

## **Is English as a Medium of Instruction a Curse or Blessing for the Content Lecturers in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq? A case study**

Jihad Shwan Rahman

*Department of English language, College of Social Science/ University of Kurdistan- Hewlêr, Kurdistan Region- Iraq*

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**Abstract:** Since EMI is under-researched in the context of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the aim of this interpretive, exploratory study was to examine the challenges content lecturers confront in EMI classrooms at a major state university in the KRI. This study collected data using a large-scale survey using a questionnaire, and face-to-face, semi-structured individual interviews. The findings showed that lecturers encountering a number of challenges when teaching in English. One such challenge was students' relatively low level of English. This study recommends policymakers and university administrators to provide sufficient support to enhance lecturers' and students' English language proficiency, establish a consistent EMI policy, and review and reconsider the current approach so as to allow the university to have a productive, and coherent language policy.

**Key Word:** EMI; Challenges; Perceptions; Language Policy; Language Proficiency.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The medium of instruction (MI) has an important role in any educational situation to ease and facilitate learning of academic content. In regard to that, it is crucial for both teachers and learners to employ the language of instruction appropriately for the teaching and learning process to be enhanced. Kurdish policymakers adopted the Kurdish language to be the official MI in primary, secondary, and high schools in the KRI, but when it comes to HE, EMI is being widely implemented, especially for courses in science, geography, technology, accounting, engineering, mathematics, and other subjects with a 'global orientation'. While in most universities in the KRI, Salahaddin University included, the language of the coursebooks is English, the corresponding courses are still taught in Kurdish, or Arabic, due to the majority of lecturers lacking the ability to use English as the MI (Borg, 2016). Furthermore, students are required to learn English as it is the medium of teaching and examinations. In many cases, the students do not understand what they are being taught and make use of undesirable coping mechanisms such as rote learning, and perhaps even dishonest academic practices to pass subjects. This phenomenon has affected many students' future who could have been successful in their particular fields. Another concern is limitations in lecturers' own proficiency due to their limited knowledge of the English language. "[A]lmost 46 per cent of respondents, from all 13 state universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, said that EMI created challenges for them, many lecturers expressed concerns about their own proficiency in English", notes Borg (2016, p.2). Moreover, lecturers 'stay close' to the textbooks and simplify the content. Chapple (2015) states that EMI can make lecturers simplify content. This could be arguably due to lecturers' low level of English. Additionally, lecturers use their local languages to be able to pass knowledge to students or to be able to teach content in more depth. Galloway, Kriukow, and Numajiri (2017) state that EMI is viewed by lecturers more as an approach to content learning rather than language learning, thus, the mother tongue is seen as more useful in the classroom.

In fact, graduated students need to have a good command of English, what is academically called Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), which is the everyday language needed to interact socially. However, students at Salahaddin University are only exposed to Academic English, and thus build Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which is essential to negotiate textbooks and academic environments. Therefore, students have very few opportunities to use English language for their social purposes to develop their BICS and lecturers use only academic language in the classroom (Wilkinson, 2005).

Moreover, similar studies have been performed many times before, but not in the Kurdish Region. This is thus one of the first studies of its kind in the context of the KRI. Indeed, to the best of my knowledge, there is only one such review of the current situation in this region, a report commissioned by the British Council entitled English medium instruction in Iraqi Kurdistan: Perspectives from lecturers at state universities (Borg, 2016), previously referred to above, though no specific research has been conducted to study the policy of EMI at the case institution, especially from the perspective of lecturers. This brings us to the precise areas and issues which will be investigated in this thesis.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 EMI as a strange language policy**

EMI, the recent example of development in language policy, is indeed a manifestation of the target language approach only, where it is believed to teach solely in the target language and not to revert to the mother tongue is the best method, but this is highly controversial. Is this policy in the interest of quality education? Do EMI students learn the English language or the subject matter? Or do they learn both the language and the content together? The real question is, "Can quality education for all be achieved when it is packaged in a language that some learners neither speak nor understand?" (UNESCO Bangkok, 2007, p.1).

Policy-makers see EMI as a mechanism for students to improve their English language proficiency (Ali, 2013), yet Chapple (2015; cited in Borg, 2016, p.7) states that "the idea that merely taking a content class taught in English will lead to substantial linguistic gains is dubious." Saeed (2019), for example, in his doctoral dissertation, hypothesizes that the policy-makers in the education domain in the KRI give priority to the English language over the Kurdish language. This, Saeed (2019) believes, is a step towards accelerating the death of Kurdish language.

