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## Pedagogical Instruction in English in a Multilingual University in Botswana: Challenges, Opportunities and Strategic Interventions

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**Abstract.** English is a medium of instruction in many higher education institutions worldwide. Within the context of Botswana, the national language-in-education policy mandates the use of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) in tertiary education. Extant research has addressed various challenges associated with EMI in diverse settings. However, there remains a notable paucity of scholarly inquiry specifically examining its implementation and impact within Botswana's higher institutions of learning. This study aims to critically investigate the challenges and opportunities associated with EMI implementation at the University of Botswana. The study then proposes strategic interventions for students experiencing linguistic and pedagogical difficulties. Employing a descriptive survey research design, data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 220 first-year undergraduate students. Participants were selected via stratified random sampling to ensure representativeness. Complementary qualitative data were obtained through focus group discussions with conveniently sampled students, providing deeper insights into EMI pedagogical experiences. The Linguistic Human Rights Theory by Skutnabb-Kangas was applied to guide the assessment of principles related to linguistic inclusion and equity in higher education. The findings reveal that some students encounter challenges that are primarily linguistic and psychological in nature. The study further reveals that challenges may be influenced by sociocultural and instructional dynamics. Despite the challenges, participants highlighted several opportunities that EMI presents, the most prominent being that it opens doors to employment and access to higher education globally. The study recommends the establishment of a language centre within the University of Botswana to support students with linguistic hurdles, thereby enhancing their language proficiency and enabling them to remain competitive in the globalised academic and professional landscape.

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## 1. Introduction

The English language stands as one of the most significant inheritances the British Empire left for its colonies. Although these nations have gained independence from British rule, the English language continues to dominate as the language of administration and a medium of instruction in schools (Bagwasi & Costley, 2022; Galebole & Mothudi, 2022; Kgosiemang & Dennis, 2025; Tom-Lawyer et al., 2021). There is much controversy surrounding English as a global language; however, the adoption of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been sweeping across the higher education landscape worldwide (Mallilin, 2024). English as a medium of instruction (EMI) refers to the use of the English language to teach academic disciplines.

In such contexts, English functions as a foreign or second language for some of the learners or teachers (Galloway et al., 2020; Smit, 2023). Elkhayma (2022) posits that an increasing number of universities around the world are joining the trend of offering both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in English. This phenomenon is largely driven by the forces of globalisation, the internationalisation of higher education, and the growing dominance of English as the global lingua franca (Dayananda, 2024; Huang & Fan, 2023; Unsiyah et al., 2024). Macaro et al. (2018) assert that most institutions of higher education use EMI because they experience falling enrolment numbers of local students and, therefore, need to attract foreign students.

Much of the world's academic literature is published in English; therefore, using English as the instructional language increases learners' opportunities to participate in global knowledge exchange. In addition, EMI can serve as a tool for enhancing students' English proficiency, equipping them with language skills that are highly valued in the global job market (Guo et al., 2024; Macaro et al., 2018). However, the use of English in teaching and learning can pose challenges, particularly for students and faculty members who are not fully proficient in English. Students can experience challenges in asking questions to clarify what they do not understand, and they cannot express themselves well when answering questions in class (Waswa, 2020).

This can affect the quality of teaching and learning, as complex concepts may be inadequately communicated or misunderstood (Shao & Rose, 2022). There is also concern about the marginalisation of local languages and knowledge systems, which can be overlooked or undervalued in English-dominated curricula (Bagwasi & Costley, 2022). Furthermore, EMI may pressure institutions to prioritise linguistic competence over academic content, potentially undermining educational outcomes.

In Botswana, formal education is a foremost way of spreading English throughout the country. English is used in government affairs, the judiciary, education, business, social domains, media, and religious domains in Botswana (Chebanne, 2022a). Most universities in Botswana are international institutions that are multilingual and multicultural in nature. The University of Botswana enrolls students from different countries and different regions of Botswana who speak different languages and have different cultures. Despite this diversity in linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the medium of instruction is English, as per the dictates of Botswana's language-in-education policy for higher education.

There is a growing body of research on the implementation and implications of EMI in higher education globally, particularly in Asia, Europe, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Macaro et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2020; Waswa, 2020); however, there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning the Botswana context. Despite the plethora of studies on the use of EMI, limited attention has been paid to the challenges faced by students whose proficiency in English is low at the first public university in Botswana. This study, therefore, is an endeavour to produce context-specific evidence regarding challenges associated with EMI use in a multilingual university to come up with strategic interventions to address them.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What challenges do University of Botswana students face using EMI?
2. What opportunities are envisaged using EMI in the University of Botswana?
3. How can the challenges be mitigated?

## 2. Literature Review

Studies conducted in different parts of the world reveal that EMI has posed several challenges and obstacles in educational settings. Tom-Lawyer et al. (2021) provide a systematic review of the challenges and prospects of EMI in Nigeria and Botswana. The study recognises prospects of English in both countries due to its hegemony in the areas of business, education, law, and administration. The study also brings to light the fundamental challenge when using EMI in the two countries. Tom-Lawyer et al. (2021) observe that students do not acquire adequate literacy skills as they are taught in an unfamiliar language; as a result, some of them end up dropping out of school.

