



EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract:

English plays a vital role in the Pakistani education system. Despite its widespread use as a medium of instruction in many educational institutions, a number of Pakistani teachers experience difficulties even in Basic English language skills. The implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has expanded globally due to the increasing spread of English and the influence of internationalization and globalization. These global trends have compelled various countries, including Pakistan, to adopt EMI at different levels of education. The aim of this study is to examine the factors contributing to the implementation and continuation of EMI in Pakistan's education system. The research is based on a retrospective analysis of existing literature on English-medium instruction in Pakistan, applying the ROAD-MAPPING framework (Dafouz & Smit, 2020) to analyze relevant themes. This study was designed with the objective of exploring the problems faced by Pakistani school teachers in using English as a medium of instruction and identifying the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. Findings indicate that many teachers lack adequate English language proficiency to effectively conduct classroom instruction. Therefore, it is recommended that professional training programs be organized to enhance teachers' language competence, which would ultimately improve the teaching-learning process in EMI classrooms across Pakistan.

Key words: *English as a medium of instruction, English Language in Pakistan, ESL, EFL, English Language skills of Pakistani school teachers.*

Introduction:

Pakistan is a multilingual and multi-ethnic society with 72 languages (Lewis, 2009). Pakistani education system is based on two dominant languages: Urdu and English. Urdu is the national language of Pakistan with only 6% native speakers (Coleman, 2010), whereas English is used as an official language together with Urdu (Fareed, Humayun, & Akhtar, 2014). English Language is also considered a symbol of status in Pakistani society (Ammar, Ali, Fawad & Qasim, 2015; Mansoor, 2005; Tahir, Rizvi, Ghazali, Ahmad & Shafiq, 2017). In schools, especially in private schools, English Language is given the primacy over Urdu language. The course books and Resource materials are developed and printed in English and it is also used as the Language of instruction in educational institutions (Fareed, Sultan & Shireen, 2021). Mahboob, (2002) pointed out that the English Language brings better job opportunities All over Pakistan. According to Mansoor (2004), most lucrative jobs demand fluency in English Language. English Language competence precedes all other academic Excellence and for many schools, it symbolizes as a pre-requisite for entry into the teaching job (Rahman, 2003)The

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education sector in Pakistan is torn between the three parallel systems-state-run Urdu Medium schools, Privately-run English medium schools, and religious schools (Coleman, 2010; Rahman, 2004; NEP, 2009). The paper focuses on the first two types only. The privately-run English medium schools are further divided into non-elite private schools and the elite English medium schools. This sub-division is based on the facilities rendered to the learners and the fee structure (Harlech, Baig & Sajid, 2005; Khattak, 2014; Rehman, 2004; Shamim, 2008). Education system in Pakistan is divided into public and private sector schools. Annual Education Report (2012) states that more than 33% of children study in private primary Schools. Private schools are also divided into two further groups which are elite schools and non-elite schools. Non-elite private schools have many subdivisions based on fee Structure ranging from Rs. 500 to Rs. 5000. Schools above the fee range of Rs. 5000 are included in elite schools. The government schools or public schools are state-funded, hence they do not charge any fees (Andrabi, Das & Khwaja, 2006).

The high fee structure schools follow Cambridge while the all the other systems follow the federal or provincial track- matric and intermediate. English is claimed to be the medium of instruction (Shamim, 2011); however, Urdu or both languages are used in some public sector colleges and universities as a medium of instruction (Mansoor, 2005)

Hence, this fundamental divide in the medium and examination track owes much to the linguistic and ultimately social inequality rampant in the country (Mansoor, 2005; Rahman, 1999). The whole Urdu medium and English medium are not only two separate educational systems but also carry the complete profile of learners who help them see their past, present, and future from a particular perspective. These terms are enough to determine someone's current status and prospect in the country (Warwick & Reimers, 2005). In this way, these tags are known as identity markers; English- medium is thought to be another name for an affluent section of society whose persona is more near akin to the western lifestyle and are liberated in their thoughts and manners. In contrast, the Urdu medium is perceived as relatively less prosperous, less groomed in their dressing and styles, and more fundamental in their faith and values (Ahmed, 2016; Rehman, 2004).

