

English-Medium Master's Degree Programs at a Saudi University: Attitudes, Experiences, and Obstacles

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Abstract—English-medium instruction has become a prevalent strategy for increasing the internationalization opportunities of Saudi universities and the international employability of their graduates. The findings of an interview (12 professors and 30 students) and an observation of three established Science, Social Science, and Engineering master's degree programs at a major Saudi university in Riyadh are presented in this article. In order to facilitate the implementation of English-taught master's degree programs, the purpose of this study was to identify the perspectives, experiences, and obstacles of higher education stakeholders regarding English-medium instruction. Findings showed that English-medium instruction is generally preferred by both professors and students. Although the need for support measures was not as high as expected, certain challenges remain, which can be addressed through focused initiatives. Notable issues include stakeholder unhappiness, a high workload for students, varying degrees of prior knowledge among students. The research highlights how crucial it is to include English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction in the curriculum and recommends adding more tools and resources to support teacher development. These measures could involve voluntary participation and incentive programs.

Index Terms—EMI, ESP, Higher Education and University Support

I. INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia recognizes the importance of education for the continued expansion and growth of the economy (see Alghamdi, 2018). The nation has made significant investments in education and is dedicated to providing its citizens with the best opportunities for learning and professional development that are currently available. Instruction for master's degrees that are given in English is one way that universities in Saudi Arabia can improve the services they provide. The reasons for teaching courses leading to Master's degrees in English at Saudi universities will be discussed below.

First and foremost, offering master's degree programs in English will increase Saudi universities' global competitiveness. Because English is the language most commonly used in international trade and communication, many students from other countries would rather have their classes taught in English. The ability of Saudi universities to offer Master's degrees in English will enable them to attract a greater number of international students, which will, in turn, enhance the country's universities' global competitiveness and reputation. Second, the awarding of Master of Arts degrees in English education will help Saudi Arabia in its efforts to diversify its economy. The country needs to cultivate new industries and market niches if it wants to reduce its reliance on revenue from oil and gasoline exports (Al-Haidari, 2018). One strategy for achieving this objective is to successfully compete for investment and talent from other countries. Because they will be able to better attract international talent, Saudi universities will be able to stimulate the economy and foster growth as a result of their decision to offer Master's degrees in English.

Last but not least, master's programs in English instruction will contribute to the improvement of the educational system in Saudi Arabia. Because of their commitment to providing instruction in English, Saudi universities will have access to a vast store of international knowledge and expertise, which they will be able to incorporate into their course offerings. This will contribute to the overall improvement of the education system in the country and ensure that Saudi graduates are competitive on the job market in other countries. It is essential for Saudi universities to offer master's degree programs taught in English if they wish to increase their competitiveness, attract international talent, and improve the quality of education offered throughout the country. If Saudi Arabia takes this step, it will be in a better position to diversify its economy, reduce its reliance on oil and gas exports, and drive growth and development (Alghamdi, 2019; Alshumaimeri, 2017; Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the fields of academia, science, and technology, English is the language of choice because it is one of the languages that are spoken by many people around the world. A large number of universities around the world offer

master's degree programs that are instructed in the English language in order to maintain their position as competitive players in the global market for higher education and to attract students from other countries. Students have the opportunity to learn in a diverse environment and improve their command of the English language through participation in these programs. However, there are potential challenges that come along with English-medium programs. These challenges include language barriers, cultural differences, and academic expectations. In this review of the relevant literature, we will conduct an investigation into the perspectives held by students and faculty members at a university regarding English-medium master's degree programs, with a particular emphasis on the difficulties and opportunities presented by these programs.

Students enrolled in English-medium master's programs have the opportunity to study in an environment that is rich in cultural diversity, which is a significant benefit of these programs. Additionally, students have the chance to improve their English language skills. However, a significant number of international students experience difficulty communicating due to language barriers, cultural differences, and academic expectations. According to the findings of a study that was carried out by Dearden et al. (2008), the academic writing and speaking skills of international students who are enrolled in English-medium master's degree programs in the United Kingdom frequently present challenges for the students. In a similar vein, Li and Kaye (2013) found that language and cultural barriers were commonplace for international students attending English-medium master's degree programs in Australia.