Similarly, Alanazi and Curle (2025) reviewed the impact of EMI in Saudi Arabian medical schools. The study revealed that cultural gaps that exist between students and instructors in a typical classroom setting affect lecture delivery in the English language. The study recommends the need for specialised teacher training and curriculum development that aligns with the linguistic and pedagogical demands of EMI. In the same vein, Pomat et al. (2024) examined EMI in Thailand, revealing that students encounter various challenges, such as low self-esteem, cognitive difficulties, language anxiety, and issues related to teachers' accents. According to the study, participants reported speaking English as moderately challenging, indicating possible anxiety or reluctance driven by concerns over pronunciation and fluency. Further research

reveals that the emphasis on English language proficiency negatively impacts participation in class discussions and academic performance (Alanazi & Curle, 2025).

Waswa (2020) researched the effects of using EMI in learning Mathematics on Thai learners in public schools. The findings revealed that the language of instruction hindered students from achieving high grades in Mathematics, and the notion that the students were not 'smart' was misconstrued. The study observed that instruction is given through language, and learners must understand the language of instruction for successful comprehension. English is a foreign language to Thai learners, and Waswa (2020) demonstrates that EMI makes it more difficult for learners to achieve high grades in comparison to learning Mathematics in the native Thai language.

The challenges posed by using EMI cannot be solely attributed to students' linguistic incompetencies. Research reveals that in some instances, instructors may not be proficient enough in the instructional language (Çankaya, 2017). When instructors do not pay attention to the effectiveness of communication in learning contexts, the learning demand burden is left to the students. Teachers often express anxiety that their low level of English proficiency makes it difficult for students to comprehend the content (Campagna, 2016). To deal with the challenges posed by EMI, Shao and Rose (2024) argue that transitioning from first language (L1) instruction to EMI requires that educators make considerable adjustments to the curriculum. Other aspects that would need such adjustments are pedagogic strategies, instructional resources, and assessment. Pun and Thomas (2020) also suggest that some teachers should ask students to read additional information from other materials to get a deeper understanding of what was taught in class.

However, the use of EMI presents opportunities for students. Kırkgöz (2014), cited in Çankaya (2017), presents a plethora of benefits of EMI, such as improving students' English language skills and enabling them to access primary sources of information in English. Kırkgöz (2014, cited in Çankaya, 2017) asserts that English proficiency offers better employment prospects and competitiveness globally. It is specifically this issue of globalisation of universities which has become one of the main drivers of global English (Ahmed, 2025). Results of research by Meenasantirak and Chaiyasuk (2024) revealed that, although participants had challenges with EMI, they viewed studying in English as a valuable tool for improving their English competence.

English proficiency could be a gateway for studying abroad, participating in international collaborations and conferences, as well as gaining a competitive edge in the job market. Meenasantirak and Chaiyasuk (2024) report that their participants strongly felt that the opportunity to teach and learn in English outweighed the disadvantages, despite the pedagogical challenges associated with EMI; hence, the preference for English as a language of instruction. This study establishes whether undergraduate students at Botswana universities have similar or different views regarding EMI.

Research has also shown that EMI offers students the opportunity to access subject matter from different sources of information. Results from a study by Tang (2020) reveal that EMI facilitates subject matter learning, as many of the reference books are written in English. This means that students can consult a variety of sources to get information on concepts, which may ultimately help them to understand them better.

Research suggests solutions for EMI university students facing challenges in building their language competence and academic success. One of the solutions, according to Robah and Anggrisia (2023), is for students to apply cognitive strategies such as repeating sentences in English, extensive reading, and dictionary use. Some of the strategies include identifying new words and using them, as well as practising and evaluating speech to improve linguistic repertoire. Another strategy, according to Zahro et al. (2021), is for students to implement affective strategies such as taking deep breaths before speaking to calm their nerves. This can help them control their emotions when anxiety is prevalent.

In addition, Najihah et al. (2023) suggest that social interactions with people, especially native English language speakers, can enhance students' speaking abilities. Similarly, Nguyen (2025) recommended that universities provide first-year students with simplified academic texts and lecture materials, create an environment conducive to learning, provide tutoring support to encourage classroom participation and integrate technology-driven tools such as AI-powered writing assistants to foster writing and comprehension skills.

## **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

This study uses Skutnabb-Kangas' linguistic human rights theory (2008) to critically assess the justification for using the English language as a medium of instruction at a public university in Botswana, and whether Botswana's language-in-education policy for higher education aligns with this theory. The theory is underpinned by three core principles: first, the right of individuals to use and learn in their mother tongue, particularly within educational and public domains; second, the support of minority and endangered languages to avert linguistic and cultural erosion; and third, the assertion that linguistic discrimination constitutes marginalisation, thereby denying equal opportunities.

Skutnabb-Kangas' linguistic human rights theory comes from the United Nations' (2004) Human Development Report. The theory highlights that language is a fundamental aspect of human identity, culture, and empowerment. It states that every individual has the right to linguistic freedom, participation, and the preservation of their linguistic identity. Skutnabb-Kangas' linguistic human rights theory further stresses that access to linguistic resources and education in one's native language is crucial for social equity and empowerment. The theory advocates multilingual education, particularly for indigenous and minority groups. It criticises the tendency of schools to view minority mother tongues as inferior to the legitimised language and views it as a violation of the right to education.

The use of EMI in Botswana universities warrants critical examination through the lens of linguistic human rights principles, encompassing both advantages and inherent challenges. Empirical evidence suggests that EMI can enhance access to global knowledge, augment individual cognitive and communicative capacities, and foster international mobility (Elkhayma, 2022; Dang & Nguyen, 2024). When ethically implemented, EMI aligns with the promotion of learners' linguistic rights by equipping them with linguistic skills for contemporary global contexts. Conversely, the adoption of English in a multicultural nation as the instructional lingua franca can invoke linguistic imperialism and coercive language policy, and this may inadvertently perpetuate discrimination and power asymmetries (Zeng et al., 2023), thereby reinforcing cultural hegemony and economic dominance (Phillipson, 2018).

