EFL students’ challenges in English-medium business programmes: Perspectives from students and content teachers

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Abstract: The overarching aim of this study was to investigate EFL students’ challenges in English-medium business programmes from the perspectives of both students and content teachers. English medium instruction (EMI) has been increasingly used in business study programmes in higher education institutions in English as second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts around the world. Consequently, there has been a growing body of research reporting the experiences of both EMI teachers and students utilizing EMI, particularly in European contexts. However, there is little attention given to EMI in the Middle East and the North and sub-Saharan African contexts. This paper duly reports findings from a large study of students’ experiences on an EMI Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme in Sudan. A qualitative ethnographically-oriented methodology was adopted involving three methods of data collection namely, interviews, classroom observations and collection and analysis of some documentary data. Twenty-one MBA students and ten subject teachers took part in the investigation. Results

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The paper reports on findings from a qualitative research project that was set to investigate the challenges experienced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students enrolled on an English-medium business post-graduate programme in a Sudanese EFL Higher Education context. English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been increasingly used globally to teach subject contents in contexts where English is not spoken as a first language. Although EMI business as a study area seems to attract large number of students in higher education institutions globally, it is still under-research in the EMI literature. The implications and insights gained from the present study will duly have some contribution that could help advance and inform theory, policy and pedagogy of EMI in Higher Education.
showed that students experienced a range of challenges which were reportedly perceived to have impacted on students’ academic performance and experiences on the programme negatively. Pedagogical implications for both EMI business education and English for academic purposes (EAP) are presented and discussed.

**Subjects:** Education; Educational Research; Higher Education; Language & Linguistics; Language Teaching & Learning

**Keywords:** EAP; ethnographic; EMI; business education; challenges

1. **Introduction**
   
   Over the last two decades, English has been increasingly used as a principal medium of instruction in several higher education programmes around the world (see e.g. Aizawa & Rose, 2020 & 2020; Holi, 2020; Airey, 2020; Aizawa, Rose, Thompson & Curle; Kamasak, Kamasak et al., 2020, & Holi, 2020b; Rose et al., 2020; Lin & He, 2019; Rotheooff, 2019; Walkinshaw et al., 2017; Hung & Lan, 2017; Airey, 2006; Airey & Linder, 2006; Chang, 2010; Dafouz & Camacho-Mirano, 2016; Dimova, 2017; Flowerdew & Miller, 1992, 1996, 1997; Graddol, 2006; Jensen et al., 2011; Macaro, 2013, 2018; Macaro et al., 2018). Although these EMI programmes have expanded significantly, it is clear that they are not without problems for both staff and students. Dimova (2017) describes how some lecturers spoke of “embarrassment and disappointment” and fear of dismissal for failing to meet the required standards of an English test at a Danish university (p. 54); while Sert (2008) and Byun et al. (2011) describe students’ anxieties in EMI contexts in Turkey and South Korea respectively about understanding and mastering the subject content. While there is a huge number of EAP studies (e.g. Angelova & Riazantaeva, 1999; Braine, 1995, 2002; Casonave, 2002; Currie, 1998; Gimenez, 2008; Jordan, 1993; Leki, 2003, 2007; Spack, 1997; Zhu & Flaitz, 2005) in English as a first language (L1) countries that have investigated EFL university students’ experiences concerning different aspects of the learning process, research on EMI programmes are less common in EFL contexts in general and on EMI business programmes in particular. Many previous studies of business in EFL contexts (e.g. Trinder, 2013; Zhang, 2007, 2013) have a rather different focus to that of the present research, examining EFL students’ experiences with business communication concerning professional workplace settings, to bridge the gap between the academy and the workplace.

   Globally, EMI business as a subject area of study has proved attractive to a large number of EFL students compared to other disciplines at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study. In Sudan, there is a growing trend for EMI programmes, particularly at the postgraduate level of study, and several English-medium business postgraduate programmes are offered in both public and private higher education institutions. The present study is therefore of significance internationally and more locally: internationally, it adds to the relatively limited number of studies of EMI contexts, and locally it is of significance for Sudanese higher education policymakers and educators, as it advances our understanding of students’ and teachers’ perspectives on EMI and the ways forward pedagogically to enhance the English-medium business programmes and their curricular.

