

College Students' Perspectives On the Role of English in their Academics

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ABSTRACT

The significant global presence of English has manifested as an evident shift in language-in-education policies in most multilingual countries worldwide, including India. Because of the growing need to develop proficiency in English, it has been offered both as a medium of instruction and as a subject in higher educational institutions. The present study has examined, from students' perspectives, the impact of English as a global language on educational practices being adopted in higher education institutions in the state of Punjab. For this study, data were gathered by interviewing undergraduate students from different streams who study through English medium in colleges in Punjab. An interview schedule has been prepared for this purpose. The responses given by these students have been content analysed. The results show manifold implications of the predominance of English globally for students studying in higher education institutions in Punjab.

KEYWORDS: Global language; Educational practices; Undergraduate; Medium of instruction

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalised world, the emergence of English as a default medium of global communication is quite perceptible. The 1990s, which are termed as an era of globalisation, initiated a phase of worldwide changes, influencing the economies globally and more specifically the developing economies. The proliferation of the English language, in the era of globalisation, led to a shift in language-in-education policies in various multilingual countries, including almost all third-world countries (Spolsky, 2009). The rise of English as an international lingua franca made it an acceptable rhetoric, and English language learning opened doors for personal and national development. The English language, therefore, became what Bourdieu (1993) called 'symbolic capital', which people desired so that they could gain access to the global economy.

In this respect, in her critical theory, Nino-Murcia (2003) explains that globalisation and the consequent rise of the global market have made English a necessity. Further, people in various countries learn English mainly to create access to quality education and better employment opportunities.

Higher English proficiency is strongly linked to the opening of lucrative job avenues. Upadhaya and Sah (2019) have found that, in South Asia, access to working literacy and communicative skills in English

are often recognised as tools for socio-economic growth. Therefore, because of the English language's prominent role internationally, English proficiency has become one of the most desirable learning goals at the higher education level.

To achieve this goal, English is being taught as a second language in various undergraduate courses and is also being offered as a medium of instruction. As a result, in most of the educational settings, students are engaged in a learning situation whereby they receive education in a language different from their mother tongue, and teachers perform teaching tasks in English, which is not their first language.

In this scenario, it is essential to survey the research literature to identify what kind of impact has been reported due to the introduction of English on educational practices such as teaching-learning processes, evaluation, classroom interactions and above all, the attainment of learning outcomes in higher educational institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English, as a global language, is influencing the formulation of modern educational systems worldwide. English has affected curriculum design, teaching pedagogies and educational policies in various countries of the world. Many studies have supported the role of English-medium instruction in

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generating employability at national and global levels. Jelena and Romero (2013) investigated students' motivation and attitudes toward learning English and found that their primary motivation is its role in enhancing employability. Ali (2013) has also reported that, in Malaysia, competence in English is correlated, by and large, with economic development.

However, students also face difficulties in English-medium classrooms. Exploring the challenges, Rose et al. (2022) have reported, in the context of Chinese higher education, that the use of English-medium instruction (EMI) has caused several social and academic issues for both students and teachers. These problems include unjust promotional opportunities, unequal access to EMI learning, poor learning outcomes, as well as unacceptable teaching standards. Xiao and Zou (2020) have also reported that, in China, students experience difficulties in speaking and reading in EMI courses.

Various studies have demonstrated how various factors interfere with effective learning of the English language, especially in non-native contexts. Evaluating the contemporary English Language Teaching practices in India, Malini (2011) has stated that effective learning implies developing the ability of learners to communicate fluently, both in writing and speaking.

Generally, the EMI classroom has been viewed as a monolingual setting and linguistic multiplicity is perceived as an obstacle, rather than an advantage, in the attainment of learning outcomes (Preece, 2022). He has pinpointed that universities are generally silent about the linguistic diversity of their students. Regarding the role of learners' mother tongue in the learning of the English language, Yadav (2014) has expressed his apprehensions about the general conception that English must be learnt the way a native learns it. He has emphasised the role of the learner's first language (L1) as a resource in the learning of a second Language.