Botswana is a multicultural and multilingual nation with about 25 to 30 languages (Bagwasi & Costley, 2022; Mokibelo, 2014). According to the 1977 National Commission on Education, Setswana was declared the medium of instruction in the first four years of primary school to promote national unity in a diverse linguistic landscape (Botswana Government, 1977). English is mandated as the medium of instruction from Standard 5, leading to a bilingual education system (Bagwasi & Costley, 2022). This linguistic prioritisation has resulted in a shift, with minority languages such as Ikalanga, Shekgalagarhi, and Khoesan experiencing decline, thereby reinforcing the dominance of Setswana and English (Bagwasi & Costley 2022) as lingua francas.

Therefore, scholarly critique underscores the need to reconsider language policies to preserve linguistic diversity and prevent cultural assimilation, which is one of the principles of linguistic human rights theory. Thus, the Botswana Ministry of Basic Education has proposed a draft on the Botswana Language Policy aiming to incorporate 11 Indigenous languages into the school curriculum. The policy aims to promote language equity and support the national vision for 2036, which envisions "Education for All" (Botswana Daily News, January 2022).

Incorporating multilingualism in the curriculum enhances learners' performance, promotes their cultural identity, and fosters their sense of belonging (Gnaoré, 2024). However, Chebanne (2022b) contends that implementing this initiative may present major obstacles, casting doubt on its likelihood of success. The findings of this study, therefore, will interrogate whether the use of the English language as a medium of instruction in the first public university in a diversified linguistic landscape demonstrates language equity.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive survey design, which was appropriate for collecting information from a large group of participants to describe their characteristics, opinions, or behaviours. Salaria (2012) notes that descriptive survey research design goes beyond tabulating facts; it includes meaningful analysis and interpretation of information to come up with solutions to local

problems. A descriptive survey design was relevant as it permitted an in-depth investigation of EMI through gathering qualitative data that provided rich insights into the perspectives of participants.

A stratified random sample of 220 university undergraduates completed the questionnaire (Leavy, 2017). Stratified random sampling ensured representations across different faculties and demographics among first-year undergraduate students in the University of Botswana. Participants were chosen from diverse academic backgrounds, including social sciences, sciences, health sciences, and education, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of undergraduate students' experiences and perspectives of the use of EMI in teaching and learning. In addition, convenient sampling was used to select 23 students who participated in focus group discussions.

To gather data, the researchers used an open-ended questionnaire and focus group discussions. The open-ended questions gave the participants the opportunity to express themselves freely, eliminating researcher bias (Kumar, 2011). Over a period of three weeks, questionnaires were administered to elicit detailed and reflective responses regarding the challenges and opportunities experienced by undergraduate students. The focus was on EMI and possible intervention strategies to minimise the challenges. On the other hand, focus group discussions facilitated an interactive exchange of ideas among students, and this generated rich and deep descriptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) of students' experiences and challenges in using EMI.

The administration of the questionnaire was done by each researcher in their respective classes during their lectures. Students were asked to complete the questionnaires and return them upon completion. Focus group discussions were conducted on an agreed date with students who had volunteered to participate. Three focus group discussions were conducted, each facilitated by the two researchers, with one serving as the moderator and the other taking detailed notes throughout the session.

To analyse the qualitative data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach was adopted. Through coding responses, the researchers identified recurring themes and patterns within the qualitative data. Grouping the initial codes into broader themes enabled the researchers to derive meaningful insights from the participants' responses. Reliability and validity were maintained through regular discussions among the researchers to ensure consistent coding and interpretation of data.

#### **4. Results and Findings**

This section presents and discusses findings from the questionnaire and focus group discussions. The findings reveal that the use of EMI presents challenges, opportunities and solutions for undergraduate students at the University of Botswana. The researchers begin by presenting and discussing the challenges encountered by students and then shift to opportunities and strategic

interventions that can help bridge the gap for those students who experience challenges when using EMI.

#### **4.1 Challenges Encountered by Students When Using EMI at the University of Botswana**

The analysis of participants' responses reveals several key themes, highlighting the difficulties encountered when English is used as the medium of instruction. These challenges are both linguistic and psychological in nature and often intersect with sociocultural and instructional dynamics.

##### *4.1.1 Language comprehension barriers*

Most participants indicated difficulty understanding academic content due to the use of complex vocabulary, jargon, and unfamiliar terminology. Words described as "*bombastic*", "*overly complicated*", or "*used interchangeably*" hindered comprehension. This is evident in the following excerpts from students' responses:

*"The use of complicated words in academic questions makes it hard to understand."*

*"They use common words that are not specific to a concept."*

*"They use difficult words."*

*"There are complex and difficult terms incorporated in academics."*

*"They sometimes use vivid language to explain the concept, which was not necessary; they need to budget for students who understand basic English."*

*"Use of overly complicated vocabulary."*

*"Bombastic words not explained."*

Students reported that they encountered unfamiliar words during instruction, which impeded both understanding and pronunciation. One student reported, "*Sometimes I encounter new words that I don't know what the words mean and how to pronounce them.*" Another one said, "*Use of unfamiliar terminology, making it harder to understand.*" Several participants reported needing dictionaries to understand the content, suggesting a misalignment between their language proficiency level and the instructional language.

