



THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN UZBEKISTAN

Usibalieva Sayyora Kayrat Qizi

EFL Teacher at UzSWLU

UzSWLU

E-mail: sayyorausibalieva99@gmail.com

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Abstract: *English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has gained prominence in higher education worldwide, including Uzbekistan, where it is being increasingly implemented in state universities. This study examines the benefits and challenges associated with EMI in Uzbekistan's higher education institutions (HEIs). It provides an overview of the sociolinguistic landscape, the government's language education policies, and the motivations for adopting EMI. The study explores the benefits of EMI, such as improving English proficiency, enhancing academic and career opportunities, and fostering internationalization. However, challenges include variability in teacher preparedness, limited resources, and disparities in students' language proficiency. The research also draws comparisons with Kazakhstan, where EMI has contributed to global competitiveness and higher education reforms. The findings suggest that EMI implementation in Uzbekistan, while still in its early stages, has potential benefits but requires structured policies, improved teacher training, and adequate financial support to be effective. Future studies are encouraged to conduct empirical research on classroom dynamics, discipline-specific EMI effectiveness, and long-term student outcomes.*

Keywords: *English Medium Instruction (EMI), higher education, Uzbekistan, language policy, internationalization, teacher training, academic competitiveness, educational reform.*

1. Introduction

English is arguably the hegemonic language of academic communication in many countries, including Uzbekistan. English is widely recognised as a dominant language of instruction globally, which aligns with the concept of 'linguistic imperialism' (Phillipson, 1992). English Medium Instruction (EMI) involves teaching academic subjects in English within countries where English is not the primary language for most of the population. (Dearden, 2014). Although the field of EMI research is quite recent, the trend has been metaphorically characterized as 'unstoppable' (Macaro 2018, p.7). EMI in Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) in Uzbekistan has been introduced relatively recently. While there is considerable literature on EMI in the European context, where this educational approach has been widely adopted for a significant period, studies conducted in developing countries are scarce (Guo et al., 2022). Therefore, this essay aims to evaluate the implementation of EMI in Higher Education (HE) in Uzbekistan, focusing on this educational practice's potential benefits and challenges. The focus will be on EMI practices in state higher education



rather than international or non-governmental ones, as the latter often employ foreign teachers, unlike state institutions. Focusing on state universities, which often employ local instructors, provides a deeper understanding of how EMI is implemented in Uzbekistan. Additionally, this essay will rely on existing research papers about EMI in Uzbekistan rather than conducting an empirical study. Due to the dearth of literature, it also examines EMI benefits and challenges in Kazakhstan, a nation with a shared history that has implemented a trilingual education policy (Kazakh, Russian, and English). As a researcher and former student in Uzbekistan, I recognize that EMI's implementation in the country is not fully fledged, and substantial work remains to be done to enhance it. Therefore, the implementation of EMI faces some challenges, and unveiling them is essential for improvement, bearing in mind the benefits EMI is generally believed to offer.

2. Background

2.1 Sociolinguistic Landscape of Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan's linguistic landscape is complex and dynamic, shaped by its history with the Soviet Union (1925-1990) and Western influences post-1991. It is a multilingual country where various ethnicities coexist, including Uzbeks (83.8%), Tajiks (4.8%), Kazakhs (2.5%), Russians (2.3%), Karakalpaks (2.2%), Tatars (1.5%), and others (2.9%) (cia.gov, 2024). Following independence in 1991, Uzbekistan implemented a 'one language-one nation' policy (Djuraeva, 2022, p.93). Russian still serves as a lingua franca, facilitating communication across ethnicities. However, the role of Russian in the country remains a sensitive issue, as it is widely spoken but lacks official status (Egamberdiev, 2020).

Although English has not deeply penetrated Uzbek society, with only a minority of the population proficient (Hasanova, 2007), interest in the language is growing significantly. According to the EF English Proficiency Index 2021, Uzbekistan ranked 88th out of 112 non-English speaking countries globally and 18th among 24 Asian countries, classified with "very low" proficiency. Despite this starting point, there is considerable enthusiasm from the government and society to pursue EMI in HE (Linn & Bezborodova, 2022). This has led to several decrees to enhance foreign language education, particularly emphasizing EMI in higher education.

