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University Students and Instructors' Attitudes towards English Medium Instruction Courses: Voices from Iran

Abstract

For over the past 20 years, internationalization and globalization have become buzzwords in many universities. English-Medium Instruction (EMI) has been used as one of the main means to respond to these trends. Alongside the rapid adoption of EMI, a huge number of research works have been conducted on the (re)definition of EMI, on both challenges and opportunities of EMI, on the personal and contextual factors for success or failure of EMI, and on the efficiency of EMI. Against the backdrop of these global trends, Iranian universities seem to be left behind. Persian is almost inclusively being used as the medium of instruction at Iranian universities. Nevertheless, the potential implementation of EMI at Iran's universities and the attitudes of university students and instructors toward the use of EMI have been addressed in a scant number of studies. To shed more light on the growing applicability of EMI, the present study explored the status quo of EMI in Iran's context through a qualitative study at four Iranian universities. Employing open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the data were gathered from 12 university students and 12 instructors to better understand their attitudes toward EMI. Implementing inductive content analysis, participants' responses were codified and interpreted. The results of the content analysis indicated that along with several opportunities offered by EMI courses, participants encountered some severe challenges, which were mainly caused by their inadequate English proficiency. The results also demonstrated that most participants held university administrators responsible for the challenges of EMI courses. To them, in order to reduce the challenges of EMI courses, university administrators should revisit the way EMI courses are being administered at Iranian universities. The findings of the study are expected to help administrators and stakeholders to plan for internationalization strategies considering EMI by determining the possible advantages and/or disadvantages in Iran's context.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction (EMI), Challenges, Opportunities, Internationalization, Iran

Introduction

In today's globalized higher education (HE) sphere, internationalization is closely linked with Englishization (Chang, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2011). English has been identified as a "killer language" (Coleman, 2006, p.1), due to its rapid adoption as an international lingua franca, and more importantly, as the medium of instruction (EMI) (Carrió-Pastor, 2020; Dearden, 2014; Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Dearden, 2018). While the use of English as a language of instruction can have both political and cultural consequences in countries where the first language is not English, the internationalization of education and the desire to compete globally have contributed to the rise of English-medium instruction (EMI) in higher education around the world (Macaro et al., 2018). Since English is one of the most extensively used languages today, EMI has often been seen as a way of getting access to an international academic community whose lingua franca is English (Vinke, 1995). Teaching courses in English enables educational institutions to attract international students and faculty members while providing students and instructors

the opportunity to engage in an international research community where a substantial amount of scientific research is written in English (Graddol, 2000).

EMI in Asia started through a partner collaboration with English-speaking countries and/or launching branch campuses. Gradually, Asian governments and universities have developed their own EMI programs. Many Asian Ministries of Education, including in Japan, Korea, China, and other Asian countries, have supported their HE sectors to implement EMI, through a number of internationalization initiatives (Barnard, 2014).

In Iran, nonetheless, EMI has not been encouraged by the Ministry of Education, and there has been no evidence of EMI implementation in Iran's HE sector the literature. Nevertheless, university faculty members and students have shown positive attitudes toward promoting the usage of English as an internationalization strategy (Khorasani & Zamani Manesh, 2012; Rassouli & Osam, 2019), as well as EMI implementation (Ghorbani & Alavi, 2014; Hejazi & Zare-ee, 2017; Zare-ee & Gholami, 2013).

The present chapter seeks to contribute to the literature by shedding light on the current status of EMI implementation in Iran's HE, and illustrating that EMI has been recently introduced and implemented at a few Iranian universities. It attempts to address the current attitudes and perceptions of university students and instructors towards EMI courses running at Iranian universities. The following three main research questions are addressed:

- 1) What are the university students and instructors' perceptions towards the advantages/opportunities of the EMI courses?
- 2) What are the university students and instructors' perceptions towards the disadvantages/challenges of the EMI courses?
- 3) How can the status of EMI be improved at Iranian universities?

Literature Review

The first non-English universities that offered EMI programs were in Europe in the 1980s. The Bologna Declaration (1999) created a mobile space throughout Europe and facilitated the expansion of EMI (Phillipson, 2009). In Asia, the countries that used to be colonized by English-speaking countries have adopted EMI faster than other Asian countries without this experience (Byun et al., 2011). The rationale for offering EMI in Asia differs widely but has been focused on avoiding to fall behind in the competitive global market and international rankings (Barnard, 2014). Many Asian Ministries of Education have launched internationalization initiatives to encourage and facilitate EMI adoption (Hommond, 2016).