##### *4.1.2 Difficulty with academic communication*

The use of complex language can be a barrier to comprehension, especially for students who are still developing academic English skills. The students find it difficult to speak coherently in a second language as it requires organising thoughts, selecting appropriate vocabulary, and structuring sentences, all at once. One student emphasised, "*Presenting orally in English requires a strong ability to be coherent... and I struggle with this.*" Some students may know what they want to say but lack the linguistic tools to express it clearly. Because of limited vocabulary, syntax and grammar, they end up constructing

ungrammatical or incomplete sentences. This is evident in the following excerpts from student responses:

*"I struggle to form a sentence."*

*"Sometimes it is not easy to construct [a] good sentence you could use in English."*

Some students have difficulty with academic communication because they frequently use slang or informal English and consequently may struggle to switch to the academic or formal English required in EMI contexts. This is expressed in the excerpt below:

*"Sometimes phrasing English sentences is a bit challenging because most of the time we speak slang."*

This shows that students with lower English proficiency levels find it difficult and overwhelming to cope with EMI in academic communication.

#### *4.1.3 Speed, accent, and pronunciation in delivery of instruction*

English is spoken in different accents around the world, and in diverse academic settings, students are exposed to these different ways of speaking. Lecturers' pace, accent, and pronunciation were frequently mentioned as barriers to meaningful understanding of the concepts taught through the English language. Students struggled to understand lecturers whose accents differed from theirs. They found it difficult to follow fast-speaking lecturers, especially when trying to take notes. Several participants noted that this is a source of confusion and that it makes learning difficult. The combination of fast delivery and unfamiliar accents further complicates comprehension, as shown in the following excerpts:

*"Because sometimes my lecturers and some students speak so fast, and I am unable to catch up."*

*"Getting used to lecturers' accents."*

*"I have encountered different accents with different pronunciations and unfamiliar accents."*

*"Pronunciation of some words makes it difficult for one to understand instructions."*

*"Unfamiliar accents."*

*"The lecturer speaking too fast."*

*"If the lecture presents fast or communicates fast."*

When English is spoken rapidly, it becomes difficult for non-native speakers to process and understand the message. Students miss key points, instructions, or explanations. This can be overwhelming to students who need more time to process English. These responses show that the challenge of comprehending information delivered through the English language is further compounded by

the speed, accent, and pronunciation of their different lecturers who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

#### 4.1.4 *Misinterpretation of instructions in assessments*

In addition to the above challenges, test or examination questions written in English may contain complex vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, or academic phrasing that is difficult to grasp. Some students noted unclear or ambiguous test instructions. Lack of elaboration and conceptual ambiguity were cited as causes of misunderstanding. This is indicated in the following responses:

*"Some instructions in the tests are not clear."*

*"Misunderstanding instructions delivered through learning platforms."*

When instructions are written in English, students who have not reached the level of full proficiency may struggle to interpret what is being asked. Reading and processing the instructions can be time consuming for them because they may need to translate mentally or look up unfamiliar words. This can lead to confusion about how to approach the question, what format to use, or what content is expected. Some students wrote:

*"It takes long for me to get through some instructions."*

*"I could not understand the questions in the examination."*

This seems to suggest students' failure to interpret instructions, probably because of incompetence in the English language, since lecturers normally give straightforward instructions.

#### 4.1.5 *Confidence and psychological factors*

Another challenge of using EMI is the presence of emotional and psychological barriers. These include fear of public speaking, shyness, and anxiety about being judged for poor English. One participant reported, *"I am afraid of the eyes of people and the comments from other students after I ask a silly question."* Another one said, *"Facing a lot of people and [being] required to speak English truly is just traumatising,"* while another one stated, *"I am shy and don't know how to speak English fluently,"* and *"I stutter with words, especially complex ones."*

These responses suggest that those who are incompetent in English find it difficult to engage in conversations and class discussions fluently, despite it being the language of instruction, which everyone should use for communication in the multicultural university. Despite these challenges, participants highlighted opportunities that the use of EMI presents, and this is what the subsequent discussion focuses on.

## 4.2 Opportunities Presented by Using English as the MEI

The use of EMI offers many opportunities. Results show that first-year students realise and acknowledge the importance of EMI in the context of the university.

The subsequent section focuses on the opportunities offered by EMI from the participants' point of view.

#### *4.2.1 Early English exposure and improved EMI outcomes*

Results show that some students were comfortable with EMI because they had early exposure to the English language. This is shown in the following responses:

*"English is my first language, and I am more comfortable with it."*

*"I understand because English is my second language."*

*"I am a proficient English speaker; the vocabulary used fits the audience."*

*"I grew up speaking English more than any other language."*

*"I do not find it difficult to understand concepts in English."*

*"I use English daily in my personal life, so I'm familiar with the language."*

The above responses show that some students expressed a high level of comfort and skill in English. As shown in the responses, some participants are first-language speakers of English, while others are second-language speakers of English. This makes it easy for them to understand concepts in English as they are familiar with the vocabulary. Because of their background in using English, EMI offers them an opportunity to receive instruction in a language that is accessible.

Early and continuous exposure to English contributed to the participants' proficiency in the language. This can be shown in the following responses:

*"I have been taught in English since primary level."*

*"English Language has been the language used in the school system since primary school."*

*"I studied English all my life; English is understandable. In both primary and senior I was only taught in English, and at home, I only speak English."*

*"From early education, we have been taught in English only."*

Many participants reported being taught in English from an early age, which contributes to ease of use and comprehension of EMI at university. They stated that they were exposed to English from preschool to higher education, and some were raised in English-speaking homes. This makes it easy for them to understand concepts delivered in English. They also noted they are confident in

speaking, reading, and writing, suggesting that long-term exposure to English has fostered their familiarity with and adaptability to the language. Given this scenario, EMI thus offers an opportunity for those with high levels of proficiency in English to access educational knowledge with ease.

