



## RESEARCH PAPER

### English as the Medium of Instruction: Exploring Comprehension and Writing Challenges Students Face at University Level

<sup>1</sup>Muhammad Faisal Qureshi, <sup>2</sup>Raheel Memon, <sup>3</sup>Zahoor Ali Junejo

1. Research Scholar, Department of English Language & Literature, The Shaikh Ayaz University, Shikarpur, Sindh, Pakistan
2. Research Scholar, Department of English Language & Literature, The Shaikh Ayaz University, Shikarpur, Sindh, Pakistan
3. Research Scholar, Department of English Language & Literature, The Shaikh Ayaz University, Shikarpur, Sindh, Pakistan

**\*Corresponding Author** | fshakoor87@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

The use of English as the Medium of Instruction is growing in academia, from school level to university level. As the trend is growing, a plethora of challenges are emerging, impacting both teachers and students. EMI in Pakistan is one of the most under-researched areas. This article explores the challenges students face in terms of comprehension of content and writing at a local university in Sindh. This research was conducted with 129 undergraduate students randomly selected using a quantitative survey through a closed-ended 9-question, 4 about comprehension and 5 about writing, on a 5-point Likert scale. The results were presented in the tables in numerical form. The findings reveal that students mainly struggle with understanding vocabulary and jargon. Moreover, they also struggle with grammatical accuracy, expressing ideas, finding the right words, and using punctuation while writing. On the basis of these findings' researchers presented some recommendations for future researchers and scholars.

**KEYWORDS** English, Medium of Instruction, Students, Higher Education Institutions, Challenges, Content Courses

## Introduction

The trend of English used as the medium of instruction is increasing globally at the university level (Ahmad et al., 2021; Lasagabaster, 2022). Dearden (2015) surveyed English-medium instruction in 54 countries worldwide and revealed a drastic expansion of English-medium courses and programs in higher education on a global scale. This shows the significance of the EMI in higher education. There are several factors for this growing trend, including attracting staff and international students (Jensen & Thøgersen, 2011; Lei Hu, 2014; Ahmad et al., 2025), uplifting competitiveness and internationalization of the institution (Hu, 2009; Joe & Lee, 2013), and securing better jobs for students (Bozdoğan & Karlıdağ, 2013; Lei Hu, 2014).

Dafouz and Gray (2022) explain EMI as the use of the English language to teach academic subjects other than English itself, where English is a second or foreign language to some of the students or teachers (Pecorari and Malmström 2018; Ahmad, Maitlo & Jeevan, 2023). EMI is expected to give two benefits to students: one is that they get to learn English, and the second is the acquisition of content knowledge at the same time (Rose et al., 2020, p. 2150). Whether students get all the benefits of EMI in higher institutions is debatable. For example, research conducted by Galloway et al. (2017) in the context of Japanese and Chinese higher education found that students learning through EMI

improved their English language and acquired content knowledge as well. On the other hand, another study conducted by Yang (2015) found that students in Taiwan showed improvement in their receptive and productive skills through EMI, but they did not show considerable improvement in their content knowledge.

In Pakistan, the previous studies in this area have focused on teacher's perception of EMI at the level of higher secondary schools of Sindh, Pakistan (Shakir et al., 2011; Mukhtar et al., 2021; Naz et al., 2024), while another research by Fareed et al., (2022) also focused on teachers only, but they chose private school teachers in Karachi to find out their challenges and to give potential solutions to overcome their challenges. Furthermore, another research conducted by Lin and Lei (2021) looked at the impacts of EMI on content learning at a university in China. They compared two groups of English-taught and Chinese-taught students in business courses to find out which students learn better, meaning whether the students taught in their native language learn well, or the students taught using English. Moreover, they also wanted to find out if students taught in English performed well in the class, because of their language skills, or was it their academic ability in general?

There is a growing need for more research to better understand the issues of students at higher institutions in Pakistan so that the solutions for the challenges can be given to policymakers and teachers. This research paper is going to delve into the challenges of students at higher institutions in Pakistan to uncover their struggles with comprehension of course content and writing in English.

Students in higher institutions in Pakistan face numerous challenges, as the trend of English as the medium of instruction is growing. These issues can adversely affect comprehension of course materials and writing in the English language. However, there is limited research that exists about comprehension of course materials and writing in English at the university level in Sindh, Pakistan. Therefore, this investigation is going to fill this gap.

## **Literature Review**

As previously mentioned, higher institutions are leaning towards the use of English as the medium of instruction for content learning, but the existing research surrounding this area is scant and not growing as rapidly as its trend (Bowles & Murphy, 2020). For example, Macaro et al. (2017) conducted a global systematic review of studies on EMI in higher education and found that out of 83 studies, there were only four that measured the impact of content learning. Additionally, Macaro et al. (2017) found that only one study on EMI had been conducted before the twenty-first century. This study reveals how relatively new this area is and why there is limited research on EMI.