Alongside the rapid EMI implementation, much research attention has been focused on the challenges and negative outcomes of EMI (Aizawa, Rose, Thompson, & Curle, 2020; Al-Bakri, 2013; Byun et al., 2011; Huang, 2012; Lei & Hu, 2014; Phuong & Nguyen, 2019; Pun & Thomas, 2020; Soe, Ko, & Myint, 2020; Ter-Vardanyan, 2021). For instance, Byun et al. (2011), in an exploratory survey study, attempted to investigate the challenges and disadvantageous sides of EMI classes. To this end, using surveys and focus group interviews, they gathered Korean students' perceptions towards EMI courses. Analyzing

the verbal and textual data, researchers mentioned inadequate English proficiency of students and instructors as the main challenge of EMI courses experienced by students at Korean universities. Similarly, Phuong and Nguyen (2019) set out to probe the challenges and drawbacks of EMI courses by administering a close-ended questionnaire to 136 Vietnamese students. The analysis of students' responses illuminated that they perceived "difficulty in comprehending the specialized textbooks written in English" as the most important challenge of EMI courses. Subsequently, Soe et al. (2020) explored the challenges of EMI courses experienced by 120 Myanmar teachers and students at the University of Mandalay using questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews. The findings from qualitative and quantitative data analysis indicated that both teachers and students viewed "low language proficiency levels" and "confidence levels of EMI practitioners" as the most significant challenges of EMI classes, respectively. Gradually, the opportunities and positive outcomes of EMI have also been addressed in research projects (e.g., Başıbek et al., 2014; Brown, 2018; Diezmas & Barrera, 2021; Tamtam, Gallagher, Olabi, & Nasher, 2012; Wallitsch, 2014; Xie & Curle, 2019).

Although many Asian Ministries of Education are encouraging the universities to rapidly adopt EMI, they are sometimes being criticized for being too government-led and forcing the HE sectors to implement EMI without carefully considering the students and faculty members' linguistic limitations and planning for curriculum design. In contrast with the literature, Iranian HE seems to be missing this support from the Iranian government, despite the fact that Iranian students and faculty members give the impression of being ready to take part in EMI programs (Khorasani & Zamani Manesh, 2012; Rassouli & Osam, 2019). In Iran, Persian (Farsi) has been used as the official language in the HE sector. Starting from 2013, a small number of studies have addressed the feasibility of EMI implementation in Iran. Zare-ee and Gholami (2013) reported that due to the widespread use of English as an international language, EMI implementation would be beneficial in communication with English-based scholars and avoiding content loss that often occurs during the translation process of research studies, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

A year later, Ghorbani and Alavi's (2014) study documented that the potential advantages of EMI in Iran's HE can be twice more than its disadvantages. Among the advantages, using EMI as "a means for scientific communication" and its role in "facilitating the use of internet and computer software" (Ghorbani & Alavi, 2014, p. 8) were highly ranked. As for the disadvantages, the challenges associated with comprehension of class materials in English were frequently mentioned. The study found that before implementing EMI, emphasis should be placed on students' English skills through systematic "modifications in the school educational system" (Ghorbani & Alavi, 2014, p. 9), and that EMI needs to be supported hand in hand by the university and the government.

Hejazi and Zare-ee's (2017) study results were in line with those of the previous two studies. They specifically focused on the positive outcomes of EMI, including its role in facilitating the participation of Iranians in academic events, avoiding unessential translation, and a better academic communication opportunity with the world. These studies showed no significant differences between students (both undergraduate and graduate) and faculty members' positive attitudes toward EMI.

In the reviewed literature, several studies in Asia have examined the challenges and opportunities of EMI courses (e.g., Aizawa et al., 2020; Byun et al., 2011; Lei & Hu, 2014; Wallitsch, 2014; Xie & Curle,

2019), but there is insufficient evidence for the advantages and disadvantages of such courses in Iran. To put it differently, a scant number of studies have been done to explore the benefits and drawbacks of EMI classes at Iranian universities (e.g., Ghorbani & Alavi, 2014; Zare-ee & Gholami, 2013). In addition, much of the previous research in this era has focused on university students' perceptions (e.g., Kym & Kym, 2014; Phuong & Nguyen, 2019); hence, the voices of university instructors are not extensively heard. Hence, this study seeks to fill these gaps by surveying both the university students and instructors' perceptions regarding the challenges and opportunities of EMI courses at Iranian universities.