However, not all international students who are enrolled in English-speaking master's degree programs are confronted with the same challenges. According to the findings of a study that was carried out by Liu and Jin (2016), some international students who were enrolled in English-medium master's programs in China reported that they had experienced a significant improvement in their English language skills as a result of participating in the program. In a similar vein, Sercu and Bandura (2017) found that some international students enrolled in English-medium master's programs in Belgium felt the program provided them with opportunities to learn about different cultures and develop intercultural competence. These students felt that the program was beneficial to their academic growth.

Master's degree programs that are offered in English present challenges for professors as well, as they may need to adapt their pedagogical practices and the expectations they have of their students in order to accommodate international students. Hellekjaer et al. (2014) discovered that professors in Norway teaching English-medium master's degree programs frequently had the impression that students from other countries had different academic expectations and needed extra help with academic writing and speaking skills. Similar to what was discovered by Matsuda and Gobel (2004), it was found that lecturers in English-medium master's programs in the United States frequently struggle with language and cultural barriers when communicating with international students.

Despite this, a number of instructors teaching in English-language master's degree programs have a positive outlook on these programs and believe they offer opportunities for both personal and professional growth. Sawir et al. (2008) found that lecturers in English-medium master's programs in Australia believed that these programs provided opportunities for students to improve their English language skills, learn about different cultures, and prepare for careers on the global job market Tatzl (2011). In a similar vein, Tang and Zhang (2015) discovered that lecturers in English-medium master's programs in China believed that these programs provided students with opportunities to develop critical thinking skills and engage in cross-cultural dialogue. This supports the findings of the previous paragraph.

Students enrolled in master's degree programs that are taught in English have the opportunity to learn in an environment that is rich in cultural diversity and to improve their English language skills. However, these programs also present additional challenges in the form of barriers relating to language, cultural differences, and academic expectations. It is possible that students from other countries will have difficulty with academic writing and speaking, and as a result, professors may need to adjust their teaching methods and the expectations they set for their students. In spite of these challenges, a sizeable percentage of international students and lecturers enrolled in master's programs taught in English have favorable attitudes towards these programs and believe they provide opportunities for both personal and professional growth. As universities continue to offer these programs in an effort to attract students from other countries, it will be essential for them to provide support and resources to address the challenges that are associated with English-medium programs. This support and resources should include things like language classes, academic writing workshops, and cross-cultural training for both students and faculty.

As was mentioned earlier, master's degree programs taught in English are gaining popularity at educational institutions located all over the world. This pattern is a consequence of globalization, the progression of technology, and the rising demand for professionals who are fluent in multiple languages and cultures. The use of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) has resulted in both challenges and opportunities for students and teachers in terms of language proficiency, communication, and pedagogical approaches to education. In this section, we investigate the perspectives of both students and teachers enrolled in Master's degree programs taught in English. The benefits of pursuing a master's degree in the English language Students, professors, and universities can all stand to benefit from master's degree programs that are delivered in English. Students have the opportunity to improve their language skills through the EMI program, which focuses on English as the language of academic and professional communication around the world (Huang & Brown, 2019). Second, EMI enhances cross-cultural communication and contributes to the development of inclusive and diverse educational settings (Wang, 2018). Lastly, EMI is an effective

method for universities to attract international students, increase the institution's global visibility and competitiveness, and enhance the institution's global competitiveness. These goals can be accomplished by increasing the institution's global visibility and competitiveness (Rao, 2019).

Both the students and the teachers face difficulties when dealing with EMI. To begin, students are confronted with linguistic and cultural barriers, both of which have the potential to lead to communication difficulties as well as academic underachievement (Jin & Cortazzi, 2020). Second, students might have trouble understanding academic concepts and jargon when they're presented in English, which could have a negative impact on their overall academic performance (Hu & Zhang, 2021). Thirdly, it may be challenging for instructors to adjust their methods of instruction to meet the varied requirements and preferences of their students in terms of how they learn (Liu & Hua, 2021). Fourthly, it may be difficult for instructors to ensure effective communication with students, particularly when conveying difficult academic concepts in English. This is especially true when the language of instruction is English (Jin & Cortazzi, 2020) student accounts from master's degree programs taught in English with regard to their experiences.