## **Impact of EMI on Content Learning**

In the literature, there are mixed studies on the impact of EMI on content learning. Some of the studies have identified positive or no significant impacts (Dafouz et al., 2014; Guo et al., 2018; Hernández-Nanclares & Jiménez-Muñoz, 2017; Joe & Lee, 2013; Lin & Lei, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2024). On the other hand, some studies have also found negative effects of EMI on content learning (Acro-Tirado et al., 2018; Hellekjaer, 2010; Li, 2018). According to Macaro et al. (2017), the research designs and testing instruments employed in to research to assess the impact of EMI are questionable. Due to lack of research, it cannot be said looking at the existing body of literature whether EMI is detrimental to content learning or not (Aizawa et al., 2023; Macaro et al., 2017; Macaro & Rose, 2023). So, there is

an obvious need for more research to assess the effects of EMI on content learning that uses better research designs and better testing instruments.

### **Challenges Faced by Teachers**

In countries where English is not the first language, people would come across numerous issues using it, especially in the case of teaching and learning in higher institutions. The first problem teacher's face is the inability to deliver their content in English in the same way that they deliver in their native language, and the students face the challenge of not being able to comprehend the material properly. This is believed to be the main issue among all (Shimauchi, 2018; Maitlo et al., 2023; Ramzan et al., 2023). Resultantly, it can lead to poor outcomes for both teachers and students. There are also some other problems that teachers face. One of them is that it takes more time for them to prepare their lessons in a foreign language (Thøgersen and Airey, 2011). Another issue is the size of classes. A large class of students, who have different levels of language proficiency, can make it difficult for the teachers to interact with the students (Guarda & Helm, 2017). As a result, large classes with students having different levels of language proficiency can also be challenging for the learners, as they may not be able to communicate with one another in the class. It is worth mentioning that teachers using English to teach content subjects do not see themselves as language teachers (Block, 2020). So, for them, the main target is not teaching English; rather, the main goal is to teach their content effectively. To overcome the challenges of teachers, McKinley and Rose (2022) promote targeted language support and professional development programs for the instructors. However, the practice is rarely observed when it comes to enhancing the qualifications of teachers and providing pre-service training designed for EMI teachers (Sahan et al., 2021). This research, and others providing similar results, raise concerns for the implementation of policies of language-in-education.

### **Challenges Faced by Students**

Not only teachers, but students also face difficulties when English is used as the medium of instruction, since they are at the receiving end. No matter how good their English is, if instructors lack language skills and are not well-trained, students can never fully grasp the content. According to Keuk (n.d.), students find it difficult to comprehend course material, as they are unfamiliar with terminology. Furthermore, Evans and Morrison (2011) conducted a mixed-method study and interviewed 28 students over their 3 years of research and surveyed around 3000 students in Hong Kong, and found that students mainly struggle with lecture comprehension, vocabulary, meeting disciplinary standards, and achievement of an appropriate academic style. Moreover, Lee (2015) points to the level of difficulty of the English language used in the course material. This is also one of the obstacles students face. Furthermore, students also face the issue of not understanding exam questions, which can prevent them from answering the questions correctly, even after gaining enough knowledge in their mother tongues (Al-Bakri, 2013; Sivaramana et al., 2014; Cheema et al., 2023; Jalbani et al., 2023). Additionally, students with low proficiency also struggle with self-esteem, which can hinder them from taking part in class (Al-Bakri, 2013). Another recent study done by Maito et al. (2024) looked at writing issues of undergraduate students in Khairpur, Sindh, using a qualitative study and found that students struggle with grammar and using punctuation marks in the English language.

The above review shows that there is still a lot to uncover in this area of research. Most studies that have been discussed here are limited to specific locations and countries. However, there is a clear lack of studies in EMI in higher institutions in Pakistan, even

though there is a growing trend of using English as the medium of instruction in Pakistan. The previous studies in the context of Pakistan are scant. They have investigated the perception of teachers of higher secondary schools of Sindh (Mukhtar et al., 2021), or private school teachers in Karachi, Pakistan (Fareed et al., 2022). Another recent study by Suleman et al. (2024) explores the extent to which EMI addresses social equality and social justice issues in the public school system of Pakistan. This study by Suleman et al. (2024) is also focused on English language teachers. As far as studies conducted within the context of higher institutions are concerned, a recent study done by Ramzan et al. (2025) is focused on the challenges of teachers teaching in higher institutions in Punjab, Pakistan, using a qualitative study. As for the challenges faced by students in higher institutions, a qualitative case study conducted by Siddiqui (2021) in Sukkur focused on the problems of first-year undergraduates learning in an EMI classroom. This study was limited to one classroom, and six students of the university were selected, who belonged to different parts of the country. This study revealed issues related to vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and difficulty with the language used in the course materials. This study is going to fill the research gap by investigating the challenge of comprehending course contents in English and writing in English using a quantitative study, using a larger sample at the undergraduate level at a local university in Sindh, Pakistan.

