

Exploring Learning Challenges Coping Strategies Among EFL Business English Learners

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Abstract

The present study investigated the nature of learning challenges inherent in studying Readings in Business through the English medium instruction (EMI) and the coping strategies business English learners use to overcome those learning challenges. The study adopted a mixed approach and collected the data through an online questionnaire and semi-instructed interviews. The findings revealed that business English learners face challenges related to the language used in the textbook, and some may find the textbook's language more difficult to comprehend. Additionally, the findings revealed that business English learners in the context of language proficiency-based challenges face challenges that affect their comprehension of textbook content, ability to answer tests effectively, exam scores, and participation in classroom discussions. Furthermore, the findings revealed that business English learners have mixed perceptions regarding instructor-based challenges. Finally, in terms of coping strategies, the findings revealed that business English learners adopted a variety of coping strategies, such as using Google Translate to translate the paragraphs, using their native language to inquire and ask questions, creating a glossary to memorize new words, using bilingual dictionaries and translation tools, and seeking help from classmates and instructors. The study provides a number of implications and recommendations for further studies.

Keywords: business English learners; coping strategies; English Medium instruction; learning challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the significant role that the English language plays worldwide as a lingua franca and second language, there is a growing need to learn English, especially in business sectors in many societies (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Soruç & Griffiths, 2017). English Medium Instruction (EMI) has promoted worldwide collaboration and communication in a variety of educational disciplines (Ali, 2020; Crystal, 2003; Jusuf, 2001; Schützenhöfer & Mathelitsch, 2001; Soruç & Griffiths, 2017). Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Dearden (2018:37) defined the term 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."

Due to globalization, English is now widely used as a language of communication and as a medium of instruction such as in some Arab countries, Malaysia, Indonesia, Korea, and the Netherlands (Jones & Oberst, 2007; Tamtam et al., 2010; Zughoul, 2003). It is assumed that the language of education is a tool that enhances the learning of the subject matter (Kagwesage, 2013; Kyeyune, 2010; Vu, 2014).

In many educational contexts, students are taught "content" in a language other than their native tongue. These include all levels of education, including higher education, secondary, primary, and preschool (Macaro et al., 2018). Worldwide, universities are increasingly rushing to provide undergraduate and postgraduate programs in English (Earls, 2016; Lasagabaster et al., 2014). According to Phillipson (2009), adopting EMI in higher education makes universities more global.

Success in further education and the job market depends on good English communication skills. Hence, Al-Mahrooqi (2012) reported that most high school and college graduates do not have the necessary communication or English language skills to succeed in the job market. In many countries, EMI is becoming more and more widespread. Researchers have looked into the challenges students face and the coping mechanisms they employ. The educational challenges and strategies adopted by other significant participants and instructors have been under investigation (Pun & Thomas, 2020).

Surprisingly little research has been done on the challenges that students have while trying to learn a subject matter using a language that is not their native

tongue or on how learners strive to overcome these challenges (Soruç & Griffiths, 2017). Kırkgöz (2014) calls for more systematic studies comparing the perceptions of undergraduate students receiving their education in their native languages versus EMI.

Researching business English learners' perceptions is significant because their views about the nature of learning challenges inherent in studying Readings in Business through the medium of English (EMI) may help the teachers and administrators to pay attention and provide solutions to overcome these challenges and therefore; their concerns should be taken seriously. This suggests the need to explore the learning challenges and coping strategies among Business English Learners (BELs) in terms of the nature of learning challenges inherent in studying Readings in Business through the medium of English (EMI) and the coping strategies used by these learners to overcome any learning challenges. In addition to the significant issues arising from the Business English learners through studying Readings in Business courses, the current study aims to answer the following research questions: RQ1. What is the nature of learning challenges inherent in studying Readings in Business through English? RQ2. What are the coping strategies used by Business undergraduates to overcome these learning challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, English is clearly established as the language in which the world engages in commerce, social interaction, travel, and entertainment. English is also increasingly being used in educational settings (Soruç & Griffiths, 2017). In many countries where English is not the primary language, students learn content in many contexts such as math, business, and science through English (Rose & McKinley, 2018). Business English, or English used in business, is a type of English that has its academic content, interpersonal relationships, and media and channels of communication. It is an area of socioeconomic activity. As a result, it needs consideration as a stand-alone interdisciplinary study (Zhang, 2007). Business education allows its students to contribute to their nation's economic system and gives them lasting abilities that support their decision-making as employers, employees, or customers (Gidado & Akaeze, 2014).

