

English Medium Instruction at Salahaddin University in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to learn more about tertiary students' perspectives of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in Kurdistan Region-Iraq, in relation to language skills, language beliefs, and language administration. The study revealed that students had a favorable attitude towards the idea that EMI could boost their English language skills and career prospects but encountering difficulties in comprehending technical terms and the teacher's proficiency in the English language. They firmly believed that EMI could expand their career choices and generate more employment opportunities by enhancing their English language skills. The study was replicated in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) using diverse student populations. In addition, it suggests providing students with designated assignments and engaging materials to cultivate their self-sufficiency in education.

Keywords: English-medium instruction (EMI); students' perceptions; challenges; tertiary education; reducing linguistic barriers; Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

1. Introduction

Every educational setting relies heavily on English medium instruction (EMI) to make it easier for students to understand academic information. In order to enhance teaching and learning, teachers and students must use the language of instruction successfully. EMI is frequently used in academic fields, such as science, geography, technology, accountancy, engineering, and others. Most of Kurdistan Region of Iraq universities, including Salahaddin University, coursebooks are in English. Furthermore, Students are required to study English because it is the language of teaching and examinations. Dearden (2021) states that "For EMI courses, English should be used to demonstrate and evaluate learning objectives (such as oral presentations, assignments, or tests), as well as the delivery of content, whole-class engagement, and the learning materials. For instance, student-to-student and teacher-to-student interactions during pair work and group work may occasionally be conducted in languages other than English to facilitate mutual understanding and idea production. However, at least 70% of class dialogue should be delivered in English, and lecturers should expect students to deliver their debates in English. The goal of EMI is to help students to improve their professional English skills, expand their understanding of several academic areas, and prepare them to participate in a global society.

Additionally, students face challenges and find it difficult to study in a foreign language due to their limited knowledge of English language (Borg,2016). It is the lecturers' pedagogical decisions that make EMI teaching meaningful. For instance, providing students with engaging classroom instructions is crucial to provoking reactions from students and improving their learning (Chen, Han & Wright, 2020).

Considering the foregoing, the aim of the study is to examine the students' perceptions of English Medium Instruction (EMI) implementation in Kurdistan Region-Iraq of language skills, language beliefs, and language administration. According to the research's objective, the following questions have been developed.

1. What do students think about English medium Instruction (EMI)?
2. What effect will English Medium Instruction (EMI) have on student's prospective carrier?
3. What type of difficulties do students face while learning the subject matters in English?

2. Background: EMI in Kurdistan higher education

Past researchers have recently explored several elements of EMI in higher education, including as policy assessment, perceptions, and students' performance around the world and KRI (Gill, 2006; Jiang, 2010). The adoption of EMI in classroom will help students develop proper English skills and improve their self-confidence in speaking English, motivate them to study English, and assist them in reading English textbooks and articles (Rahmadani, 2016). English is viewed as a tool rather than a standalone subject. This means that becoming proficient in the English language is seen as a natural outcome of acquiring knowledge in academic content areas (Alfehaid, 2018). In the context of EMI, English serves as the primary language for both teachers and students to effectively communicate, deliver subject matter, complete assignments, and study relevant materials. However, the emphasis is not on teaching English as a foreign or second language. It can be inferred that a prerequisite for teachers, students, and administration staff is to possess proficient English language skills. EMI programs often present linguistic challenges that can affect both teachers and students. Non-native learners, in particular, may find it difficult to understand the English spoken by native-speaking lecturers, especially when it is accented.

However, many students face multiple challenges in regards to EMI due to their limited English proficiency, which can impede their comprehension of scholarly literature written in English. Similarly, Borg (2016) state that Kurdish students are facing difficulties in comprehending EMI programs at Salahaddin University due to their insufficient grasp of the English language. Overall, there is prevalent issue discussed in the EMI literature pertains to the potential inadequacy of English proficiency among students. This concern is often linked with one's self-perception or a fundamental presumption (Huang, 2015; Wächter, 2008). Students are becoming increasingly worried about the standard of teaching and the depth of subject knowledge, especially in light of the challenges faced during language acquisition and learning. Furthermore, it is frequently observed that lecturers adhere closely to the textbook and present the content in a simplified manner in English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses. As noted by Chapple (2015), this tendency could be attributed to the lecturers' limited command of the English language. In addition, lecturers utilize their native languages with expertise to effectively communicate information to their students or delve deeper into the subject matter while instructing. Galloway, Kriukow, and Numajiri (2017) suggest that lecturers often view EMI as a means of gaining content knowledge rather than language proficiency. As a result, they tend to favor the use of the mother tongue in the classroom environment.

