

PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS ON THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION: A CASE STUDY OF TWO PUBLIC SECTOR UNIVERSITIES IN SINDH

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand the perception, practices and challenges of the medium of instruction (MOI) in higher education in two of the public sector universities in Sindh, Pakistan. A qualitative approach was used and it entailed semi-structured interviews conducted from 30 students and 15 teachers identified through a purposive sample in two public sector universities in Jamshoro, Pakistan. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data and find patterns and key themes. The paper finds that inflexible English-only policy does not suit the linguistic realities of students and proposes a flexible multilingual orientation where multilingualism is a concept where local languages are used as cognitive and affective scaffold. The implications point to the necessity of the inclusive language policies, and pedagogical approach that would facilitate learning in multilingual higher education settings.

Keywords: Medium of Instruction, Perceptions, Qualitative, Learners, Teachers, Sindh, Multilingualism

1. Introduction

Language is a symbolic and instrumental component, which is instrumental in the establishment of an educational access and achievement (Hoffmann, 2014). The selection of medium of instruction (MOI) is an area that is closely linked to legacies, identity politics and socio-economic stratification in multilingual countries like Pakistan, where more than 70 languages are spoken. Since its independence, Pakistan has been unable to apply a uniform MOI policy that does not overemphasize or undermine the roles of English, Urdu, and regional languages (Rahman, 2002). The use of English, which was an imposition by colonial rule, is still predominant in higher education and in the administrative sectors though the national language, Urdu, was meant to replace it. At the same time, the regional languages (i.e., Sindhi) are not taught in schools, even though they are acknowledged in the Constitution as official languages at provincial level (Coleman, 2010). Moreover, contemporary trends of English-Medium Instruction (EMI), which are commonly stimulated by globalization and the desire to achieve academic excellence, have added to this exclusion (Dearden, 2014). This paper explores how these language dynamics are negotiated in practice between the students and teachers in two public sector universities in Sindh. It examines the attitudes and experiences of learners and teachers regarding MOI, particularly, how English, Urdu, and Sindhi are used in the academic domain.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis of the study is based on Instructional Communication Model, which is a very strong interdisciplinary tool in the analysis of the influence of communication practices in learning institutions on teaching and learning outcomes. Instructional communication theory was developed on a cross between communication studies, education and psychology and this theory focuses on the fact that teaching is not merely about content delivery, but also on the way content is communicated, interpreted and received by students (McCroskey & McCroskey, 2002). When the medium of instruction (MOI) is not a first language of learners and teachers,

as in the case of multilingual societies, including Pakistan, communication takes even greater centrality in the success of instruction. According Alhamami (2023) Language is the primary tool of communication, and in a learning environment, higher proficiency in the medium of instruction (MI) enables instructors and students to communicate and interact successfully. The model is organized in three related levels, namely macro, meso, and micro, which are directly related to the educational decision-making and interaction levels that affect the perception and effectiveness of MOI. Figure 1 illustrates the relevance of McCroskey's Instructional communication model in this study.