#### 4.2.2 EMI facilitates academic success

In addition to the above, participants indicated that EMI facilitates mastery of concepts, hence guaranteeing them academic success. Responses indicate that participants generally felt that academic concepts are better understood when delivered through the English language, which, according to them, has rich expressions for different academic concepts. Some of their responses were:

*"The language is diverse and has a lot of expressions that can be used to explain one concept. English that is used is simple and understandable."*

*"Most of the content is relatable and easy to understand when explained in English."*

*"I don't think some of the concepts in my courses can be expressed in our languages."*

*"Our lecturer mostly explains in simple English and uses real life examples which help us to understand concepts better."*

*"This helps me succeed in my course."*

*"I can access all the information I need from materials written in English."*

*"Using English in learning makes it easy for me to access valuable information for my courses."*

From the responses above, English is seen as facilitating better understanding and learning. The first response in this section shows a belief in the diversity of English (probably compared to local languages), which enables lecturers to use different expressions to explain one concept. The third response shows doubt as to the possibility of expressing some concepts in their courses in local languages. The last response shows that the material for the different courses students take is written in English. Hence, EMI is an advantage as it is the main language through which knowledge can be accessed from written materials. Participants, thus, think that EMI offers rich expressions and clarity for the expression of academic concepts, more so because most of the content is delivered in accessible and simple English. Most of the participants were second-language speakers, and they indicated that EMI guaranteed success in their studies.

#### 4.2.3 EMI facilitates global relevance

In addition to facilitating academic success, participants indicated that EMI is necessary for global relevance. According to them, English is recognised as a global academic language, and learning through it broadens their career and educational opportunities. This is shown in the following responses:

*“English is my first language, so I enjoy presenting orally and engaging in debates and discussions in English.”*

*“If Setswana was used, international students like me would not be able to enrol in this university.”*

*“English is a global language and trying to abandon it for our local language would lead us to isolation from international academic discourse.”*

*“I love English because it opens career opportunities for me within and outside Botswana.”*

*“English is a universal language, and we are forced to communicate using English from an early age.”*

*“I understand because it is global.”*

These responses show that using EMI has enabled the university to attract international first-language English speakers as an international university. Even second language speakers still felt that using EMI was advantageous because it enables them to participate in international academic discourse. According to the participants, the abandonment of EMI would lead to the isolation of university students from international academic discourse.

#### 4.2.4 Promotion of equitable access to knowledge

Another opportunity presented by EMI is that it enables students from diverse backgrounds to receive instruction in one common language. The university is a multilingual context, and as such, the participants thought that EMI can be useful in supporting multilingualism. The following responses show the utility of EMI in a multilingual context:

*“As an international student, use of English daily to communicate helps me to fit in this environment.”*

*“Professors should be more mindful of how they present information to students.”*

*“They should use simple English and avoid explaining in Setswana to cater for international students like me.”*

*“As an international student, I have to interact, so English makes it easy for me.”*

The responses above highlight the utility of the English language in facilitating meaningful learning and interaction for international students. In the second response, the participant finds it difficult to catch up when professors switch to Setswana (Botswana's major indigenous language) to explain concepts. The situation could be even worse for students who are not proficient in Setswana if it (or any other local language) were the sole medium of instruction. Thus, EMI is seen as advantageous in a multilingual context since it ensures that everyone accesses knowledge through a 'neutral' language. The next section focuses on strategic interventions that the university can employ to address the challenges encountered by students when learning through EMI.

### 4.3 Strategic Interventions

The data revealed that first-year students proposed several strategic interventions to address the challenges they face using EMI at the university. These interventions encompass the simplification and clarification of words, bilingual and multilingual support, provision of conducive learning environments, and employment of self-directed learning techniques.

#### 4.3.1 Simplification and clarification of words

A key strategic intervention that students proposed is the necessity for speakers to convey ideas and concepts in a clear, concise, and easily understandable manner. Students noted that lecturers often use complex or technical terms, which can hinder comprehension. Thus, they recommend that lecturers: *"use basic English/simple words; explain instructions with simple terms; explain [the] meaning of complex term[s]; use non-ambiguous words, [and] use ... visual aids for clarity."*

The above responses show that students' lack of English proficiency can be minimised by lecturers using simplified language. They can also try to avoid ambiguity in relaying instructions and in their explanations of concepts. Other participants echoed that students' lack of proficiency in the English language can be mitigated if lecturers change their teaching methods. This involves *"using less abbreviations in their contents, explaining the contents in depth when lecturing, [and] reducing their speed."* Three participants suggested that students should be given more written assignments and adequate time for reading. This is exemplified in the excerpts below:

*"Reduce abbreviations."*

*"Being given more work and assignments to write."*

*"There should be a reading period for students to grasp grammar."*

*"Lecturers should explain more."*

*"Even though we are at tertiary our English is still not good, lecturers should slow down and use simple English."*

The suggestions above show that students' linguistic competence does not solely depend on them but also on lecturers' pedagogy. Effective communication

means not just sharing information but guiding, organising, and engaging your audience. The above responses show that lecturers who speak rapidly and use difficult words in their lectures do not help their students understand the message being delivered. This negatively impacts students' understanding of the concepts and may result in psychological trauma or fear. They may be demotivated to attend lessons. Adopting the above suggestions will help students improve their listening, writing, and reading skills.

