Challenges and Professional Development Needs of EMI Lecturers in Omani Higher Education

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Abstract
English Medium Instruction (EMI) has been increasingly used in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Sultanate of Oman, and the English-taught degree programs have been offered in different disciplines. The adoption of EMI seems to have potential challenges for both teachers and students. While previous EMI studies have attempted to identify and classify these challenges, particularly those of EMI students, little research thus far seems to have focused on EMI subject teacher challenges and training needs. The present study fills this gap by exploring the issue in the Omani EMI tertiary context with a view to better informing EMI teacher education and professional development. A qualitative methodology, with both interviews and classroom observations, was adopted. The data was coded and analyzed thematically and inductively. Results showed that participants encountered both linguistic and pedagogical challenges. Participants also reported their needs for training and professional development. Pedagogical implications and recommendations for EMI content teacher education and professional development are presented and discussed.

Keywords
EMI, challenges, content teacher, higher education, needs, professional development

Introduction
English Medium Instruction (EMI) or English as a medium of instruction seems to be defined differently in different contexts and this perhaps due to as Macaro (2018) notes, the recent emergence of EMI as a research field. The working definition in this paper would be the one suggested by Macaro et al. (2018). They defined EMI as “The use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English” (Macaro et al., 2018, p. 37). The adoption of EMI in higher education worldwide has been gaining prominence (see Wächtler & Maiworm, 2014). The main driving force frequently cited in the literature behind this global trend of EMI in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is the internationalization and globalization of higher education to produce globally minded graduates that are capable of competing in the global labor market. Other cited reasons for internationalization are the economic growth, ranking and visibility of HEIs, staff mobility and quality assurance and academic accreditation by both national and international organizations. The Sultanate of Oman (Oman) is not an exception to this global trend of EMI. In fact, since the 1990s English has been increasingly used in HEIs as the main language of instruction with the view that Oman needs English as a tool for modernization and the acquisition of science and technology (Al-issa, 2006). This seems to motivate and boost the adoption of English as a language of instruction in the Omani HEIs. EMI in Oman has therefore become a reality that needs to be acknowledged and dealt with. However, the growing use of EMI in the Omani HEIs seems to have created a range of challenges and difficulties on the side of both EMI content teachers and students. For the purpose of this paper, the focus is predominantly on the EMI subject teacher challenges and training needs. The overarching objective of the study was to explore the challenges and needs of EMI teachers from humanities and social sciences with a view to informing future EMI content teacher training and professional development programs in the Omani context, while also providing some transferable insights and implications for other similar contexts. Given that the area of EMI teacher training and professional development is still in its infancy and also given that, to the best of my knowledge, there is no, to date, any kind of well-defined and systematic EMI teacher training for modernization and the acquisition of science and technology (Al-issa, 2006). This seems to motivate and boost the adoption of English as a language of instruction in the Omani HEIs. EMI in Oman has therefore become a reality that needs to be acknowledged and dealt with. However, the growing use of EMI in the Omani HEIs seems to have created a range of challenges and difficulties on the side of both EMI content teachers and students. For the purpose of this paper, the focus is predominantly on the EMI subject teacher challenges and training needs. The overarching objective of the study was to explore the challenges and needs of EMI teachers from humanities and social sciences with a view to informing future EMI content teacher training and professional development programs in the Omani context, while also providing some transferable insights and implications for other similar contexts. Given that the area of EMI teacher training and professional development is still in its infancy and also given that, to the best of my knowledge, there is no, to date, any kind of well-defined and systematic EMI teacher training.

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and development programs in the context of the study, the implications of this study have twofold contribution. First, they generally contribute to the body of the recent and growing research in the area of EMI teacher education and professional development. Second, they, specifically, inform any future attempts aiming to design, develop and deliver EMI training and professional development programs in the Omani HEIs.

**Context of the Study**

The Sultanate of Oman is a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) state located in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula with a population of around 4.5 million. HEIs expansion is relatively recent in Oman, noting the first public university, Sultan Qaboos University, was established only in mid 1980s. Since the 1990s, HEIs have been undergoing an expansion and reforms in both quality and quantity. Oman has a significant number of both governmental and private sector universities, colleges, and institutes offering a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in various disciplines. In these educational institutions, English has been officially used as a language of instruction, whilst Arabic is used in the pre-university level of education. HEIs in Oman are overseen and monitored by the Omani Ministry of Higher Education (currently known as Ministry of Higher Education, Research & Innovation) as the main regulatory body (Al-Lamki, 2002). Broadly speaking, educational language policies in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts in the Middle East, Asia and North Africa (MENA) region seem to have been significantly influenced by the widespread use of English and Oman is not an exception to this trend. In fact, English has played a significant role in Oman’s educational system (Al-Mahrooqi et al., 2016). English is viewed as key to the Oman development process and interaction with other countries globally (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). English is widely used in Omani HEIs and Oman language policy makers have realized that English is not only the dominant language of science, research, and technology in the 21st century, but it is an essential means for the country to integrate and engage with the international academic community (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). However, the use of English in education is not without its challenges. There is a need for enhancing both EMI students’ and teachers’ capabilities and skills to effectively cope with the EMI higher education in Oman. Therefore, the current study is timely and relevant since it attempts to explore the challenges and professional needs of EMI content teachers in Omani HEIs with a view to better informing any future EMI teacher education and professional development in Omani higher education.