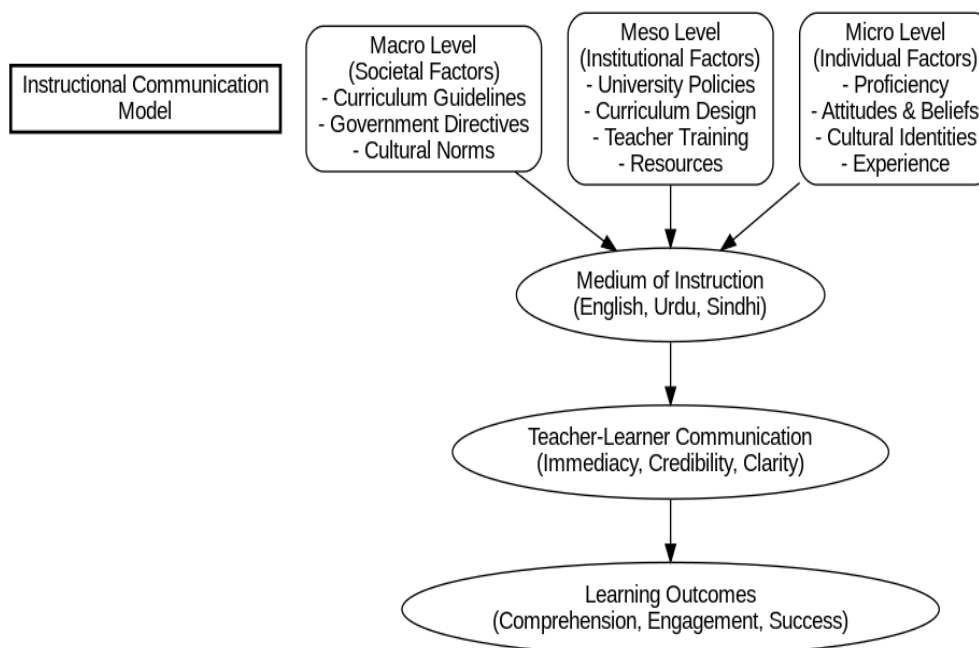


Figure: 1 Framework for the study based on McCroskey's Instructional communication model

The study aims to achieve following research objectives.

1. To understand the perceptions of learners and teachers regarding effectiveness of English Urdu, and Sindhi, as medium of instructions in higher education in two public sector universities in Sindh, Pakistan.
2. To investigate the challenges with the current Medium of Instruction in two public sector universities in Sindh, Pakistan.

3. Literature Review

The medium of instruction (MOI) is a crucial aspect that determines the academic life of any learner and educator, particularly in a multi-linguistic community like Pakistan where the number of languages is more than 70 (Fareed et al., 2019). Decisions of the MOI in these situations are not just pedagogical, but historically influenced, political and socio-economic as well. There is a big dilemma in choosing to use English, which is a global language and a social mobility tool and using local languages, which could create a sense of belonging, understand more and student involvement.

Fareed et al. (2019) studied this dilemma and examined the preferences and issues of students and teachers at various academic levels. They conducted a study in which 139 students and 36 teachers of a school, college, and university participated and identified that although the stakeholders acknowledged the significance of English, they still preferred Urdu to be the medium of instruction in the classroom. Instructors pointed out that the weak knowledge of

English by the students was a source of obstacles to learning, which led to superficial learning and disengagement. They supported a gradual transition model whereby in the initial stages basic concepts are taught in the mother and English is slowly introduced as a subject and also as a medium of learning. This is in line with the Common Underlying Proficiency theory by Cummins (2000) which states that learning of cognitive and literacy skills in first language may be transferred to other languages.

Ozer (2020) in a mixed-methods research investigated English Medium Instruction (EMI) practice. Coding switching between English and Turkish was common among lecturers to fill the gaps of understanding and most of them pointed out that specific in-service training on EMI techniques was necessary. The importance of the collaboration between the subject specialists and English language teachers was also emphasized by the study in the context of the foundational year programs which can be relevant to Pakistani universities that introduce EMI without sufficient support.

Similarly, Lakhan (2022) that analyzed Sindhi-speaking students in the public university in Sindh. It was found out during the research that quite a number of students did not have the English proficiency needed to understand complex concepts in science and mathematics. They had problems with reading and writing and communicating fluently in English which was a barrier to the classroom interaction and self-learning. The study proposed that students should be taught using their mother tongue to create a deeper level of understanding and suggested that English should be taught as a language and not be used as the only language to teach.

Khushnuma et al. (2020) also managed to prove the usefulness of mother tongue instruction by the example of a quasi-experimental study of 50 elementary students of Pashto in Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The results revealed that the students who were taught science in their first language performed better than the students who were taught in a foreign language. The study concluded that teaching with mother tongue allowed better communication, interaction with peers, and learning experiences making linguistic expertise a priority in science education. Shamim and Rashid (2019) considered the matter through the lens of socio-cultural analysis, which was applied to the English/Urdu divide in Pakistan's education system. In their qualitative study, they analyzed the way students in one of the public universities built their identities as part of their language learning background. The results indicated that the less privileged student population did not have the same access to English language schooling and this limited them in their future academic and career potential. This strengthened the pre-existing disparities and the lack of debate against the systemic prejudices in language policy.