Previous research on learning challenges and coping strategies has been investigated in various subjects (see Ali, 2020; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Wahi, 2013). Ali (2020) has examined how Omani engineering students dealt with the challenges of learning in an English-medium environment and how the students and their teachers employed various coping mechanisms to get through EMI-related issues and challenges. In the current study of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where English was the language used as the medium of instruction and assessment, Al Zumor (2019) identified that significant challenges that resulted from EMI in teaching science courses have a significant adverse effect on the scientific content comprehension and assessment of most of the students. The results demonstrated that EMI contributes to feelings of stress, worry, anxiety, shame, and, ultimately, poor academic performance. Furthermore, EMI denies students their fundamental rights to comprehension, interaction, dialogue, discussion, and inquiry during lectures. According to Evans & Morrison (2011), Hong Kong University students could study in English by creating their learning strategies, utilizing peer support, and putting in a lot of effort. King (2014) discovered that EFL instructors and students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) employed several tactics in English-language programs, including avoidance, material simplification, content reduction, and code-switching into Arabic.

Kagwesage (2013) investigated the coping strategies that multilingual university students employ successfully to handle the challenging academic material offered through EMI in the faculty of Economics and Management. Findings show that students have various coping mechanisms, such as successfully using other languages to mediate cognitively challenging academic tasks.

Evans and Morrison (2011) examined how learners in Hong Kong deal with challenges brought on by having EMI; the researchers indicated that when behaviors like hard work, high motivation, efficient learning techniques, and peer networks are combined, students can overcome academic issues including knowing the technical vocabulary and comprehending lectures. In another study, Onojetah (2020) examined the challenges and coping strategies for achieving the goals of Business Education in Nigeria. The researcher recommended sufficient funding, hiring competent facilitators, and designing and distributing course content.

Previous research (see Briggs et al., 2018; Macaro, 2018; Pun & Thomas, 2020) has concentrated on teachers' language challenges, such as ignoring language needs, using ineffective teaching methods, having limited English communication skills, a lack of EMI training, and having poor students–teachers communication that may have a negative effect on teachers' teaching practice. Other studies (Kırkgöz, 2014; Soruç & Griffiths, 2018) investigated students' Perceptions towards using English and Turkish Languages in Higher Education in Turkey. Kırkgöz (2014) investigated how final-year engineering students viewed the benefits and perceived challenges with learning disciplinary knowledge and the impact of the English and Turkish languages on their learning. In another study among 39 students from 11 different nationalities at a Turkish university, Soruç and Griffiths (2018) described the challenges students encounter, including, such as difficulties with speaking and listening, with vocabulary, and with challenges related to affect or cognition, as well as the coping mechanisms they use to deal with EMI. The majority of the challenges are caused by "linguistic deficiencies."

Previous research on EMI within various contexts (see, Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Cankaya, 2017) has focused on challenges encountered by students and teachers and language-related problems. Belhiah and Elhami (2015) reported that the current EMI scenario in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) leaves much to be desired, with learners finding it challenging to comprehend the material because of their poor English language. Moreover, Belhiah and Elhami (2015) suggested that to improve students' linguistic and biliteracy abilities, a bilingual curriculum is needed in which instruction is given in English and Arabic. Additional research has yielded conflicting results about instructors' attitudes toward EMI. Many instructors are in favor of EMI's implementation in their classrooms because they think it will help students' language and content knowledge, whereas some instructors believe that it is not their job to help students to develop their language or content knowledge (Macaro, 2018).