With respect to setting learning goals for English language teaching, Jeyaraj (2017) has emphasised the role of home assignments or projects or the use of English in real-life contexts, rather than memorising language rules and repetitive structures. Further, due to the examination system in India, rote learning receives priority over language competence (Sagar, 2013).

Nishanthi (2017) has expressed that, at the college level, students use English mostly inside the classroom. They receive negligible encouragement to

practice English outside the class. The absence of reading and listening habits obstructs English learning. Moreover, a common belief among students is that fluency in English is unachievable.

Mathad (2019) stated that, in colleges, English language learning is often perceived not as a set of integrated skills, but as a list of words and grammatical rules to be memorised. Regarding learning strategy, he suggested actively involving learners in group settings to process the meaning of what they hear and read.

Therefore, various researchers have pointed out that EMI-based learning entails multiple challenges for teachers and students. Unequal access to EMI-based education, inadequate encouragement to learn speaking skills, poor methods of teaching, lack of clarity of learning goals and less participation of learners in the teaching-learning process are certain major issues. They have also expressed apprehensions about considering a native-like classroom setting as the ideal setting for teaching in a non-native EMI context.

Rationale of the Study

English has grown to be a lingua franca of people with varied lingua-cultural backgrounds (Galloway & Numajiri, 2019). The number of its non-native speakers is more than the native speakers. It implies that English is no longer an exclusive medium of communication for L1 speakers (Jenkins, 2018).

The rise of globalisation and the consequent proliferation of the English language all over the world made attainment of English proficiency a worthy goal. In present times, as English language ability has attained the status of an essential professional resource, it has become a critical determinant of accessing and succeeding in higher education globally (Kirkpatrick, 2018). "English as a medium of instruction (as opposed to English as an 'object' of instruction) is becoming a 'new normal', and a key site for this change is higher education, nowhere more so than in the Asian-Pacific" (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017). In India too, English-medium education at both the school and college levels gained prominence. As a result, two parallel learning systems appeared on the educational landscape: vernacular-based learning and newly emerging English medium instruction (EMI). Today, in Punjab, EMI-based schooling has gained prestige, as it is equated with quality education. English proficiency is perceived as a resource for professional success and resultant socio-economic upliftment. But, at the same time, vernacular-based

schooling is also a reality in the state. Therefore, students from both schooling backgrounds with varied English proficiency levels join professional and non-professional courses in higher education institutions, leading to the pairing of a heterogeneous group of students with diverse demographic backgrounds. Strong proficiency in the English language is a predictor of academic success for them, while its lack presents a major barrier and consequently becomes the cause of marginalisation of certain groups of students. Inclusivity at the school and higher education level is a vital policy concern in India. NEP 2020 has proposed, in quite explicit terms, to restructure the Indian education system in such a way that prevailing inequitable access to education on a linguistic basis can be dealt with. Proposals for strengthening the indigenous language base of students, preparation of bilingual study material and focus on developing bilingualism among students are the key goals (NEP,2020).

In this context, this study is an attempt to find out what exactly happens in English medium classrooms, with special attention to pedagogical choices, students' level of understanding, performance during examinations, in-class communication and the affective implications of the classroom environment on the students. In this framework, the present study explores the perspectives of a group of college students of different EMI programs, having diverse schooling and socio- economic backgrounds and with varied levels of English competence, regarding the role of the English language in their academics.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the present study is to analyse the impact of the rise of English as a global language on the academics of students studying in the colleges of Punjab.

METHOD

Sample: In the present study, for the selection of students' sample, the incidental sampling technique was used. In this manner, 418 college students pursuing their studies in English medium in various streams such as B.A., B.Sc., B.Com., BBA, BCA and B. Tech. from all the prominent professional and general higher education institutions of the state were included in the sample.

Research tool: An interview schedule was used to seek their responses. Its content has been standardised by including exact and precise questions to eliminate the interviewer's bias and to ensure that each respondent receives the same

stimuli in the form of questions. Interviews with 418 college students, studying through the English medium, in various professional and non-professional streams, have been conducted to collect their diverse views regarding the role of the English language in their academics. The data collected through interviews has been analysed by employing the techniques of content analysis and percentage analysis. The percentage analysis has facilitated gauging themes and patterns across the data, avoiding biased interpretation, enhancing precision, making contrasts and comparisons and validating conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study aims to analyse responses of college students regarding the role of the English language in their academics and various issues and challenges being faced by them while pursuing their academic programs in English medium.