2. **Literature review**

   There are two main strands of research featured in the EAP literature on business as a subject area in academic settings. The first strand is the body of research that has focused on the provision of foundational/pre-sessional or adjunct/in-sessional EAP support for business students (e.g. Bacho & Bahous, 2008; Ferris, 1998; Ferris & Tagg, 1996c, 1996b; Jackson, 2005; Johns, 1981; Kim, 2006). These studies have addressed issues such as the needs and language skills required of business students to effectively function on content courses and how language programmes could provide such skills. The ultimate aim of these studies has been, therefore, to align EAP provision with business students’ actual needs and requirements on content courses. The second strand is a body of work (e.g. Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Conseco & Byrd, 1989; Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Dudley-Evans, 2002; Harwood, 2003; Harwood & Petrić, 2012; Lung, 2008; Zhu, 2004) which has more closely examined the specific written genres associated with business courses in the academy. For example, researchers have classified the types of written tasks/genres required on business content
courses, compared and contrasted specific textual features of student genres (e.g. Master’s dissertations) and business expert genres (research articles) and analysed business students’ citation behaviours. These studies aim to inform both business education and business EAP pedagogy, ensuring that these are sensitive to students’ actual needs and requirements on business content courses.

Some studies on the discipline of business in EFL academic contexts (e.g. Hsu, 2011) have focused on analysing how much vocabulary students need to learn to effectively read English-medium subject textbooks. Others (e.g. Jackson, 2005) have focused on the perceptions of business lecturers of the linguistic and conceptual problems encountered by Chinese undergraduate business students enrolled on English-medium business programmes in Hong Kong. Lecturers in Jackson’s study reported problems in many areas: students were said to lack the capacity to study independently, had poorly developed study habits, and had problems participating in classroom discussion, making oral presentations and in asking questions in the classroom due to their weak language and interpersonal communication skills.

The above studies were located in EFL contexts similar to the present study, but, given the lack of research on EFL business students’ experiences on EMI business courses, We have also drawn on other relevant studies investigating EFL students’ experiences situated in L1 English contexts, and focusing on disciplines other than business namely, academic literacy longitudinal case studies (e.g. Braine, 2002; Casanave, 2002; Currie, 1998; Gimenez, 2008; Spack, 1997; Zhu & Flaitz, 2005) to understand the types of problems and challenges EFL students experience on EMI programmes of study. These studies report various language-related problems such as difficulties with lecture comprehension, problems with writing tasks, including plagiarism and more general issues such as adapting to the new learning situation. Unsurprisingly, these problems were found to have had impacted on students’ performance negatively.

In a much-cited longitudinal case study on the acquisition of academic literacy in a second language, Spack (1997) followed a social science undergraduate EFL Japanese student, Yuko, at a US university over three years. Spack focused on academic reading and writing tasks and how Yuko went through the process of acquiring competence in and performing them. Yuko experienced a range of problems, both language- and discipline-related along the way.

In a similar vein, Leki’s (2003, 2007) longitudinal case studies on EFL/ESL undergraduate students’ literacy experiences in a US university have revealed a range of difficulties students experience and various strategies they adopt to cope on their content courses. For instance, Yang, a Chinese nursing undergraduate student, experienced severe difficulties in writing the required genres. Yang found writing nursing care plans for patients somewhat problematic, feeling she needed better writing skills: “If you got good writing, you will spend little time. For me … I spend a lot of time” (Leki, 2003, p. 92). Yang also reportedly experienced problems with oral communication which is a crucial skill for success on nursing study programmes since it is used on clinical rounds that constitute a large part of the assessment on the programme.

