

Rethinking the Use of English as a Language of Instruction in a Botswana Public University

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Abstract

This paper examines students' perceptions of the use of English as a language of instruction at one of the public universities in Botswana across levels. The institution uses English as a language of instruction only even though it enrolls international, regional, and local students, hence making it a multilingual and multicultural setup. The study adopted the qualitative approach with the use of open-ended interview questions to tease out students' views about the language of instruction and relied on critical language theory. The population of the study was students at first-year level from different faculties of the university. The findings of the study indicated that some students appreciate the use of English because it has been the language of instruction from lower levels of learning, while other students share different views that they do not understand the language. The study concluded that the institution needs to intervene by introducing support lessons for English proficiency to enhance learning for students who are weak in the language, for better understanding.

Keywords: competence, English, first language, proficiency, second language, transfer

1. Introduction

The language of instruction plays a critical role in the teaching and learning process as it conveys information and knowledge to the students, as well as engaging them. It is, therefore, one of the most widely discussed topics in education systems from early childhood learning to tertiary institutions. The language of instruction has an impact on the students because it helps them to understand concepts and achieve their educational goals. Though a vital topic of discussion, it is a complex phenomenon, especially when it comes to countries that have rich linguistic diversity and are multicultural.

The language of instruction has been politicised and influenced by tribalistic issues for decades in African countries, and it is still happening. Trudell et al. (2023) argue that in most cases, the population of speakers who are fluent in the language of instruction is not counted, and also, there is a lack of social interaction in the language, especially when the students coming from the disadvantaged regions, is ignored, and this can result in education inequality and minimal achievement of learning outcomes.

Further, it was pointed out that African education systems have placed significant value on using foreign languages for instruction, and yet the languages are not serving learners well in some situations (Kamwendo, 2010). African languages have been perceived as inadequate as a medium in academic environments (Breton, 2003). It was argued that stakeholders and elites have looked negatively at African languages being used in the classrooms as languages that do not have intellectual capability, and consequently, the authorities did not put efforts into a better understanding of how the foreign languages can ultimately affect the success of students (Okafor & Noah, 2014).

Trudell (2016) asserts that authorities believe that for students to be competent in the foreign language of instruction used, more time should be spent on learning the language without using the learners' first language as a resource. Further, the local languages were discouraged because globally developed concepts must be communicated in a global language. After all, local languages lacked the vocabulary.

Again, Mweri (2020) also highlighted that most authorities believed that English is equal to development, and this

propelled the idea that foreign languages are important. UNESCO (2021) notes that most children grow up in an environment where more than one language is spoken. Despite this, more than 40% of the children do not have access to an education in a language they understand, and this has negatively affected their learning. Many countries still prioritise one national language and official language as languages of instruction, which are not the languages spoken by learners at home (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1999; 2000; Kosonen, 2017).

The views of scholars on the use of English as a language of instruction, even where students do not speak and understand the language, impact this paper as it analyses the situation at a public university in Botswana to establish how EMI is perceived by the students and their reasons for such perceptions. This contradicts the bases for language-in-education policies in most African higher education. These provided not only motivation but a concern of this paper in highlighting students-policies contradictions. This paper critically analyses the students' responses by scrutinising their perceptions.

2. Background to the Study

The University of Botswana was established in 1982 by an Act of Parliament after undergoing transition from being the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland to the University of Botswana and Lesotho and then the University of Botswana (University of Botswana, 2020). Ever since it was established, the language of instruction has been solely English. It has been under the management of six Vice Chancellors until the current one, who has been holding the post since 2017. It is evident from the transitional stages that the institution has been multilingual and multicultural, with other African students and local students from different regions of the country speaking different languages. One can also anticipate that even the students from other African countries had their own issues in using English as a medium of instruction due to other influential language issues in their own countries. The university is now transforming its faculty structures and merging some of them to form schools (University of Botswana, 2024). The academic staff come from different parts of the world to impart knowledge and information to the students and teach different courses.

Currently, the university has eight faculties, and soon some of them will be merged as the institution is undergoing a transformation. It is important to state that the medium of instruction at the University has always been English, even though African and other languages are taught as subjects. Therefore, English has always dominated in the lecture rooms. Despite this, there are no support services for learning English in the institution. The assumption could be that learners are admitted with different competencies in English, especially those who do not speak it as a native language. They are assessed in English, and this is the niche of this study to interrogate the use of English generally across the institution's classrooms.