**Background**

Despite the increase in the use of EMI in HEIs worldwide, there is still a paucity in research addressing the EMI teacher challenges and needs for training and professional development. There is indeed a lack of actual training programs and certification available for EMI teachers (see e.g., Banks, 2018; Dearden, 2015; Macaro et al., 2018; O’Dowd, 2018). A growing body of EMI literature has now asserted that EMI teachers encounter a range of challenges with EMI. Previous studies in the literature (e.g., Airey & Linder, 2006; Albakri, 2017; Hu et al., 2014; Macaro et al., 2017, 2018; Zacharias, 2013), have shown that EMI subject teachers experienced a range of challenges when delivering subject content in English. These challenges can broadly be classified into two types: linguistic and pedagogical challenges. For example, teachers were reported to have limited language proficiency and, therefore, felt challenged to comfortably teach in English. These linguistic challenges, unsurprisingly, seem to be common in various EMI contexts where English is spoken as a second or foreign language. For example, Aizawa and Rose (2019), reported findings from a study conducted in Japan, where EMI content teachers were found to have language-related challenges that negatively impacted on the students’ content lecture comprehension and the overall academic performance in EMI programs of study. In a similar vein, in a much-cited study by Coleman (2006), it was also reported that there were both pedagogical and linguistic challenges of EMI content teachers in the European higher education context. Furthermore, similar pedagogical and linguistic challenges along with calls for EMI teacher education and professional development were also reported in the South American context (see e.g., Martinez & Fernandes, 2020).

As for the pedagogical challenges, the lack of awareness of and attending to students’ learning styles was also reported as a major pedagogical challenge EMI content teachers experience in the EMI classroom. The teachers were reported to not attend to students’ preferences and strategies when designing and delivering lectures. Moreover, in some cases, it was found that EMI subject teachers would tend to stick very closely to the subject textbooks when delivering the content lecture: as a compensatory strategy and perhaps as a defensive mechanism to “minimize spontaneous interaction and improvisation” (Hu et al., 2014, p. 35). Indeed, the lack of linguistic ability coupled with the lack of pedagogic ability would arguably lead to the inability of EMI subject teachers to “deliver conceptually complex matters in a second language” (Albakri, 2017; Barnard, 2015, p. 57).

Generally speaking, there is a lack in well-defined and established EMI teacher training and professional development in the EMI contexts worldwide (see Airey, 2011, 2013; Banks, 2018; Costa, 2015; Macaro, 2018). Indeed, research on professional development for teachers in higher education (e.g., Alhassan & Ali, 2020; Borg, 2010; Burns, 2010; Richards, 2010) has shown several benefits of the connection between professional development and the good teaching and learning practices as well as the teachers’ overall professional growth and success. EMI training is believed to be
essential as a growing number of universities across the world have been adopting EMI as a means for internationalization, rankings and academic accreditation. The debate in the literature is centered around the types of training and professional development that is relevant and needed for EMI teachers. There have been some attempts in some contexts, like Europe, to establish programs that are oriented to prepare EMI teachers to effectively deliver their EMI subject content.

For example, in an extensive overview, Costa (2015) provided a review of the attempts made by the European non-English speaking universities for preparing and training their EMI subject teachers. Abiding by the Bologna process and to facilitate the mobility of both students and staff, universities in Europe have offered various English-taught programs of study in various disciplines. However, this situation has created a real need for addressing the challenges brought about by the adoption of English as a language of instruction across many European universities (see Coleman, 2006; Costa, 2015 for more discussion). The common denominator among the various types of training is the attempt to prepare teachers in terms of both language and teaching methodologies. These training programs in some cases, but not all are based on feedback from students (Costa, 2015; Klaassen, 2001, p. 129) who often find challenges in understanding teachers’ accent and the range of vocabulary used to exemplify and elaborate on the subject content by manipulating the language.

EMI teacher training efforts are not only limited to universities, there are also examples of organizations and bodies that attempted to establish and provide certified training for EMI subject teachers. Oxford university, for instance, based on its insights from its the EMI research center, has started offering short training courses in EMI that provide professional development for subject teachers’ teaching in applied sciences, social sciences and humanities. The British Council and Cambridge University provide similar training courses. These training courses are often generic in nature and they are intensified short teacher refresher courses. They might not necessarily be based on context-specific needs analyses or stakeholder feedback.