Some students in English-language Master's degree programs have difficult experiences, while others have enriching experiences. According to Li and Li (2020), students who have had prior exposure to English and who have studied in an international setting may find the programs easier to understand and follow than those students who have had limited prior exposure to English. Students who have a strong academic background in their respective fields may find it easier to comprehend difficult academic concepts when they are presented in English. This is in contrast to students who do not have such an academic background. This latter group might profit from receiving language support in addition to additional academic assistance in order to improve their academic performance (Hu & Zhang, 2021). Additionally, the cultural backgrounds of students may have an effect on their educational experiences, with some students discovering that it is difficult to adapt to the teaching and learning strategies used in contexts where English is spoken (Wang, 2018).

The perspectives of English-language teachers and their experiences Master's degree programs Master's degree programs that are offered in English are typically instructed by professors who have a broad range of professional experiences. It's possible that some professors, especially those who aren't native English speakers, will find it challenging to instruct in English (Liu & Hua, 2021). It's also possible that these professors have trouble conveying difficult academic ideas in English, and they might benefit from receiving additional language instruction to help them improve their proficiency. However, there is a possibility that some educators will find EMI rewarding due to the fact that it provides them with the opportunity to engage in conversation with students who come from a wide variety of backgrounds and to gain knowledge about the educational practices of a variety of cultures (Huang & Brown, 2019).

EMI necessitates a shift in the pedagogical approaches taken in English-medium master's degree programs in order to accommodate the varied requirements and learning styles of students. The level of student comprehension can be improved through the use of a variety of strategies, including the introduction of visuals and examples from the real world (Jin & Cortazzi, 2020). In addition, professors may use a communicative method of teaching, which places an emphasis on the application of language to situations that occur in everyday life (Wang, 2018). Students are able to acquire language skills that are applicable to their academic and professional contexts through the use of this methodology.

EMI is gaining popularity among students, professors, and universities all over the world where English is spoken as a first language because it provides a variety of useful benefits to all three groups. While EMI helps to improve cross-cultural communication and creates a diverse and welcoming learning environment, it also presents challenges, such as language and cultural barriers, which must be overcome. Nevertheless, these challenges can be conquered with the right kind of linguistic support and instructional strategies.

In conclusion, students who enroll in Master's programs taught in English have the opportunity to improve their command of the English language, foster intercultural communication, and cultivate an inclusive learning environment. On the other hand, there are challenges to overcome, such as language and cultural barriers. For English Language Instruction (EMI) programs to be successful, universities and instructors need to provide sufficient language support and put into practice effective instructional strategies. From above, the purpose of this study is to determine teachers' and students' attitudes towards English-medium master's degree programs at a Saudi university, as well as their best practice experiences, the effects of English-medium instruction on teaching methods, and their perceptions of challenges. Hence, the primary research inquiries were as follows:

1. What are the attitudes of teachers and students towards English-medium instruction in their specific degree programs?
2. Which aspects of their work do they find most satisfactory?
3. What challenges have they encountered and successfully addressed?

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

In qualitative research, common research methods include observation and interview. They enable researchers to collect information about the experiences, behaviors, and attitudes of individuals in a naturalistic setting (Patton, 2002). In this section, I will describe the observation and interview techniques used in a study conducted at a Saudi university. The purpose of the study was to examine teachers' and students' perceptions of English-medium master's degree

programs at a Saudi university, as well as their best practice experiences, the effects of English-medium instruction on teaching methods, and their perceptions of challenges.

Participants included 30 male and female students and 12 male and female academic lecturers from a Saudi university's Computer Science and Engineering Colleges. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, which entails selecting individuals who meet specific criteria related to the research question. In this instance, the requirements included being a university student or academic lecturer and having experience with English-language master's degree programs.

Regarding data collection, data were gathered through observation and semi-structured interviews. The observation consisted of the systematic documentation of participants' classroom behaviors and interactions. The researcher observed the activities of the participants during class, including their engagement with the course material, interactions with their peers, and instructors' instructional strategies (see Creswell, 2013). In field notes, the observations were documented. To gain insight into participants' attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of master's degree programs taught in English, semi-structured interviews were conducted with them. For analysis, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The questions were open-ended, allowing respondents to freely express their experiences and opinions.