After a thorough analysis of the existing literature, it is clear that the implementation of EMI in KRI presents a number of challenges. These challenges encompass linguistic, cultural, and social barriers that demand attention and resolution. In order to tackle these concerns in a successful manner, it is absolutely essential to obtain valuable input from significant parties involved in the educational process, particularly

those who are EMI students. Hence, it is of utmost importance to carry out interviews and assessments to assess their viewpoints on EMI.

3. Conceptual framework

In order to explore students' attitudes towards EMI, the present study employs the framework developed by Bernard Spolsky. The assessment of the implementation of EMI at Salahaddin University in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is dependent on this componential model developed by Spolsky (2004). In this model, language policy is evaluated based on its language skills, beliefs, and administration. Therefore, it provides a foundation for determining whether the implementation of EMI in KRI Higher Education is progressing effectively or requires attention to areas for improvement. In this study, the evaluation of language skills will be conducted with a focus on the insights and perspectives of students. For example, what obstacles students may face while studying in a foreign language. The second component is language beliefs which concerns values and responsibilities of a specific language. To put it another way, this refers to how EMI students who are not native English speakers see the usage of English as they grow in their chosen area, acquiring mastery and expertise. Language administration is the third essential component in enhancing and adapting current teaching or learning methods. It necessitates the dedicated efforts of both teaching and administrative personnel.

However, students may encounter difficulties, it is important to note that there are significant challenges that often arise when students studying in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Similarly, Bradford (2016) has proposed four categories of EMI challenges. These include linguistic, cultural, structural, and identity-related (institutional) obstacles. The linguistic challenge presents itself as a language barrier that both students and lecturers may face throughout the EMI program. According to Ammon & McConnell (2002), non-native students frequently encounter difficulties in understanding English spoken by native lecturers. Moreover, as noted by Hellekjær (2010), comprehending the message of a lecture delivered in English can be quite challenging. Students face a variety of difficulties when learning in (EMI) context. One of the most prevalent challenges is difficulties understanding academic material owing to a lack of English language ability. One of the common concerns emphasized in the EMI literature is the English language competency of students, which is often associated with their self-image and fundamental convictions (Huang, 2015; Wächter, 2008).

As Bradford (2016) defines cultural challenge, it is a disparity between the qualities and expectations of students within and outside a country. The issue of cultural challenge arises when English education is prioritized above the preservation of indigenous languages, particularly in places where indigenous "minority" languages have been suppressed. This cultural anxiety arises from a conviction in the superiority of English and can be a significant impediment to sustaining cultural diversity.

The EMI program encountered structural challenges that included difficulties with program coordination, an insufficient amount of EMI courses, and support personnel who lacked the capacity to collaborate with diverse groups (Bradford, 2016: 4). The aim of this study is to explore the satisfaction level of KRI learners regarding the present state of EMI implementation, with a particular focus on their language proficiency, beliefs, and administration.

4. Data and Method

To achieve the goal of this study, a qualitative research design was opted for the third level of students in order to delve into the intricacies of EMI implementation, from the viewpoint of students, and the

challenges they face in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. By analyzing EMI practices via the viewpoint of students provide crucial insights on the problem, acknowledging both the successes and areas for improvement in policy implementation is crucial to enhancing the current methods of teaching and learning.

Qualitative research design has been found to be beneficial in examining the viewpoints of students, recognizing difficulties, and gaining a deeper understanding of current practices in EMI classrooms. The aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding by conducting interviews with students from Salahaddin University in KRI. The students are studying third and fourth academic year in the department of information technology (n4), computer science (n3), chemistry (n4), and mechanical (n4) where English medium instruction is practiced. There were interviews with 15 participants: nine males and six females. In order to delve deeper into the perceptions and challenges of students, a qualitative approach was utilized through conducting semi-structured individual interviews. The data is collected by a master student of Istanbul Aydin university.

The qualitative data of the students was expertly combined, examined, and conceptualized to reveal their perspectives and struggles. The researcher can obtain valuable information from the participant(s) by conducting a semi-structured interview (Solloway, 2016, p.64). Due to certain circumstances, participants possess the ability to express the issues that affect them. The interview guide consists of two sections, containing a total of nine questions. The questions have been designed to gain a deeper understanding of how the participants perceive EMI and the challenges they may have encountered. There was a total of fifteen participants who responded, including nine males and six females, were interviewed. Each participant was interviewed for approximately 20-25 minutes in the English language. The interviews were conducted online and face to face with the respondents' consent.