### **2.2 English and EMI in the KRI**

In the KRI EMI is becoming more and more trendy, and policy-makers are considering making English the MI of educational settings. However, Aziz (2015), in a survey among a group of students at Salahaddin University, tried to find the levels of commitment and loyalty of the students to Kurdish, Arabic, and English, and found that 90% of the learners agreed that the preferred and most important language to them is Kurdish.

To go into further detail, if one wants to discuss EMI policy and practice, as mentioned earlier, one commonly finds that there is a mismatch between the language of the teaching materials/learning resources and the MI in an HEI in Kurdistan. As it is known, policy-makers adopted Kurdish to be the MI in primary, secondary, and high schools in the KRI, but when it comes to HE, EMI is being widely implemented, especially for scientific courses and in most universities in the KRI, Salahaddin University included, the language of the coursebooks is English. Nevertheless, corresponding courses are still taught in Kurdish, or Arabic, due to the majority of lecturers lacking the ability to use English as the MI (Borg, 2016). Additionally, lecturers use their local languages to be able to pass knowledge to students or to be able to teach content in more depth. Galloway et al., (2017) state that EMI is viewed by lecturers more as an approach to content learning rather than language learning, thus, the mother tongue is seen as more useful in the classroom. Hence, one can see that there exists a gap in this context between EMI policy and practice.

### **2.3 Implementation of EMI without firmly grounded empirical evidence**

Numerous studies have reported the fact that the key actors in the process of teaching and learning through EMI have rarely been consulted on a national level by decision makers or on the institutional level by university administration (Akünal 1992; Dearden & Macaro, 2016; cited in Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Dearden, 2018).

In his doctoral study of EMI in HE in the UAE, Solloway (2016) writes that lack of adequate research on EMI policy is one of the consequences of political and socioeconomic factors being given greater focus than educational concerns. Nunan (2003; cited in Solloway, 2016) criticizes governments and policy-makers that frame language policies without effectively taking in to account the implications of the effect of such policies and practices on the lives of the teachers and students. Akünal (1992) in her research at an HEI in Turkey, remarks that policy-makers appear to have implemented EMI without conducting any formal, empirical studies.

Dafouz and Camacho (2016) state that EMI policy is beginning to take shape in all educational settings, however, there is very little local research available to help inform such a policy. The same observations could be found in the context of the KRI as no specific research has been conducted to study the policy of EMI, yet, it is being employed in many educational contexts. Indeed, as noted earlier, there is only one such review of the current situation in this region, a report commissioned by the British Council entitled English medium instruction in Iraqi Kurdistan: Perspectives from lecturers at state universities (Borg, 2016).

### **2.4 Lecturers' perspectives towards EMI in HE**

Recently, researchers in their studies have examined different aspects of EMI in higher education, such as policy evaluation (Gill, 2006; Jiang, 2010), and perceptions and performance of students (Byun et al., 2011; Fernández, 2017; Gerber, Engelbrecht, Harding, & Rogan, 2005; Kirkgöz, 2014; Li & Kember, 2001; Solloway, 2016). Indeed, there are also studies devoted to the understanding of lecturers' perceptions and experiences (Başibek et al., 2014; Borg, 2016; Byun et al., 2011; Crawford, 2005; Flowerdew & Miller, 1996; Kim, 2011). Lecturers communicate different views depending on their context. Generally, there seem to be more proponents of EMI than opponents (Başibek et al., 2014; Byun et al., 2011; Fernández, 2017).

Başibek et al. (2014), in a survey on 63 Turkish lecturers from a faculty of engineering, report that 'partial EMI' is employed at two Turkish state universities by those lecturers that are more positive towards the idea of employing EMI rather than Turkish as the MI. However, Başibek et al. (2014) write that lecturer participants accept the fact that students are not that proficient at learning content matters in English. Consequently, Başibek et al. (2014, p.1823) add that lecturers support the idea that "lecturing in Turkish provides a more in-depth and clearer understanding in terms of the content of the lesson. Also, they think that EMI would contribute to their English proficiency levels as well as their fields of study." Flowerdew, Miller, and Li (2000), in their study of a group of Hong Kong Cantonese L1 lecturers, interviewed 15 content lecturers and obtained results that they wanted to maintain EMI at the university.

