that while EMI is widely perceived as valuable and necessary, its implementation at the secondary level in Sindh is accompanied by significant linguistic and pedagogical challenges. Students' difficulties are shaped by limited English proficiency, subject-specific language demands, and inconsistent instructional practices. Teachers play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges, particularly through adaptive strategies such as code-switching and simplified explanation. These results reinforce the argument that EMI effectiveness depends not merely on policy adoption but on sustained teacher support, language-sensitive pedagogy, and institutional commitment.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

#### Conclusion

This study examined the challenges associated with English Medium Instruction (EMI) at the secondary school level in Sindh and explored the role of teachers in facilitating student learning within EMI classrooms. Drawing on qualitative data from students and teachers, the findings reveal that while EMI is widely perceived as valuable for academic advancement and future career opportunities, its implementation is accompanied by significant linguistic and instructional challenges. Students particularly struggle with limited English proficiency, unfamiliar academic vocabulary, and the complex language demands of science subjects, which often impede conceptual understanding and contribute to reliance on rote learning.

The findings further demonstrate that teachers play a crucial mediating role in shaping students' EMI experiences. Instructional strategies such as simplified language use, repetition, contextual explanation, and controlled code-switching were found to be effective

in supporting student comprehension. However, the effectiveness of these strategies largely depends on teachers' own language proficiency, pedagogical awareness, and ability to balance content delivery with language support. These results underscore the importance of viewing EMI not merely as a policy decision but as a classroom practice that requires sustained professional support and contextual sensitivity.

By focusing on secondary school classrooms in Sindh, this study contributes to the growing body of EMI research by offering context-specific insights from a linguistically diverse and underrepresented setting. The findings highlight the need for EMI policies that recognize multilingual realities and prioritize pedagogical effectiveness alongside language development.

### Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of EMI at the secondary school level in Sindh:

First, targeted professional development programs should be introduced for EMI teachers, with a particular focus on academic English proficiency, classroom communication strategies, and the integration of language support within content teaching. Such training should equip teachers with practical tools to address students' linguistic needs without compromising subject coverage.

Second, bilingual instructional approaches should be formally recognized and strategically implemented. Controlled code-switching, when used purposefully, can serve as an effective scaffold for comprehension, especially in concept-heavy subjects. Rather than being viewed as a weakness, bilingual practices should be incorporated into EMI guidelines to support learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Third, teaching and learning resources should be enhanced to support EMI classrooms. The use of visual aids, multimedia materials, and simplified supplementary texts can reduce cognitive load and promote deeper understanding of subject content. Curriculum designers and textbook developers should also consider linguistic accessibility when developing instructional materials for secondary students.

Finally, future research should expand on the present study by examining EMI implementation across multiple schools and districts to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal studies investigating the long-term academic and linguistic outcomes of EMI would provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators seeking to evaluate the sustainability of EMI practices in Pakistan.

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