UNESCO (2016) spells out that the results of learning assessment show that when home and school languages differ, there is a negative impact on test scores. This sentiment has been supported by SACMEQ III data in 2010 that there is a positive correlation between speaking the language of instruction and learner achievement (Trudell, 2016). In this regard, bilingual and multilingual education has been found to increase learners' confidence and self-esteem. However, UNESCO (2016) discovered that while many countries have a national language policy that supports the use of local languages, such policies are not always implemented, and the reasons are different and they include the cost of developing local languages, lack of trained teachers in the language, and unwritten and non-standardised languages. Hence, language policy and planning have always been an issue, which demands an in-depth situational analysis of the sociolinguistic and educational context of communities. Therefore, an update of information on the language situation is required.

The Revised National Policy on Education (1994) recognised two languages of instruction and has always strengthened their existence. English has dominated the classrooms from the primary level to the tertiary level. Preschools have also followed the same tradition of using English because the curriculum is written in English, and teachers find it tedious to translate concepts to Setswana and other children's familiar languages (Mokibelo, 2023). Although problems have been identified with the use of the two languages, especially in regions where they are not spoken in children's homes, the process of using children's familiar languages has been slow. At the tertiary level, the issue of English as the language of instruction has not been debated. It seems as if it is a norm; it is supposed to be used because the language has been used from early learning. Again, most learners enrolled at UB have passed the subject with a good or better grade. In this regard, the assumption is that students enrolled are already proficient and competent in the language to get grounded in university learning. Therefore, this paper interrogates this long-standing 'normal situation' as perceived by the beneficiaries of the instruction.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper is premised on the theoretical framework of critical language policy. English-medium policies typically rest on colonial forces in most contexts (Anjum & Ali Shah, 2024), such as African and European examples, which Critical Language Policy (CLP) research criticizes for perpetuating hierarchies between "major" and "minor" languages.

Critical Language Policy (CLP) of Tollefson (2006) stipulates that social and historical factors influence the choice of the medium of instruction (Norro, 2022). It analyses the implementation of language policies within broader relations of power, inequality, and ideology. Instead of treating policy as a neutral, top-down text, CLP is concerned with how certain languages and speakers are privileged and others excluded through policy, and how stakeholders negotiate, resist, or reshape policy in daily practice.

In its current synthesis, the powerful strand of CLP is policy-in-practice—how schools implement, interpret, or reverse official policy. Hence, this paper discusses perspectives on the use of English as a language of instruction at tertiary level, making the CLP relevant for the discussion of access and equity in language-in-education policy (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014). The expectation is that at the tertiary level, students must become critical thinkers and possess the ability to analyse issues, solve problems, synthesise information and write logically to enable them to attain tertiary education. To achieve this, the language of instruction is the core of multilingual education since language policy is best conceptualised across a set of social factors (Tollefson, 2014).

Regarding CLP, some students are multilingual from home; they can speak two to three languages, and therefore learning English as a third or fourth language (Mokibelo, 2014). This can create unspeakable problems in acquiring English. These are the students who are admitted into tertiary education with limited competence in English, and therefore struggle to understand the key concepts in their different courses when English is the language of instruction. The transfer has always been negative from lower levels and has not been addressed for a long time. In this regard, there must be constant monitoring and input to reinforce the little that students understand.

4. Review of Literature

English medium of instruction (EMI) describes the act of teaching academic subjects or content through English language in a country where English is not the first or primary language (Rose & McKinley, 2018; Macaro, 2019). Existing literature on EMI at the higher education level is quite extensive, with attention to non-native contexts. Schmidt-Unterberger (2018) recognised five ways of implementing English as a medium of instruction in higher education. Specifically, Pre-sessional English for specific/academic purposes, Adjunct English for specific purposes, Embedded English for specific/academic purposes, English-medium instruction, and Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education were identified as different varieties of English-medium instruction in non-Anglophone countries. The author convincingly recommended EMI in higher education, while also advocating for the stakeholders' awareness of the importance of language and content.

Almost half of the students' population worldwide learns through EMI (Rose & McKinley, 2018). Even though EMI in global higher education is considered tasking and challenging (Pham et al., 2023); most non-Anglophone countries are fast embracing it (Rahman & Singh, 2021) as a response to the pressure of globalisation (Chang, 2022). It has been noted that teachers' development and perspectives are central in the implementation of EMI (Block & Moncada-Comas, 2019). No wonder, Yuan (2023) addressed the issues of EMI through teachers' development and teaching in China's higher institutions. Specifically, there is a demand for specialist-based practices in connecting language and content, which aligns with Schmidt-Unterberger's (2018) position, and identity construction in EMI education (Block & Moncada-Comas, 2019).