However, these programs and perhaps, due to some logistic reasons, seem to be generic in nature and are aimed to cater for different applied, arts and social sciences EMI teachers coming from different educational and cultural contexts. Given the nature of such training programs one might arguably critique them in some aspects. First, they are offered by outsider organizations who might not be familiar with the culture of these areas and this, in turn, could lead to unsuccessful training. Second, they also group all EMI teachers in one single category while they might have different needs and skills required depending for example on whether they teach soft and theoretical subjects involving more language and thus requiring more linguistic training or hard and applied and quantitative subjects where there is arguably no need for more linguistic oriented training. Moreover, another question that can be raised is related to the extent to which the balance between the linguistic and pedagogical parts of the training is struck.

Having this backdrop in mind and having also into account the lack of research in the EMI teacher challenges and professional development needs in Omani higher education, the present study is a timely and relevant contribution in the context, while also potentially adding to the growing literature of EMI, particularly in the emerging area of EMI teacher education and professional development.

**Design of the Study**

The current study addresses the following two research questions:

(i) What challenges do EMI content teachers encounter when delivering their subject content in English?

(ii) What kind(s) of training and professional development do they need to overcome these challenges and effectively deliver their EMI subject content?

**Data and Participants**

The research was carried out in an Omani tertiary context. It is an English-medium university offering a range of English-taught undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs in humanities, social sciences, and applied sciences. The study adopted a qualitative methodology and the data was collected through both face-to-face tape-recorded semi-structured interviews and semi-structured classroom observations. The study conducted in the classroom of the same teachers covering the main themes emerged from the interview data. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and each classroom observation lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. The observational data was used to complement and validate the interview data. Detailed field notes were taken during the observations. Prompt cards were also used during the interviews in a discourse-based format to talk around text to elicit more specific, focused and in-depth responses (see Lillis, 2001; Odell et al., 1983) and more follow-ups and probe questions were also asked. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded thematically and inductively. Twelve participants: eight from business (BUSS) and four from sociology (SOC) studies, representing humanities and social sciences, voluntarily took part in the investigation. Participants are non-Omani nationals belonging to various cultural and educational backgrounds, and they have an average of 5 years teaching in HEIs. English is a second language for them and they have been teaching content subjects in the area of their specialty in both their mother tongue and in English. Participants were recruited via emails after the ethical approval was obtained for the study. It is worth noting that since the overarching objective of the study was to inform EMI content teacher education and professional
development, involving teachers, as stakeholders, in the investigation would potentially yield in a much more realistic, focused and context-sensitive professional development programs.

I followed the purposive sampling for the selection of the study participants (Denscombe, 2010) whereby I included the participants with experience and expertise so that I could gain as much informed and valuable insights as possible.

I limited my participant pool to social sciences and humanities EMI teachers for two reasons. First, this study is focused more on humanities and social sciences programs, in contrast to that of applied sciences. Second, and related to the first, there is already existing literature and research in this area on applied sciences; there is a very limited number of studies and literature on humanities and social sciences.

**Coding and Analytical Procedure**

Interview transcripts and observational notes were coded thematically and inductively to gain in-depth and rich insider’s perspectives on the issues under investigation. An open strategy for coding (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Saldana, 2009; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) was adopted whereby the data was read thoroughly and themes were identified and labeled. Such approach enabled the researcher to discover as many potential issues as possible from the datasets. This coding 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 (see e.g., Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Mason, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Sample coding from both interview transcripts and observational data was checked by a second coder for the purpose of inter-rater reliability. Simple percentage to calculate coding agreements was used and coding disagreements were discussed and resolved. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the simple percentage for inter-rater reliability in qualitative data is calculated as follows: the number of coding agreements over the number of coding episodes multiplied by 100. Accordingly, 79% and 80% of inter-rater reliability agreement for the interview transcripts and the observational notes were reached respectively. It can be claimed that these percentages are satisfactory as for simple percentage, anything above 75% may be considered “good” (see Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 244). Having explained the coding procedure and having identified the salient themes emerged from the datasets, the following section is devoted to the reporting of the study findings along with the discussion and interpretation.

**Findings and Discussion**

RQ1. What challenges do EMI content teachers encounter when delivering their subject content in English?

Participants reported a range of teaching, learning and classroom management challenges with EMI. These challenges were classified into two main types: linguistic and pedagogical. As for the linguistic or language-related challenges, both business (BUSS) and sociology (SOC) teachers reported difficulties in delivering their subject content.