#### 4.3.2 Bilingual and multilingual support

Findings also show that bilingual/ multilingual support is needed to address the linguistic challenges faced by students in the institution. This approach includes translating key concepts or enabling students to comment or ask questions in Setswana, as well as allowing code-switching when appropriate. Students felt that the university, being a multilingual and multicultural institution with staff and students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, would benefit from such practices. They suggested that lecturers communicating in both Setswana and English could enhance understanding. The following excerpts illustrate this perspective:

*"Use of some languages, such as Setswana, translation of slides into other languages."*

*"Lecturers can be advised to communicate in both languages but it may impact negatively on [the] minority."*

*"English is not my mother language, so I prefer my own language, Setswana."*

*"I often interchange both English and Setswana... and this is not allowed."*

*"Lecturers should allow students to speak in Setswana."*

While the suggestions to use Setswana alongside the English language could benefit Setswana L1 speakers, it may negatively impact minority languages that are declining in Botswana. Furthermore, international students may have difficulties understanding a Setswana lecturer's code-switching from English to Setswana. Thus, the data reveals that some students whose mother tongues are not Setswana suggested the following:

*"Lecturers should use simple English and avoid explaining in Setswana to cater for international students."*

One of the participants claimed that his elder brother, who completed his studies at the university, attended a cultural exchange programme known as Erasmus in America, and he opined, *"The University should encourage more students to attend exchange programmes [s] because it fosters people's awareness of other people's culture."* Another participant remarked, *"Students should engage in multicultural activities*

such as sports and international day festivals." Additional suggestions included the following:

*"Students should learn to respect other people's culture."*

*"Learners should be open-minded towards diversity because English has come to stay."*

In summary, the above suggestions show that higher education has a vital role to play in preparing students for interaction with people from diverse cultures. Adopting the above strategies will help students to participate within the university community and communicate effectively, since the world is becoming a global village.

#### 4.3.3 Supportive learning environments and resources

Provision of supportive learning environments and resources is another strategic intervention revealed in the data. Some participants claim that, by *"establishing an English language lab"* and *"students forming language clubs"*, students with linguistic deficiencies would improve their linguistic repertoire. The data also indicates that offering simplified academic texts and lecture materials would improve students' comprehension of the complexities of the English language, as one student commented: *"We should be given handout notes instead of the notes being dictated to us."*

Another way of providing support to students is through the creation of a supportive classroom environment by lecturers, where students can freely express themselves without fear of judgment. Lecturers should incorporate small-group discussions and interactive activities that allow peer interactions to boost their confidence in expressing themselves, fostering their communication skills. This is illustrated in the excerpts below:

*"Engaging in interactive conversation between students."*

*"Forming group discussions for better understanding."*

*"Engaging in oral presentations."*

*"Interacting with colleagues."*

*"Listening practice and employing many more lecturers should make their lessons interesting."*

The data also reveals that the university should encourage lecturers to see students with language deficiencies individually and introduce extra reading classes and training centres for basic English. This is illustrated in the excerpts below:

*"One-on-one sessions could help."*

*"Reading classes should be offered."*

*"Introduce training centres for basic English."*

*"University can provide advanced English classes."*

*"Increase public speaking opportunities."*

The above students' suggestions show that if university lecturers adopt the strategies advocated, specifically by creating an environment conducive to learning, students whose mother tongue is not English can freely interact socially with other students.

#### **4.4 Self-Directed Learning Strategies**

The findings also indicate that students take personal initiatives to develop their vocabulary and improve their English language proficiency through various strategies. These include reading novels and magazines, practising listening skills, recording lectures for replay, and practising speaking English daily with friends. This is exemplified in the excerpts below:

*"I sometimes record the lesson, take short notes, then later expand them or ask someone to explain. I use synonyms as they give out simple words to help me understand complex words."*

*"Read novels written in English; search meanings of words I find hard; practice speaking."*

*"English by practising speaking it every day, listen to educational video, paying full attention in class, look up words in the dictionary, study vocabulary used in my courses."*

These responses show that some students have devised self-directed intervention strategies to address their linguistic challenges. Another interesting finding on how to overcome EMI challenges in higher learning is to integrate technology-driven solutions. Some students commented that the use of information technology fosters their communicative competence, as echoed in the following excerpts:

*"Using videos as a source of information as we can revisit the picture in motion again."*

*"Practice writing regularly using AI."*

*"Watch TV/TikTok videos."*

*"Use of Google to understand and translate some words."*

These responses reveal that technology can help enhance students' English language proficiency. The data also shows how students overcome their anxiety, lack of confidence, low self-esteem and poor oral communication by using intrapersonal skills. Some of the participants commented that they mitigate their poor oral communication skills by *"reading to oneself and facing the mirror, reading to oneself when walking to the shops."*

This self-practice in front of a mirror can be seen as a social strategy because it incorporates an element of social interaction with oneself. It is a form of preparation and self-assurance. In the same vein, some other participants claim that they engage in interpersonal communication by “*practising reading aloud facing my siblings*”, “*spacing up and down reading to my group members*”, and “*maintaining eye contact and projecting my voice when practising oral presentation with my peers.*”

From the findings presented above, it can be inferred that self-directed strategies contribute not only to emotional well-being but also to personal development. The use of a mirror during practice functions as a simulated social tool, enabling the learner to rehearse speech as though addressing others. This technique allows the student to visualise themselves speaking, thereby gaining insight into their appearance and delivery in communicative situations. Such visualisation has the potential to reduce anxiety and build confidence by recreating the dynamics of a real-life interaction where English must be used. Thus, employing socially oriented strategies through independent and collaborative rehearsal can yield positive outcomes in the development of language proficiency.