It is crucial to highlight some of the challenges reviewed in Yuan's (2023) study, including limited institutional recognition and collegiality support, isolated feelings and low pedagogical knowledge and proficiency. Apart from these, teachers' roles, attitudes, and knowledge in EMI education influence the strategies deployed in teaching, which could impact students' views of EMI in any non-native context at the higher institution level. This implies that EMI teachers need continuous development and institutional support to effectively enhance students' learning and preserve their identities. Hence, more attention has been focused on language and content in EMI higher education, and this formed the basis for the argument that both EMI and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) share some likeness (Aizawa et al., 2023).

Students' EMI perspectives are premised on beliefs that are essential for effective language of instruction (Stratton, 2023). Hence, Chung and Choi (2022) studied students' learning experiences at a Korean Private University and

found out that most international students rated EMI courses positively on content delivery, proficiency, and general experience. Since they mainly focused on international students, the findings may differ from the current study of students in a public university. Also, both teachers' and students' perspectives in Russian higher institutions indicated a key awareness of the roles of EMI for academic success (Chicherina & Strelkova, 2023).

Karim et al. (2021) argued for the suitability of Bangla, English or both as the medium of instruction in Bangladesh higher education based on micro and macro policies. The study revealed prevailing issues of stigmatisation, linguistic dominance, limited analytical skills, and language-focused graduates through the analysis of 7 senior teachers' discourse on the medium of instruction (MOI) in Bangladeshi higher education institutions. They discovered that graduates of Bangla medium universities are better products with more benefits than the EMI graduates. Language ideologies at different levels have been intricately connected with EMI and language practices (Hu & Lei, 2014), and lecturers' and students' language ideologies influence the construction of content (Rahman, & Singh, 2021). However, Tri and Moskovsky (2021) distinguished language ideology and practices by challenging the misconception that language ideology solely determines language practices in EMI as contextual factors, such as language immersion, plays dominant roles by using EMI programmes in Vietnamese higher institutions as a case study.

Further, Karim et al.'s (2021) work is essentially concerned with the language ideology of teachers, which advocates for a bilingual medium of instruction rather than the usual and differential practice of Bangla Medium Instruction (BMI) in public universities and EMI in private institutions. In a similar vein, Crawford et al. (2021) investigated the language ideology of students and lecturers on the benefits of EMI in Bangladesh. Even though the benefits were acknowledged, the participants were apt to decry the struggles due to minimal language support affecting EMI implementation.

Bangladesh's language, in education policy and practice, is noticeably like Botswana situation as observed by Akinkulore and Seru (2023). No wonder, the matter of equity is also a concern to university lecturers in Bangladesh, and several other studies have raised concerns on differentiated language policies in the public and private education sectors. Surprisingly, there is evidence that students' mode of instruction (MOI) in secondary schools is insignificant to the academic performance of students in EMI universities (Tai & Zhao, 2024).

To further discuss the suitability of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction, ResCue and van Pinxteren (2022) argued for the gradual incorporation of Ghanaian languages in higher education by benchmarking with Estonia. Their argument was premised on the need to promote quality education for all and reduce inequality in the country. Despite the solid argument, their recommendation is similar to Karim et al.'s (2021) position on using English alongside indigenous languages, starting with technical and vocational education.

Along the same reasoning, Al-Bataineh (2021) highlighted the relevance of a linguistic balance of mediums of instruction in the United Arab Emirates' higher institutions by advocating for the citizens' right to choose from various languages. The study evaluated the compatibility between EMI with students' proficiency before and after university education through a case study methodology. Even though this is consistent with other studies' argument on the incorporation of indigenous languages in HE instruction in Ghana and Bangladesh (ResCue & van Pinxteren, 2022; Karim et al., 2021), it further decries the development of EMI only and the non-commitment to students' competence capital preservation in Arabic. This observation implies a gap between policy and practice.

Despite copious arguments for indigenous language medium of instruction, Kucherbayeva and Smagulova (2023) were apt to highlight the ideological and pragmatic challenges, including a dearth of teaching and resources in the Kazakh language despite its ability to resist domination and sustain national identity. Some of the challenges, especially the dominance of English language, were regarded as sociolinguistics problems in North Africa (Ntombela, 2023), while Xulu-Gama & Hadebe (2022) reiterated mind shift as a key requirement to implement an indigenous medium of instruction through the analysis of university students' views on language preferences and attitudes in South Africa.

