

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ „ГОЦЕ ДЕЛЧЕВ“ - ШТИП
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

UDC 81
UDC 82
UDC 008



ISSN: 2545-3998
DOI: 10.46763/palim

ПАЛИМПСЕСТ

МЕЃУНАРОДНО СПИСАНИЕ ЗА ЛИНГВИСТИЧКИ,
КНИЖЕВНИ И КУЛТУРОЛОШКИ ИСТРАЖУВАЊА

PALIMPSEST

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LINGUISTIC,
LITERARY AND CULTURAL RESEARCH

PALMK, VOL X, NO 19, STIP, 2025

ГОД. 10, БР. 19
ШТИП, 2025

VOL. X, NO 19
STIP, 2025

ПАЛИМПСЕСТ

Меѓународно списание за лингвистички, книжевни
и културолошки истражувања

PALIMPSEST

International Journal for Linguistic, Literary
and Cultural Research

Год. 10, Бр. 19
Штип, 2025

Vol. 10, No 19
Stip, 2025

PALMK, VOL 10, NO 19, STIP, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46763/PALIM251019>

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International Journal for Linguistic, Literary
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Papers can be submitted and published in the following languages: Macedonian, English, German, French, Russian, Turkish and Italian language.
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ATTITUDES OF BUSINESS UNDERGRADUATES TOWARDS ENGLISH-MEDIUM INSTRUCTION FOR THEIR ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL CAREER ASPIRATIONS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: English is not only the official language of Pakistan but also the medium of instruction in higher education. Although English is often the third or fourth language for a student in Pakistan, key stakeholders have positive attitudes towards English-medium instruction. The present study was conducted to explore the attitudes of business undergraduates towards English-medium instruction for their academic and professional career aspirations. Guided by the Interpretivism research paradigm, qualitative approach was used for collection and analysis. Nineteen business students were purposively sampled from an undergraduate writing course and open-ended questionnaires were used to collect data from them. Thematic analysis technique was used to analyze the data from the written responses of the participants. The findings revealed that participants view EMI favourably because they believe it helps them to achieve both academic and professional career goals. The participants believed that they improved their chances of enrolling in universities abroad by improving their language and analytical skills, increasing their self-confidence in the classroom and excelling in extracurricular activities. Thus, EMI may help them advance in their academic careers. The research participants also considered EMI as a way to penetrate the global employment market, showcase their abilities, and leave a lasting impression on the employers. Despite offering valuable insights into Pakistani students' attitudes toward EMI, the current study's findings are not generalizable. Future studies should strive for larger samples and extensive nationwide surveys which will assist scholars in creating a comprehensive account of undergraduates' attitudes of EMI. The findings of this study has implications for students, teachers, university administrations, and policymakers.

Keywords: *Attitudes; Undergraduates; English-medium Instruction; Academic Career; Professional Career.*

1. Introduction

English has become a world language in the present times. It is used in various socio-economic settings such as tourism and travelling, business and commerce, entertainment and communication, and teaching and learning. In fact, English is the medium of instruction (MOI) in many countries and at different levels of education. Macaro (2022) stated that all levels of education are under great influence of English because of its status as a world language. The spread of

English has given birth to a phenomenon called English as a medium of instruction (EMI). EMI is described as providing content for teaching in languages except the language commonly used by students (Macaro et al., 2018). The adoption of EMI can be attributed to various reasons. Due to globalization, internationalization and competitiveness, it becomes essential to implement EMI in universities (Dearden, 2014). Other drivers of EMI policy include mobility and student exchange (Yıldız, 2021). However, the choice of adoption of EMI in Pakistan has been a matter of colonial legacy. English has not only been the official language of Pakistan for over seventy years but also the MOI at the university level (Mahboob, 2017). Contrarily, either the national language (i.e., Urdu) or any regional language is used as the MOI in primary and secondary schools. Thus, a huge number of students entering universities come from educational backgrounds where English is not the MOI.

In spite of this, studies conducted on attitudes of students towards English as MOI indicate that students prefer English for educational purposes in university settings. Mahboob (2002) studied attitudes of freshmen students at a public university in Karachi, Pakistan. The survey data showed that 94.4% of the participants favored English to be the MOI at high school and the university levels. Likewise, Mansoor (2003) conducted a survey on 2136 students of various public and private sector HE institutions from all the capital cities of the four provinces of Pakistan. The results of the survey showed preference for EMI in higher education because of opportunities of higher education abroad and a handsome job. Haidar (2017) conducted a qualitative study in Pakistan which explored the access to English in different elite schools, which are highly expensive English-medium schools owned by private owners, trusts, non-government organizations (NGOs). The study concluded that students perceived English to be beneficial for them not just in their academic career but also in their post-graduation lives. Even the recent studies, based on small-scale survey, suggest positive attitudes of undergraduates towards English-medium instruction (EMI) (Haq et al., 2023). Likewise, Siddiqui et al. (2024) conducted a quantitative study to analyse undergraduates' attitudes toward English-medium education in light of their cultural identities. The results revealed that participants, regardless of their cultural identities, have positive attitudes toward English-medium education because they see it as a source of career development and improvement of their language, communication, and interpersonal skills.