Wang (2009) and (Cai, 2014) reported that it is advocated that English curricula prioritize English for specific purposes (ESP) to prepare students for academic study and professional work. However, the lack of English language proficiency among teachers, the diverse needs of heterogeneous students, the questionable quality of the teaching material, and the discrepancy between what is required in target academic contexts and what is offered by the EMI and ESP

programs that are currently available are all pressing issues (Cai, 2015; Wang, 2015).

In terms of coping strategies, various studies provide different strategies (see Ali, 2020; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Wahi, 2013; Esquinca, Araujo & De la Piedra, 2014) to deal with EMI in various academic subjects. Ali (2020) reported that Omani engineering students employed various coping strategies, such as using their first language (Arabic) as a compensatory approach to encounter language-related challenges, along with translation, bilingual dictionaries, online translation software, peer, team, and family support. In the field of bilingual education (see Garcia, 2009; García & Kleifgen, 2010; Esquinca et al., 2014) reported that translanguaging is being utilized more frequently as a communication tool and as a method for teaching courses that are relevant to science. Translanguaging, which involves techniques including switching between texts in one language and debate in another, speaking in one language but checking comprehension in another, and using both languages flexibly, facilitates learning for bilingual learners (García & Kleifgen, 2010; Esquinca et al., 2014). Wahi (2013) reported that engineering students used various coping strategies, such as translation strategies, heavily relying on dictionaries to help them understand the course content and to construct their utterances and writing, in addition to cognitively thinking in their first language but translating their thoughts into English in order to achieve the academic demands.

Other studies (e.g., Ball & Lindsay, 2013; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Li, 2013) have reported a significant barrier to the efficient implementation of EMI. However, most EMI research (Ball & Lindsay, 2013; Li, 2013) has highlighted that non-native English-speaking instructors' language insufficiency has become a significant barrier to the efficient implementation of EMI. Furthermore, Belhiah and Elhami (2015) reported that students' English deficiencies could also contribute to difficulties in EMI practice.

In this study, the business English learners who participated in this study used both their native tongues (Arabic) and English to interact and assist one another in understanding ideas and instructions during studying the Readings in Business course. The researcher argues that Business English Learners (BELs) encounter learning challenges inherent in studying Readings in Business through the medium of English (EMI), and they use various coping strategies to overcome

these learning challenges. Therefore, in this study, the researcher investigated the learning challenges and coping strategies business English learners use to overcome these learning challenges.

RESEARCH METHODS

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in this study to gather data that deepens our understanding of the learning challenges and coping strategies among business English learners (BELs) in terms of the nature of learning challenges inherent in studying Readings in the Business course through the medium of English (EMI).

Research context and participants

The study's sample consists of (N = 157) students of the Human resources department, who study Readings in the Business course as part of this program in English language. In contrast, the rest of the courses in the program are taught in Arabic. In addition, the sample studied two introductory English courses to improve their English language before registering for the Readings in Business course.

Business English learners (BELs) speak the same language (Arabic), their age ranges from 18 to 22, and they belong to the same cultural background. The sample of the study consisted only of male and female undergraduate students.

Instruments, data collection, and analysis

Since this study focused on investigating the learning challenges and coping strategies inherent in studying Readings in the Business course, data were collected from the students' responses to online questionnaires. In addition, the researchers designed and developed an online questionnaire concerning previous studies (Ali, 2020; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Suliman & Tadros, 2011). The online questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1), comprised 20 items, consisted of four sections: textbook-based challenges, language-based challenges, instructor-based challenges, and coping strategies.

Four experts in the area of applied linguistics validated the questionnaire. They were asked to review the questionnaire items and ensure they were appropriate for the aims and questions of the study. Their feedback was taken into

account. Once the experts in the field validated the questionnaire, the researchers translated it into Arabic. Finally, the Arabic version of the questionnaire was submitted to two experts in Arabic to improve its style and clarity.

Using SPSS, the questionnaire data were analyzed to get relevant descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviation. Further, Business English learners' responses to the questionnaire items were divided into three categories: low (1–2.33), moderate (2.34–3.66), and high (3.67–5).