In general, although the types of problems and difficulties EFL students experience on EMI programmes would seem to overlap regarding both EFL and L1 English contexts, at least some of the problems identified will likely be context-bound and content-specific, which will have implications for appropriate EAP pedagogy in these settings. Hence, there is a need to focus on the context and on context-specific issues to arrive at a deeper understanding of students’ problems and propose ways to overcome or minimise these problems.
Given the lack of previous research in the Sudanese EMI context in general and on business courses in particular, the present study is intended to have both significant contextual and disciplinary contribution for business lecturers, EAP practitioners, curriculum designers and policy-makers in the Sudanese context, while also contributing to the growing literature on EMI globally. The study was set to address the following two research questions:

1. What challenges do Sudanese EMI business students experience in EMI business programmes?
2. To what extent do these problems impact on students’ academic performance on the programme?

3. Methodology & design

We adopted a qualitative ethnographically-oriented methodology because of its emic and emergent design nature that well suited our purpose. Two rounds of data collection were followed, enabling data collection over two successive years. This allowed the researchers a relatively lengthy immersion and sustained engagement in the context of the study. The analysis of the first visit data generated specific areas of interest which were further explored in the second visit. The ethnographically-oriented design we followed in the study was informed by the literature (see e.g. Hammersley, 1994, 2006; Harklau, 2005; Lilis, 2008; Walford, 2009; Watson-Gegeo, 1988), and several principles and core characteristics that are typical of ethnography and ethnographic research were applied in the study research design, data collection, and data analysis.

3.1. Participants

Thirty-one participants, both MBA teachers and MBA students took part in the study. Ethical approval was obtained before the start of the study and all participants were reassured that their participation was voluntary and that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. Ten teacher participants (T1-T10), of which five (T1 T3, T5, T6 and T7) were involved during both rounds of data collection. A total of 21 student participants took part in the study (S1-S21). Five student participants (S2, S3, S5, S6, S7 and S7) were interviewed during both visits. The student participants had different disciplinary backgrounds ranging from applied sciences to humanities and social sciences. They all studied their undergraduate degrees in Arabic, their first language and most if not all of them were also working besides studying and so were not full-time students, although the programme is a full time, requiring students to attend six days a week with classes being run in the evening after work.

3.2. Methods and procedures for data collection

Semi-structured interviews were utilized as they were appropriate for this study because they allow the researcher to be flexible and responsive since a participant might supply additional information stimulated by the situation. Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to follow up the interviewees’ answers and provide an opportunity to ask for clarification if necessary or to probe unexpected responses (Kvale, 2007; Robson, 2011). By employing semi structured-interviews for the current study, the participants felt free to discuss the wider issues that particularly concerned them concerning their English-medium business programme. The participants were assured about confidentiality and anonymity during the interviews was intended to reinforce the ethical position and to encourage the participants to express their views and to talk freely about their experiences with the EMI classes and challenges. All the interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken during the interviews to compensate for any missing details.

Interviews, observations and collection of documents were used as the main methods for data collection. Forty-one face-to-face tape-recorded interviews were conducted with the participants during the two rounds of data collection. Each interview lasted between 60 and 60 minutes. During the interviews, we used prompt cards and documents to elicit specific, in-depth responses. The information on the prompt cards was of three types: (i) extracts from classroom observations; (ii) views and information reported by other interviewees; and (iii) extracts from the documentary materials collected.
Interviews with the subject teachers were conducted in English while all students were interviewed in Arabic. Interviews conducted in Arabic were translated into English. To ensure greater accuracy of the translation, we asked an Arabic L1 speaker to check our translation. We showed them the full transcripts of one interview and we asked them to listen to the recordings of the interview while reading through the transcripts. There were no translation problems and/or differences noted by the checker.