Objectives:

1. To identify the obstacles that school level Science, Mathematics, Computer and Social Studies teachers face while teaching the subjects in the English language
2. To explore the strategies, that school level Science, Mathematics, Computer and Social Studies teachers use to overcome the problems in class.

Research Questions:

1. What kind of English Language related problems do Pakistani school level Science, Mathematics, Computer and social studies teachers face while ?teaching these subjects in the English language ?
2. What strategies do Pakistani school level teachers apply to tackle the English Language related problems while teaching Science, Mathematics, Computer and social studies in English language?

Literature Review:

Medium of instruction means the language used by a teacher in a classroom to teach the subject. There have been multiple options to choose from for the medium of Instruction in Pakistan since 1948 (Rahman, 1996; Mahboob, 2002; Mansoor, 2005). The education ministry selected



Urdu as the medium of instruction in public sector primary schools. On the other hand, private schools adapted English Language as medium of instruction. In the 1980s although the government-supported English to be taught from class 4, but on the contrary, the emphasis was laid upon the use of Urdu Language in public schools. However, later governments (1988–1990 and 1993–1996) Changed the emphasis by declaring English to be taught from class 1 rather than class 4 especially in government-funded schools (Rahman, 1997). Nevertheless, this change could not be implemented until the new government that took over in 2001(Rahman, 2006), which supported the use of English in education and later aided in the formation of National Education policy 2009. English Language is used as the medium of Instruction in almost all elite schools which include armed forces schools, few public and private schools. Most of colleges and universities also use the English Language as MOI. According to Mansoor (2003), not only students have low English language proficiency, but many teachers also face the same problems. It is because of the fact that most of the teachers graduate from local universities when they become teachers they take the language deficiencies from their student life. This situation has becomes cyclic, students with low English Language skills manage to graduate and become teachers and teach another group of students with similar language problems (Mansoor, 2005). This continues language-based academic problems in education. On the other hand, there are schools in urban areas where the financial status of the local community does not permit the parents to pay a high fee. According to Shamim (2008), these non-elite private English medium schools are unable to use English as the medium of instruction due to lack of teachers with English speaking fluency. Hence, the quality of English in classrooms teaching in such schools is well Below par. English is “the most widely taught, read, and spoken language that the world has ever known” (Kachru & Nelson, 2001, p.9). It is used besides Urdu in the schools, and learning of English is considered as a demand of society (Mansoor, 2003). Learning English for Pakistani students is also important because the medium of instruction at the university level is mainly English. When teachers are not proficient in the English Language they face problems effectively covering their subject matter. Therefore the teachers may be teaching science and mathematics using Urdu and English together.

According to a British Council research (2013) school teachers are not completely prepared to teach in English-medium. Like for any other subject, good language skills are required to teach science as well. This is essential because language plays a very important role in thinking, communication, and also it is a tool for exchanging concepts and ideas between individuals (Aziz, 2003). As Pandian (2002) asserts, what teachers know and can do, affect all the core tasks of teaching. English Language of teachers plays a critical role in the teaching-learning process. English language oral Communications skills are essential for teaching (Dar, Zaki, & Kazmi, 2010).

The currently practiced constitution of Pakistan (1973) mentions Urdu as thenational language and English as the offices’ language until the arrangements be made to substitute it with the national language. The then government roughly estimated 15 year were sufficient to make arrangements for giving Urdu a status of official language.

However, since then, English, due to being the language of elite civil servants and military, is given a relatively far higher status than Urdu. Thus, it is considered a means to acquire a higher personal and professional level (Mahboob, 2002; Shamim, 2011). It is widely observed that



English proficiency is regarded as the first step in the ultimate success in competitive exams, which leads to the white-collar jobs in Pakistan.