Lastly, Tamim (2020) discussed the overlaps of language, class, and inclusion in the Pakistani educational institutions. Using a qualitative research design based on three years of research with 36 participants, the paper has identified how the English-medium policies reproduce the class-based exclusion even in the schools that preach inclusion. Tamim (2020) noted that education spaces tended to develop English as the sole legitimate language of knowledge, which excludes those who speak local languages and the hierarchical structure of language. Instead of making multilingual inclusivity, the practice widened the social gaps and restricted the transformative capacity of mother-tongue education.

The combination of these studies exposes a more subtle image of MOI in Pakistan and other such scenarios. As much as English is symbolically empowering and is of value in global contexts, there are instances where its use as a language of teaching and learning does not reflect the linguistic realities of students hence hindering learning. The literature proves the necessity to reconsider the available MOI frameworks in the public sector universities in the province of Sindh, Pakistan, so that they could not only satisfy the world demand but also consider the local educational and linguistic requirements.

4. Research Methodology

This study follows an exploratory, descriptive qualitative design with the aim of understanding how English, Urdu and Sindhi are perceived as a medium of instruction in two universities in Sindh, Pakistan in the public sector. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate when it comes to exploring the life experience of participants, their perceptions, and the context-related specifics that influence instructional practices (Creswell, 2014). Using semi-structured interviews administered to faculty and students, the study produces rich, detailed descriptions of instructional dynamics, challenges and affordances unique to each language medium. The two sites of the research are two public sector universities in the province of Sindh, the University of Sindh, Jamshoro and the Mehran University of Engineering and Technology (MUET), both located in Jamshoro. These two institutions have comparable degree programs in social sciences, and professional disciplines, comparable demographics in student populations, which are mostly Urdu-and Sindhi-speaking undergraduates, but they also have some differences in their language-policy histories and resource bases. By interviewing in the two universities, the researcher is able to draw cross-case comparisons and increase transferability of results.

The participants were undergraduate students and teachers from English departments of both universities. The sampling technique is purposive so as to make sure that the participants have direct experience of the medium of instruction being studied (Patton, 2015; Gopang et al, 2015). To ensure an instructional context with diversity, thirty students (fifteen each at the universities) and fifteen teachers (eight at University of Sindh and seven at Mehran University) are selected. Student respondents have the diversity of disciplines and years of study, thus incorporating both English-medium and Urdu/Sindh medium experiences. The participants that will be involved in the study are the teacher participants, which include the lecturers and assistant professors who use English, Urdu or Sindhi as a regular part of their lectures. Such a sample size corresponds to qualitative recommendations that twenty to thirty interviews are enough to achieve thematic saturation in the moderate-scope studies (Guest et al., 2006).

The main data collection tool is semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews are guided by two different interview guides (one focusing on the students and the other on teachers) around five major domains: language background and preferences; experiences in English, Urdu and Sindhi classrooms; perceived benefits and drawbacks of each medium; institutional and contextual challenges; and recommendations on how things can be improved at policy or practice levels. The researcher asked open questions and use probing prompts to drive examples, experiences, as well as detailed descriptions (Creswell., 2014). During the recruitment process, coordinators of the faculty at each university will send the invitations of the study by email and phone calls, people who want to participate in the research will be contacted to arrange the interview. Before every session, the participants will be given an information sheet and will sign a consent form explaining the procedures of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their freedom to withdraw at any given time. The interviews are conducted in a face-to-face manner in an office or as an option, through a phone call.

5. Findings

5.1 Code switching between English, Urdu and Sindhi in ESL classrooms

In the multilingual classrooms of the public universities of Sindh, instructors and learners do not refer to code-switching as a side effect of mixed-language settings, but as a carefully constructed scaffold that contributes to clarity of concepts and learner confidence. Instead of merely switching between the languages at will, teachers describe a more conscious three-stage process: introducing new concepts in English so as to keep it in line with the academic level of the curriculum; rephrasing the concepts in Urdu so that they can be easily understood; and drawing on the specifics of examples in Sindhi, which are always culturally relevant.