Similar findings can be seen in studies conducted in other contexts. For instance, participants of a Turkish technical university in the descriptive survey study of Ekoç (2018) favored EMI because of employability, prestige, confidence and access to their future destinations. Likewise, Evans and Morrison (2011) reveal in their longitudinal study on first year students in the context of Honk Kong that despite undergraduates' desire to study in L1, they preferred EMI because of the status of English as global lingua franca. Similarly, Macaro and Akincioglu (2018) found that students believed that EMI increases career opportunities, helps improve English, gives access to international resources such as news and academic journals etc., and adds to chances to study abroad. Phuong

and Nguyen (2019), in their study on Vietnamese sophomore students revealed that respondents believed EMI makes them cognitively active, facilitates their reach to credible reading material and provides chances for professional growth. Hu et al. (2014) discovered in the Chinese context that students thought EMI would improve students' employment prospects. In Europe also, similar results have been documented (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014).

While the previous studies in the context of Pakistan provide valuable insights, they primarily focus on quantitative data. Although some qualitative studies have been conducted on students' perceptions about EMI in Pakistan (Maqsood et al., 2021; Siddiqui, 2021), they mostly report students' challenges with EMI. Moreover, the sample for these qualitative studies come from various disciplines and business undergraduates have not been studied exclusively. Since every discipline has its own peculiarities, it is essential to see how these variations impact students' views of EMI (Van et al., 2023). So, there is a gap in understanding how business undergraduates see the usefulness of EMI for their academic and professional careers. Since lived experiences and individual narratives of students are important to understand EMI in Pakistan, there is a need for a qualitative case study which examines the phenomenon in depth. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research question.

Research Question

What are the attitudes of business undergraduates towards English-medium instruction for their academic and professional career aspirations?

2. Methodology

2.1. Context

The study was conducted at a public sector university in Sukkur, Pakistan which offers degree programs in English. Besides, there are two main reasons for choosing this public university for this study. The first reason was the ease of access of the data for research purpose and the second was the status of the university. The university is considered to be the best in the region and provides quality education to students from across the country. So, the sample from this research site was rich and produced insightful findings.

2.2. Design

Since the study aimed to get an in-depth understanding of the attitudes of business undergraduates about the EMI for their academic and professional career aspirations, qualitative case study design best suited for this purpose. Case study provides a detailed account of the events, connections, experiences, or processes that occurred in a specific instance (Denscombe, 2017). Therefore, this case study focuses on a class of business students with their collective attitudes towards EMI as core focus. By collecting data in cross-sectional time horizon (Melnikovas, 2018), this study attempted to gain rich and in-depth insights into undergraduates' attitudes towards EMI.

2.3. Participants

Purposive sampling matched the sample selection requirement in the study because it requires the choice of rich data yielding cases for an in-depth study (Campbell et al., 2020). The basic inclusion criterion or the selection of the sample was participants' enrollment as a business undergraduate. However, other considerations were gender, cultural background and the ability to respond to the researcher's questions in writing. Therefore, the sample comprised 19 business students from an undergraduate program studying a writing course. The class was selected because of student diversity as participants belonged to the different geographical locations of Pakistan. Additionally, out of 19 participants, 10 were male and 09 were female.

2.4. Data Collection Tool

Open-ended questionnaires were used as a tool to collect data from the selected participants. Open-ended questionnaires consisted of two questions asking participants about the perceived benefits of studying in EMI classrooms for their educational and professional careers. Since this type of questionnaire is most suitable for exploratory research, it helps to explore the perceptions of respondents about an issue or a phenomenon. Therefore, they are considered useful for qualitative research particularly case studies. Open-ended items are used in ELT and Applied Linguistics research because broad open questions "generate more expansive, and often unpredicted, responses", and their flexibility results in investigation of unexplored issues (Brown, 2009).

2.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis technique was used to analyze the data from the written responses of the participants. In this regard, six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019) were followed: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and doing the write-up. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), thematic analysis is reliable in qualitative research because "it lets the researcher explore and analyze individual experiences and perceptions and make meaning of that data".

3. Findings

3.1. Skills Development

Participants of the study considered EMI to be useful for the development and improvement of various skills required for educational and later on professional success. For instance, participant 1 said, *English medium instruction grows our reading and speaking skills*. This comment indicates that students associate development of receptive and productive skills with EMI. Additionally, participants believed EMI improved their comprehension skills. In this regard, participant 6 shared, *English helps in our educational career as when we attend all seminars are in English-medium... also lectures and our courses are in English medium... to understand them and our book, English is helpful*. It can be seen from the quote how crucial students consider EMI for comprehension of content in universities.