### **Material and Methods**

A quantitative research design was employed to measure the challenges in comprehension and writing in English. According to Creswell and Creswell (2022), the quantitative research design is appropriate for measuring data in numerical form and to generalize findings across a large population.

### **Population and Sample**

For this research, the department of English Language and Literature was chosen at a local university. The total population of the department was 193. All of the students in the population belonged to Sindh. Furthermore, all the students were enrolled in the undergraduate programs.

### **Sampling technique**

The sample was chosen using simple random sampling to ensure objectivity. There were 193 students in the department, of whom 129 students were randomly chosen using Microsoft Excel for the research.

### **Research Instrument**

This research was conducted using a structured Likert scale questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale. There were 9 questions, four were related to comprehension, and 5 were related to writing. The question focused on problems regarding comprehension of jargon, inability to understand course materials without the help of the teacher, grammatical and punctuation errors in writing, inability to find the right words, and challenges in maintaining connectivity while writing in English.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The questionnaire was given by hand in the classroom to the students to collect the data during regular classroom sessions. Participants were given enough time to fill out the questionnaire in a comfortable environment without any pressure.

## Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel. The responses were tabulated, and %age for each question was calculated to identify trends and patterns related to challenges regarding comprehension and writing.

## Ethical Consideration

All the participants voluntarily agreed to contribute to the study. Students gave their consent and filled out the form. Their personal information has been kept anonymous to ensure confidentiality.

## Results and Discussion

To understand the challenges regarding comprehension of course materials in English, four Likert-scale questions were asked in the questionnaire. Moreover, 5 Likert-scale questions were asked to explore the challenges in writing. The responses of which are presented below in the form of bar charts. Each bar chart is followed by a brief interpretation of the results.

**Table 1**  
**Understanding Vocabulary as a Challenge**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
10.1%	36.4%	24.8%	27.1%	1.6%

The response shows that 36.4% of students agree that they find it difficult to understand the vocabulary used in the course materials. In addition, 10.1 % of students strongly agree with the difficulty in understanding course materials in English. In contrast, 27.1 % disagreed, and 1.6 % strongly disagreed with the statement. Furthermore, 24.8 % remained neutral.

**Table 2**  
**Difficulty in Understanding English Books**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
14.0%	23.3%	15.5%	38.8%	8.5%

In response to the above statement, 38.8% of students disagreed and 8.5% strongly disagreed that they are unable to understand course materials in English. Meanwhile, 23.3% agreed, and 14.0% strongly agreed with the statement. The remaining 15.5% chose the neutral option.

**Table 3**  
**Difficulty in Understanding English Terms (Jargons)**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
12.4%	44.2%	22.5%	18.6%	2.3%

The above figure shows that 44.2% agreed and 12.4% strongly agreed that they have difficulty understanding technical terms in English used in the course materials. Whereas, 18.6% disagreed, and 2.3% strongly disagreed. 22.5% of students were neutral.

**Table 4**  
**Need for Teachers Support**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
14.7%	44.2%	21.7%	18.6%	14.0%

In response to the above statement, the same percentage of students agreed and disagreed with the statement. However, 14.7% strongly agreed that they ask their teachers

for help. Whereas, only 14% strongly disagreed. The remaining 21.7% chose the neutral option.

**Table 5**  
**Idea Expression in English Writing**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
22.5%	36.4%	14.7%	20.9%	5.4%

When students were asked whether they struggled to express their ideas while writing in English, 36.4% agreed, and 22.5% strongly agreed. On the other hand, 20.9% disagreed, and 5.4% strongly disagreed with the statement. The remaining 14.7% preferred the neutral option.

**Table 6**  
**Vocabulary Selection in English Writing**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
7.8%	30.2%	28.7%	28.7%	4.7%

In response to the above statement, 30.2% of students agreed, and 7.8% strongly agreed. Whereas, 28.7% disagreed, and 4.7% strongly disagreed with the statement. The remaining 28.7% remained neutral.

**Table 7**  
**Idea Connectivity in English Writing**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
11.6%	20.9%	21.7%	39.5%	6.2%

This shows that 39.5% of students disagreed, and 6.2% strongly disagreed with the statement. On the other hand, 20.9% agreed, and 11.6% strongly agreed that their ideas are not well-connected while writing in English. 21.7% chose the neutral option.