Type of schools opted during schooling

Out of the total students, 49.3 per cent had schooling from government schools, 48.2% studied in private schools, and the remaining 2.5 per cent took education from private aided schools.

Table 1. Type of School Opted During Schooling

Type of School	Number of Respondents	
Government	206	49.3%
Private	201	48.2%
Private aided	11	2.5%
Total	418	100%

The data indicates that the sample under study comprises almost equal proportions of students affiliated with government schools and private schools. It shows that the students who join various professional or non-professional courses come from varied school backgrounds. In Punjab, primarily, there are two types of schools which are functional side by side. Under the first system, there are government schools and private aided schools which are affiliated to the state board, i.e., Punjab School Education Board(PSEB). Whereas, on the other hand, there are private schools, the majority of which are affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education(CBSE). Besides, a substantial number of private schools are affiliated to PSEB also.

Medium of Instruction during Schooling

All government schools impart education in Punjabi medium. However, in line with private education, in 2019, English was introduced as an optional medium at 9th and 10th standards. On the other hand, all private schools, which are affiliated to the CBSE board, provide complete education in English

medium. There are certain private schools, affiliated to PSEB, which offer vernacular (Punjabi/Hindi) as the medium of instruction. Besides elite private English medium schools, there are also low-fee private so-called English medium schools. Here, students from low socio-economic backgrounds enrol to fulfil their aspiration of attaining EMI-based education.

The students were asked about their medium of learning at school level. 68.9 per cent of the students said that they studied in English medium; 18.2 per cent had Punjabi as the medium of instruction, and 12.9 per cent of students opted for Hindi medium.

Table 2. Medium of Instruction during Schooling

Medium of Instruction during Schooling	Number of Respondents	
English	288	68.9%
Punjabi	76	18.2%
Hindi	54	12.9%
Total	418	100%

The figures show that the present group of respondents has varied levels of exposure to the English language at the time of joining undergraduate courses in colleges. Their basic competence in English is largely determined by the learning they received during schooling.

Medium of instruction offered for different Higher Education Programs

In India, a three-language formula has been adopted. In the higher education institutions, English, Hindi and other vernacular languages have been adopted as medium of instruction. To ascertain the significance of the English language in various academic programs, students were asked about the medium of instruction offered in their respective institutions. In response, half of the students stated that their program is offered only in English medium. However, twenty-four per cent of the respondents reported that their respective programs are being offered in Hindi, Punjabi and English medium.

Table 3. Medium of instruction available in different institutions

Language	Number of Respondents	
English	210	50%
Hindi or Punjabi or English	99	24%
Hindi or English	65	16%
Punjabi or English	44	10%
Total	418	100%

Further, sixteen per cent of respondents have reported that Hindi and English are the medium of

instruction in their case. Similarly, 10 per cent of the respondents have reported that Punjabi and English are available as the medium of instruction.

It is concluded that in Punjab, almost all professional programmes such as B. Tech, BBA, and BCA are offered only in English as the medium. Whereas students who opt for non-professional courses also have the option of choosing a vernacular medium of instruction.

Difficulty in Understanding Content during Delivery of Lectures in English Language

Students were asked whether they faced any difficulty understanding the subject matter in English medium. A considerable proportion of students (40%) responded affirmatively. However, sixty per cent of the respondents were of the view that they were not facing much difficulty.

Table 4: Difficulty in understanding the subject matter during delivery of lectures in English language

Difficulties	Number of Respondents	
Facing difficulties in understanding the content	167	40%
Not facing difficulties in understanding the content	251	60%
Total	418	100%

Thus, after opting for English as a medium of instruction (EMI), the students are not at ease with learning the course content. A considerable number of students face difficulties comprehending the course content. During interview sessions, it emerged that students with diverse schooling backgrounds get admission to different undergraduate programs. Students with vernacular-medium schooling must study in English medium if they choose a professional course. It becomes incomprehensible for these students when 'content is presented continuously in English for a stretch of time and is not followed by some explanation in vernacular'; or when 'certain terminology is introduced which is sometimes difficult to pronounce even'; or when 'they are asked to answer a question which they find difficult to frame' and for some students 'reading from English medium text books is not psychological comfortable.' This supports Hammou and Kesbi's (2023) view that, although graduate students hold a positive attitude towards English-medium instruction (EMI), they feel unprepared for it because they received education in the vernacular medium at earlier levels. Besides, in non-professional courses, certain students with

vernacular medium schooling prefer English medium for better academic and professional prospects.