2.2 Foreign Language Education Reforms

Government efforts to enhance foreign language proficiency, especially English, in Uzbekistan are evident through various decrees. A significant reform was Presidential Decree #1875, issued on December 10, 2012, which aimed to foster an educated, modern-thinking generation and integrate Uzbekistan into the international



community (National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2012). This decree targeted the improvement of foreign language proficiency at all educational levels, including HE, where some institutions adopted EMI for technical and international specialities. However, Mamasolieva (2019) argues that most higher education institutions (HEIs) have not fully transitioned to English as the instruction medium. In agreement with her, it is observed that teachers and students often engage in translanguaging, using Uzbek and Russian alongside English. This practice can be described as employing 'features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts' (Vogel & García 2017, p.1).

In 2017, another presidential decree aimed to enhance the education system, which led to the establishment of the British Council's English for Academic Purposes program, focusing on international connections and pedagogical practices (Linn and Bezborodova, 2022). To further promote international academic mobility, a decree was signed in 2018, establishing the *El-Yurt Umidi* Foundation to send talented students abroad to pursue Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD degrees at the top 300 universities worldwide (lex.uz.2018). I also received a full scholarship from this foundation, which covered my study and living expenses abroad. My experience confirms that the foundation significantly benefits Uzbekistan's youth by providing access to advanced standard education. This exposure allows them to gain valuable knowledge and experience from top universities, contributing to Uzbekistan's scientific development.

In the same year, another decree was enacted permitting the use of TOEFL or IELTS scores as substitutes for the English language section of the national standardized exam required for admission to HEIs (Linn and Bezborodova, 2022). Furthermore, the President enacted a decree that significantly influenced the execution of the *Concept of Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Uzbekistan* until 2030. This decree mandates that a minimum of ten universities in Uzbekistan achieve international recognition (lex.uz.2019). Linn and Bezborodova (2022) argue that a university's position in global rankings is closely linked to its research productivity, prompting higher education institutions to adopt strategies that boost publications in peer-reviewed journals. They believe that these strategies put considerable pressure on researchers and educators. However, it can be argued that this focus does not necessarily pressure faculty. Instead, this approach might motivate them to enhance their research quality and engagement, potentially leading to broader academic contributions and innovations that benefit the educational community.

3. EMI in Uzbekistan



3.1 EMI: overview

The total number of HEIs is 210 (fledu.uz, 2023). This includes 115 state institutions, 65 non-state institutions, and 30 foreign institutions. While not every state university offers English-language programs, some have specialized programs where courses are partially conducted in English. Notably, the University of World Economy and Diplomacy offers courses in English within its International Relations and World Politics departments. The Uzbekistan State World Languages University (UZSWLU) also strongly emphasizes EMI for preparing future language teachers and translators (Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022). Drawing from my experiences as a former UZSWLU student, I observed that while primary subjects were often taught in English, several secondary subjects, such as history, economics, philosophy, and physical training, were taught in Russian or Uzbek languages.

3.1 EMI: Motivation

A significant European study by the Academic Cooperation Association (Wachter & Maiworm, 2008, cited in Wilkinson, 2013) identified three key reasons for implementing EMI. The main reason is to draw international students who might not enroll if the programs were offered in the local language. EMI is also designed to prepare local students for the global marketplace and enhance the institution's ranking in the country. The adoption of EMI in Uzbekistan is primarily motivated by the aims of global connectivity, internalization, educational advancement, and improving the Uzbek universities' ranking (lex.uz.2019). Wilkinson (2013) notes that the adoption of EMI aims to increase international visibility, attract funding, enhance university rankings, and improve graduates' global competitiveness and employability. These motivations are consistent with the aims of Uzbekistan's EMI strategy in HE.

Although EMI is a relatively recent development in Uzbekistan, it attracts international students to state universities, especially in fields like medicine, law, and languages. The increasing enrollment of these students suggests that implementing EMI is proving effective. Linn and Bezborodova (2022, p.3) further argue that English is growing as the medium of instruction in Uzbekistan, and "English groups" are becoming increasingly common, following national guidelines for HE development. Overall, the expansion of EMI in Uzbekistan reflects a broader global trend towards embracing English as a key tool for global and international engagement, educational advancement, and enhancement of universities' rankings.