Data were collected through interviews as well as through observations, and then subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This requires identifying recurring themes and patterns in the data, which are then sorted into categories based on how pertinent they are to answering the research question. In order to guarantee the reliability and validity of the findings, the analysis was carried out with NVIVO, the most cutting-edge technology available at the time.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following findings offer a deeper understanding of the perceived benefits and challenges among lecturers and students enrolled in existing English-language master's degree programs. It is noteworthy that professors and students generally hold a positive view of their degree programs, but they differ in their perceptions of obstacles and areas for improvement. Notably, more students highlighted the positive impact of English-medium instruction on their English language skills. This could be attributed to the fact that lecturers implicitly believed an enhancement in linguistic competence was inherent in their statement regarding the international employability of graduates, considering English as the global lingua franca across various economic sectors.

During the interviews, both students and professors acknowledged that international experience played a significantly more vital role in improving English language skills compared to lectures conducted in English. Lectures were still thought to be advantageous for students, though. One lecturer noted that teaching in English encourages students to practice the language when questioned about the impact of English-medium instruction on students' language skills. However, this lecturer did not observe any noticeable linguistic development among learners, attributing it to the students' already high level of English proficiency. Only a few lecturers mentioned the importance of exposure to subject-specific vocabulary as a positive effect of English-medium instruction. Additionally, a male lecturer confirmed that students showed "*substantial improvement in English terminology from the first to the second year.*" Another female lecturer mentioned, in a general sense, that English-medium instruction had a positive impact on students' language skills without providing further details. When asked about students' linguistic progress, a female interviewee was unable to discern any specific improvements but noted that students seemed to experience reduced anxiety and increased confidence in public speaking. Another male lecturer commented, "*Of course, students face speaking difficulties, just like us teachers.*" This tension between English as both a means for linguistic improvement and a potential barrier is well summarized by another student who remarked, "*On the one hand, it can be a tool for skill development, but on the other hand, it can limit the participation of some students in class.*"

However, it is worth noting that students demonstrate a greater awareness of language compared to lecturers (Swales & Feak, 2009). Several students underlined the value of English-medium master's programmes in acquainting students with the language on a daily basis during interviews and observations. However, during the interviews, very few lecturers mentioned the same thing. This result validates the theory that employing English as the medium of instruction in content courses increases students' exposure to the target language while improving the relevance and efficacy of language learning (Tatzl, 2011). Students recognize the feasibility of incorporating the foreign target language into their daily lives and university education.

Furthermore, the majority of lecturers mentioned another advantage of English-medium instruction in terms of providing access to English books, papers, magazines, and newspapers during the interviews. A female lecturer stated, "*English-language programs offer a significantly broader perspective on global knowledge.*" This aspect was seen as beneficial for enriching students' content knowledge, according to the source.

In the context of student papers and theses, the lecturers' response was relatively low, considering that this is a tertiary institution where research and teaching interests intersect to advance both academic pillars. However, their responses indicate that scientific writing and thesis supervision motivate them and yield satisfactory outcomes. Students also found projects and practical aspects of their work rewarding, partially aligning with their professors' views. As scientific writing assignments typically build upon previous projects or industry-related tasks, the sources of motivation

for both students and instructors overlap to varying degrees. Nearly all students expressed satisfaction with the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge and the use of English, indicating that the integrated content and language approach yielded satisfactory outcomes in both areas. However, it is surprising that so few students highlighted the improvement in their English language skills as the most important advantage of English-medium instruction.

The question about challenges faced by instructors and students during the course revealed a range of issues. According to professors, one of the challenges identified was the varying levels of English language proficiency among students. One male lecturer confirmed this observation during the interviews, acknowledging that students have different levels of language proficiency due to their unique backgrounds, strengths, and weaknesses. This issue tends to be more pronounced in degree programs with international students, where the student groups are more heterogeneous in terms of educational backgrounds. Instructors also mentioned the difficulty of motivating students, which is likely connected to the most frequently mentioned challenge by students: time management and workload. Students who face a dense curriculum with mandatory attendance may struggle with limited study time, leading to exhaustion and a lack of willingness to actively participate in class and lectures. One female lecturer confirmed the issue of a heavy workload for students during the interviews, noting their preference for a lecture-based approach instead of independent assignments during class time.