Methodology

Participants

As put forward by Nassaji (2020), using multiple data sources, known as triangulation, can help researchers “to achieve a more accurate and complete understanding of the issue under investigation, thus increasing the validity and credibility of the findings” (p. 428). Accordingly, two groups of participants, including 12 university students (Table 1) and 12 university lecturers (Table 2) took part in this study. They were selected based on the purposive sampling method. The primary objective of purposive sampling, which is the most recommended sampling technique in qualitative inquiry, is to handpick a sample that can reasonably be deemed to be representative of the target population (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2018). To increase the representativeness of the findings, the participants were chosen from both genders, different age levels, different nationality (i.e., Afghan, Iraqi, Iranian, Lebanese, Tanzanian), and different universities (i.e., Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Tehran University of Medical Sciences (TUMS), Allameh Tabataba'i University, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences).

Table 1. Demographic Information of Students

Participants	Gender	Age	Nationality	University
1	Female	23	Iraqi	Ferdowsi University of Mashhad
2	Female	25	Iraqi	Ferdowsi University of Mashhad
3	Female	27	Iraqi	Ferdowsi University of Mashhad
4	Female	20	Lebanese	Tehran University of Medical Sciences
5	Female	25	Iraqi	Tehran University of Medical Sciences
6	Male	26	Iraqi	Tehran University of Medical Sciences
7	Male	20	Tanzanian	Tehran University of Medical Sciences
8	Male	22	Lebanese	Tehran University of Medical Sciences
9	Male	24	Iranian	Tehran University of Medical Sciences
10	Female	33	Afghan	Allameh Tabataba'i University

11	Female	23	Afghan	Allameh Tabataba'i University
12	Male	33	Iranian	Isfahan University of Medical Sciences

Table 2. Demographic Information of Instructors

Participants	Gender	Age	Nationality	University
1	Male	55	Iranian	Isfahan University of Medical Sciences
2	Female	32	Iranian	Isfahan University of Medical Sciences
3	Female	52	Iranian	Isfahan University of Medical Sciences
4	Male	33	Iranian	Isfahan University of Medical Sciences
5	Male	29	Iranian	Ferdowsi University of Mashhad
6	Female	33	Iranian	Ferdowsi University of Mashhad
7	Female	34	Iranian	Allameh Tabataba'i University
8	Male	36	Iranian	Allameh Tabataba'i University
9	Female	29	Iranian	Tehran University of Medical Sciences
10	Female	48	Iranian	Tehran University of Medical Sciences
11	Female	42	Iranian	Tehran University of Medical Sciences
12	Male	30	Iranian	Tehran University of Medical Sciences

The participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study. Prior to initiating the inquiry, respondents were asked to fill out the consent forms. They were assured that their valuable information would be employed for research purposes and would be kept confidential. They were also informed that their biographical information would not be divulged, and pseudonyms would be used in the research.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Open-ended Questionnaire

To gather students and instructors' perceptions towards the opportunities and challenges of the EMI courses, an open-ended questionnaire containing two different sections was employed (Appendix A). In the first section, participants were invited to write about their demographic information, namely gender, age, nationality, and university. In the second section, participants were asked to answer three open-ended questions about EMI courses they have experienced in their universities. The rationale of employing open-ended questionnaire in this inquiry was that "they are easier to administer (notably when conducted online), provide more time for respondents to complete questionnaires, and do not need to be transcribed" (Friedman, 2012, p.190).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the questionnaire, three non-participant university students and instructors filled out the first draft of the questionnaire. The required revisions were made on the basis of piloting outcomes. To finalize the questions, two university instructors in the field of applied linguistics who have conducted some studies on EMI courses were invited to check the appropriateness of the questions in terms of language and content. Based on their comments, the open-ended questions were finalized. The finalized version of the questionnaire was sent through social networks such as WhatsApp and Telegram to the respondents.

Semi-structured Interviews

For the sake of triangulation which enhances the credibility of qualitative findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nassaji, 2020), semi-structured interviews were also held with half of the participants. Prior to initiating the interview sessions, the researchers prepared an interview guide encompassing three predetermined questions and some follow-up ones. Before interviewing the participants of the study, some interview sessions were held with some non-participants in order to pilot the interview guide that helps researchers to detect the possible problems of the interview prompts (Friedman, 2012).