A famous nonparametric test also analyzed the data, the Mann-Whitney U test, to compare outcomes between two independent groups and to find whether there were any significant differences between male and female learners in terms of utilization of various coping strategies.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This section presents findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the e-questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions.

The nature of learning challenges inherent in studying via EMI

In terms of the first research question on the nature of learning challenges inherent in studying Readings in Business through the medium of English (EMI), these learning challenges are discussed under the following themes.

Textbook-based challenges

Business English Learners (BELs) were asked to respond to one item to identify the textbook-based challenges. Using mean and standard deviation for the total scores revealed that Business English Learners express their opinions that the language of the textbook is challenging to comprehend. More specifically, the overall mean of Business English Learners' responses was rated in a moderate category ($M = 3.31$, $S. Dev. 1.33$), as shown in Table 1. In other words, the language of the textbook could be clearer to comprehend and falls in the moderate category. That means the Business English Learners found the textbook to be challenging to understand.

Whereas the $S. Dev. 1.33$ indicates some variability in Business English Learners' responses to these statements. Overall, the findings revealed that Business English Learners face challenges related to the language used in the

textbook, and some of them may find the language of the textbook more challenging to comprehend.

Table 1. Textbook-based challenges

No	Items	Mean	S. Dev.
1	The language of the textbook is difficult to comprehend	3.31	1.33

Language proficiency-based challenges

Various types of language proficiency-based challenges were investigated by asking Business English Learners to respond to five items to identify the types of challenges related to their language proficiency they face inherent in studying Readings in Business through (EMI). More specifically, the overall mean of Business English Learners' responses was rated in the moderate category ($M = 3.62$, $S. Dev. 1.11$).

Using the mean and standard deviation of each item revealed that Business English Learners face various challenges related to their language proficiency when studying via (EMI). For example, table 2 shows that the overall mean of Business English Learners' responses to each statement related to the challenges related to their language proficiency ranged from (3.52 to 3.68) indicating that Business English Learners observe their limited language proficiency to be a noteworthy challenge.

The findings show that the most frequent challenge faced by Business English Learners was difficulties comprehending the textbook's content due to their limited language proficiency ($M = 3.68$, $S. Dev. 1.21$), followed by two items that got the same mean score ($M = 3.65$, $S. Dev. 1.30$) Due to my limited language proficiency, I did not score well in my exams and Due to my limited language proficiency, I do not answer the questions correctly and effectively in tests. The other challenges faced by Business English Learners are the students hesitate to ask questions inside the classroom, do not participate in classroom discussions ($M = 3.52$, $S. Dev. 1.31$), and keep silent due to their limited language proficiency ($M = 3.60$, $S. Dev. 1.29$).

The findings indicate that there is some variability in Business English Learners' responses to the language proficiency-based challenges items. Overall, the findings revealed that Business English Learners in the context of language

proficiency-based challenges face challenges that affect their comprehension of textbook content, ability to answer tests effectively, exam scores, and participation in classroom discussions. This means that these challenges fell in the moderate category.

Table 2. Students' language proficiency challenges

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1	Due to my limited language proficiency, I did not score well in my exams.	3.65	1.30
2	Due to my limited language proficiency, I face difficulty comprehending the textbook's content.	3.68	1.21
3	Due to my limited language proficiency, I do not participate in classroom discussions and keep silent.	3.52	1.31
4	Due to my limited language proficiency, I hesitate to ask questions inside the classroom.	3.60	1.29
5	Due to my limited language proficiency, I do not answer the questions correctly and effectively in tests.	3.65	1.29
	Total	3.62	1.11

Instructors-based challenges

Various types of instructor-based challenges were investigated by asking Business English Learners to respond to five items to identify the types of challenges related to instructors they face inherent in studying Readings in Business through (EMI). More specifically, the overall mean of Business English Learners' responses was rated in a high category ($M = 3.90$, $S. Dev. 1.00$).