## 5. Discussion

The results presented above show that some first-year students face a plethora of challenges when English is used as the medium of instruction. One of the challenges that participants highlighted was a lack of proficiency in the English language, which led to problems in comprehending information presented solely in English. Because of their limited proficiency in English, they found it very difficult to understand some concepts, especially when lecturers used what some participants described as “*bombastic*” vocabulary.

In some cases, they misinterpreted instructions with complex or vague vocabulary. This is consistent with findings from Waswa (2020), who notes that limited English proficiency can restrict learners’ access to subject matter. Misinterpretation due to linguistic complexity or vague language use corroborates findings from Pomat et al. (2024), who emphasise the importance of instructional clarity in EMI settings, as learners may find it difficult to comprehend complex vocabulary. The findings also reveal that some students had significant challenges with sentence construction, grammar, and articulating their thoughts in English. Oral presentations and written tasks were especially difficult due to a lack of fluency and coherence, yet some of their courses required them to do those activities as part of their assessment.

The challenges in sentence construction and grammar made it very difficult for them to meaningfully express their ideas during oral presentations, and consequently, their performance during these presentations was negatively affected. Students also highlighted that they lacked confidence in making oral presentations in class, owing to their limitations in sentence construction and grammar in the English language. As a result, students indicated that they became very anxious each time they were asked to come in front of the class to make an oral presentation. These findings align with earlier studies that show

students in EMI environments often struggle to produce academic discourse in English, which can affect performance (Tang, 2020). They are also consistent with literature highlighting that language anxiety in EMI environments can inhibit classroom participation and performance (Alanazi & Curle, 2025; Pomat et al., 2024).

The challenges highlighted above were exacerbated by the speed, accent, and pronunciation of some lecturers. Participants highlighted that some lecturers were too fast in their delivery, which made it extremely difficult for those with a limited proficiency in the English language to keep up. This was worsened by what local participants referred to as “*unfamiliar accents*” of some lecturers, especially those who came from other countries. Participants indicated that they had challenges in understanding how some lecturers pronounced certain English words. Similar observations have been made in EMI classrooms globally, where rapid speech and dense content delivery often overwhelm learners (Macaro et al., 2018). In multilingual EMI contexts, accent variation among lecturers and peers is a known obstacle (Pomat et al., 2024), and students may need time to adapt to diverse pronunciations. In this study, this was a serious challenge that several students grappled with.

Despite these challenges, participants highlighted several opportunities that using EMI presents. Some of them indicated that they had an early exposure to the English language, which facilitated improved EMI outcomes. In addition, they stated that EMI facilitates success in their studies as most academic information is accessible in the English language, which, according to them, has rich expressions for academic concepts. They also felt that EMI offered all students equitable access to knowledge since the university enrolls students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These results corroborate Tang’s (2020) findings that EMI facilitated subject matter learning, as countless reference books are written in English.

The findings also reveal that, despite the challenges faced during EMI instruction, participants still preferred it, citing that it increases their chances of remaining relevant on the global stage. Thus, the use of EMI in the university is influenced by forces of globalisation, the internationalisation of higher education, and the growing dominance of English as the global lingua franca (Dang & Nguyen, 2024; Dearden, 2014; Kirkgöz, 2014, cited in Çankaya, 2017). Despite the challenges students face, they think EMI offers them the opportunity to fit into the global village, career wise and academically (Dang & Nguyen, 2024).

To strike a balance between the challenges encountered in EMI instruction and the opportunities it offers, participants suggested some interventions that can be employed to help those experiencing challenges. One of the interventions that can be employed is the simplification and clarification of concepts by lecturers. Participants highlighted that lecturers should avoid using unnecessarily complicated vocabulary, cognisant of the fact that some learners’ competence in the English language is limited.

This means that lecturers have a part to play in creating accommodative environments to cater for the needs of students with different levels of competence in the English language. They also suggested the establishment of an English language lab where students with limitations can get assistance from experts. This corroborates Çankaya's (2017) observation that students' linguistic incompetencies do not solely lie with students but also with lecturers' pedagogy, as they hardly pay attention to effective communication during the learning process.

The findings also show that the challenges faced in EMI instruction can be minimised if the University of Botswana offers bilingual and multilingual support. Where possible, participants suggested that lecturers could switch to Setswana (the L1 for most students), which could bridge the gap created by EMI. The suggestions above align with Skutnabb-Kangas' (2008) linguistic theory, which stipulates that every individual has the right to use and learn their mother tongue, particularly within educational and public domains. Switching to the students' native language, like Setswana, as suggested by participants, could enhance their understanding of English as a second language. It could also promote their cultural identity and foster their sense of belonging (Gnaoré 2024).

While the suggestions to use Setswana alongside English can benefit Setswana L1 speakers, it may negatively impact minority languages declining in Botswana, as observed by Bagwasi and Costley (2022). International students who participated in the study also indicated that they found it difficult to understand each time a Setswana lecturer code-switched from English to Setswana. The suggestion that lecturers should use both English and Setswana as mediums of instruction may not be practical for some foreign lecturers, whose mother tongue is not Setswana. Thus, using EMI ethically in a heterogeneous community can enhance students' access to global knowledge (Kırkgöz, 2014, cited in Çankaya, 2017; Meenasantirak & Chaiyasuk, 2024) since education materials are written in English. It will also foster students' cognitive and communicative capacities (Elkhayma, 2022).