According to one of the lecturers, The sequence of my code-switching is in three steps. First I present a concept in English then I present it in Urdu and then I provide a real-life example in Sindhi. This sequence enables students to relate theory with their daily lives. Such systematic course of action has two complementary purposes. Cognitively, it gives abstract terminologies a point of reference in the already established linguistic system of the students hence minimizing the inherent challenge of processing discipline specific terms. Emotionally, it will produce a feeling of psychological safety: indicating that the three languages are all appreciated, the instructors will reduce the risk of participating and limit the performance anxiety.

The effectiveness of this scaffolded technique is supported by the reflections of students. The strategic language changes are commented upon by many: it demystifies the unknown: Explanations are easier to understand and identify with when the lecturers use Urdu or Sindhi. The other learner also comments on pedagogical inclusivity as enabled by this practice: Some cross over to Urdu or Sindhi when it is necessary. I believe it would be a good approach to ensure that everyone is on the same page. This scaffolded code-switching is relevant to major principles of good bilingual pedagogy. Front-loading the teaching of the target academic language (English) and then capitalizing on the better L1/L2 resources available to the students (Urdu/Sindhi), teachers can provide a gradual release of responsibility that is characteristic of best-practices in terms of second-language learning.

Moreover, this multilingual strategy is deliberate, and it also leads to a more democratic classroom atmosphere. By openly recognizing the home language of students, teachers challenge the hierarchy which tends to give preference to English over the local identities. This is as one student notes, It is used to break the ice. When the teacher speaks our language, we feel that he/she knows us- not only the syllabus. Altogether, the evidence highlights how code-switching in such settings can serve as an extremely precise pedagogical instrument, one that is intended to scaffold meaning, build engagement, and respect the linguistic repertoires learners bring to the academic environment. The systematic use of English, Urdu, and Sindhi allows the instructors to maintain high curricular standards, as well as establish a comprehensive learning ecosystem where students feel supported in terms of their cognitive abilities and affectively safe.

5.2 Strategic Role of English as the Main Medium of Instruction

English has assumed a central role in the context of Sindh higher education not merely as one language among many, but as the major channel of scholarly knowledge, discourse and professional prospect. Students and instructors describe English proficiency as the means to reach global research, discipline-specific conventions, and increase employability. Students always point out the fact that English is a passport to global research. One of the students says, English opens the door to international scholarship and enhances academic writing skills. The same feeling is reflected in the words of another learner: It will also equip us to study abroad, research and work. Besides, we use English language in our books, hence the content is compatible to it . These reactions are an indicator that English is no longer a medium of instruction but a strategic academic tool, which is making curricular materials in line with the language of science and scholarship in the global arena.

Other than in writing and reading, students emphasize that English helps them to grow assertive and active. According to one of the participants, the sense of competence is developed through English-medium presentation: It helps to read the international articles and speak. We are also more confident speaking English in presentations as well. English, in this case, is both an identity marker and a set of skills, being fluent in English grants the person belonging to larger academic communities, and not being fluent can be a way of enforcing a sense of marginality. Teachers also share the same viewpoints that English is the key to academic excellence. One

of the lecturers says, English opens students to international scholarship and makes them better at citing sources. Such stratified vision illuminates the affordances of English: it insists on technical accuracy and introduces students to disciplinary argument, local languages being supportive in the areas of clarification and rapport. In this regard, English is purposely favored in core lectures, readings, and assessments, which is consistent with international academic standards.

Nevertheless, the data reveals that English only instruction when it is not supported by a targeted intervention can serve to marginalize students who are not linguistically prepared. English has an instrumental value that is in conflict with its exclusionary power, which highlights the necessity of balanced pedagogies. English is kept at the core of the higher education agenda and complementary linguistic practices have been introduced to affirm that no student is left behind in academic engagement.