3.3. Observations
The observation was used in this study along with other techniques of data collection and generation, namely, semi-structured interviews and some institutional documents and artefacts. Gathering live data from naturally occurring social situations is the distinctive feature of observation (Robson, 2011). Observations offer opportunities to collect data as it occurs in its naturalistic setting by allowing researchers to discover things that the participant may not want to talk about in an interview (Denscombe, 2010). This unique feature of observation gives the researchers the potential to access valid, authentic data through the use of immediate awareness or direct cognition, which cannot be possible using mediated or inferential methods. Furthermore, Patton (2002) points out that direct observation enables the observer to understand more and capture the contexts where human interaction takes place. Data obtained from observation should serve as supplementary to substantive information generated employing interviews (Robson, 2011). The observed EMI classes provided the research with a rich description of the challenges encountered by business major students in their EMI classes. Observations were chosen as they offer the researchers an opportunity to observe directly and closely the participants in the classroom and to gather first-hand data, rather than asking the participants or relying on second-hand data (Robson, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Thirty classroom observations were conducted during the two rounds of data collection. The observations were open in their structure as the purpose was to explore as many issues as possible in the context. Some observations were conducted right at the beginning of classes in week one, others were conducted sometime later after some interviews had been conducted. The purpose of conducting multiple observations over time of many classes was to try and observe as much as possible and avoid the “hit-and-miss” type of observations. The data collected from observations were analyzed thematically guided by the research questions and the interviews data.

3.4. Documents
A range of documents were also collected and used during the two visits. The documents helped triangulate the data as they were reproduced as interview prompt cards. The documents featured:

(A) Samples of students’ written responses to tasks they were asked to do on the MBA courses by their teachers.

(B) A booklet on the MBA programme including details of the structure of the MBA programme and all MBA course descriptions, criteria related to assessment and award of the degree, and criteria for admission onto the programme.

(C) Two textbooks taught on the ESP/EAP course to MBA students.

3.5. Coding and analytical procedures
All interview transcripts and observational notes were coded and analysed thematically and inductively. We adopted an exploratory open strategy to code our data in the sense that we coded everything so that we could discover as many potential issues as possible from the datasets. This strategy was informed by the cross-sectional qualitative coding approach whereby thematic coding was followed and themes were generated from the data with representative quotes (e.g. Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Mason 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994).
Several strategies were used to sustain and enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. One of the strategies was the methodological triangulation of the techniques of the data collections. Interviews, observation and some institutional documents were utilized to collect data to allow comparison between the datasets. This technique enabled researchers to minimize any potential drawbacks in the data collection through one source. We believe triangulation helped in enhancing the study trustworthiness and its credibility and building the confidence of the study findings to get a fuller picture of the situation and the issues under investigation. Additionally, study participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time if they wish to do so without expressing their reasons.

4. Findings
In this study, thematic analysis was used because it is flexible, and a generic approach that can be used with different studies. Thematic analysis has the potential to produce many interpretations of data and potentially give more insightful interpretations than other approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As for the steps of the data coding and analysis, we adopted the five phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, familiarising ourselves with data which included the data transcription process and our reading and re-reading through the data. Second, we generated initial codes and themes that were salient features of the data. Third, we searched for the most salient and recurring themes in the data and collated them. Fourth, we reviewed the collated themes to generate a thematic map of the analysis. Finally, we refined, defined and named the themes to ensure that the themes accurately capture and represent the participants’ voices and perspectives.

Data analysis revealed that there was a range of problems students reportedly experienced on the MBA. These problems were ascribed to several sources and were believed by participants to have negatively affected students’ academic performance on the programme.

4.1. Lack of relevant business background
The lack of relevant business background among the majority of students appeared to be a problem that impacted on students’ academic performance. For example, here is S4, stressing how the lack or possession of relevant business disciplinary background could facilitate or impede one’s successful academic performance on the MBA:

People on the MBA come from different disciplines ... science, pharmacy, engineering, arts, etc. We have maths [in some MBA courses] for instance, which is very familiar and easy for me. But for someone who comes from a pharmacy background, they would find maths very difficult. Some people already studied accounting. For such people, the Financial Accounting course is very easy. For me, it is a bit difficult as I didn't study it before. (S4)

In a similar vein, S7 reflected on their lack of business background compared to other students:

I don't have prior knowledge in accounting courses [such as] the Financial Accounting course. In the economics and management courses ... I try to cope although I don't have a background. But people who come from the business background are ok as they can cope. (S7)

This problem of lack of disciplinary background, however, seemed less acute for some students, namely for those who have quantitative and mathematical backgrounds (e.g. engineering and computer science students):

Since our study in engineering involved mathematics and mathematical problems so I don't find problems in dealing with everything that is logical or anything that involves mathematics. (S12)