Similarly, in his study on lecturers' views and practices of EMI, Yeh (2012) surveyed 348 lecturers and reports that EMI instructors tend to teach in EMI classrooms as it maintains English proficiency and allows them attend international conferences and speak in public. As one lecturer comments, "My English improved at the greatest rate in these two years because I had to keep talking [in English when giving lectures]. Now when I step up to a podium, I talk in English, automatically" (p, 219).

## **III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research design and instruments.**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the policy of EMI from the perspective of lecturers and challenges they encounter in the EMI classrooms, mainly 'non-native'-English-speaking lecturers. Data were collected in two phases, the first phase of data collection included quantitative methods through a large-scale survey using a questionnaire to assess the lecturers' perceptions and to explore the understanding of EMI from a wider group of lecturers at the case institution. Employing questionnaires possibly "enable the researcher to form meaningful generalisations as regards the perceptions, views, and experiences of respondents, and can be a highly efficient – and cost-effective – means of gathering valuable data" (Solloway, 2016, p.64).

The second phase included a qualitative method; semi-structured individual interviews so that lecturers' perceptions and interpretations could be explored in a more in-depth fashion. This way, the researcher was able to pursue themes and trends uncovered in the survey in the individual interviews. Furthermore, this method was helpful to incorporate more 'why' and 'how' questions.

The quantitative data (questionnaire) was analysed using SPSS 25 data analysis software (appendix 3) that collected lecturers' perspectives and views towards EMI and the practice of the policy at their institution and revealed significant concerns and challenges that lecturers face in EMI classrooms. Moreover, the qualitative data were synthesized, analysed, and conceptualized to allow critical issues and themes to emerge from the lecturers.

### **3.2 Participant of the study**

It should be borne in mind that this study is based on lecturers' perceptions in only one state university; Salahaddin University, owing to the fact that this particular university promotes EMI and yet has not put a clear and consistent policy in place as discussed earlier. In fact, choosing only one particular university might limit the generalisability of the results. More research in this area of study could be conducted in a more and/or other governmental or private universities to see if these results can indeed be generalised across the greater KRI (see limitations of the study in the final chapter). Indeed, 72 content lecturers participated in the questionnaire and 5 of those were interviewed.

Table1 the profile of the respondents

		Count	Percentage
Gender	Male	38	52.8%
	Female	34	47.2%
Age	Under 30	10	13.9%
	30-39	34	47.2%
	40-49	20	27.8%
	50-above	8	11.1%
Mother Tongue	Kurdish	65	90.3%
	Arabic	5	6.9%
	Turkmani	2	2.8%
College	Science	20	27.8%
	Engineering	15	20.8%
	Education	24	33.3%
	Agriculture	13	18.1%
Academic Title	Assistant Lecturer	41	56.9%
	Lecturer	20	27.8%
	Assistant Professor	11	15.3%
Level of spoken English?	Elementary	7	9.7%
	Intermediate	35	48.6%
	Higher Intermediate	26	36.1%
	Advanced	4	5.6%

### 3.3 Coding and analysis of the questionnaire and interview data

The data collected from the questionnaires were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software (version 25). After inputting the data and setting up the variables (Muijs, 2004) the nominal and ordinal measurements were set and numbers were assigned to values. For example, assigning numbers for the Likert scale values where the values range from strongly disagree to strongly agree were illustrated as: (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4= agree; 5= strongly agree.).

For the interview data the researcher employed “analytical constructs, or rules of inference, to move from the text to the answers to the research questions” (White & Marsh, 2006, p.27; original emphasis). In this study, the tape-transcribe-code-interpret (TTCI) chain is used as conducted by Solloway (2016).

## IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As discussed in the literature review, despite the approach of EMI is observed to develop the teaching and learning processes in many ways, i.e., lecturers' and students' English language proficiency, nevertheless, EMI is noticed to be creating challenges for both lecturers and students whose first languages is not English (Aizawa & Rose, 2018; Chapple, 2015; Hu et al., 2014; Tange, 2010; Tsuneyoshi, 2005). This study, too, highlights a number of challenges and concerns that lecturers face which might impede the successful adoption of EMI.