5.3 Affective Barriers to the Medium of Instruction

According to narratives by students and teachers, there are three overlapping affective filters concerning medium of instruction: fear of negative evaluation, the absence of linguistic confidence, and concerns about performing in public. Such filters are not vocal but very influential and in many cases they tend to block the inner understanding and limit classroom communication. A mismatch between cognitive knowledge and the ability to express it in English is described by many students. One learner notes, I have a feeling that I know the concept, however, I am not able to express it well in English. This is a problem in exams. This pressure is increased by the high stakes of testing: the fear of not doing well not only on knowledge but on the form of the language, leads some students to take a defensive position and avoid demonstrating their language output. One of the students said, I am afraid to make a mistake when I am asking questions in English and hesitate to do it, as well. This reluctance indicates that the atmosphere in the classroom may not always be psychologically secure enough to allow the so-called mistakes that are the key to language acquisition.

Teachers also confirm these findings by reporting that even academically smart students tend to react in silence when they are lectured in pure English. One of the instructors notes, English provokes knowledge gaps in students with a non-urban background and, as a result, leads to silence in the classroom. This quietness, nevertheless, does not turn out to be the apathy but rather the demonstration of worry and lack of confidence. One of the teacher participants emphasises this fact: confidence is a big issue. They are afraid of speaking English even when they know it because they are afraid of being embarrassed. During these times, the emotional burden of speaking a second language is overpowering the intellectual need to contribute. To add more to the problems, the low academic vocabulary of most learners increases their self-consciousness.

Participant responses indicated that students are afraid not only of structural mistakes but of the other type of errors as well, i.e., they are afraid of using exact terms. The language then becomes an indicator of academic prowess: the slightest misuse of grammar or choice of words is perceived as a personal shortcoming instead of a piece of writing in the process of development. When considered along with other accounts, it can be seen that emotional preparation is as important as linguistic competency. When the affective barriers prevail, they not only block oral participation but also the more fundamental processes of questioning, debating and building of knowledge.

5.4 Challenges in successful execution of medium of instruction policies

In the public universities of Sindh, there is often a disjuncture between official language in education policies and classroom practice, which creates confusion among instructors and learners alike. Even where English is officially the only language, at undergraduate level in particular, faculty report that the reality is that programs are run under de facto multilingualism,

with teachers uncertain about when and how to use which language. According to one of the lecturers, the policy is that undergraduate courses must be in English, but in practice undergraduates have greater flexibility. This inconsistent policy creates confusion on the part of faculty. This ambiguity makes curriculum planning and assessment difficult because teachers cannot determine between institutional guidelines and different linguistic background of students.

This environment has resulted in pedagogical decision making being made on a case by case basis rather than as part of a coherent, campus wide framework. Added to these policy pressures are grim resource constraints. Even libraries with large holdings in English and Urdu do not usually have parallel materials in Sindhi, which negates any attempts at bilingual or trilingual scaffolding of the instruction. One teacher said, there are a lot of English books in library but very few Sindhi scholarly books. In the absence of Sindhi-language materials the educators need to spend extra time to produce customized materials, and students are deprived of the chance to learn using the mother tongue.

The voices of students resonate in these gaps in institutions, especially as far as early-stage language support is concerned. Majority of universities offer general English course in the first year, but learners complain that they do not meet their discipline specific requirements. One of the students says, We have a general English course in the first year, but it is not sufficient. We need to have writing labs or English-for-specific-purposes courses. I am still weak in writing research papers. We never learned to write academic English as it should be done, only grammar. Such contemplations highlight a devastating disjuncture: introductory language coursework focuses on elementary grammar, but students need specific training in academic vocabulary, genre knowledge and discipline-specific discourse to achieve the demands of their respective disciplines.

Uniformly, the faculty urges an increase in support infrastructure to fill these gaps. According to one of the lecturers (teaching English in engineering department), In the first year, there is a general English course, but it is not sufficient. It ought to be more customized. Technical students cannot benefit much by taking a one size fits all course. In a similar manner, a professor of criticizes the theoreticalism of the policy position: It is a good idea in theory. We desire that our students compete in the international arena and English assists in this process. But the truth is, when there is no scaffolding, it turns into a gatekeeping tool. It restricts it, not facilitates. Collectively, participants' responses regarding challenges of MOI implementation demonstrate that contemporary policy, as well as the material resources it reflects, does not take into consideration the affective, cognitive, and disciplinary requirements of multilingual teaching.