The researchers interviewed each participant individually. Since all participants had a good command of English, the interview sessions were conducted in English. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to obey the health protocols stated by World Health Organization (WHO) to decrease the chance of spreading the Corona virus, the interview sessions were held through the online platform of Adobe Connect. The interview sessions were recorded, and the interviewees' perceptions towards EMI courses were transcribed verbatim for further content analysis.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was employed as the method of data analysis in this inquiry. Content analysis as a widely used qualitative data analysis approach involves "coding data in a systematic way in order to discover patterns and develop well-grounded interpretations" (Friedman, 2012, p. 191). As put forward by Cole (1998), content analysis is a common approach for analyzing various modes of data, including textual, visual and verbal. As such, it was employed in this study to analyze both verbal and textual data gathered from participants' responses.

Overall, there are two main approaches to content analysis, namely deductive approach and inductive approach. In the deductive approach, analysis is operationalized on the basis of some theoretical

frameworks, while in inductive content analysis, there is no prior theoretical framework, and the codes and sub-codes are derived entirely from the obtained data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In the present study, the researchers implemented the inductive approach to analyze participants' perceptions towards EMI courses. Both inductive and deductive approaches of content analysis proceed in three phases of preparation, organization (i.e., coding process), and reporting (Burnard, 1996).

To increase the credibility of the study, all phases of content analysis have been implemented by two applied linguists. At the preparation phase, the analysts initiated the process by selecting sentences as the unit of analysis. Prior to initiating the organization phase, the analysts decided to examine only the manifest data. Then, to become acquainted with the depth and breadth of the gathered data, the analysts read and reread participants' responses. In the organization phase, they went through three stages of open coding, creating categories, and abstraction in order to code the obtained data. The coding process in this study was done through MAXQDA software (version 2020) due to the fact that "using a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) can improve the credibility of the coding process" (Baralt, 2012, p. 228). At the first stage of the coding process (i.e., open coding), the analysts went through the data line by line and freely generated some initial codes. In the stage of creating categories, they drew connections among the generated codes and grouped them under higher-order headings. Finally, in the abstraction stage, the analysts named each category through "content-characteristic words". During this stage, subcategories (sub-themes) with similar statements were grouped together as categories (themes), and categories were classified as main categories. As the result of analyzing process, 11 themes and four sub-themes were extracted from participants' perceptions towards the opportunities and challenges of the EMI courses. Employing Krippendorff's alpha (α), an inter-coder agreement coefficient of 0.91 was reached, which represented a high consensus between the coders.

Due to the fact that member checking can increase the trustworthiness of qualitative findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rolfe, 2006), at the end of this three-phase approach, the derived themes and sub-themes were returned to 10 participants to verify their accuracy on the basis of their personal experiences in EMI courses.

Findings

The findings of the present study represent the opportunities and challenges of the EMI courses experienced by students and instructors at Iranian universities. Based on the research questions of the study, three general patterns emerged: the advantages/opportunities of EMI courses, the disadvantages/challenges of EMI courses, and the suggestions for improving the status of EMI courses at Iranian universities. These patterns are demonstrated by several themes and sub-themes. Each theme is closely related to a specific pattern associated with a particular research question. In the following sections, the derived themes and sub-themes were portrayed through some hierarchical models.

Advantages/opportunities of EMI courses

As the first question, participants were asked to express their perceptions regarding the advantages/opportunities of EMI courses. The analysis of both verbal and textual responses provided by students and instructors resulted in six themes (Figure 1): *More access to specialized sources, more chances*

to improve language proficiency, higher chance of continuing education abroad, higher chance of employment, more exposure to English, and higher chance of publishing articles in prestigious journals.