In this study, a purposeful sample was chosen for the study. Kindly note that the study participants comprise only the students from Salahaddin University. This is due to the university's significant focus on utilizing English as a medium of instruction (EMI). By choosing to attend only one university, there is a possibility that the application of new findings could be limited. The students were from the Faculty of Science and Engineering, namely information technology (n4), computer science (n3), chemistry (n4), and mechanical (n4). Participants were divided into three groups based on their department, gender, and interviewing order.

Thorough examination of the data collected from semi-structured interviews was carried out through the use of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used to examine qualitative data as well as uncover patterns and themes (Kwong, 2017).

According to Chapple (2015: 4), there seems to be skepticism regarding the idea that simply signing up for an English-taught content course would result in significant improvement in language skills. Policy makers often view EMI in higher education as an effective means to enhance the English language skills of university students (Ali, 2013). Although the participants had received English instruction during their middle school years, their individual learning experiences revealed significant differences.

5. Findings

This section contains important observations gathered from individual interviews with students who are actively involved in EMI context learning. The information given aligns perfectly with the three research questions that have guided this study. As a result, the following sections will be included in the explanation of the results.

RQ1. What do students think about English medium Instruction (EMI)?

The following section contains findings based on language skills, language beliefs, and language administration regarding graduate students' perceptions of EMI. All 15 participants have a positive perception of EMI programs, irrespective of their department.

1. Necessary for pursuing higher education. The results clearly indicate that students have a deep understanding of the crucial role that EMI plays in their higher education.

I am certain that EMI is an excellent strategy for overcoming language barriers in diverse locations where English is not the predominant language. Choosing to study English is a very useful technique for quickly improving one's English skills. It is an important aspect of education that should not be overlooked (student 5).

EMI is a must have for any academic pursuit, especially while conducting research and collecting articles from many English-language sites. This is crucial since it allows you to have a deeper understanding of different cultures while also giving multiple opportunities for personal growth and development. By honing your EMI skills, you may improve your ability to speak with the appropriate accent and listen to native speakers. So, if you want to excel academically while also broadening your horizons', studying EMI is the way to go (student 3).

2. EMI in classrooms. Throughout the interviews, a handful of individuals delicately hinted at the possibility of cognitive advantages. Here are some ideas that students shared:

This program boasts a multitude of benefits, but what stands out to me the most is its incorporation of courses centered around problem solving and communication skills, in addition to specialized subjects taught in English. This unique blend has undoubtedly bolstered my capacity to navigate intricate real-world situations and refine my technical prowess (student 9).

Being able to understand English materials has truly been a blessing for me. It's given me a significant advantage, allowing me to access exclusive exercises that aren't available in Kurdish textbooks and improving my reading abilities. In the past, I heavily relied on Google for information, but I've learned that it's not always reliable. Now, I'm proud to say that I have the confidence to find accurate information from trustworthy sources (student 2).

3. Being at the forefront. It is widely acknowledged among graduates in Kurdistan that possessing a strong command of the English language holds immense value. This proficiency is known to expand one's outlook and provide avenues for generating fresh and innovative ideas. Consequently, the significance of English language education cannot be overstated in shaping the educational trajectory of the region.

Having a strong command of the English language and access to English study materials can unlock numerous job prospects and promote ongoing growth in the IT industry. It is regrettable that many programming and coding resources are not easily accessible in Kurdish. Nevertheless, I am grateful for the EMI environment, which has given me an advantage over my peers studying at other universities in our country (student 11).

My English skills have significantly improved thanks to the abundance of English materials presented in the program. I don't know about other programs, but our teachers assign a substantial amount of work

that encourages us to exert more effort. This has enabled us to enhance our self-study capabilities and achieve greater success (student 1)

RQ2. What effect will English Medium Instruction (EMI) have on student's prospective carrier?

In general, the participants unanimously agreed that choosing English Medium Instruction would be advantageous for their future career opportunities. A vast majority of them acknowledged that studying subjects in English could greatly enhance their language proficiency. This viewpoint was frequently expressed during interviews when asked about the impact of EMI on their career growth.

Although I rarely have to utilize my English proficiency in the workplace, there was a specific instance where it was absolutely crucial. During the launch of a new product, we had to retrieve a foreign guest from the airport. To my astonishment, none of my colleagues were able to help except me. This occurrence highlighted the advantages of possessing a firm grasp of the English language. I felt extremely grateful for the opportunity to communicate proficiently (student 10).

I am sincerely grateful to my engineering instructors for the remarkable strides I have made in my English language skills. Their unwavering support and guidance in correcting my grammatical errors in assignments and presentations have been invaluable. Thanks to their consistent encouragement, I now feel self-assured when communicating in English. In essence, my speaking, writing, and reading abilities have undergone a remarkable transformation (student 13).