Remarkably, the English language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking are essential for EMI's effective implementation. It has been thought by Yapp (2023) that the ability to read in an EMI higher education context is non-negotiable because reading strategies in the first language may not be applicable in a second language. This implies the need for teachers to implement crucial strategies to support EMI in universities.

In the work of Bezborodova and Radjabzade (2022), EMI's experiences in Central Asian countries' higher institutions were investigated to identify societal, pedagogical, institutional, and communicational roles. By focusing on Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, a questionnaire was administered across 58 Higher Education institutions.

It was found out that English has various but interrelated roles as the medium of instruction, but the highlighted challenges were lack of English support, inadequate materials, poor English language proficiency, slow content learning, and fewer classroom interactions. These challenges were also identified by Pham et al. (2023) with the inclusion of intercultural learning issues and a recommendation of institutional support for both students and lecturers. Stakeholders' improvements of EMI experiences require language development for both students and teachers. This recommendation provides a wider scope than Yuan's (2023) focus on teachers only, while Aizawa et al. (2023) recommend that more language support programmes are required for higher education students, with more attention at lower levels.

It is noted that the presence or absence of language support recurs in EMI discourse. Simie & McKinley (2025) draw our attention to the policy provision for language support in Ethiopia's HEIs. The mission statements of 48 universities were analysed, and it was found that higher education policy lacks statements on language support, which was considered a major weakness. Aside from this, the study considered the compulsory English courses for Year 1 students as a language support, but it was observed this was grossly insufficient because students still struggled to learn English. This situation calls for additional language support, which most institutions lack.

A common feature of the literature is the indispensability of the English language as a medium or one of the languages of instruction, which is further strengthened by the internationalisation of English language and its various professional roles in higher education (Hu & Lei, 2014). Also, students in EMI higher institutions are more satisfied than dissatisfied with the medium (Barrios, et.al., 2022). Hence, this study draws on an extensive literature and primary data analysis to investigate the perceptions of students on EMI at a Botswana University to highlight the experiences and strategies deployed in the learning process.

5. Research Methodology

This study was conducted in 2025 at the University of Botswana as an action study by the researchers. An action study is collaborative and allows practitioners investigate and solve real world problems (Altrichter, 2002). In this case, the classroom is investigated as far as language use is concerned, the practical scenario in the classroom and contradictions arising from it were discussed. The study adopted the qualitative approach to get first-hand information from students and hear their voices about the language of instruction from their natural settings, within four weeks during the 2024/25 session in the university lecture rooms. Qualitative study, as described by Aspers and Corte (2021), is an iterative process generating new distinctions for deeper understanding, responding to debates about its nature by advocating for clear definitions to guide innovation. It moves beyond mere description to get and create new scientific knowledge (Creswell, 2009). The target population consisted of first-year students from six out of eight faculties at the university. A total of 54 students were systematically selected based on every fourth participant from a larger, randomly sampled group of 220 voluntary participants across the six faculties. The study did not consider gender issues. However, the researchers made sure that from each target sample, there were local, regional, and international students hence participants were selected from both diverse academic and cultural backgrounds. This allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the experiences and insights of university students on the use of English as a medium of instruction in public universities. This means that even though random sampling was used, systematic and purposive samplings were also applied.

The data collection tool was the open-ended interview questions. The set time for each interview session was 30 minutes though it extended depending on how explicit the different interviewees would respond. Interview data was recorded electronically and transcribed later to review patterns and insights related to research questions.

The data was rich with insights into the problem under study, as researchers were able to observe group dynamics and how individual students were able to influence one another. The open-ended questions provided detailed and personalised responses from participants. Respondents provided their thoughts and opinions. The research questions were exploratory, complex, subjective, theoretical, or evaluative. Hence, the responses lead to in-depth details that are flexible. Open-ended questions provided the researchers with a better understanding of the participants' perspectives, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences, which is crucial in gaining insights into complex issues (Creswell, 2009). They led to unexpected responses and exposed new information. Further, open-ended questions provided a range of answers that offered insight into the respondents' thoughts, feelings, or experiences.