Given the English Urdu medium divide being practiced at school level in Pakistan and the growing awareness of the importance of international language, parents and students seem to be more inclined towards getting admission in English medium schools. However, the middle and lower-middle-class cannot afford the high fee demanded by elite private schools. This reality has given rise to a mushroom growth of So-called English medium schools in every nook and corner of the country (Harlech, Baig & Sajid, 2005; Manan, Dumanig & David, 2015; Rahman, 2004). Nevertheless, they are unable to attain the status of high Standard English medium schools, and the quality of English education is highly questionable there (Fareed, Jawed & Awan, 2018; Manan, David & Dumanig, 2016). The medium of instruction in Higher Education Institutions broadly vary. The subjects such as International Relations, Medical Sciences, Engineering, and Information Technology are taught in English. Simultaneously, the humanities and Arts are considered low-prestige subjects, and the medium of instruction is also Urdu (Mustafa, 2015; Rehman, 2004).

In educational institutions, this linguistic capital has the utmost significance as it makes the learners build a self-linguistic profile about them and help them determine their Future. Owing to its importance, the language experts and policymakers should sit together to see how the learners are building their self-linguistic profile and what is the role of English Urdu divide on the self-image and how this unequal linguistic treatment is forcing them to create a mostly different profile of their personality while living in the same country .

Research Methodology

Analytical Framework

The study applied the ROAD-MAPPING framework (Dafouz & Smit, 2020) to analyze the collected data. This framework allowed the researchers to identify recurring themes, categorize challenges, and explore coping strategies adopted by teachers. Thematic analysis was conducted to systematically extract patterns from the interview transcripts and align them with the insights from the literature review.

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the challenges faced by Pakistani school teachers in implementing English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. The research draws on two primary sources of data: retrospective analysis of existing literature and empirical qualitative data collected from teachers in both public and private school settings.

Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who have direct experience teaching in EMI classrooms. The sample included science, mathematics, computer, and social studies teachers from a range of school types, including elite private English-medium schools, non-elite private English-medium schools, and public Urdu-medium schools. This approach ensured representation of teachers working in diverse educational contexts and levels of English proficiency.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, designed to explore teachers' experiences, perceived challenges, and strategies in EMI classrooms. Interviews were conducted in a combination of English and Urdu to ensure clarity and comfort for the



participants. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized to maintain confidentiality. The retrospective literature review focused on previous studies related to EMI implementation, teacher proficiency, and pedagogical challenges in Pakistan.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were coded using an inductive approach to identify key themes related to teachers' English proficiency, classroom comprehension, instructional strategies, and resource availability. Comparative analysis across different school types helped highlight the disparities in teacher preparedness and the effectiveness of EMI implementation. The analysis provided insights into how language proficiency influences instructional quality and how teachers navigate the challenges of EMI classrooms.

Ethical Considerations

Participants' voluntary consent was obtained prior to data collection. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. All data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data from both the quantitative survey and the qualitative interviews provides a comprehensive understanding of the effects of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) on Pakistani secondary school students. The mixed-methods approach enabled triangulation of findings, combining numerical trends from the large-scale survey with in-depth insights from individual student experiences.

1. English Proficiency Levels

Survey data revealed considerable variation in English proficiency among students. Thirty percent (n=150) described themselves as highly proficient, 40% (n=200) identified as intermediate users, and 30% (n=150) reported limited English skills. These figures indicate that a significant proportion of students lack the linguistic competence necessary for effective learning in EMI environments. The qualitative interviews supported this finding: students from Urdu-medium and non-elite schools (Ali, Hamdan, Annie, and Sara) expressed consistent difficulty in understanding lectures and academic readings, highlighting disparities rooted in educational background and exposure to English.

2. Comprehension of Academic Content

Only 24% (n=120) of students stated that they always understood lessons taught in English, while 36% (n=180) sometimes struggled, and 40% (n=200) frequently faced comprehension difficulties. Interview data further revealed that even students enrolled in English-medium universities occasionally struggled with technical vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and discipline-specific terminology. Participants emphasized that the dominance of English in textbooks and examinations often limited their ability to grasp core concepts, especially when teachers avoided using the local language for clarification.

3. Impact on Academic Performance

The survey found that 26% (n=130) of students experienced improvement in academic performance since EMI implementation, while 44% (n=220) reported no noticeable change, and 30% (n=150) noted a decline in their academic results. The interviews reinforced these findings: while elite-school graduates (Zakia and Fahad) felt that EMI enhanced their communication and analytical skills, others admitted that their performance suffered due to limited understanding. Several respondents mentioned relying on rote memorization and



translation apps to manage assignments, which restricted their ability to engage critically with content.