Most teachers also agreed that quantitative or numerical backgrounds can help students cope with some of the MBA courses:

Students who come from mathematical backgrounds, generally have a better understanding for the things that are related to calculations and accounting issues ... so the best and
distinguished students on the MBA are of engineering backgrounds because they understand things better and so they are better [in coping with accounting courses]. (T3/2)

4.2. Medium of instruction

The difference between the languages of instruction used in the MBA (English) and that predominantly used in students’ undergraduate degrees (Arabic) appeared to impact students’ academic performance. Students reported finding the English-medium teaching experience unfamiliar and they seemed to undergo a difficult transition into adapting to and coping with this new learning situation:

I did my undergraduate in Arabic. I studied five years of my undergraduate in Arabic. Most of the subjects were in Arabic. The course textbooks and exams are in Arabic… The language of communication between students was Arabic… so when I joined the MBA programme, I found it a bit difficult at the beginning to understand classes in English (S6/2)

Moreover, this new English-medium learning situation was unfamiliar even for MBA students with business backgrounds. Although they had relevant disciplinary knowledge in place from their undergraduate study, they still encountered language problems as they did their undergraduate degrees in Arabic:

We studied all our undergraduate degrees in Arabic so when we joined the MBA, we found new terminology and even problems with spelling and the like. We particularly found problems with the [MBA] theoretical subjects. Courses like Marketing Strategies for instance, and Capital Market need vocabulary. They require skills in the language. Even if you understand the subject in Arabic from your studies in the undergraduate level you would still have problems to communicate that in English. Here [on the MBA] we are required to use certain, scientific and organised language and this seems a bit difficult for people who studied their undergraduate in Arabic. (S11)

These students contended that the situation would have been different had they been taught the business subjects in English during their undergraduate study:

During my undergraduate study, we were taught one course in English. It was the Financial Management course. You see any subjects that taught to us fully or partially in English in our undergraduate, they don’t seem new to us now [on the MBA]. (S11)

Indeed, teachers described how lack of punctuality and fatigue were problems they were familiar with:

All of them [students] are employees and they would come directly from the office to the lecture halls. Sometimes you feel they are tired and have not even the interest to attend or participate in the class. I noticed that some would come very late. [The classes] starting time is 5 pm and they still come in after five-thirty, and their main excuse is always that “we are working”. (T4)

Another major problem area was the students’ poor English skills. We will now describe these problems in more detail, beginning with their speaking and listening problems.

4.3. Communication (speaking and listening) problems

Most students reportedly encountered communication problems which seemed to affect their study in various ways. In this section, analysis of communication problems covered two main areas, namely problems with speaking skills, related to oral presentations and classroom participation, and listening skills, including lecture comprehension and note-taking skills. Students claimed that they found it difficult to express their ideas in English. They reported they grasp the relevant concepts but cannot express them, preventing them from participating in classes:
The problem is how to get people to speak fluently. You know most people can write but their problem has always been [oral] communication. (S16)

The speaking problem was one of the persistent language problems we observed in classes over the two visits. MBA teachers also noticed and commented on this problem. Students speak hesitantly and they speak in fragmented and incomplete phrases:

Different students provided different answers to the teacher's question in the class on the difference between cost accounting, financial accounting and accounting management. Students' answers were expressed in incomplete phrases and the teacher keeps saying to them that your problem is that you don't organise your ideas. You just talk but you don't put your ideas in an organised way, please organise your ideas. (T3/CO1*)

When asked, during interviews, about the issue of disorganised or incomplete answers to the teachers' questions in classes, students ascribed the problem to the lack of speaking skills:

You see there are problems in communicating and getting your ideas organised. I feel there are problems of expressing your ideas in English without repeating words. You feel you got the ideas in mind but you can't translate that into English. (S5)

During classroom observations, we also noticed how students would resort to Arabic as, seemingly, a compensatory coping strategy:

We noticed that students when asking questions, they ask in Arabic or a mixture of both Arabic and English. We noticed that they ask and interact using half English and half Arabic … (T7/2 CO2)