Data were thematised and analysed according to each key research question to make sure that all the questions were adequately answered. In the thematic analysis, responses were coded, and recurring issues identified. This was done through regular discussions among the researchers and as such enhanced reliability and validity of the study. Such an analysis provided insights into each question and context-specific interpretation, unexpected discoveries and even

contradictions from the students' responses in the different faculties. Some of the data led to new directions. It even prompted further research on the problem under study. In essence, the data provided a clearer picture of what students think and believe about the use of English as a language of instruction at the University of Botswana. Comparisons were made between the answers for further debates on the issue. Ethical issues were also considered as students were requested to participate in the study, and they willingly agreed to participate after understanding the purpose. The study touched on what influenced their learning at tertiary education, and therefore, those who participated were willing to take part in the study.

6. Presentation of Results

This section presents the results of the study, focusing on the views of scholars on the use of English as a language of instruction in universities. The common understanding from the results is that English is indispensable as a language of instruction and it plays various academic and professional roles in universities. The results are presented based on students' comprehension of EMI, transfer of linguistic traits from L1 to L2 and students proposed interventions and strategies.

6.1 Students' Comprehension of EMI

The first question was to assess the level of comprehension of concepts taught in English at the University. Since the language of instruction at the University of Botswana, as in any other university in the country and region, is English, it is crucial to determine the effectiveness of content delivery in English. The major thrust of the question was to explore the ability of students to grasp academic concepts taught in English since students speak and use other languages, especially those whose first language is not English. The purpose was to assess whether students actively engage with course material and can participate meaningfully in classes conducted in English.

Most students interviewed responded that they do understand concepts taught in English. The answer 'YES', which was prominent in their responses, revealed personal understanding of the concepts taught. From the excerpts given below, students noted that they understand the language of instruction.

Student 16 - *I do not find it difficult to understand concepts in English, as it has been used from my preschool till now to teach concepts.*

Student 24- *I grew up speaking English more than any other language*

Student 32- *Yes, I understand most of the knowledge/concepts taught in my course using the English Language*

Student 40- *I do understand most of the knowledge taught in my course using English, since we understand it better. Also, spoken by millions worldwide and creates better communication between different races.*

Student 60- *Because I have prior teaching experience in English, and I am a proficient English speaker*

Student 72 -*Because every module in my programme is taught in English*

Student 180- *English is my second language, and I have been taught from an early age to understand and use the language.*

Student 192- *Most of the content is relatable*

Though some respondents had indicated YES on the question, further probing indicated that they had no understanding whatsoever of the concepts that are taught in English and showed deeper linguistic challenges, and would prefer translation or lecturers' code-switching during lecture times. The findings further indicate that, from the YES responses, those students who showed partial understanding of English as a language of instruction tend to miss some of the concepts taught in English. This can be confirmed from the following responses:

Student 20- *Even though I understand, it can take time to interpret the message being delivered because of the use of terms that might require one to refer to their synonyms to understand the concepts; the language is diverse and has a lot of expressions that can be used to explain one concept, hence, better understanding.*

Student 8-*Yes, but I have some delay when I am writing the test or exam*

Student 28-*I understand English but not more than Setswana*

Student 144-*Because my brain has developed the ability to process language through education. And even repeated exposure.*

Student 148 -*I do not understand most of the knowledge and concepts*

6.2 Negative Transfer of Linguistic Traits from L1 to L2

The findings indicate that though the students claim to understand English, in the real classroom practices they are not proficient in the language. Though many claimed that they understand, they still admit their struggles in the classroom. From conversations, their first language interferes with the attainment of second language proficiency. Under pressure, those students who think they understand concepts might struggle, especially in ad hoc or timed exercises. This might be due to inadequate vocabulary in the language, and they might need to mentally translate back to their first language to process and respond; hence, the transfer from their L1 to L2 might be negative as it strains them mentally. Notably, a few respondents said NO because they do not understand concepts taught in English. The excerpts below relate to what the students said:

Student 24-*Because sometimes my lecturers and some students speak so fast and I am unable to catch up to what they are saying, some concepts are complex and they are not easy to master; they sometimes use vivid language to explain the concept, which was not necessary, and they need to budget for students who understand basic English.*

Student 12- *Here, they are complex and difficult terms incorporated into academics.*

Student 96- *I don't understand some topics, I prefer Setswana.*

Student 104-*I understand some, but most of the knowledge I cannot comprehend; They use difficult words.*

Student 124- *The use of complicated words in academic questions makes it hard to understand.*

6.3 Students' Proposed Interventions and Strategies

The teaching strategies used by the teachers affect the students' level of understanding and students must adopt coping mechanisms on their own to effectively use the language terrain in a scenario where English is used as a language of instruction. However, the pertinent concern is investigating students' coping mechanisms in the use of EMI, since English is not their mother tongue. The students' responses brought to light several issues regarding this.