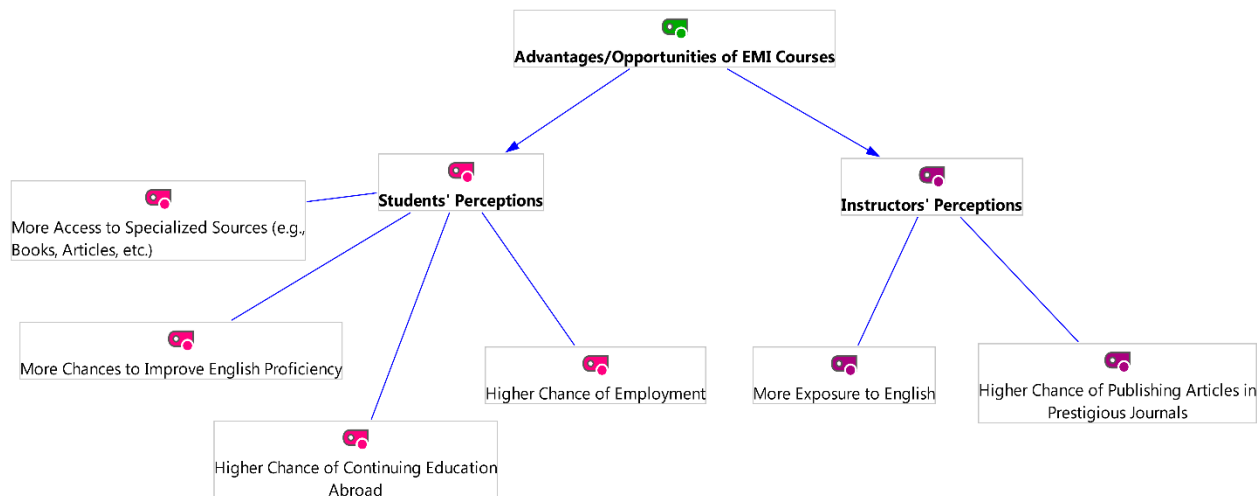


Figure 1. Advantages/Opportunities of EMI Courses

More access to specialized sources as the first advantage of EMI courses refers to resource availability. Most of the students stated that EMI enables them to access various specialized sources that are not available in their mother tongue. They illustrated that “*EMI helps us to access more valuable resources because most of the specialized textbooks and reliable articles are published in English*” (P6).

Regarding the second advantage of EMI courses, students highlighted the role of EMI in improving their English proficiency. They explicated that due to more exposure to English in EMI courses, their English language proficiency would be considerably enhanced. For instance, some of the participants stated that,

P9: *In addition to learning the subject matter, we can improve our English proficiency in EMI courses.*

P12: *EMI provides more exposure to English which leads us to become more proficient users of English language.*

As another advantage of EMI courses, students noted that EMI increases their chance of continuing education abroad. Some statements demonstrating this advantage of EMI courses are:

P8: *EMI gives us more opportunities to continue our studies abroad.*

P9: *Due to the fact that having a good command of English is a necessity for educating abroad, I think EMI offers higher chances for university students to pursue their studies overseas.*

Students also mentioned the *higher chance of employment* as the last advantage of EMI courses. They believe that being a more proficient user of English can dramatically increase their chances of employment.

P4: *Our chances of employment can be enhanced as the result of EMI courses because those who have good command of English will be offered more employment opportunities.*

In line with the second advantage of EMI courses mentioned by students, many instructors stated that EMI offers university students *more exposure to English* which causes improvements in their level of English proficiency. To illustrate,

P2: *One of the advantages of running a class in English is that the students are exposed to English, and the higher the input and exposure, the more output will occur accordingly.*

P10: *The main advantage of EMI courses would be that the use of English as the medium of instruction ideally increases the amount of exposure to English. More exposure to English is likely to exert great influence on students' English language proficiency.*

The second theme extracted from instructors' responses regarding the advantages of EMI courses is *higher chance of publishing articles in prestigious journals*. They declared that *“EMI enables students to write in English, helping them to publish their academic articles in peer-reviewed journals”* (P6).

Disadvantages/Challenges of EMI courses

As the second question, respondents were asked about the disadvantages/challenges of EMI courses. Analyzing the gathered data culminated in five themes and four sub-themes (Figure 2). Among them, three themes were derived from students' responses. *Difficulty in expressing the ideas/opinions* is one of the important challenges raised by students. Many students noticed that they face difficulties in expressing their ideas during classroom discussions. For instance, participant 12 expressed that,

P12: *In EMI courses, due to insufficient English proficiency, it is difficult to share our ideas and opinions with others.*