3.2 Benefits of EMI

EMI has gained significant attention in HE research, with numerous studies highlighting its benefits for students and educators. Galloway (2017) reveals EMI



improves English proficiency, provides access to up-to-date academic research, and boosts global competitiveness. It also enhances career prospects and facilitates international collaboration and opportunities for studying or working abroad, enriching educational and professional experiences. Regarding the context of Uzbekistan, Rahmanova and Ekşi (2023) conducted a study in Uzbekistan to discern the perceptions of administrators, teachers, and students of the benefits and opportunities EMI presents at state universities. The research indicates that administrators view EMI as a valuable tool for enhancing students' English and communication skills and their ability to engage in international conferences. Teachers at state universities in Uzbekistan generally hold positive opinions on the effectiveness of EMI, noting its potential to improve students' prospects for future educational and career opportunities. Teachers also recognize that teaching through EMI can enhance their English language competence and pedagogical skills. Furthermore, students report that EMI contributes to their English language improvement, participation in international conferences and projects, and provides opportunities to study and work abroad after graduation. Their study aligns with Galloway's (2017) research.

Another study conducted in three Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, by Bezborodova and Radjabzade (2022) is consistent with the findings of Rahmanova and Ekşi (2023), highlighting the widespread recognition of EMI's benefits in Uzbekistan among students and teachers. The participants in their study perceived EMI as offering better educational opportunities, supporting professional and academic development, and enhancing employability in the global job market. These findings underscore the value placed on English proficiency as a critical component of modern education and career advancement, aligning with the broader objectives of national education reforms aimed at internationalization.

Furthermore, the research by Tajik et al. (2023) in Kazakhstan reveals that EMI is perceived as a symbol of prestige and social status. It is a gateway, enabling students to access international universities and global job markets while enhancing educators' teaching skills. Historically, Kazakhstani students and skilled workers have depended on Russia. However, adopting EMI offers graduates expanded prospects in overseas universities, global job markets, and various economic fields. This shift not only offers individual benefits but also positions Kazakhstan as a competitive player on the global stage, emphasizing English as a crucial language for international communication and integration.



Overall, EMI has become a central focus in HE due to its wide-ranging benefits, as underscored by studies from various researchers, including Galloway (2017) and more localized research in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan by Rahmanova and Ekşi (2023), Bezborodova and Radjabzade (2022), and Tajik et al. (2023). These studies collectively highlight EMI's role in enhancing English proficiency, academic competitiveness, and career prospects, making it a valuable educational strategy. In Uzbekistan, EMI is seen as a tool for boosting students' language skills and international engagement. Educators, students and administrators appreciate the improved academic and professional opportunities it provides. Similarly, research from Kazakhstan indicates that EMI is elevating education standards, helping students access global opportunities and marking a significant shift away from traditional reliance on Russian influences. This broad adoption of EMI across varied contexts illustrates its effectiveness in integrating local education systems into the global academic and economic landscape.

3.3 Challenges of EMI

Although EMI offers several advantages, the challenges associated with its adoption should not be overlooked. Rahmanova and Ekşi's (2023) study reveals variability in the preparedness and motivation among instructors for teaching in English-medium classrooms; some are highly motivated, while others lack the necessary experience or confidence. Students also encounter obstacles in understanding new materials, fulfilling tasks, expressing ideas in English, and building an adequate academic vocabulary. As a result, both teachers and students often engage in translanguaging practices in the classroom. Moreover, Rahmanova and Ekşi's (2023) report difficulties in recruiting native English-speaking instructors for teacher training, hiring foreign experts, and forming partnerships with international universities to enhance local instructors' English teaching capabilities. They also highlight issues with inadequate IT resources, such as insufficient computers, unreliable internet connectivity, and a lack of suitable teaching materials. Additionally, Bezborodova and Radjabzade's (2022) research identifies similar challenges, noting students' dissatisfaction with teaching methods at state universities. In other words, teachers focused more on attendance than actual learning, leading to low student motivation. The main student complaints were about boring lectures, an excessive focus on theory without practical applications, and unclear learning objectives. From the teachers' perspective, teaching through EMI was particularly challenging due to a lack of materials and training. Furthermore, the study found that translanguaging practices were prevalent in classrooms, with



teachers and students often using other languages alongside English. The researchers referred to this phenomenon as code-switching. However, I view this practice as translanguaging, which can be considered deliberate pedagogical practice (Wei and Lin, 2019).

Interestingly, a study by Tajik et al. (2023) in Kazakhstan revealed that EMI contributes to inequalities and difficulties, leading to stress and anxiety among students. A significant variation in English language proficiency among students results in classroom segregation and inequality. This gap fosters social inequalities as it benefits students with strong English language skills and excludes less proficient ones. (Phillipson, 1994, cited in Tajik et al., 2023). Pennycook (1994, cited in Tajik et al., 2023) argues that EMI may sustain the dominance of English-speaking cultures and strengthen the notion that the English language is superior, implying that academic achievement depends solely on proficiency in English. Moreover, the study reveals that implementing EMI has made the roles of Kazakhstani teachers more challenging and complex. They are expected to excel in their subject matter and teach in English. Their insufficient English skills and minimal knowledge of EMI techniques impede their effectiveness in teaching.