From a linguistic perspective, students highlighted vocabulary and technical terms as challenging areas that could be addressed through the inclusion of English language courses in the curriculum or through content lecturers providing more extensive explanations. The interviews supported this observation made by students. They stressed the importance of instructors being aware that students may struggle to grasp important points due to a lack of understanding or reluctance to seek clarifications. The lecturer recommended adopting a discussion-based approach to encourage student engagement with the subject matter, rather than relying solely on asking if students understood what was said.

As a result of detailed explanations during courses and other factors, English-medium lectures typically cover less material compared to lectures delivered in the native language. During the researcher's observation, it was noticed that one class proceeded at a slightly slower pace. In another class, it was estimated that the content covered might be reduced to 55-75 percent compared to 100 percent in the native language, resulting in a 25-35 percent reduction. This suggests potential linguistic challenges for lecturers during courses, as acknowledged by a female lecturer who stated, "*As a lecturer, you may struggle to meet students' demands if you haven't traveled much, especially since they already have a good command of English*". Additionally, during the observation, it was observed that non-native lecturers may encounter significant difficulties when orally describing mathematical formulas.

Regarding course and exam preparation, it was observed and confirmed through interviews that instructors face challenges due to students' varying language and content proficiency. Similarly, to language skills, students' content knowledge depends on their educational backgrounds and motivation to engage with the subject matter. Therefore, motivating students and sparking their curiosity are crucial factors in promoting student achievement. However, instructors need to find a balance between providing digestible material and presenting complex concepts to accommodate students with different skill levels during course and exam preparation. As new groups of students enter the program each academic year, maintaining this balance becomes an ongoing challenge for professors. In course materials and exams, the choice of words becomes significant as using incorrect terminology can lead to misunderstandings. This highlights the importance of language as a means of conveying content. Therefore, instructors must exert additional effort to overcome linguistic barriers in content instruction.

During the observation and based on their responses regarding course and exam preparation, it was evident that students' primary concern is the availability of study time. The heavy workload necessitates effective exam preparation, which often results in long and intensive study periods depending on the number of exams students need to take. As mentioned by the lecturers in the interviews, difficulties related to exams may arise during the assessment phase of seminar-style courses. One lecturer specifically mentioned the challenge of evaluating and grading students, particularly when grading is conducted in a foreign language. However, none of the professors explicitly stated that language considerations were taken into account when despite the indications from the interviews that both professors and students do not perceive difficulties in producing written English content, integrating scientific writing instruction in English into bachelor's degree programs can help address issues related to academic writing and citations. However, during the observation, writing was observed to be a demanding language skill for both lecturers and students, which contradicts the earlier results. This apparent discrepancy may be attributed to different types of learners and subgroups of respondents.

The observational data and responses from both groups confirm the importance of spoken interaction not only in higher education but also in graduates' future careers. Effective communication through speech is crucial for professionals to interact with partners, colleagues, superiors, subordinates, and clients. The fact that both professors and students rated this skill as the most difficult emphasizes the challenges that both speakers and listeners face, such as the speed of conversation, limited time to formulate responses, regional variations in accent and dialect, and social variations in pronunciation, register, and idioms.

The observation suggests a clear need for assistance in English-language master's degree programs. However, the measures mentioned by some professors indicate a need for support in the preparation of course materials, although a larger sample size would have provided a more diverse perspective. One female lecturer emphasized the need for

proofreading slides by language specialists and proposed co-teaching, lecture observations by English language teachers for improvement suggestions, and lecture training meetings in small peer groups with feedback from English specialists. Another female lecturer advocated for mandatory proofreading services for student theses before submission, while two other lecturers mentioned the necessity for students to take additional English language courses. The interviews supported the notion of low demand for support measures among lecturers but also revealed the importance of having a suitable learning infrastructure to facilitate English-language instruction.