**Language-Related Challenges**

There are of course some language problems. I mean, well, for teachers who have no advanced language level, they would face some troubles to explain [subject content], to give more examples in English. This will be very difficult for the instructors sometimes. (BUSS8)

Indeed, the lack of language proficiency was reportedly found to have some negative consequences on teachers’ confidence in delivering their EMI classes, feeling uncomfortable and less confident when teaching in English compared with when teaching in L1, especially when it comes to language manipulation and elaboration:

Actually, I’m more confident when I teach in [my L1] because this is my mother language. English is not my native language. When I explain anything by giving examples, I am free, more relaxed, when I teach in [my L1]. In English, I am limited to the terminology specific to the subject when I teach in English; I try to limit myself to the terminology. (BUSS4)

These findings lend support to similar findings (e.g., Albakri, 2017; Dearden, 2015; Macaro et al., 2018; Zacharias, 2013) in the literature in that implementing EMI has potential linguistic challenges on the side of both students and teachers, and therefore this clearly signals the importance for more systematic and sustained EMI teacher training to address such language-related challenges. However, it does not seem to be clear as to what type(s) of linguistic training and language proficiency qualification (e.g., O’Dowd, 2018) that is required or suitable for EMI subject teachers. Perhaps more context-specific training and professional development programs can be the way forward. Interestingly, this study, in contrast to the findings of some previous studies (e.g., Wächter & Maiworm, 2014) where program directors evaluated a high level of language proficiency of the EMI teachers, found that some teachers claimed that their language level is not high enough to enable them to comfortably and confidently teach their subject content in English. This would again necessitate the context-specific EMI teacher training and education programs. The findings also suggest that teachers in the context of the study might also be different in their level of experience in dealing with both language and content and so are the needs when it comes to designing and delivering such training and professional development programs. These differences perhaps are due to the fact that EMI has been
somewhat more established in European HEIs than in those of the Middle East and North African region.

Unsurprisingly, this lack of language proficiency at the side of teachers is reported to have affected the delivery and understanding of the subject content:

You know for us to explain, to give more examples in English. This is very difficult for the instructors sometimes. (BUSS8).

This absence of maneuvering and manipulation of the language for further explanation of the subject content was also confirmed during the classroom observations. Teachers would sometimes try to paraphrase when they could not get the exact general English words to illustrate the discipline-specific terminology concepts and ideas.

In the same line, the students’ were found to have a low language proficiency, which led to the teachers claiming that the simplification of the delivered subject content was for the students’ benefit. Most participants seem to advocate the issue of subject content simplification to make their classes accessible to students. Here is what one of the teachers said:

Simplifying the content is very important in the case of our students, very important, because they are very weak in English, very weak. But simplification also has its own consequences. It is a matter of challenge. If you simplify, then you will lose the quality and lose [the opportunity] to exposing students to the main source of knowledge. (BUSS7).

Similarly, sociology participants went in the same line:

I think this is a valid point here that, sometimes, you have to simplify the material so that you ensure that the students understand it, and you have to avoid a lot of material which is important but is difficult for them to understand. This is going to minimise the quality of education, but I think even if we minimise the quality of education and most of the class understand, then, this is better than giving a high standard quality delivery and no-one understands you. (SOC2).

These findings highlight the importance of the role of content teachers in handling the language issues in the EMI classroom when delivering the content subject (e.g., Dafouz & Smit, 2016; Dearden, 2015; Kuteeva, 2020; Macaro, 2020). It is arguably that this simplification is triggered by the low language proficiency of students but the findings seem to equally indicate for the need to strike the balance between simplifying the content for comprehension and maintaining the quality and quantity of the delivered subject content. This, in turn, would require both language and pedagogical training for EMI content teachers.

Language and Pedagogy-Related Challenges

Interestingly, simplification of the language in delivering the content was also primarily viewed as beneficial for facilitating subject content and not the language learning:

In contrast to the interview data, the observational data showed that this reported simplification varied among teachers. While some teachers would simplify some chunks of their lectures and mediate some case studies to the context by exemplifying, maneuvering and using simple language, others, on the contrary, would seem to literally stick to the presented subject contents which in most cases are based on the course prescribed textbooks without any efforts of language simplification and manipulation.

Such findings corroborate previous research findings (e.g., Airey & Linder, 2006; Hu et al., 2014) with regard to the potential pedagogical consequences that are likely to affect students by compromising the content due to the teachers’ lack of the appropriate language proficiency level. However, it is still not clear as to how far this subject content simplification should go. This clearly suggests the need for some pedagogical training to strike the balance and to ensure that the simplification of delivery does not affect the overall quality and quantity of the presented subject content.

Although in some previous EMI studies (Alhassan, 2019; Alhassan, Ali et al., 2021; Ali, 2020a, 2020b) subject content simplification was primarily attributed to the low proficiency level of the students, it does not, however, seem to be the case in the context of the present study. At least with some teachers, as both the interview and the classroom observational data revealed, that there are some language-related challenges experienced by some teachers which led them to simplify and stick closely to the content textbooks and the relevant discipline-specific terminology. These findings would necessarily emphasize the importance of language-related training for EMI content teachers along with the pedagogical training.