Offering Choice of Vernacular Language as Medium of Instruction

Students' opinions were sought on the need to offer the course content of their respective program in Punjabi medium. To this question, many students have responded positively. However, a variety of reasons emerged in support of their responses.

Thirty per cent of the respondents have the belief that vernacular medium leads to willing involvement of students in the learning process. Further, they (23%) have opined that the course content should be offered in vernacular for those students who lack basic English proficiency. According to them, it will make them 'active participants in the classroom where, otherwise, they remain silent'. Another set of respondents (17%) has been of the view that vernacular medium makes the learning process familiar and understandable. Besides, in the view of fifteen per cent of these respondents, learning through vernacular mediums (Hindi/Punjabi) contributes to their growth and 'they need not hold on to whatever is

emerging in their minds during the classroom discussions.'

On the contrary, ten per cent of the respondents have reported that there is insufficient availability of learning resources for their professional courses in Hindi and Punjabi languages. Further, they have opined that English, being the global language, is crucial to develop English language skills. Thus, these respondents have varied reasons to support their preference for English or vernacular as a medium of instruction. High motivation for learning, lack of sufficient command of the English language, and better understanding and recognition of the significance of local languages are the arguments that go in favour of preference for vernacular. The significance of English in the context of a globalised world and availability of adequate resources for learning make English a preferred medium of instruction for these students. This supports Vaish's (2008) view that due to the high value attached to learning the English language, people strongly believe that quality education can only be attained through English medium.

Table 5: Offering Choice of Vernacular languages as Medium of Instruction

Option	Rationale	Number of Respondents	
Choice of vernacular languages as medium of instruction should be offered.	The vernacular mediums lead to students' willing involvement in learning.	124	30%
	Many a time, students lack English proficiency, due to which their learning is obstructed.	96	23%
	Vernacular media make the learning process familiar and understandable for students whose medium of learning was not English in school.	72	17%
	Learning through vernacular media contributes to the development of local languages.	62	15%
Choice of vernacular languages as a medium of instruction should not be offered.	Insufficient availability of books and other learning resources in Hindi and Punjabi makes the learning process difficult.	42	10%
	English is a global language; it is crucial to develop English language skills by implementing English as the sole medium of learning.	22	5%
Total		418	100%

Medium of Classroom Teaching

Another important aspect of the learning process is the teacher's choice of medium of instruction in the classroom. While responding to the question whether the English language is the only medium of classroom teaching, 17 per cent of the respondents have reported that everything is explained completely in the English language. Whereas thirty per cent of them have been of the view that everything is explained mostly in the English language, but mother

tongue/regional language is used sometimes in order to make the subject content understandable.

Further, one-fourth of the respondents stated that, while explaining the content, the mother tongue is used very frequently. However, 21 per cent of the respondents have highlighted the simultaneous use of English and vernacular by teachers in the classroom. Seven per cent of respondents reported that English is used sparingly and that teachers mostly use the

mother tongue. Many students were of the view that ‘they couldn’t stay attentive for long if the lecture was delivered in English only.’ Some were of the view that ‘they felt tuned in to the class when the teacher quoted real-life examples in Punjabi.’ A small group of students have said that teaching a professional course in Punjabi is not acceptable. ‘They must be made to speak in English in the classroom.’ Thus, despite having English as the medium of instruction,

teachers are making use of vernacular for explanation of curricular content for ensuring better comprehension of concepts. Though there are teachers who prefer to teach in English medium only, yet the use of vernacular in the other cases is quite substantial. The demographic variations present in the classroom influence teachers’ decision to use bilingualism in the EMI classrooms for the attainment of comprehension and engagement.