Although we encountered some challenges when using English as medium of instruction, we have now recognized the numerous advantages it presents. This method has allowed us to enhance our vocabulary and comprehend good ideas, resulting in a substantial enhancement in our language skills (student 8).

3. What type of difficulties do students face while learning the subject matters in English?

Based on the findings, it appears that the students expressed contentment with their academic experience in the EMI environment and acknowledged its value. Nevertheless, the implementation of EMI presented notable obstacles that impeded their progress and led to an increase in their workload, resulting in a range of challenges, and difficulties.

1. Speaking and hearing challenges. EMI classrooms can pose challenges for students, as they may struggle to effectively express their thoughts and ideas due to discomfort.

During class, I occasionally experience a feeling of seclusion when I encounter challenges in articulating my thoughts or concepts. It can be rather intimidating when the lecturer speaks rapidly, and I encounter difficulties in comprehending the subject matter being presented (student 6).

2. participation and confidence. It appears that EMI has an effect on the amount of student participation. *Sometimes, I find myself hesitant to participate in lectures due to a lack of confidence in expressing my ideas. The fear of mispronouncing words and the potential of feeling embarrassed or shy hold me back from speaking out (student 14).*

3. Difficulty in understanding instructors' language. The instructor's level of language proficiency may present some difficulties.

Attending EMI courses may prove to be a challenge, particularly when some instructors face difficulty in communicating fluently in English. The primary concern is the lecturer's proficiency in English, leading to the usage of simplistic language instead of academic jargon, thereby reducing the intricacy of the course. It is unfortunate that such instances occur in higher education settings (student 12).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

EMI can have a significant impact on students' learning experiences and studies, both positively and negatively. While it can serve as a valuable resource for improving their English language skills, it can also present obstacles to their mastery of subject-specific knowledge and abilities. Integrating EMI in the classroom can significantly enhance students' English proficiency, making it easier for them to meet the required standards, and boosting their confidence in their ability to speak the language fluently. Consequently, students can effortlessly comprehend English textbooks and articles, while also developing a profound appreciation for diverse global cultures. Students are gravitating towards the idea of pursuing their education in an EMI environment, despite varying viewpoints. This preference can be credited to the acknowledgement of the numerous benefits it provides, such as enhancing their academic development and propelling their career prospects in the long run. The Thematic Analysis presents a comprehensive summary of the outcomes derived from the conducted interviews.

Table 1. The findings derived from the Thematic Analysis conducted in this study are outlined below.

Table 1

The perceptions of students towards EMI in Salahaddin University, both positive and negative, will be explored.

Open code	Axial	Selective
Prospective career	Positive perception	The perspectives and obstacles of students in EMI context learning in higher education
Enhance vocabulary and comprehend good ideas		
Improve speaking English proficiency		
Understanding different cultures		
The chance to get the best job		
Changed attitude to a positive to be familiar with materials that have not been translated into Kurdish		
Necessary for other studies		
requires more time to study		
Feel hesitant to participate in lectures		
lack of confidence in expressing my ideas.		

having a limited understanding of English before enrolling in college		
mispronouncing words		
Can't understand the instructors' language.		
Writing in academic way		
Using dictionaries to discover the meanings of some complicated words		

Based on the aforementioned findings, it can be inferred that the current results align with those of previous studies. Although the integration of EMI has demonstrated numerous benefits, including the improvement of English language skills for students, it is crucial to recognize that it may pose difficulties for those who do not speak English as their primary language (Aizawa & Rose, 2018; Chapple, 2015). Several studies have recognized that EMI students face a considerable difficulty in understanding technical terms. However, it is important to consider that lecturers may encounter challenges in their language proficiency due to their limited English skills. Borg (2016, p.2) notes that universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have faced challenges when using English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), many lecturers in the region have shared their apprehensions regarding their English language proficiency. According to Chapple (2015), lecturers may need to simplify their material due to limited English proficiency, which is one potential result of EMI. Furthermore, lecturers employ their native language to convey information to their students with precision and to delve deeper into the curriculum during teaching sessions. While EMI offers numerous benefits for both students and teachers. It elevates academic performance, improve English language skills, and encourages a deeper passion for acquiring knowledge (Hakim, 2021).

According to the third question of the study, many students still face difficulties with confidence when using English as a medium of instruction. They often wonder if this method truly promotes effective communication in the classroom. This viewpoint is also expressed by Idris (2014), who notes that English is typically taught as a subject in schools and is not frequently used in daily life.

It is important to remember that the study was only carried out at Salahadin University, focusing on graduate EMI students, during a specific point in time, and it cannot be generalized. To delve deeper into the influence of EMI on tertiary education in KRI, the researcher replicated the study with different student populations.

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