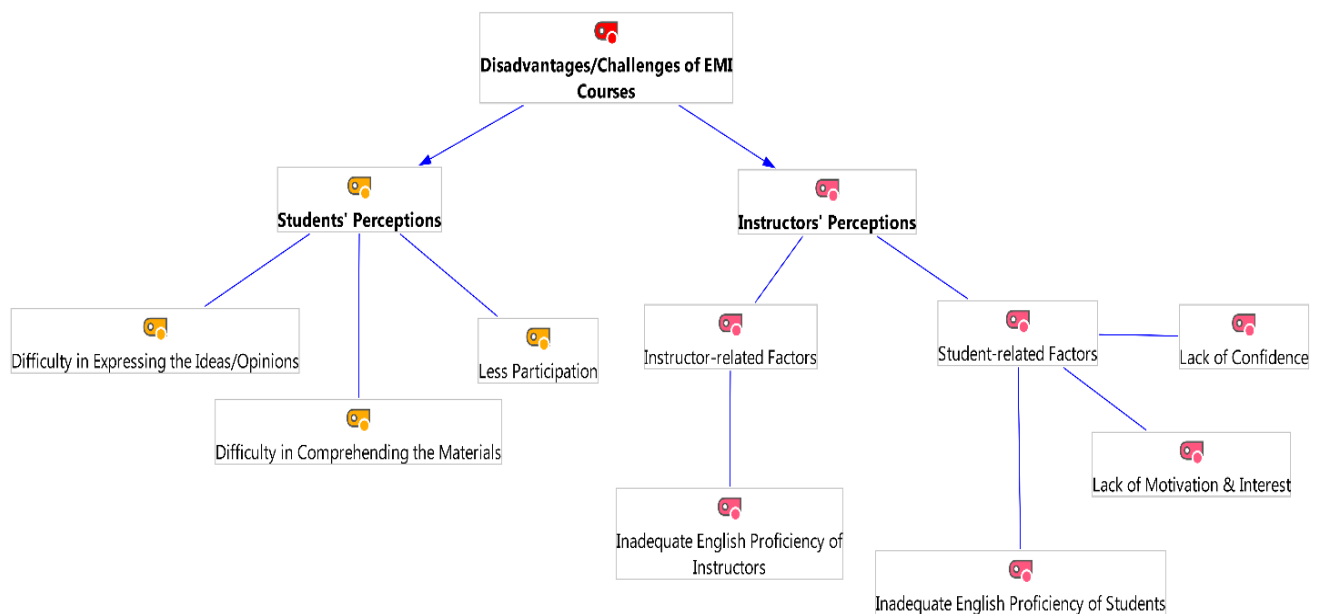


Figure 2. Disadvantages/Challenges of EMI Courses

Students also mentioned that they encounter some challenges in comprehending the materials for the same reason. This challenge of EMI can directly be demonstrated through the following statements.

P6: *I do not personally interested in EMI courses since I cannot comprehend the academic contents very well.*

P7: *It difficult for us to fully grasp the information provided in our specialized textbooks.*

As the third disadvantage of EMI courses, students stated that EMI decreases the amount of their participation in classroom activities. To illustrate,

P8: *Since we are not skilled enough in English language, it is not possible for us to participate in classroom tasks and activities.*

As Figure 2 depicts, instructors' perceptions towards the disadvantages of EMI courses were categorized into two main themes, namely *instructor-related factors* and *student-related factors*. The theme of *instructor-related factors* encompasses a single sub-theme which is *inadequate English proficiency of instructors*. Instructors expounded that some EMI instructors are not proficient enough to transmit content through English language.

P3: *I assume that the main problem of EMI courses is teachers' lack of English proficiency.*

P10: *One of the most prevalent challenges of EMI courses is the inadequate level of English language proficiency of lecturers and professors while they're trying to run a full class in foreign language.*

The theme of *student-related factors* generated from instructors' responses comprised three sub-themes –*Inadequate English proficiency of students, lack of motivation and interest, and lack of confidence*. As for English proficiency of students, some instructors stated that,

P3: *Sometimes learners do not understand what I say and I have to explain in their mother tongue.*

P8: *Due to inadequate English proficiency, some students may find it difficult to understand the ideas and information presented in English.*

For the next sub-theme, *lack of motivation and interest*, some participants mentioned that “*immersion in a foreign language may demotivate some students who are not proficient language users*” (P2). Finally, for the last sub-theme in this regard, instructors reported that “*due to low English levels, students are not confident to learn content through English language*” (P10).