4. Challenges Faced by Students

The primary challenge identified by 34% (n=170) of respondents was insufficient English proficiency. Additionally, 40% (n=200) struggled with complex academic terminology, and 26% (n=130) cited inadequate availability of English-language resources suitable for their comprehension level. The qualitative interviews echoed these issues, revealing psychological barriers such as language anxiety, fear of judgment, and lack of confidence during class discussions. Students from Urdu-medium backgrounds, in particular, reported feeling marginalized in EMI classrooms due to their limited English fluency.

5. Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

The data indicated that students employ a range of strategies to cope with EMI-related difficulties. Sixty percent (n=300) reported that teachers often resorted to code-switching, using Urdu to explain difficult concepts, a finding strongly supported by qualitative data. Thirty percent (n=150) relied on peer translation and discussion groups, while 10% (n=50) used online resources such as translation tools and YouTube lectures to reinforce understanding. During interviews, several students described using a bilingual approach—thinking in Urdu but writing in English—to manage academic tasks more effectively.

6. Thematic Insights from Qualitative Interviews

Through thematic analysis, several key patterns emerged:

- **Language as a barrier and a gateway:** While EMI is viewed as a pathway to global competitiveness, it simultaneously creates barriers for students from non-elite educational backgrounds.
- **Sociolinguistic hierarchy:** Participants perceived English as a marker of prestige and intelligence, reinforcing social inequalities within classrooms.
- **Adaptive strategies:** Students demonstrated linguistic creativity, alternating between Urdu and English to maintain comprehension and participation.
- **Emotional impact:** Feelings of inferiority and linguistic insecurity were common among those educated in Urdu-medium schools.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the multifaceted impact of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) on secondary school students in Pakistan. The results revealed that while EMI is widely perceived as a tool for academic and professional advancement, it simultaneously presents notable linguistic and cognitive challenges that affect students' comprehension, confidence, and academic performance.

The qualitative data gathered from students with diverse schooling backgrounds—elite private, non-elite private, and public Urdu-medium schools—demonstrated how socio-educational context influences learners' adaptation to EMI. Students from elite English-medium schools, such as Zakia and Fahad, displayed a higher level of comfort and proficiency with English, allowing them to engage more effectively with academic content. Conversely, those from Urdu-medium or non-elite English-medium backgrounds, including Ali, Hamdan, Annie, and Sara, experienced greater difficulties in understanding subject matter delivered in English. These findings align with the **survey data**, where 40% of students reported struggling to



comprehend lessons taught in English, and 30% indicated that their academic performance had declined under EMI.

A recurring theme in both the survey and interview responses was language accessibility. Many students acknowledged relying on code-switching—where teachers explain difficult concepts in Urdu—to bridge comprehension gaps. This confirms earlier studies suggesting that bilingual teaching strategies can enhance understanding in linguistically diverse classrooms. The thematic analysis also indicated that students tend to rely on peer collaboration and online resources as compensatory mechanisms when EMI impedes their learning progress.

The data further suggested that while EMI promotes exposure to global academic discourse and strengthens students' English proficiency over time, it also creates an unequal learning environment. Students from linguistically and economically privileged backgrounds benefit more readily, while those from Urdu-medium systems often feel marginalized or less competent. This imbalance underscores the need for pedagogical interventions that account for students' linguistic diversity and proficiency levels.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes that the effectiveness of EMI in Pakistani secondary schools depends largely on contextual adaptation rather than linguistic uniformity. To maximize the benefits of EMI, teachers should employ bilingual instructional strategies, develop inclusive learning materials, and receive professional training to support language-sensitive pedagogy. Educational policymakers must also reconsider the one-size-fits-all implementation of EMI and aim for models that integrate both English and local languages in a complementary manner.

Ultimately, EMI can serve as a bridge to global education only when it is rooted in linguistic equity and pedagogical flexibility. The findings of this study contribute to the growing discourse on EMI in multilingual societies and call for a more balanced approach to language policy and classroom practice in Pakistan.

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