During the observation, it can be inferred that lecturers in English-medium programs must dedicate more time to clarifying subject matter compared to instructors in monolingual education, as students often request additional explanations. The need for extra English language instruction, tutorials, and study assistants is plausible but may present budgetary challenges for institutions with limited resources. However, because most of the professors in the interviews insisted that there was no difference between lectures given in Arabic and those given in English, the interviews offered further insightful information that was missed during the observation. However, one male lecturer mentioned incorporating "*more drill and practice*" and repeating the lecture's main points in Arabic at the end. Most lecturers acknowledged that access to English-speaking literature through English-medium programs facilitated the use of advanced teaching methods and strategies. On the other hand, some lecturers identified difficulties in delivering content and their lecturing style due to English being a foreign language, which hinders the incorporation of anecdotes, personal stories, and jokes into their lectures. The interviews did not directly address adaptations to courses resulting from English-medium education, but one student reported that in the upcoming academic year, students would be given more time or fewer reading materials to prepare for class discussions. While some students suggested adding more images to slides and translating key terms as previous steps taken to meet students' needs, these suggestions were not implemented.

In terms of lecturer qualifications, the best cases would include dual degrees in a content area and English linguistics or language teaching. These combinations are very uncommon in higher education environments, though. As a result, the most typical scenario is that subjects are taught in English by non-native English speakers with differing degrees of foreign experience and language competency. Language franca English is becoming more and more regarded as an equally desirable alternative in academic settings, despite the fact that lecturers and students in the current survey emphasize native-speaker English as a performance model (Tatzl, 2011; Belcher, 2009).

V. CONCLUSION

This research study examines the attitudes of teachers and students towards English-medium master's degree programs at a university in Saudi Arabia. It investigates their experiences with best practices, the impact of English-medium instruction on teaching methods, and their perceptions of challenges. Consequently, the results provide a number of suggestions for the effective execution of English-medium higher education. While stakeholders may have viewed the need for support as less pressing than they had previously believed, the study demonstrates that additional steps can help bring English-taught programmes into existence. In order to help all parties involved, the study concludes by summarising suggestions for institutions making the switch from mother tongue to English-medium instruction. Lecturer and student participation based on perceived needs should be the main idea driving these support strategies (Tatzl, 2011). However, institutions with limited budgets face the risk of entering a cycle where they can only compensate for the lack of funding through the creativity and innovation of their stakeholders. However, in order for creativity and innovation to thrive, institutions must actively promote and reward them.

Based on the findings, English language instruction for students should prioritize spoken interaction and academic writing, delivered through integrated-skills courses rather than isolated skill-focused specialized courses. This recommendation is supported by industry feedback that highlights the significance of oral communication (Wulff & Campbell, 2009) and writing (Menekse & Chi, 2013) as essential skills for practicing engineers. However, other linguistic skills, such as listening, reading, and speaking, should not be neglected. The rationale behind these recommendations is that integrated-skills courses tend to enhance student motivation, and teachers can readily adapt and shift the instructional focus when necessary. Additionally, emphasis should be placed on vocabulary development, reading for discussion and writing, study skills, and learning strategies.

It is important to note that subject teachers cannot replace language teachers when it comes to teaching language within their respective courses (Raisanen & Fortanet-Gómez, 2008, p. 48). Conversely, language teachers cannot teach specialized content like programming skills. Therefore, it is crucial to leverage the expertise of both content and language teachers in their respective fields and promote increased collaboration between these groups to integrate content and language effectively. Only through the utilization of language as the medium of content instruction by content teachers and content as the medium of language instruction by language teachers can English-taught tertiary degree programs thrive.

APPENDIX. INTERVIEW QUESTION

- (1) What effects do you believe English-medium instruction has on the language skills of students?
- (2) What effects do you believe English-medium instruction has on the content knowledge of students?
- (3) How does English-medium instruction affect your teaching methods?

- (4) What do you consider to be the most urgent issues in your course(s)?
- (5) What modifications will you make to your course(s) next semester?
- (6) Have you attended any of the university's English language courses for lecturers teaching in English-medium programs?
- (7) Which support measures would assist you in teaching English?
- (8) What are your future objectives?

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