Using the mean and standard deviation of each item revealed that Business English Learners face various challenges related to instructors-based challenges when studying via (EMI). For example, table 3 shows that the overall mean of Business English Learners' responses to each statement related to the challenges related to instructors-based challenges ranged from (3.74 to 3.90) indicating that Business English Learners have mixed perceptions regarding instructors-based challenges.

The findings show that the most frequent challenge faced by Business English

Learners was "The course instructor explains the content in both English and Arabic" ($M = 3.90$, $S. Dev. 1.00$), indicating that most students agree with this statement and rated in a high category followed by three items ranging from mean scores (3.74 to 3.83), indicating that it is a high category agreed upon by Business English Learners. The lowest item got a mean score ($M = 2.96$, $S. Dev. 1.53$), "Although the course is in English, the instructor teaches everything in Arabic," indicating that most Business English Learners disagree with this item.

Overall, the findings revealed that Business English Learners have mixed perceptions regarding instructors-based challenges. The students reported that "The instructor's use of Arabic language and translation of course content seems to be a challenge for them. Furthermore, other Business English Learners appreciate the instructor's efforts to simplify learning through the use of both English and Arabic.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of instructors-based challenges

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1	The instructor used to translate most of the course content.	3.74	1.14
2	Although the course is in English, the instructor teaches everything in Arabic.	2.96	1.35
3	The instructor used to provide feedback on tasks and tests.	3.76	1.10
4	Instructors used Arabic to facilitate learning and explain concepts that learners couldn't comprehend in English.	3.83	1.08
5	The course instructor explains the content in both English and Arabic.	3.90	1.00
	Total	3.90	1.00

Students Coping Strategies

The Business English Learners in this study utilized several coping strategies to overcome their learning challenges when studying Readings in Business courses. Some of these coping strategies seemed more effective and widely used by the learners than others.

Table 4 provides descriptive statistics, the mean and standard deviation (SD) for nine items related to students' coping strategies used to overcome their learning challenges when studying Readings in Business courses.

Using the mean and standard deviation of each item revealed that Business English Learners employ various coping strategies than others when studying via (EMI). For example, table 4 shows that the overall mean of Business English Learners' responses to each statement related to the students' coping strategies ranged from (2.95 to 4.30) indicating that Business English Learners have mixed perceptions regarding coping strategies.

The item stated that "I used Computer-aided translation tools such as Google Translate to translate the paragraphs" ($M = 4.30$, $S. Dev. 0.90$), indicating that most students used Computer-aided translation tools. This statement was rated in a high category, followed by seven items ranging from mean scores (3.58 to 3.98), indicating Business English Learners moderately and highly agree with these statements in terms of coping strategies.

The lowest item got a mean score ($M = 2.95$, $S. Dev. 1.54$). "During my study of the Reading in Business, I used to hire a private tutor to explain the lessons again," indicating that most Business English Learners did not hire a private tutor. The SD of each item of coping strategies ranges from (0.90 to 1.54), which indicates that there is some variability in Business English Learners' responses to the statements. Overall, the findings revealed that Business English Learners adopt a variety of coping strategies, such as using Google Translate to translate the paragraphs, using their native language to inquire and ask questions, creating a glossary to memorize new words, using bilingual dictionaries and translation tools, seeking help from classmates and instructors. The total mean score of 3.70 revealed that these coping strategies are highly prevalent among the students in this context.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of students' coping strategies

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1	I used bilingual dictionaries to translate the difficult words and expressions.	3.68	1.22
2	I used Computer-aided translation tools such as Google Translate to translate the paragraphs.	4.30	0.90
3	I take help from my classmate.	3.58	1.21
4	I used to ask the instructor to provide feedback on tasks and tests.	3.61	1.21

No.	Items	Mean	SD
5	I use the Arabic language to inquire and ask questions in class.	3.98	0.96
6	Due to my limited language proficiency, I rely primarily on note class summaries and translated remarks than on the textbook.	3.59	1.28
7	I request the instructor to explain some topics in Arabic when needed.	3.75	1.10
8	I create my glossary to memorize the new words.	3.84	1.17
9	During my study of the Reading in Business, I used to hire a private tutor to explain the lessons again.	2.95	1.54
Total		3.70	0.78