**Table 8**  
**Grammatical Errors in English Writing**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
17.2%	29.7%	25.0%	21.9%	6.3%

In response to the above statement, 29.7% of students agreed, and 17.2% strongly agreed that they always make grammatical errors while writing. Whereas, 21.9% disagreed, and 6.3% strongly disagreed. The remaining 25% preferred the neutral option.

**Table 9**  
**Punctuation Awareness in English Writing**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
25.6%	35.7%	15.5%	20.2%	3.1%

When students were asked whether they struggled with using punctuation marks, 35.7% agreed, and 25.6% strongly agreed. On the other hand, 20.2% disagreed, and 3.1% strongly disagreed with the statement. The remaining 15.5% preferred the neutral option.

## Discussion

This part discusses and interprets the findings derived from the quantitative data. This research aimed to explore the challenges faced by students in understanding the course materials in English and writing in English. This section is also going to compare the findings with the previous studies and show how they are going to contribute to the existing body of literature.

The findings of the study reveal that students face several issues regarding comprehension of course materials and writing in the English language. As evident from table 1 that over 46% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they find it difficult to comprehend vocabulary used in English course materials. This finding confirms the qualitative study conducted by Siddiqui (2021) in Sukkur, that the students have difficulty understanding vocabulary. This shows a language barrier at a lexical level that can negatively impact the academic performance of students at a higher level.

This study also found that 37.3% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they are unable to understand course materials without any help, as shown in table 2. This result aligns with the study of Shimauchi (2018). Nonetheless, 47.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Indeed, this is a unique finding that goes against the earlier studies in the literature. A possible explanation for this is the drastic increase in the use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, DeepSeek, NotebookLM, and other similar tools, that students are now using to understand course materials.

In table 3, when students were asked whether they found technical vocabulary (jargon) difficult to understand, over 56% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. This finding confirms the study of Evans and Morrison (2011) that students struggle with technical vocabulary.

When it comes to seeking assistance from teachers in understanding the course materials in English, the table shows that 39% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they require some sort of assistance from their instructors. On the other hand, the same percentage of students (39%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea of seeking help from teachers. This finding seems to contradict the result in table 2, that 47.3% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they cannot understand the concepts in English without any help. However, a possible explanation for this can be that although many students feel confident in their ability to understand concepts without any help, as table 2 suggests, they still prefer the help of teachers to understand the materials in depth, or just to be sure that they are on the right track, or to show that they are participating in the classroom, or just because of their habit to ask teachers.

Comprehension is not the only area where students are facing challenges; many students are also struggling with writing in the English language. As shown in table 5 that over 50% of students struggle to express their ideas in English. Furthermore, 38% of students also reported not being able to find the right words while in English, as shown in table 6. Although over 50% believe that they struggle to express their ideas while writing, only 32% think that their ideas are not well-connected while writing in English, as shown in Figure 7. These results may seem to be contradictory. However, the statement in table 7 measures different aspects of writing. It only assesses coherence of thoughts, meaning how logically their thoughts are organized. So, while a student may struggle with grammar or vocabulary, he or she may be able to connect the ideas while writing. As for the grammatical errors and mistakes in punctuation, 47% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they always make grammatical mistakes while writing, as shown in table 8, and table 9 shows that over 60% agreed or strongly agreed to struggle with punctuation marks. These findings regarding grammatical errors and mistakes in punctuation marks align with the study of Maitlo et al. (2025).

## Conclusion

This research delves into the challenges faced by undergraduate students at a local university in Sindh in the comprehension of course materials and writing in English. It has

been uncovered that 56% of students struggle with understanding jargon, and 46% struggle with vocabulary in English. In addition to comprehension, students also find it challenging to write in English. 47% have reported making grammatical errors, 50% have said they are unable to express their ideas, and above all, 60% have reported making mistakes while using punctuation marks.

This research was only conducted in one department at a local university. Hence, the sample size was also small. As a result, it cannot be used to generalize to all the students of Pakistan. Still, the findings of this research are valuable because so far it is the only research conducted in interior Sindh at an undergraduate level using a quantitative research design that not only explores the challenges of comprehension but also assesses challenges in writing. It lays the ground for future researchers to look into other aspects of EMI in this context, such as how students are using AI or other tools to cope with such challenges at the university level, or does EMI hurts the learning outcomes or grades of students in this context. Furthermore, there is still room for more research in the field of EMI at a higher level that uses a much larger sample size. Such research can be quintessential as its findings can be generalized to a larger population.

### **Recommendations**

- Special programs should be conducted for teachers so that they can help students better understand the course content in English.
- Universities should introduce specialized writing programs for undergraduates to polish and sharpen their academic writing skills.
- Policy makers should revise course materials to simplify them for the ease of students.
- Specialized programs should be arranged for students entering universities to monitor and improve their English language proficiency levels so that students do not become learning barriers for one another in the classroom and for the teachers in EMI settings.



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