Moreover, participants reported that things would get easy if they learned English. Participant 13 in this regard wrote, *at first we even do not know how to speak during our academic activities as we have to use English there. Once we learned [speaking in English] everything seems to be alright*. This comment indicates that initially participation in academic activities like presentations was difficult for students; however, they perceived ease and comfort in these activities after they learned speaking in English. Not only the participants associated development of language skills with EMI but also the development of other 21st century skills like communication. Participant 5 said, *the ability to learn this [English] will help develop the analytical skills and make communication smooth*. This comment shows that the participants believed they would acquire other soft skills while studying in EMI institutions.

3.2. Building Confidence

In addition to improving language and analytical skills, participants felt that EMI helped them get confidence. Participant 11 said, *it helps a lot like it helps to be more confident when you talk about things in English*. This remark points towards psychological superiority students experience in the form of confidence while speaking in English. This confidence may influence their participation in classroom activities and other co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Participant 15 believed, *English medium provides a great help to grow in educational career as it enhances the confidence to compete with anyone in educational career*. This comment also implies that lack of confidence in one's English proficiency deprives students from participating in competitive activities in classrooms. Moreover, studying the content through the target language i.e., English increases learners' exposure to the language; the opportunities they have to communicate in it develop their confidence.

3.3. Seeking Higher Education Abroad

Participants of the study believed that studying in EMI classes paves ways for higher education abroad. For example, Participant 15 said, *English-medium education provides more opportunities to study abroad*. One of the reasons for this is the fact that English is the MOI in many countries across the world, especially for foreign students as Participant 18 pointed out, *in almost every country there is English-medium instruction for international students. So, this will help us in future*. So, participants seemed to be aware of the importance of English for studying abroad. Therefore, they consider proficiency in English is imperative for educational career. Participant 14 aptly put, *in order to study abroad, English language is required. So, as much familiar we are to this language, it is as much beneficial for educational career*. Therefore, participants clearly perceive the facilitative role of EMI in seeking higher education abroad.

3.4. Access to the Global Job Market

Being a part of the modern world, participants of the study demonstrated awareness of the role of English as a lingua franca of the world and, thus, its vital place in the global job market. Participant 19, for instance, shared, *when it comes to*

business transactions internationally or globally. All the emails, letters, memos and report use the English language. Given the awareness of English as a language of global communication, participants 18 believed that *every business is going to be multinational nowadays. So, English is very important for professional career.* Apart from the awareness and importance of English as a global language, participants showed that EMI would help them transcend boundaries and become a part of global job market. In this regard, Participant 11 stated, *English is the language which is everywhere in the world, and used as a medium of exchange for people related to any nationality. With English, wherever you want to start your career, you can do easily.* This view reinforces students' common belief that English can give them access to any job market because of its use all around the world. This may also indicate that students unintentionally consider EMI as an essential factor for starting their professional careers.

3.5. Competitive Edge for Employability

Participants' views revealed that English-medium instruction is indispensable in the present times because English has become a top-most criterion for seeking jobs. Participant 15 reported, *English medium is very much useful for professional career nowadays. Because every employer wants to hire a person who is well-trained and proficient in English in his company.* This indicates that lack of proficiency in English may limit job doors on many students as they enter professional career. This idea aligns with Participant 14's comment, *working in Pakistan or abroad, the language which is mainly used is English. It is being like the first criteria for getting a good job. No matter what but we have to learn this.* Given so much importance to English by employers, students consider EMI as a chance to improve their skills as participant 14 further shared, *if we [the students] use English medium instruction now, we would enhance the language skills and, thus, it would be easier for us to cope up with such demands in future.* Additionally, students believe that EMI will not only help them in securing a good job but also do it effectively which Participant 5 pointed out in the comment, *in a job we can understand the instructions easily and won't do any serious mistakes due to lack of understanding.* These comments show that the participants of this study view EMI useful for their professional careers in the long-run.