Students seemed to resort to Arabic to help them avoid communication breakdown when asking or answering questions in classes:

We noticed that one of the students asked the teacher to repeat the explanation of a point in Arabic and the teacher commented on the issue of students' resort to Arabic to answer or ask questions in classes by recalling a story from exams he marked. He told students that he noticed that some people in the exam when get blocked writing in English, they would resort to and write some points in Arabic … (T7/2 CO2)

Most teachers also agreed that students have communication problems which prevented them from successfully participating and engaging in class discussions:

When I sometimes deliver the class, I feel that students look uneasy or I feel that they sort of not understanding which means there is a problem in understanding English. There is also a problem with communication. Students are not easily able to express themselves in English … (T7/2)

This general lack of English language skills and its effects was summed up by T6 as follows:

In my opinion, language is a real problem. It is an obstacle. Those who suffer from the lack of language proficiency, they will not be able to study, they will not be able to understand in lectures, they will not be able to do exercises after classes, they will not be able to read, they will not be able to write and also, of course, they will not be able to better do their exams. (T6)

4.4. Teachers’ speed of delivering lectures

One of the problems related to the lack of listening skills can be seen when students describe their difficulties comprehending lectures, ascribing comprehension problems to
teachers speaking quickly. This problem reportedly prevented students from understanding the subject and taking notes in response to teachers' explanations and elaborations on the subject in classes:

There was a problem in the accounting courses. For instance, we couldn't understand from the teacher of Financial Accounting course in semester one. Even those who graduated from the school here and who have business backgrounds faced a problem with understanding the teacher … she was fast. (S1)

The note-taking problem was indeed confirmed during the classroom observations during our first round of data collection. We noticed that students did not take notes in classes and seemed to find listening and writing at the same time problematic:

We noticed that only a few students take notes while the teacher was talking. We again noticed that only a few of the students write down what the teacher was talking about and displaying in the PowerPoint slides. (T1/CO1)

The same problem was also observed during the second round of data collection:

We noticed that the students in this class were not taking notes. Only a few (more than 50 students were attending the class) who were taking notes. (T1/2 CO2)

When students were asked later during interviews for an explanation, they confirmed they found it difficult to listen and write at the same time. Indeed, even more, seasoned third-semester students reportedly continued to experience the same problem:

We couldn't take notes or write everything with the teachers because teachers talk fast. I think that teachers talk fast and we don't forget that there's a problem of language although we are in semester three. It is difficult to follow up. The problem is the language problem. (S8)

4.5. Lack of writing skills

Students identified various aspects of the writing problem in the sense that when writing they reportedly encounter problems of structure, grammar, presentation and the clarity of the writing as a whole:

I think people have got problems with writing. People can't write. They know for instance, the word and they pronounce it but they can't write it. This is a real problem. You find someone talks about the topic and understands the topic and when it comes to writing they make mistakes. You feel there are problems with structure, grammar, and clarity. (S10)

The complexity of writing problems extended to the students' lack of summary and paraphrasing skills, particularly evident when writing for exams and the more theoretical MBA courses. For such courses, rather than writing things verbatim from the textbooks and sources, they are required to summarise and paraphrase in their own words. They were also required to write lengthy texts:

I think writing is the most common problem. Many people were worried about writing for exams for the management courses which involve a lot of writing and the teacher warned students that they shouldn't write things as they were in the coursebook. That made it more difficult for the students who would say that they could learn things by heart and then regurgitate that verbatim in the exam as they could not paraphrase and use their own words. Most people faced problems with writing especially for the management courses. I know a lot of people who told me that they couldn't write much. You feel that people understand the subject when they chat on the subjects but they find problems when it comes to exam question like writing and discusses and so on. (S12)
The students' lack of writing skills was also noticed during classroom observations. Due to that, students could not take notes in classes:

We noticed that most of the students were not taking notes from slides or the teachers’ explanations and elaboration on the content presented on of the slides. (T1 CO2)