Suggestions for Improving the Status of EMI Courses at Iranian Universities

As the last question, participants were asked to suggest some ways through which the status of EMI courses can be improved. Their responses were grouped into two main categories: *Students' suggestions* and *instructors' suggestions*. As Figure 3 reveals, university students proposed two solutions including *train instructors for EMI courses and employ some English native instructors for EMI courses*. The following responses of students explicate these two practical solutions respectively:

P9: *Since EMI courses are somehow different from other specialized courses, university administrators should provide some teacher training courses for university lecturers to equip them with the knowledge of teaching content through English language.*

P7: *To improve the efficiency of EMI courses, university administrators should ask some English native speakers to run such courses.*

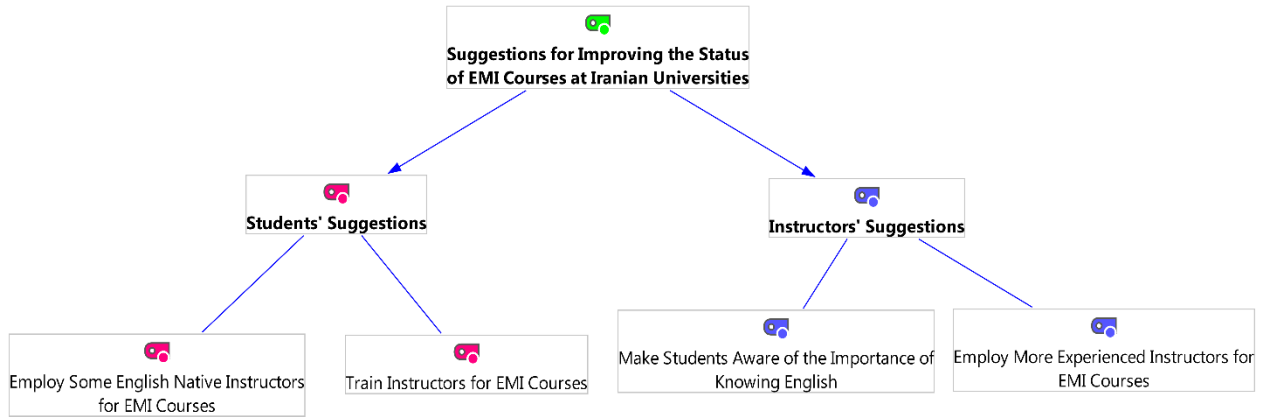


Figure 3. Suggestions for Improving the Status of EMI Courses at Iranian Universities

Two important solutions were also identified from instructors’ responses: *Employ more experienced instructors for EMI courses* and *make students aware of the importance of knowing English*. They stated that,

P9: *Experienced teachers who are interested in teaching EMI courses ought to be taken into account as the most effective type of aid here.*

P2: *I do believe that one of the best ways to improve the status of EMI courses at Iranian universities is to make students aware of the importance of acquiring English language.*

Discussion and Conclusions

This research study was intended to examine how students and instructors of Iranian universities perceive EMI courses. To put differently, how EMI courses are advantageous and disadvantageous for university students. The present study also aimed at suggesting some practical ways to improve the current status of EMI courses at Iranian universities.

Concerning the first research question, content analysis represented that the advantages/opportunities of EMI courses can be grouped under six themes: “*More chances to improve language proficiency, more access to specialized sources, higher chance of continuing education abroad, higher chance of employment, more exposure to English, and higher chance of publishing articles in prestigious journals*”.

Most of the above themes are directly/indirectly tied with improvements in English language proficiency of students. As the result of *more exposure to English*, students' English proficiency will be improved which lead them to a brighter future (i.e., *higher chance of continuing education abroad, higher chance of employment*). This result may be explained by the fact that since English is an international language, being skilled in it can be considered a prerequisite for almost every occupation in the future. Hence, it is quite natural if students and instructors enumerate "*higher chance of employment*" as one of the main advantages of EMI courses. This finding is consistent with the ideas of Tamtam et al. (2012), who suggested that "bilingualism is the root of career and studying opportunities" (p. 1423). They explicated that those who have a good command of English would be offered more employment and promotion prospects. This finding is also supported by the ideas of Phuong and Nguyen (2019), who stated that since there is a growing number of foreign companies in several countries around the world, being a proficient language user can be deemed as a key to career opportunities.