Overall, in Uzbekistan, challenges with EMI include variability in teacher readiness, motivation, insufficient IT resources, and language proficiency, leading to a reliance on translanguaging in classrooms (Rahmanova and Ekşi, 2023; Bezborodova and Radjabzade, 2022). In contrast, Kazakhstan faces significant social inequalities due to EMI, with disparities in English proficiency causing classroom segregation and stress among students (Tajik et al., 2023). Additionally, Kazakhstani teachers struggle with inadequate English skills and a lack of EMI pedagogical training, complicating their dual roles as content and language instructors. These differences illustrate how EMI introduces distinct challenges in each country, affecting educational outcomes and social equity.

3.4 Evaluation of EMI Practice in Uzbekistan

In response to national HE reforms, Linn and Bezborodova (2022) evaluated the EMI project in collaboration with the British Council and the Ministry of Secondary and Higher Education. This project aimed to enhance English proficiency and promote internationalization in HE by training EMI professionals at 16 state universities. The evaluation project, conducted by the University of Webster, focuses on key aspects such as relevance, effectiveness, sustainability, and strategic recommendations. The findings highlight the importance of a holistic approach to EMI development, emphasizing the need for multilingualism. This could be



facilitated by incorporating translanguaging practices in the classroom. Although translanguaging is frequently observed, as noted in previous studies, there is a lack of training on effectively implementing translanguaging techniques in educational settings. Moreover, the project highlights the necessity for standardized language proficiency tests for admissions. The use of standardized language proficiency tests for admissions is important. Applicants to state universities can submit internationally recognized certificates like IELTS, CEFR, and TOEFL or opt for a national exam focusing mainly on grammar. This leads to a classroom division: students with international certificates usually have more practical English skills, while those who pass the grammar-focused exam often struggle with speaking and listening. This segregation needs to be addressed to ensure a more balanced classroom environment. Additionally, the report emphasizes the necessity of collaboration between language and content teachers and the development of robust online and offline resources to support teachers and students in improving their language proficiency. This recommendation is important as a hybrid form of teacher and student training could be beneficial, allowing flexibility and convenience. Furthermore, the project recommends embedding holistic EMI development in institutional policies and addressing specific disciplinary needs through sector-wide training.

University leaders are primarily motivated by internationalization and research publication goals. However, educators in HE lack financial support for their research activities. Therefore, proper funding is essential for achieving the national reform objectives of EMI. Furthermore, a crucial issue is that students appear to have a limited understanding of the educational approach through EMI (Bezborodova, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to provide thorough training on EMI not just for teachers but also for students. Ultimately, the EMI project's success depends on continuous support, standardized practices, and a comprehensive approach to EMI development, ensuring its long-term sustainability and effectiveness in Uzbekistan's HE landscape.

Conclusion

EMI is a recent educational approach in HE in Uzbekistan. Its implementation reflects a significant shift towards internationalization and enhanced global competitiveness for the country. The existing literature underscores EMI's potential to improve English proficiency, academic success, and career opportunities. Despite its benefits, the transition to EMI has faced challenges such as variability in teacher preparedness, motivation, insufficient resources, and language proficiency. These obstacles highlight a gap between educational goals and practical realities. However,



the evaluation project conducted by Linn and Bezborodova (2022) and this study suggest some possible strategies to address these challenges. While the full integration of EMI into Uzbekistan's higher education system will take time, the initial steps towards its adoption are promising.

Based on the existing literature, this study has laid the groundwork for a comprehensive understanding of EMI practice in HE in Uzbekistan. I believe that this is the first study to systematically review all the existing literature on EMI within this context. Since EMI is a recent educational approach in HE in Uzbekistan, further empirical investigations are encouraged to explore more teachers' and students' experiences, especially in state HEIs. Future studies could examine classroom dynamics, the effectiveness of EMI in different disciplinary contexts, and its long-term impact on students' academic and career opportunities. Moreover, while existing research has primarily relied on surveys and interviews to collect data, incorporating classroom observations could provide a more detailed understanding of EMI practices in Uzbekistan.

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