6.3.1 Reading

The most popular strategy was reading books and watching movies.

Student 52 - *Always reading English Materials. Always listening to English music and watching movies with English subtitles.*

Student 101- *Regularly reading English books to increase vocabulary.*

Student 148 - *Extensive reading and research to broaden vocabulary for better understanding*

6.3.2 Peer Interaction

Other students alluded to peer interaction. Many students turn to classmates for explanations and simplifications of some language structures. As they do this, they use the Internet to search for and verify some concepts. As such, students increasingly rely on digital platforms to support themselves after classroom instruction.

Student 76 -*Use ChatGPT, dictionaries, and Google for hard vocabulary*

Student 168 -*Research from the Internet*

Active communication with peers, through group discussions, listening to each other, and asking each other questions, is a coping mechanism. These are strong support systems. Very few students ask the lecturer for further explanations, probably out of fear of explaining or asking questions in English. EMI may silence students who would want to participate in classroom activities.

Student 164-*I am afraid to ask questions because I am not confident in my English.*

6.3.3 Codeswitching and Translating

Further, codeswitching and translating are some of the methods used. These relate to trans-linguaging. One of the participants opined thus:

Student 88-*I try to translate to Setswana to help me understand better*

6.3.4 Notetaking

Note-taking is another coping mechanism. It is worth mentioning that Academic literacy courses include topics such as note-taking and note-making.

Student 20-*Note taking, group study and discussion, asking questions*

Student 66-Taking short notes and reading course material for further understanding

Student 92-Taking short notes to read later

Student 152- I write down terms that I do not understand and look them up later

Only a few of the students who responded to using English as their first language reported minimal difficulties since they are proficient enough to understand the concepts and believe in EMI as the only way to succeed in a global world. This is shown in the following responses:

Student 176- English is my first language, and I find no difficulty in coping with the use of English. The only strategy I can think of is trying to understand local accents.

Student 200- We must master English to succeed in this global world.

7. Discussion

The emerging themes in the analysis are discussed based on the premise that a multicultural university is regarded as a multilingual pot, which uses English as a language of instruction, as noted by Rose and McKinley (2018). This is mostly because students have been taught in English since their early years in school. This corroborates the submission of Barrios et.al. (2022) that students are more satisfied with EMI than otherwise. This acceptance of English as a global language that is used to communicate beyond borders gives a positive perception of the language among the students in alignment with the views of Chang (2023), and Rahman and Singh (2021). Thus, this acceptance normally derails the use of other languages as the prestigious status of English is associated with success.

This resonates with Bezborodova's and Radjabzade's (2022), and Brock-Utne's (2007) argument that students claim to understand English, yet their performance in tests and assignments reveals comprehension challenges. The YES responses show personal acceptance, though it is not always related to performance and actual understanding, and the grasp of concepts as also shown in the work of Crawford et al. (2021) and the preference of translation or lecturers' code-switching during lecture times, which aligns with Karim's et al. (2021) advocacy for the incorporation of indigenous languages as a support system.

Some students showed the cognitive link that they have developed over the years through the use of English as a language of instruction. This brings in the concerns on perceived versus actual understanding and contradictions in EMI within Universities. It is also possible that students might overestimate their understanding, especially about spoken English, when they later have cognitive overload on tasks. This is a further testament to UNESCO's (2016) statement on how differences in home and school languages limit students' performance.

According to Block and Moncada-Comas (2019), teachers' development and perspectives are central in the implementation of EMI. However, the pertinent concern is investigating students' coping mechanisms in the use of EMI, since English is not their mother tongue; students, therefore, relied on intensive and extensive reading, note-taking, codeswitching, and peer interaction, among others, as coping strategies. But students whose first language is English appreciated the use of EMI, and they did not need coping mechanisms. Such students draw from their linguistic repertoire to understand the concepts taught by lecturers.

Considering Yapp's (2023) thought that the ability to read in EMI contexts is non-negotiable, students reported that they read novels to gain language to use in and outside the classroom, as well as to gain new knowledge and new vocabulary. They also read novels for productive learning.