### 4.1 Students' low language proficiency

The low level of English reported by the informants in this study is also similar to the findings from the survey since 27.8% of the lecturers assume that their students are currently at beginner level, 31.9% elementary, and with only 13.9% at intermediate, and just 1.4% at higher intermediate. This means that almost 60% of the lecturers believe their students are currently at beginner and elementary levels. Furthermore, lecturers perceive that there is a lack of English proficiency among the students as 77.8% of the lecturers report that the major difficulty they encounter in teaching EMI courses is their students' low and inadequate English language proficiency. In addition, 69.4% of the respondents believe that their students find it difficult to understand lectures in English. Again, this could be because of their level of English (see Table 5.5). Similar findings observed by many researchers (e.g.,

Aizawa & Rose, 2018; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Borg, 2016; Chapple, 2015; Hu et al., 2014; Tange, 2010; Tsuneyoshi, 2005).

Table 2 Students' level of English as perceived by lecturers

Items	Parts	Count	Percent		
What level of English do the majority of your students typically have?	I don't Know	18	25.0%		
	Beginner	20	27.8%		
	Elementary	23	31.9%		
	Intermediate	10	13.9%		
	Higher Intermediate	1	1.4%		
Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The major difficulty I encounter in teaching EMI courses is students' low English proficiency.	1.4%	2.8%	18.1%	47.2%	30.6%
My students find it difficult to understand lectures in English.	0.0%	5.6%	25.0%	37.5%	31.9%

#### 4.2 Lecturers' low language proficiency

Lecturers, from the interview data, did not hide the fact that the lecturers own limited English proficiency also created challenges when dealing with EMI in their classrooms. Mustafa, one of the participants of the interview stated that "We have a lot of lecturers whose English level is very low, and besides we have many lecturers with good English." Muhammed, another participant, concerned that most of the people who teach the content, unfortunately, they are not well equipped with the language they teach, they might be very good in the content but their language proficiency has worsened the case.

Although, lecturers' low language proficiency was believed to be one major challenge, findings from the survey show that 84.7% of lecturers said they were confident to teach in English. However, when asked about students finding it difficult to understand the lecturers in English, 37.5 % agreed and 31.9% strongly agreed. The students not being able to understand the lectures in English might partly be because of the lecturers' limited language proficiency as Borg (2016, p.20) found that some lecturers could not pass the knowledge to the students properly due to their limited English, as one of his participants commented: "Because I am not a native English speaker, sometimes I find it difficult to express an idea in English so that the students can easily understand it".

#### 4.3 Use of English in assessment

A significant proportion of lecturers in the survey report that examination questions are designed in English and that students should respond in English. Delivering the subject in Kurdish then assessing the students in English puts the validity of assessment into serious question (see Borg, 2016, for similar concerns). Lecturers raised concerns about this issue and found it challenging to assess their students in English as students do not always fully understand the questions or cannot answer in English as required. Mustafa, when talking about assessment of students in English, stated that the MI for assessing the students is English and during examination students are more worried about the language of the questions rather than the questions themselves.

If the assessment confirms the general impression that students actually lack English, then it would be necessary for universities to rethink and reconsider existing policies on EMI (Borg, 2016).

### V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate a number of challenges affecting the implementation of the EMI policy. lecturers reported encountering a number of challenges when teaching in English. One such possible challenge which emerged from the data was, as indicated, students' low level of English. Despite the fact that this study revealed some significant data, it must be borne in mind that, as with all research, there nevertheless exist some limitations in the present study.

#### 5.1 Limitation and possible future studies

This study is based on lecturers' perceptions in only one state university which might limit the generalisability of the results. More research in this area of study could be conducted in a more and/or other governmental or private universities to see if these results can indeed be generalised across the greater KRI. Moreover, the number of interviews conducted (5) was relatively small, and again this might affect the generalisability of the findings. This interpretive study was, however, designed to explore and document lecturers'

perceptions of EMI at a single state university in the KRI rather than to necessarily generalise from the findings. Nevertheless, the study could arguably be enhanced by the inclusion of the perspectives of a greater number of informants.

Further research is also needed to examine in greater detail the issues which emerged from this study. This is by investigating whether government officials, policymakers, university leaders, and HE administrators predict or even recognise any issues, challenges, shortcoming of the EMI policy. Exploring the attitudes towards and experience of EMI of those decision-makers warrants further research.

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