However, the language challenges seem to vary between theoretical and practical courses. Challenges reportedly seem to be less acute when teaching quantitative subjects.

I’m teaching accounting. In accounting, there is no need that you must be an expert in English. You don’t have to be an expert in English. We use mathematics mostly, calculations, and rules so if students just understand simple terms, it would be easy for them to cope (BUSS3).

Another teacher went in the same line:

Things are different with quantitative subjects because using numbers can attract their attention [students] in the class. But if you are teaching a theoretical class, you can never attract them more than 20, 25 minutes. After that everyone will be lost. (BUSS8).
Such findings support the discussion reported in the literature (e.g., see Macaro, 2018; Macaro et al., 2018) in that EMI could be more suitable for some subject content than others and that the language role is sometimes downplayed when it comes to teaching pure and applied sciences subjects. In other words, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) related subject contents need less language compared to arts, humanities and social sciences subject contents. This in turn would lead us to pose some valid questions when it comes to EMI teacher training. For example, what kind of training EMI subject teachers teaching in different EMI degree programs in different disciplines would require? Should there be, for instance, a generic EMI training for all? Should there be discipline-specific EMI training and professional development programs?

Furthermore, as part of language-related challenges, teachers’ unintelligibility was also reported as a linguistic challenge. EMI subject teachers’ unintelligibility due to strong accents and/or variation in accents and pronunciation of some words/terms could render the content inaccessible to students:

We have teachers from different nationalities and [thus] different accents. Sometimes you can notice that the local language or the mother tongue is very clear, appearing very clear in their language. To be honest, our students sometimes complain that they can’t understand from teacher X of Z nationality, they speak English in a very strange way. (BUSS8).

The issue of unintelligibility or proper pronunciation was also noticed during the classroom observations. I heard some unclear pronunciation of some words/terms both general and discipline-specific by some teachers (e.g., “pairchase” for pronunciation- “pur-chase” for purchase- “outiflow” for outflow- “sagashen” for suggestion- “Farst” for first- “privintive” and “privintion” for preventive and prevention- “through” for throw. (/pɛətʃɛn/ for /pɜːʃən/ = purchase - /səʤəʃən/ for /səˈʃən/ = suggestion - /ˈɑːtiflə/ for /ˈɑːtflə/ = outflow - /ˈfɑːrst/ for /fɜːst/ = first - /prɪˈvɪntʃən/ for /prɪˈvɛntʃən/ = prevention - /prɪvɪntɪv/ for /prɪˈvɛntɪv/ = preventive - /θruː/ for /θraʊ / = throw).

Such findings lend support to the findings reported in the literature (e.g., Airey, 2013; Banks, 2018; Klaassen, 2001) calling for addressing the pronunciation and spoken language in EMI classrooms. Moreover, these findings also corroborate the findings from previous studies (e.g., Albakri, 2017; Borg, 2016; Costa, 2015; Dearden, 2015) in that the linguistic or language-related training and professional development is essential for EMI subject teachers who are often thrown into EMI programs without any prior preparation. The findings also seem to suggest that the linguistic training could have positive implications on students’ EMI lecture comprehension and on the overall EMI effectiveness and quality.

Pedagogical and Classroom Management Challenges

In addition to the linguistic or language-related problems, participants also reported some pedagogical challenges related to teaching methodologies, techniques, and strategies in the EMI classroom:

If students are not very attentive, they don’t pay attention, it means your method of teaching is not actually making an effect. Mostly, it happens in our classes, everywhere maybe. So, I think teaching and classroom management is very important, and also the methodology – teacher’s knowledge, teacher’s methodology – that is very important. If there is any kind of training in this regard, it will have a positive effect on teaching and learning process. (SOC1).

In a similar vein, participants also showed some challenges with the classroom and activities management, which is also a pedagogical challenge. From the classroom observations, I noticed that some teachers would find it difficult to control and manage their classrooms: some students would show up late for classes, have side talks or chatting when they were assigned pair and/or group tasks, etc. and the teachers did not seem to be able to properly control students’ work and monitor the task execution and progress in the classroom.

Such findings confirm similar findings from previous EMI research (e.g., Airey, 2013; Banks, 2018; Borg, 2016; Dearden, 2015; Klaassen, 2001) which emphasized the need for the methodological and pedagogical EMI teacher training and professional development to better manage and deliver the subject content in the EMI classroom.

In sum, these reported challenges could have potential negative impact on the success of EMI degree programs in higher education institutions. To maintain a high quality and effective EMI, teachers, policymakers and administrators, as stakeholders, need to work collectively and address these challenges by providing the right and research-informed training and professional development for EMI content teachers.

To address the study’s second research question, teachers were also asked about their perspectives and views with regard to the needs and types of training and professional development they need in order to effectively deliver their subject contents in EMI classrooms. Participants reported the needs for both linguistic and pedagogical training.