Table 6: Medium of Classroom Teaching

Option	Number of Respondents	
Everything is explained completely in English.	70	17%
Everything is explained mostly in English; however, the mother tongue/ regional language is used sometimes.	128	30%
During the explanation process, the mother tongue is used very frequently to build understanding.	105	25%
Explanation in English and in the mother tongue goes side by side.	87	21%
English is used sparingly, and mostly the mother tongue is used.	28	7%

English as Medium of Examination

Examination is an integral part of the learning process, so it is pertinent to know the impact of English medium on the performance of these students in their examinations. When asked about this issue, 51 per cent of these students have reported that they perceive themselves capable of expressing themselves effectively in the English language while taking examinations.

Further, 35 per cent of the respondents have stated that while taking examinations in English medium, ‘they first think in their mother tongue and then translate their thoughts into the English language.’ Also, some of these students (19%) face difficulty in

taking examinations due to ‘lack of adequate vocabulary.’ Another problem that 16 per cent of respondents face is their inability ‘to construct grammatically correct sentences in English.’ Besides, there are some students (5%) who ‘cram the content and reproduce the same in the examination.’

Thus, on the one hand, some students are competent enough to express themselves in English. On the other hand, some students find English challenging because they lack vocabulary and have inadequate knowledge of grammatical rules. To cope with the challenges posed by English as a medium of instruction, students opt to cram and reproduce content in examinations.

Table 7: English as Medium of Examination

Option	Number of Respondents	
I can express myself effectively in English while taking examinations.	214	51%
While taking examinations in English medium, I first think in my mother tongue and then translate my thoughts into English before putting them on paper, which becomes a very time-consuming process.	145	35%
While taking examinations, I lack suitable vocabulary to express myself.	80	19%
Sometimes I cannot construct grammatically correct sentences during examinations.	65	16%
I cram the content and reproduce the same in the examinations.	20	5%

Problems faced by students due to English medium

Many students have articulated several problems faced by them in their EMI classrooms. Generally, these students face difficulty in achieving conceptual understanding and expressing their ideas in English. In their view, ‘sometimes meanings of words are not

known’; ‘some words seem difficult and cannot be understood easily’; ‘at times there is difficulty in grasping new words’. Further, these students face problems while speaking in English. The difficulties faced by students in communication are manifested in fear, nervousness and students’ hesitation in speaking English. Sabbah (2018) has reported how

fear of failure and negative feedback while speaking English caused anxiety among ESL learners. This matches the findings of the present study, where students experience fear while speaking in English in the presence of their classmates.

In addition, inadequate vocabulary, poor linguistic formulation and inadequate command over grammatical structures become problematic for students. As a result, while communicating in the English language, they face difficulty in 'sentence formation' and thus 'can't communicate in English on the spot' and 'lack fluency in expressing their point of view'. When they are expected to express orally in class, they experience fear and anxiety. Moreover, a small number of respondents have reported certain troubles in carrying out the reading process in the English language.

CONCLUSION

Based on students' perceptions of the impact of English as a global language on educational practices at the higher education level, the following conclusions have been drawn.

Because of the significance of English at the global level, most higher education institutions in Punjab offer English as the medium of instruction. The role of English is defined as the "tidal wave that is moving into almost every sociolinguistic repertoire" throughout the global language ecology (Spolsky, 2004). In Punjab, English is the sole medium of almost all professional courses, but non-professional courses are offered in English medium along with the choice of vernacular medium.

These EMI programs at the undergraduate level accommodate a diverse group of students having varying levels of English language competence. Despite having a background in vernacular-medium schooling, students enrol in EMI-based undergraduate professional and non-professional courses. They acknowledge the significance of English in a globalised world, and because most learning resources are available in English, they prefer it as a medium of instruction. The students' perspective aligns with Elizabeth Erling (2016), who argues that, across the South Asian region, "English is seen as essential for accessing the best higher education opportunities, which then lead to the best employment opportunities." On similar lines, emphasising the role of English in generating employability for high-end careers, Upadhya and Sah (2019) have also reported that, in general, access to working literacy and communicative skills in English is

often acknowledged as a tool for socio-economic development in South Asia.