The only time students started taking notes in classes was when the teachers wrote their explanations and elaborations of topics on the boards. Students could then copy directly verbatim from the boards. To sum up, from the above it would seem that all these types of problems seem to have negatively impacted on students’ performance and academic life on the EMI MBA programme.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study was set out to investigate EFL students’ challenges in English-medium business programmes and the impact of these challenges on their academic performance. Both students’ and content teachers’ perspectives were investigated. The study was qualitative in nature and it used semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and some institutional documents as sources of data. The study attempted to answer two main research questions: what challenges do Sudanese EMI business students experience in EMI business programmes? And to what extent do these problems impact on students’ academic performance on the programme? The overarching aim of the study was to investigate these challenges with the view of improving both the delivery of the EMI business programme and enhancing the supportive EAP provision for better preparing students to cope with the EMI study. The findings revealed that students experienced a range of problems which appeared to have negatively impacted their effective academic performance in and engagement with the programme. The findings corroborate the findings reported in the wider EMI and ESP/EAP literature reporting on students’ difficulties in other English-medium programmes in other EMI contexts (e.g. Aizawa & Rose, 2020; Holi, 2020a; Airey, 2020; Aizawa et al., 2020; Kamasak et al., 2020; Şahan, & Holi, 2020b; Rose et al., 2020; Lin & He, 2019; Roothooft, 2019; Walkinshaw et al., 2017; Hung & Lan, 2017; Angelova & Riazantsueva, 1999; Arden-Close, 1993; Benson, 1989; Braine, 2002; Campbell, 1973; Casanave, 1995; Casanave, 2002; Currie, 1998; Ferris & Tagg, 1996a, 1996b; Flowerdew & Miller, 1992; Spack, 1997). Content-area professors in Ferris and Tagg (1996a) study, for instance, found that ESL students’ inability or unwillingness to participate in class discussions and to ask or respond to questions were the main problems which learners encountered in EMI content courses.

The findings on students’ problems with lecture comprehension echoed similar finding in previous research (e.g. Alhassan, 2019; Flowerdew & Miller, 1996; Holi, 2020a). Moreover, lecture compression related challenges reported in this study suggest that students seemed to encounter the problem of the triple burden “of simultaneously listening, reading/deciphering a visual, and taking notes” (Flowerdew & Miller, 1996, p. 126). Issues with lecture comprehension also seemed to be exacerbated by students’ difficulties in asking questions as without the students’ questions, teachers might be less able to determine students’ specific problems and difficulties to adjust their lectures promptly [and] this may in turn further impede students’ comprehension of lectures (Chang, 2010, p. 72). These findings resonate with the findings reported in the literature (e.g. Airey & Linder, 2006; Arden-Close, 1993; Benson, 1989; Campbell, 1973; Flowerdew & Miller, 1992; Kim, 2006) in that comprehending lectures and taking notes while listening to lectures are reportedly two of the most common difficulties encountered by EFL/ESL students enrolled on English-medium programmes.

The lack of business knowledge was also reported as one of the major problems that students encounter on the MBA programme. This problem was found to negatively affect students’ academic performance on the programme to the extent that students struggled to cope with lectures and various activities required of them. This suggests that the relationship between students’ literacy/educational histories and their new/current learning situation is significant in researching and understanding students’ problems and/or practices in their new learning situations. This finding lends support to other academic literacy studies in
the literature (e.g. Johns, 1997; Casanave, 1995; Prior, 1994; Spack, 1997) which make this connection. For instance, Yuko in Spack’s (1997) study reported, in addition to language difficulties, difficulties in coping with two social science courses in her first year due to lack of background knowledge necessary for these courses, which included knowledge of the U.S and European history. Due to difficulties in grasping the arguments and rhetoric of the subject content, Yuko became so frustrated that she dropped the course. The lack of writing skills further appeared to prevent students from effectively performing the writing tasks required of them. Writing problems can be attributed to many factors such as the students’ non-business educational backgrounds, the use of Arabic as a main medium of instruction during their first degrees, in contrast to the English-medium MBA, the structure of the MBA and its intensive nature, and the students’ mode of study on the programme. Some of these problems were related to students and their backgrounds and the impact these factors have on their understanding and handling of the tasks required of them in the new learning situations. Some others were task-related since teachers who assigned these tasks in most cases were not clear and explicit in spelling out their instructions, requirements and expectations behind these tasks. While previous studies on business writing genres required of students on business courses (e.g. Consec & Byrd, 1989; Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Horowitz, 1996) have found prompts or detailed teachers’ instructions for the tasks in the business course syllabuses useful in facilitating students to effectively fulfil the tasks, in contrast, the course descriptions or syllabuses in the context of the present study did not normally contain such detailed task instructions nor did subject teachers provide direct instructions. Such a situation caused students to fail to understand the requirements and thus prevented them from successfully achieving some of the tasks.