RQ2. What kind(s) of training and professional development do they need to overcome these challenges and effectively deliver their EMI subject content?

Participants reported a range of views emphasizing the need for an EMI training and professional development.
Participants also reported a lack of clear and systematic training and professional development to help them effectively deliver their EMI subject content.

**Pedagogical Training**

I didn’t take a formal education, I mean, training as such. Before I joined here [the context of the study], and when I was a teaching assistant in a university in [my home country] I used to get some help from my seniors who would just give me tips as to how to get ready for and manage the classes, how to understand things, but it wasn’t like a proper training programme. (BUSS4)

These findings highlight the importance of creating some sort of both formal and informal EMI teacher forums and networks bringing together senior and junior EMI teachers to exchange ideas and good practices. Perhaps it is worth noting at this point here that EMI teacher trainers can draw on and benefit from the long established ELT and EAP traditions of teacher education and professional development.

In contrast, as also highlighted earlier, linguistic training seems to be downplayed by teachers who teach the courses with numerical and quantitative nature:

I’m teaching accounting and in accounting, there is no need that you must be an expert in English. You don’t have to be an expert in English. You will survive even if you understand simple terms, because we use mathematics mostly. Plus, minus, percentage, rules, etc. (BUSS3)

These findings echoed Kuteeva and Airey’s (2014) findings in that the nature of the discipline and the inter- and intra-disciplinary variations among disciplines could have significant implications on the kinds of linguistic and pedagogical training provided for EMI content teachers. This seems to suggest that providers of EMI teacher training should take into consideration such disciplinary variations when deciding on the EMI teacher training and professional programs. The findings also echo the on-going debate in the EMI literature as to whether EMI content teachers should regard the linguistic issues in EMI as an integral or dissociative part of the EMI pedagogy.

**Pedagogical Versus Linguistic Training**

One might indeed, arguably, emphasize the pedagogical training over the linguistic one due to the fact that content teachers are not language experts and therefore are not responsible for the handling of the language issues in EMI classrooms but they are rather concerned with the subject content (Airey, 2012; Block & Moncada-Comas, 2019). However, a counter argument would suggest that both types of training seem to be inextricable and equally important for maintaining quality and effective EMI. This is because language, disciplinary content and literacy are discursively indivisible (see e.g., Airey, 2020; Farrell, 2020; Macaro, 2020). This would suggest that EMI content teachers need to pay the duly attention to the linguistic issues necessary to deliver their subject content effectively and successfully in the EMI classroom.

Although students’ lack of language proficiency was stressed by participants, but, interestingly, what is said below by the same teacher clearly suggests the need of EMI content teachers for both linguistic and pedagogical training touching on accommodating students’ language abilities and learning styles:

Some students tell me to just go slowly, slow, slowly but if you just go slowly, you cannot finish the syllabus, so we sometimes have to go fast. This is the problem because students’ English level is not good, so that is the problem. Also, if you do one thing in two different ways, they [students] will not understand. So, we have to stick to just one idea. If you ask a question in a different way, then the same question, there’s a possibility that students will not get you. (BUSS3)

The findings seem, to some extent, challenge the recurrent theme by EMI teachers in the literature in that it is often the students’ language deficiencies that is blamed for the failure in the effective coping with EMI study. The findings, in contrast, stress the need for EMI subject teachers to play a role in making their subject content accessible to students. They need, for instance, to modify the modes of content delivery and input to ensure effective lecture comprehension and to create a classroom environment where students can engage into the EMI classroom, while also taking into account the students’ different language levels (Dearden, 2015). EMI content teachers could try and achieve that by closely knowing their students and their learning styles so that they can accommodate that when delivering their EMI subject content. However, the question that perhaps needs to be raised here is how far should this accommodation go, while ensuring that it does not affect both the quantity and the quality of the presented subject content? Furthermore, the findings also emphasize the calls by Cots (2013) in that EMI content teachers need to shift role and pay more attention to the methodological and pedagogical aspects involved in the EMI classroom. They should know how to reinforce the teaching and learning process through engaging, scaffolding and socializing students into the subject content.

Indeed, some other participants clearly emphasized the need for such pedagogical training for effective teaching:

I think we need training. You know we should always be open-minded to learn because I don’t think that everybody can be perfect because things are changing. I do feel that training is important and it should be provided by the institution as that will enable us to deliver our subjects in a better way. We might be very good at our subjects but we may still lack some teaching methods that help us to get our subjects delivered effectively. (BUSS5)
Similarly, some participants acknowledged that their accents might not be intelligible to some students and this would in turn make the provision of some sort of language training essential:

English is not my native language and maybe sometimes my accent is not understood to some students and this is because I was educated in [my home country]. So generally speaking, English is not a problem for me but like I said maybe sometimes my accent is not understood. (SOC1)