6. Discussion

The findings of the study show that the teachers follow a strategic three-step system of code switching known as introducing a concept in English, explaining it in Urdu and anchoring it with the Sindhi examples, which the students find not only cognitively but also emotionally satisfying. This is in-line with the findings of Ozer (2020) in Turkish EMI contexts in which lecturers switched between English and Turkish to fill in the gaps of understanding and to maintain interest. Similarly, Lakhan (2022) reported that Sindhi-speaking undergraduates used the intermittent L1 mediation to comprehend a complex scientific vocabulary. Present study complements these findings by showing that not only does code-switching facilitate a faster comprehension, but that the deliberate effect of code-switching is to be used as an affective scaffold to diminish anxiety and create inclusion in the classroom.

In line with Fareed et al. (2019), the participants in this study share the same understanding on the notion of English being the key to accessing international education, writing skill, and improved career opportunities. English-mediated teaching was reported by students as a

liberating experience, allowing them to access international literature and learn how to present themselves, and this is similar to what Shamim and Rashid (2019) referred to as English as a symbol of prestige and social ascent. But these study findings complicate this valorization by highlighting the fact that the advantages of English are conditional on proper pedagogical support: in case English is used without corresponding scaffolding, it only widens the existing gaps in understanding, instead of filling them.

Furthermore, the participants of this study repeatedly mentioned that fear of making a mistake, lack of confidence and anxiety are the potent filters that inhibit participation in English-only instructions. This is similar to the findings of Lakhan (2022) and Fareed et al. (2019) which indicate disengagement in the situation where the students are not skilled enough in L2. The findings also provide an example of learners struggle through these affective barriers: silence during lessons, the unwillingness to ask questions, and uncertainty during examinations. Following the Common Underlying Proficiency (Cummins, 2000) theory that assumes that cognitive skills are transferable across languages, we contend that the emotional preparedness is similarly an essential precondition to such transference; unless supported emotionally, the L1 skills will not be in a position to scaffold English-mediated learning.

The findings of the study suggest, the two functions of Urdu/Sindhi as cognitive clarifier and trust builder become the core of equitable pedagogy. The rich vocabulary of Urdu/Sindhi is a good way to decode abstract theories, and make the students reduce their affective filters because of their cultural familiarity. Study by Khushnuma et al. (2020) with Pashto learners also proved that the use of mother tongue instructions played a vital role in improving interaction with peers and conceptual retention in science lessons. This adds to body of evidence in the context of higher education, which should ensure that localized languages are not treated as a fallback but part of maintaining both understanding and community within academically rigorous settings.

Additionally, one recurrent pattern is the disjuncture between official MOI policies that tend to require English in all curricula and the multilingual realities in the classroom as practiced by instructors. Institutional ambiguity was reported by faculty, with English compulsory postgraduates and flexible undergraduates creating confusion and unequal enforcement. These remarks correspond to Tamim (2020) criticism on policy that institutionalizes English as the only acceptable academic language, thus confirming exclusion based on the classes. Adding to the policy disjuncture is the shortage of Sindhi-language academic materials, with no locally based glossaries or translated sources, teachers are forced to devote personal time to production of materials, and students are deprived of important L1 anchors. The lack of resources reflects the study of Lakhan (2022) on the inadequate provision of the mother tongue materials in the libraries of the public universities.

7. Conclusion

This paper explored the perceptions, practices, and issues pertaining to the medium of instruction (MOI) in higher education within the context of two Pakistani higher education institutions (universities) in the Sindh province, and identified by conducting an in-depth thematic analysis of the interviews conducted with teachers and students. The results indicate that the academic setting is linguistically very challenging with English, Urdu and Sindhi, meeting in a supportive as well as conflicting manner. Although English is generally considered as the language of academics and upward mobility, it is a source of serious barrier to students who are non-urban, non-elite, and Sindhi speaking when used as the MOI. These obstacles are also found beyond the linguistic barrier and affective barriers, like anxiety, fear, and lack of confidence, and the overall effect of these barriers is a restriction of active involvement and learning. It is therefore recommended for future researchers to explore the

effects of multilingual models of MOI by conducting action research, especially in multilingual contexts.

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