Reading not only enriches vocabulary but as students read, literacy skills are also developed. Some argued that they try to gain 5 to 10 new words daily to improve vocabulary. That fear of expression, hence, brings challenges as it impedes deeper engagement with the course content to the understanding of concepts as they are taught in English. The dominance of English marginalises the incompetent learner, which leads to sociolinguistic issues decried in Ntombela's (2023) paper.

Learners in African English as a medium of instruction contexts often build hybrid literacy practices, merging formal English with informal media consumption and peer-led learning to bridge comprehension gaps. If languages are compatible, learning becomes easy for students, especially if there is a linguistic balance of mediums of instruction as stated by Al-Bataineh (2021).

From the responses, students make efforts to cope with the challenges of EMI through self-directed learning. This strategy bridges the gap between the lecture and afterwards. Students enhance self-understanding and manage difficult situations they would have encountered in the classroom. However, this shows learner comprehension using

EMI in real time is ineffective, as the learner has to undergo personal compensatory activities because classroom activities would not have met their needs. No wonder, scholars like ResCue and van Pinxteren (2022), and Karim et al. (2021) advocate for the supportive use of indigenous languages in addition to EMI.

Indeed, language policy fails to account for students in multilingual realities; hence, individual students adopt coping strategies to navigate the English-dominant classroom. This echoes Simie's and McKinley's (2025) argument that there is need to align language policy with language practice. Hence, the suggested strategies might inform language policy decisions and curriculum design in universities, which was also a major concern in the work of Al-Bataineh (2021).

From the data gathered, English continues to dominate as the medium of instruction in African Universities. Students' perceptions reveal acceptance, fear, and adaptation to EMI through self-strategising as individuals or peers. The given perceptions are probably guided by the broader societal perspectives on the use of English as a medium of instruction. This can bring another insight into research on cultural capital about linguistic capital.

8. Implications

This study has implications. First, the outcomes of the study could mean that students at the University of Botswana have been failing, or they may have failed to cope with university learning because of the language of instruction. Even though Xulu-Gama and Hadebe (2022) criticise the use of English as a medium of instruction in Africa, saying the emphasis on English undermines the cognitive access to language. English dominance is rampant, and the language has become a gatekeeper. The burden of understanding concepts thus solely falls on the students rather than the institutions, as the institution has no pedagogical measures in place to assist the students.

This means that supportive structures could be put in place as rightly noted by Kucherbayeva and Smagulova (2023) to allow students to increase their capability and potential by providing English proficiency courses. Secondly, the study has implications on the academic staff, that they should be aware of the linguistic diversity and multilingualism in lecture rooms, and therefore, they need to go deeper in understanding who their students are and tailor their teaching to the calibre of students they teach to make sure that their teaching is effective, and it makes a positive impact on the students. Third, further research is needed to interrogate lecturers about the use of English as a language of instruction and observe whether their students are failing because of language or if there could be other contributory factors. Lastly, where students are not coping with learning, the stakeholders must put their heads together to come up with interventional strategies for both the institution and learners to achieve learning outcomes.

9. Conclusion

This paper interrogated the students' perceptions on the use of English as a language of instruction at the University of Botswana. It is clear from the students' responses that rethinking the use of English as a language of instruction is necessary. As students suggest, it may be necessary for the University of Botswana to provide support services for learners to cope with learning and teaching. The codeswitching to Setswana, as indicated by students, may not be the appropriate intervention because the strategy may address only students who understand Setswana; hence, foreign students will be left out.

The University of Botswana, as the first established higher institution in Botswana, should have strategies in place that address the issues of linguistic diversity and multilingualism internally without necessarily making drastic changes in the language-in-education policy of the institution. Since its establishment, it may mean that some students failed to achieve their learning goals because of the language of instruction, and this went unnoticed because it has never been debated.

English is, thus, the elite language that removes barriers in all contexts, be they professional or academic. Though important as a global language, the linguistic barriers need to be lifted to enable all to comprehend as they learn. There is a need for adequate language structures to enable students whose first language is not English to fit in easily and bring equity in the learning environment where the non-native speakers are not marginalised.

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Authors contributions

Prof Mokibelo proposed and designed the study. Dr Akinkurolere, Dr Mugomba and Mrs Sibisibi collected the data. All authors drafted the manuscript. Dr Akinkurolere and Dr Mugomba revised the manuscript, while Dr Mhindu and Dr Nwaefuna edited the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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