Context-Specific Training

In a similar vein, participants stressed the high need for training but they questioned the relevance of the existing teacher professional development practices, while calling for the introduction of more rigorous, relevant and up-to-date pedagogical training and professional development programs:

I think the needs are clear for teachers. This is for anyone teaching. Everyone, even if they have training before. The critical issue is how to design the real required training. We have some professional development sessions here and there but I don’t believe they are useful and relevant. It would be good if there is an organisation or if there is some training office which has created very important trainings of how to teach or how to instruct, or the methods of learning and teaching, this is very good. I would like to see new methods and new strategies of teaching and learning, and I want to see some measurements for learning. I want to know some measurements that, with them, I can know whether my students understand or not; if there are experiences of some people before or there are some authorities that would be good. So I need new things, not the old-fashioned teaching way which, already, I know and which is not working anymore. (SOC2).

The findings suggest that lecturers’ needs should be taken into account when designing and delivering professional development programs (Airey, 2013) to ensure that the training is relevant to trainees’ needs and sensitive to their teaching contexts (Banks, 2018; Bax, 1997)

These findings also echo similar findings by Guarda and Helm (2017) in that establishing an EMI training and professional development is not an easy task and it seems to be involving a range of contextual and institutional factors. Given that the use of English in Omani HEIs has become a reality, such findings suggest the need for more Omani context-bound and needs-based professional development for EMI subject teachers taking into consideration the perspectives of EMI teachers as insiders. The findings also suggest that generic EMI training programs might not always be sufficient or appealing to some EMI subject teachers operating in various EMI educational contexts.

Conclusions and Implications

The present study is a qualitative study intended to investigate EMI content teachers’ challenges and training needs in EMI humanities and social sciences programs of study in an Omani EMI tertiary context. The investigation revealed a range of challenges and professional needs which can serve as a basis for any future sustainable and teacher-informed continuing professional development programs.

As the case with any research, there are some limitations with the present study and, therefore, the study findings are not intended for generalization by any means. The study focused on a single HEI context with relatively limited number of participants. Future studies could include more higher education contexts and more participants. They could also explore, using more methods of data collection, the challenges and training needs of applied sciences EMI content teachers and some comparisons could be made with those of humanities and social sciences. Despite these limitations, the implications and insights gained from the present study can still be potentially significant and illuminating for informing EMI teacher education and professional development and they can also be transferable to and applicable in any other similar EMI contexts.

In light of the study findings, a number of implications and recommendations can be proposed, which are hoped to serve as heuristics and a basis for any EMI teacher training and continuing professional development in the context of Omani HEIs and beyond:

First, EMI subject teacher training should be part of subject teachers’ Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Institutions should take seriously the matter of EMI teacher training and professional development. These programs should be fully supported and funded and they should be made part of the overall teacher performance evaluation process.

Second, subject teacher training programs should feature two main components: linguistic and pedagogical training with the former focusing on the language-related issues and the latter on the teaching methodologies, techniques, strategies and classroom management. Echoing Farrell’s (2020) recommendations, pedagogical training could draw on a range of techniques to enhance teachers’ reflection on their own classroom delivery and practices. For example, trainers could use peer observation techniques. They could, for instance, record subject content live lectures and make teachers watch, analyze and reflect on these recorded lectures retrospectively. Coaching and mentoring between early career and experienced teachers can also be fostered and maintained. Both senior and junior EMI subject teachers should establish some professional groups and networks to exchange and share ideas and good practices. For the linguistic training, subject teachers need to be supported to play a role in making their subject content accessible to students. A balance should be stricken between simplification and sophistication of the language of delivery to minimize the risk of compromising the quantity and quality of the delivered subject content. They should ensure that their content classes are structured and delivered in an accessible way to students. In
this respect and following Alhassan, Bora et al.’s (2021) recent study, EMI subject teachers should collaborate with English for academic purposes (EAP) teachers as language experts and engage with them in professional discussion and practical work to make EMI subject content design, delivery and evaluation more effective.

Third, as part of the pedagogical training, EMI content teachers should also be made familiar with the students’ learning styles, preferences and strategies. Indeed, students have many learning styles. They learn by seeing and hearing, reflecting and acting, reasoning logically and intuitively and memorizing and visualizing (Oxford, 1990, 1992; Richard & Eunice, 1995). Pedagogical components in the EMI teacher training and professional development programs should therefore emphasize and foster differentiated learning and the diversification in the delivery of the subject content as a pedagogical practice. In this regard, subject teachers should engage in some sort of small-scale action research projects to get to know their students well, their various learning challenges, preferences and styles and to accordingly design, develop, deliver and evaluate their subject content to ensure that it attend to students’ learning styles and preferences. Such research engagement should be encouraged and rewarded by institutions. EMI HEIs should incentivise teachers by establishing projects and awards on EMI teacher innovation and best practices. The best teaching practices should also be shared between seasoned and novice teachers.