3.6. Competence and Impression

Since English language is used in almost every organization nowadays, participants believed that their degrees from English-medium educational institutions give them edge in the job market. While mentioning the usefulness of EMI for professional career, Participant 13 mentioned, *English medium instruction is useful in every career but particularly if we talk about professional career it is more important because English creates impact on one's personality.* To participants, the English worked as an impression-building tool particularly during the interviews. In this regard, Participant 6 revealed, *because all job interviews are in English, learning in English- medium is helpful when answering in English. Our impression on the interviewer goes the best.* Thus, EMI is seen as a tool for showing competence and building an impression.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explain the attitudes of business undergraduates about towards EMI for their academic and professional career aspirations. A qualitative examination of the attitudes towards EMI revealed that undergraduates considered EMI useful for their academic and professional career aspirations. Regarding academic career pursuits, the participants believed that EMI could help them improve their language and analytical skills, build their confidence for classroom and other curricular activities, and enhance their chances for higher education abroad. The findings of the study align with the findings of studies in different contexts where undergraduates felt that EMI enhances English proficiency, provides access to global resources, and boosts opportunities to study overseas (Macaro & Akincioglu, 2018; Phuong & Nguyen, 2019). Moreover, the findings also find consonance with the most recent studies conducted in Pakistan (Haq et al., 2023; Siddiqui et al., 2024) which report that EMI is seen as a means for developing language and soft skills.

Apart from the usefulness of EMI in academic pursuits, the participants of the study viewed EMI as a way to enter global job market, attract employers, exhibit their competence and create an impression. These findings align with other studies which report that undergraduates at a Turkish technical university preferred EMI due to its employability, prestige, confidence, and ease of access to their future goals (Ekoç, 2018). Likewise, undergraduates in the higher education setting of Hong Kong favored EMI due to the role of English as the global language (Evans & Morrison, 2011). Moreover, Galloway and Ruegg (2020) also maintain that a growing number of students are choosing to study through EMI in order to enhance their language skills and increase their employment prospects. As such, EMI has evolved into a vehicle for linguistic entrepreneurship, whereby students “strategically exploit language-related resources” (De Costa et al., 2016) in order to increase their marketability internationally. These findings point out that undergraduates with English proficiency and strong communication possess linguistic capital; therefore, they become competitive in the job market and are preferred by employers (Morrison & Lui, 2000).

While majority of the findings of the present study contribute to the existing literature on EMI in higher education in Pakistan, it also presents some unique findings. Firstly, undergraduates’ positive attitude towards EMI indicate the influence of globalization on the youth as they seem to consider themselves global citizens. Thus, they view EMI as essential for their education and job as evident from the participants’ responses. Secondly, the growing tendency among undergraduates of the use of EMI for higher education and job might lead them to a distaste for local languages and culture. Thirdly, while other studies on attitudes of undergraduates towards EMI have shared findings mostly on academic benefits, this study brings forth the ‘competitive edge’ students associate with EMI. More importantly, this study introduces a new perspective: the use of EMI as an ‘impression-building tool’. Unlike prior studies that focus on EMI’s role in academic and career opportunities, the finding of this study suggests that undergraduates use EMI as a strategic tool for self-presentation and creating a favorable space for themselves in academic and professional settings.

5. Conclusion, Implications and Future Research

As EMI has remained a constant phenomenon in the HE in Pakistan, this study aimed to explain the attitudes of business undergraduates about the impact of EMI on their academic and professional career aspirations. Based on the findings of the qualitative data, the study establishes that participants have positive attitude towards EMI as they consider it useful for both academic and professional career aspirations. The participants thought that EMI may help them advance their academic careers by strengthening their language and analytical abilities, boosting their self-confidence for class and other extracurricular activities, and increasing their prospects of attending universities overseas. The study participants also viewed EMI as a means of entering the global job market, attracting employers, demonstrating their skills, and making an impact. These findings suggest that students' positive attitude to EMI is driven by the cultural and linguistic capital EMI offers to students. The findings also indicate that students devoid of this capital may consider themselves diffident and marginalized thus becoming victims of social inequalities EMI creates.

The findings of this study has implications for students, teachers, university administrations, and policymakers. Students who shy away from learning English must accept the status of English language in the modern-day world. Since EMI is the MOI in universities across Pakistan, deficiency in English may not only create challenges for students but also keeps them away from acquiring cultural and linguistic capital. Likewise, teachers should be aware of the social or academic inequalities EMI may create in classroom settings. Therefore, teachers must adopt inclusive practices to create a supportive environment for students with different levels of English proficiency. Similarly, university administration, while promoting EMI, must provide adequate language support to students struggling within the system to create equal opportunities for them to acquire cultural and linguistic capital. Moreover, policymakers must consider the advantages of EMI for students' career and professional growth while acknowledging chances of exclusion put forth by EMI. Therefore, sustainable EMI programs should be designed which require ongoing policy development and resource allocation.

Although the present study provides useful insights on students' attitudes to EMI in Pakistani context, its findings cannot be generalized because of its micro scope. Therefore, studies may be conducted in future with varied samples from different universities. Attitudes of students may be influenced by the socio-economic and physical environment factors. Moreover, future quantitative studies should aim for larger samples because recent quantitative studies in Pakistan have been conducted on the small district level samples. A nation-wide study will help researchers build an overall narrative on the attitudes of undergraduates towards EMI.

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