6. Implications and recommendations for EMI business education & EAP

This was a qualitative ethnographically-oriented study conducted in a single context and its findings were not intended for generalisation. However, in light of the study findings, we believe that the study has some useful implications and insights that can be transferrable to other similar contexts.

EMI courses, preferably taking the form of pre-sessional, needs to be established for EMI business programmes to better prepare students for effective study in their EMI content courses. Most importantly, such courses should be geared towards business content courses. This is indeed crucial since the motivation of EAP learners to effectively learn and make use of the language support programmes necessarily requires that these programmes should feature the materials that learners feel are relevant to the actual needs, demands, and requirements of their subject content (see e.g., Brinton et al., 1989; Feak, 2013; Flowerdew, 1993).

EAP teachers should work closely with business subject teachers to ensure that the design, development and focus of the EAP courses are maximally relevant. One of the ways that EAP teachers can become better informed about students’ needs is to observe, record, and/or video content classes to familiarise themselves with teachers’ expectations and requirements, and so that they can have authentic content materials or at least semi-authentic materials that they have designed while observing authentic classes, to present to their EAP classes.

Given the students’ reported lack of writing skills and the potential negative consequences this would have on their academic performance on the writing tasks required, writing skills also need to be enhanced and developed. There are several ways whereby EAP courses and teachers can achieve this. For instance, echoing proposals by Zhu (2004), the pre-sessional writing component should develop students’ analytical and problem-solving skills since most business tasks required on business courses focus on problem-solving and decision-making, requiring students to analyse information, identify problems, propose recommendations for action, and justify the recommendations. EAP courses for business students should also develop students’ skills of writing to different audiences, both academic and professional, by developing students’ awareness of their readership and their needs, skills that will likely prove useful beyond academia in the workplace where students write various genres with various purposes.
Given that some of the business tasks are conducted in groups, business EAP courses should ensure that students’ teamwork and cooperative work skills are developed and enhanced since they are crucial for effective and successful performance on such tasks, and in the workplace.

Moreover, business subject teachers can also play a role along with EAP teachers in supporting students to cope with business EMI programmes. For example, given students’ reported problems with lecture comprehension, note-taking, class participation, and many other interactive exchanges, business subject teachers should change the way they structure and deliver their classes to make them more comprehensible and accessible to students. They can, for instance, adopt many strategies and techniques in preparing and designing their subject content classes in ways that match with students’ various learning styles and strategies. EAP teachers as language experts can indeed provide some advice to business subject teachers in this respect. They can, for example, as stated above observe business classes and provide feedback on the way business subject teachers design and deliver EMI classes.

One of the limitations of this study that is needed to be acknowledged is that the findings are not claimed to be representative of the experiences of all EFL business students in Sudan or other contexts. Therefore, the findings of this study are specific to a relatively small number of participants in a particular context. However, the findings can be transferred to othersimilar contexts. The findings were based on both EFL business students’ and their content teachers’ perspectives about their experiences with EMI which are individual and authentic. They do not, however, claim to be representative to the entire population of the context in question. The findings can illuminate and help in generally understanding EFL students’ potential challenges in EMI programmes of study in various EMI educational contexts.

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Notes
1. Font size is added for emphasis.
2. Digit (2) is added to indicate that this quote is from the interviews with participants during the second visit.
3. The abbreviation CD is used for classroom observations followed by digit 1 or 2 to indicate the visit (first or second: e.g. T1/C01).

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