Fourth, as part of the linguistic training, some language and pronunciation training with a particular focus on accuracy and intelligibility should also be made as a core part of the EMI teacher training and development programs. For instance, in this respect, a corpus of the most problematic words (pronunciation) in the respective field could be built and more practice can be done on such terms. There should be, in general, some training on spoken language and presentation skills. For instance, a particular focus should be made on issues such as the use of discourse markers-cross-referencing-maneuvering-manipulation, elaboration, improve the language to make subject content accessible to students. Indeed, such techniques and strategies are essential in second language lecture comprehension. Indeed, EMI subject teachers need to play an effective role in making their subject content more accessible to students whose first language(s) is not English. Echoing Flowerdew and Miller’s (1996, pp. 30–43) recommendations, EMI subject teachers can try out some or all of the following to make their lecture more comprehensible and accessible to their students: Use micro-structuring format: false starts, redundancies, repetitions and body language. Interpersonal strategies: empathizing with students and trying to make the lecture less threatening. Discourse structuring: use of a narrative thread to hold the lecture together; use of macro-markers; use of rhetorical questions. Integration with other media: use of visual aids; integration with pre- and post-reading and tutorial discussion. Simplifying language and avoid jargon, but not at the expense of the subject content quality and quantity. Cross-referencing and recaps can also be used. Finally, perhaps to further motivate EMI teachers to effectively engage into teacher education and professional development programs, some accreditation and certification should also be established for such programs.

Appendices

Appendix (A): Interview Schedule

Background questions

1. How long have you been teaching this subject here?
2. Have you ever taught it somewhere else? If so, who were your students?
3. What was the experience like?
4. How long have you been teaching it in English?
5. Have you taught it in other language(s)?
6. Can you tell me about your experience with teaching this subject in English?
7. How would you see the similarities and or differences between teaching this subject in English and teaching it in your first language or any other second/foreign language(s)?
8. Have you ever been trained on how to teach your subject in English? If so, can you tell me about your training experience?
9. How would you evaluate your experience of teaching your subject in English?
10. How would describe the challenges involved in teaching your subject in English?

Prompt card: some challenges reported in the literature. Here are some challenges reported in the literature and said to have encountered by teachers teaching their subject in English.

Challenges and difficulties with EMI

1. How would you describe the challenges involved in teaching your subject in English?
2. How would you evaluate your experience of teaching your subject in English?
11. How would you comment on these challenges? Or to what extent would you relate to these challenges?

EMI subject teachers’ strategies to make classes accessible to students

12. How would you see these challenges in relation to students’ understanding of lectures?

13. How would you respond when you see your students get lost in classes or don’t seem to understand what you are delivering to them in English?

Suggestions for improving the situation

14. If you were asked to give some tips to your colleagues who are teaching their subject contents in English, what would you give them in order to make their classes more accessible to students?

Final open ended question

15. Do you have any comment or would you like to add anything to what we have talked about throughout this interview?

Appendix (B): Classroom Observation Scheme

Non-participant’s classroom observations were conducted to support the interview data. The observation scheme followed a semi-structured format centered on some topics but also with some room to allow the researcher to explore as many issues as possible regarding the EMI lecture delivery in terms of both linguistic and pedagogic aspects. Below are the guiding issues:

1. Classroom management during lectures
2. Speed of lecture delivery
3. Teachers’ talk time and students’ talk time
4. Presentation and explanation of discipline-specific of terminology
5. Students’ reaction to and interaction with the contents of lectures
6. Lecture overall sequence and flow
7. The diversity in the lecture modes of delivery
8. The use of materials in lectures (slides-handouts-questions, etc.)

Appendix (C) Sample Prompt Card

Evidence from the literature about the linguistic and pedagogical challenges EMI subject teachers encountered when delivering EMI subject content:

Use of first language (in case the teacher shares the same language with the students) in EMI classroom as a facilitator to teaching and learning (some researchers view this practice positively and others view it negatively).

EMI subject teachers would simplify the content and the language due to the students’ low level of English, and this in turn would compromise the quantity and quality of the subject content and knowledge delivered to students.

EMI subject teachers might have some language challenges to teach their subject comfortably and effectively in English (second language).

Many teachers felt challenged lecturing/teaching in English: explaining terms and concepts in English.

EMI teachers have a Lack of awareness of and attending to students’ learning styles, preferences and strategies when designing and delivering content lectures.

Lack of linguistic and pedagogic (teaching issues) ability would lead to challenges in effectively delivering conceptually complex matters in English.

In some cases, it was found that EMI subject teachers would tend to “stick very closely” to the “subject textbook(s)” when designing and delivering the content lecture to “minimize spontaneous interaction and improvisation” (Airey & Linder, 2006; Hu et al., 2014, p. 35; Zacharias, 2013, as cited in Albakri, 2017, p. 56).

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