Still, many students prefer the vernacular medium because, according to them, it encourages their willing involvement in the learning process. The students are aware of their strengths and limitations. Lack of basic command over the English language, the goal of better understanding of learning content and the significance of the vernacular medium for the development of local languages are the arguments that go in favour of making the choice of vernacular as a medium of instruction. In this context, UNESCO's (2025) recent report states that "mother tongue instruction is a means of improving educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of the learners and teachers."

EMI deters the path of learning of many students, but mother tongue interventions contribute to easing out this process. Bilingualism is quite prominent for academic interactions in EMI classrooms. Although some teachers prefer to teach only in English, the use of vernacular is substantial. Most explanations are delivered in the vernacular language. It has been observed that English is used minimally for communicative purposes in these EMI classrooms. Khan & Nabi (2021) also reported that both the native and English languages are used for teaching at the higher education level. The native language is utilised for oral communication in the classrooms, but English is the medium for written communication only.

The same duality is present in the medium of examination. Some students can express themselves in English while taking examinations. But, at the same time, there are students who experience a shortage of adequate vocabulary and have poor command over grammatical rules of English. For them, the English language becomes a challenge. Besides, there are a considerable number of students who first think in their mother tongue and then translate the same into English.

The choice of EMI-based programs fulfils students' aspirational needs but also creates affective pressure. The researchers have highlighted that continuous affective support for students will help combat the emotional challenges of EMI classrooms. Rahmat et al. (2021) have also reported that university students experience nervousness while using English for oral interaction. When answering questions in the classroom, they experience fear of failure and performance pressure in the presence of peers.

Students' responses suggest that it is fundamentally important to shift from a monolingual teaching framework to the pluralistic reality of a non-native learning context. "Multilingual individuals tend to exhibit higher levels of empathy, enhanced problem-solving abilities, a greater aptitude for learning new languages, and better recovery from brain injuries, compared to their monolingual counterparts (UNESCO, 2025). A substantial number of students find it challenging to learn in English. They have articulated various problems that they face in their classrooms. Generally, these students have difficulty understanding various concepts and expressing their views in English. Moreover, a small number of respondents reported difficulties with reading and pronouncing English words and sentences. However, researchers have reported that there is a need for linking English language learning practices to their real-life usage. Therefore, more appropriate English language pedagogies are needed so that language learning can be put to real-world use and align with global English usage practices. (Rose and Galloway, 2019).

Further, bilingualism is instrumental in promoting inclusivity in higher education. The UNESCO report reiterates that learners have the "right to a quality education in languages they understand, supporting their path toward academic success, social inclusion, and a stronger sense of cultural identity" (UNESCO, 2025). Regardless of previous English language proficiency or demographic affiliations, students have equal access to EMI-based professional and non-professional education. By moving away from conventional monolingual standards and making requisite use of students' first language as a resource for instilling learning, it reduces linguistic barriers to learning. It supports Kirkpatrick's (2017) findings, who has suggested that the adoption of EMI policies needs to involve the use of English as a lingua franca and utilisation of bi/multilingualism in linguistically diverse classrooms.

In this context, leveraging the native language along with English may bridge the gap between English-proficient students and those who are not. Besides, EMI provides discipline-specific context for learning English, making it practically relevant too.

Implications of Study

The present study offers insights for educators and policymakers to reflect upon suitable pedagogical interventions. Bilingualism implies moving away from an English-only environment and selecting a pedagogy

that accommodates diverse linguistic and cognitive abilities of students. Teacher training in the latest pedagogical tools suitable for bilingual contexts needs to be prioritised. Training in translanguaging and CLIL. Code-switching, scaffolding, and other immersive techniques will equip EMI teachers to plan and execute learner-centric classroom teaching effectively.

Teachers and college administrators can make provisions for introducing bridge courses in English, which will extend support to students in dealing with linguistic barriers in EMI classes. The findings of the study may assist stakeholders in planning and providing the requisite learning and infrastructural resources to help students develop their English proficiency. Forming learning groups based on students' English proficiency levels may help address student-centric academic and affective issues in EMI classrooms.

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