Table 5: Mann-Whitney Test of coping strategies based on Gender

	Item1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6	Item 7	Item 8	Item 9
Mann-Whitney U	2895.0	2429.0	2704.0	2679.0	2602.5	2603.5	2612.5	2568.0	2349.5
Wilcoxon W	5380.0	6257.0	5189.0	5164.0	6430.5	5088.5	5097.5	6396.0	4834.5
Z	-.551	-2.393	-1.259	-1.345	-1.649	-1.613	-1.631	-1.767	-2.532
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.582	.017	.208	.178	.099	.107	.103	.077	.011

Grouping Variable: Gender

The findings of the Mann-Whitney Test, which is ubiquitous in statistical practice for comparing measures of two samples where the assumption of normality is questionable, denied the presence of a statistically significant difference in terms of coping strategies among male and female Business English Learners. Additionally, the findings indicated that the two groups differ significantly in item number Two and item number Nine, but not on others.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the existing research by identifying the nature of

the learning challenges inherent in studying readings in business through the medium of English and the coping strategies used by business undergraduates to overcome these learning challenges.

The findings revealed that business English learners face challenges related to the language used in the textbook, and some may find the textbook's language more difficult to comprehend. Moreover, the findings revealed that business English learners in the context of language proficiency-based challenges face challenges that affect their comprehension of textbook content, ability to answer tests effectively, exam scores, and participation in classroom discussions. Furthermore, the findings revealed that business English learners have mixed perceptions regarding instructor-based challenges.

These findings are consistent with previous research that has identified the nature of the learning challenges inherent in studying readings in business (e.g., Ali, 2020; Al Zumor, 2019; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Holi, 2020; Onojetah, 2020; Wahi, 2013). In terms of coping strategies, the findings revealed that business English learners adopt a variety of coping strategies, such as using Google Translate to translate the paragraphs, using their native language to inquire and ask questions, creating a glossary to memorize new words, using bilingual dictionaries and translation tools, and seeking help from classmates and instructors.

These findings are consistent with previous research (Ali, 2020; Al Zumor, 2019; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Esquinca et al., 2014; Holi, 2020; Onojetah, 2020; Wahi, 2013). Higher education institutions in the Gulf have recently started using English as the primary medium of instruction rather than Arabic, the official language. This policy on language instruction has sparked discussions about whether youths are linguistically prepared to study in English and how it would affect Arabic and national identity (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015).

The results of this study have significant implications for higher education institutions that employ English as their primary language of instruction, particularly in business-related subjects. The study found various challenges that business English learners encounter when studying English-language texts, such as problems understanding the textbook language and difficulties based on language competency that affects their academic achievement. These difficulties significantly impact the learners' capacity to learn successfully and meet their

academic objectives.

The development of support programs to improve student's learning outcomes can be influenced by students' coping strategies, such as using translation tools and asking for assistance from peers and teachers. Therefore, colleges can use these findings to provide focused treatments for students with difficulty adjusting to English learning requirements. For instance, to assist students in developing their language skills, colleges can offer language support services like English language classes or reading comprehension workshops. In addition, to assist students in overcoming their academic challenges, they can also provide academic support services like tutoring or mentoring programs.

The results of this study have significant implications for higher education institutions that employ English as their primary language of instruction, particularly in business-related subjects. The study found various challenges that business English learners encounter when studying English-language texts, such as problems understanding the textbook language and difficulties based on language competency that affects their academic achievement. These difficulties significantly impact the learners' capacity to learn successfully and meet their academic objectives.

Regarding the nature of the current study, several limitations should be addressed in future research. First, this study is limited to 157 undergraduates. Therefore, further studies with a larger sample of students from different programs are needed to help confirm the current findings and enhance their generalizability. Second, this study is based on a questionnaire. Further studies require a mixed-methods approach to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Third, this study is limited to investigating the students' perspectives; future research is needed to include the instructor's perspective and other variables, such as the experiences of students studying Readings in Business in English with those studying in their native language.

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