Some participants also mentioned that attending EMI courses helps them access different specialized books and articles written in English. Similar findings were also reported by some previous studies (e.g., Başıbek et al., 2014; Diezmas & Barrera, 2021; Phuong & Nguyen, 2019; Soe et al., 2020; Zare-ee & Gholami, 2013). Additionally, some participants, both in open-ended questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, assume that the EMI course gives university students the ability to write in English, helping them to publish their academic manuscripts in high-quality journals. This might be due to the fact that the language of many peer-reviewed journals is English. Hence, to publish the manuscript in these prestigious journals, one should be skilled in English writing.

Regarding the second research question, findings demonstrated the disadvantages/challenges of EMI courses with five themes and four sub-themes: *Difficulty in expressing the ideas/opinions, difficulty in comprehending the materials, less participation, instructor-related factors (inadequate English proficiency of instructors), and student-related factors (inadequate English proficiency of students, lack of motivation and interest and lack of confidence)*.

The first two challenges mentioned by students can be justified by the fact that university students' English proficiency is not good enough to be able to comprehend the materials written in English or to express their ideas in English. This finding is in agreement with Phuong and Nguyen's (2019) findings which showed that in EMI courses, most students encounter some difficulties in sharing their ideas with others and comprehending the specialized textbooks written in English. The last challenge reported by students, *less participation*, may also have something to do with their level of English proficiency. As put forward by Soe et al. (2020), during EMI courses, since students are not skilled at the English language, they rarely participate in classroom activities.

Among the aforementioned challenges, *inadequate English proficiency of instructors, inadequate English proficiency of students, lack of motivation and interest, and lack of confidence* were mentioned by instructors. Many instructors believe that the main problem of EMI courses is teachers' lack of English proficiency. This finding accords with Zare-ee and Hejazi's (2017) findings, which showed that some instructors are not proficient enough to transmit information through English language. Additionally, several instructors perceived *inadequate English proficiency of students* as another important challenge of EMI courses. They assume that many university students do not have a good command of English. Similar challenges were also found by some previous studies (Al-Bakri, 2013; Huang, 2012; Phuong & Nguyen, 2019; Soe et al., 2020). Finally, some instructors referred to students' lack of motivation, interest, and

confidence as other disadvantageous points of EMI courses. Similar challenges can also be found in a study by Ter-Vardanyan (2021).

Ultimately, the last research question was addressed by investigating participants' views on how challenges of EMI courses can be minimized in Iranian universities. Four important solutions were gathered from participants' responses in total: *Train instructors for EMI courses, employ some English native instructors for EMI courses, employ more experienced instructors for EMI courses, and make students aware of the importance of knowing English.* Based on the suggested solutions, it can be inferred that participants held university administrators and instructors responsible for the challenges of EMI courses; hence, they provided them with some solutions to minimize the existing challenges. It is in agreement with Ter-Vardanyan's (2021) findings, which represented that students put the blame for EMI challenges on university administrators and stakeholders.

Overall, the findings from qualitative data analysis suggest that along with several opportunities provided by EMI courses, participants encountered some severe challenges which were mainly caused by their inadequate English proficiency. Besides the advantageous and disadvantageous aspects of EMI courses, participants were also asked to suggest some practical ways through which the status of EMI courses can be improved. Their suggested solutions reveal that most participants put the blame of EMI challenges on university administrators. These findings offer some valuable information on the opportunities and challenges experienced by the instructors and students of the EMI courses at four Iranian universities being investigated. The university administrators may wish to revisit the way EMI courses are being conducted to enhance its benefits and reduce its drawbacks. The findings of the current study are also informative for EMI instructors. Obviously, instructors should be aware of the potential opportunities and challenges of EMI courses to ensure more efficient instruction.

Like any other study, the findings of the current study are subject to some limitations. First, the number of participants was relatively small; hence, future studies are recommended to be carried out on a larger scale. Second, the instruments used in this inquiry were restricted to open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Future studies are advised to use other data collection techniques such as diary writing and observation to obtain deeper insights into the essence of EMI. Third, this study employed a purely qualitative method. Future studies are recommended to use mixed-methods approach to examine the depth and breadth of the subject under investigation. Finally, this study was conducted in Iran. As the findings might not be transferable to other contexts, further studies on the current subject are required to be conducted in other EFL countries.

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Appendix A

1. Biographical Information

Name:

University:

Gender:

Age:

Nationality:

2. Interview Protocol

1. What do you think are the advantages/opportunities of running EMI courses?
2. What do you think are the disadvantages/challenges of running EMI courses?
3. Do you have any further comments on the growing trend of English as a Medium of Instruction in Iran?