Participants also suggested that lecturers can make classroom environments supportive by encouraging students to work in groups, where those with language limitations can be assisted by those more competent. This means that lecturers can engage students in activities that encourage peer interaction, which can positively impact the development of confidence in using the language. In some classes, there were native speakers of English – if those with language limitations work with native speakers in class activities, there could be a notable improvement in their speaking skills and comprehension of information delivered in English. This aligns with Najihah et al.'s (2023) claim that social interactions with people, especially native English speakers, can enhance students' speaking abilities.

Self-directed learning strategies were also identified as useful interventions to address some of the challenges encountered in EMI instruction. Online platforms such as YouTube and TikTok were used by some participants to

improve their English language competence. Aspects such as sentence construction, vocabulary, and subject-verb agreement could be learnt online on different platforms or through reading novels. These findings are consistent with studies by Nguyen (2025) and Alobaid (2021), which highlight that the use of multimedia learning tools such as YouTube captions, digital simulations, and interactive language platforms can greatly enhance ESL students' writing accuracy and overall proficiency in English.

Participants indicated that lecturers could play a part by encouraging other students to do the same to improve their competence in English. Pun and Thomas (2020) argue that lecturers can encourage students to read additional information from other materials so that they get a deeper understanding of what was taught in class. This supports Robah's and Anggrisia's (2023) view that students can overcome their linguistic incompetence by applying cognitive strategies such as repeating sentences in English, reading books, novels, researching words in a dictionary, and applying them in everyday life.

## **6. Limitations of the Study**

This study offers important insights into EMI implementation, but it is not without limitations. One of the limitations is the overreliance on qualitative design for capturing in-depth perspectives. This method restricts the generalizability of the findings. To address this, future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative data, thereby yielding a more comprehensive understanding of EMI's impact.

In addition, the research focused solely on first-year undergraduate students at the University of Botswana. This may not accurately reflect the perceptions and experiences of students at various academic levels of study or those enrolled in other universities within Botswana or similar contexts. Furthermore, the study did not include insights from lecturers and administrators. Future research with more diverse samples and inclusion of multiple stakeholders is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of EMI in Botswana's higher education.

In summary, the above discussion highlights challenges, opportunities, and strategic interventions in EMI instruction in a multilingual university in Botswana. While several challenges were identified, EMI was seen as useful in supporting multilingualism and enhancing graduates from the University of Botswana's chances on the global stage. Several strategic interventions were identified that could address the language barriers, foster cognitive development, and facilitate positive learning outcomes for students enrolled in a multilingual university. The next section presents the conclusion and offers recommendations based on the findings.

## **7. Conclusion**

The results of this study highlight the intricate interplay between the challenges of EMI at the university and the opportunities it presents to both local and international students. While some students encountered difficulties in

comprehending concepts taught in English, others found it easily accessible due to early exposure to the English language. The challenges identified were both linguistic and psychological in nature and interfered with students' access to academic material, making it frustrating. The use of Setswana as the language of instruction (or at least using it alongside English through code-switching) was suggested by some students to cater for their lack of understanding when EMI is used, although others indicated that they found it difficult to catch up whenever lecturers switched to Setswana.

Looking at all these dynamics regarding the choice of a language of instruction in a multilingual and international university, the research concludes that EMI in the university is the best option to accommodate all the students who come from diverse backgrounds. In the same vein, a deliberate effort is required to assist students with linguistic challenges in the English language to improve their comprehension of concepts taught using English.

Considering the findings of the current study, the following implications can be highlighted:

- The university should provide necessary support for students with linguistic limitations in English to help them cope with the use of EMI. The support could be in the form of establishing English clubs and lecturers' use of participatory learning methodologies and simple language by lecturers to promote cognitive development and facilitate positive learning.
- In line with the third principle of Skutnabb-Kangas' linguistic human rights theory (2008), the university should consider establishing a language centre that can help students from diverse backgrounds refine their language skills and give them equal opportunities during instruction.
- The university can also tap into the students' suggestions of bilingual or multilingual support as proposed by Skutnabb-Kangas (2008), who states that students have the right to use and learn through their mother tongue. This does not require lecturers to be trained in several languages that the students speak, but to employ nuanced strategies for drawing on the rich experiences learners have acquired through their mother tongue (Çankaya, 2017). Lecturers should be equipped with the skills of integration that will be useful for enhancing students' performance in the heuristic, imaginative, and representational functions of language (Shao & Rose, 2024).

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The study investigated challenges, opportunities, and strategic interventions for EMI pedagogy at a public university from students' points of view. Further research could consider comparative studies on the perceptions of students, lecturers, and administrators concerning the effectiveness and challenges of EMI in a multilingual university. This may offer guidance on the choice of the language of instruction in international universities.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in the production of this paper.

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## Appendix 1

### Questionnaire for Students

This questionnaire is designed to elicit data for a study on the use of English as a medium of instruction in the University of Botswana. The study aims to investigate the challenges first-year students encounter using English as a medium of instruction and the strategic interventions to overcome the challenges. The study also examines the opportunities the English language offers as a global language.

The paper contains two sections. Section 1 focuses on the demographic information of participants, while Section 2 consists of seven questions based on your challenges, opportunities the English language offers and solutions to overcome the challenges.

Participation is voluntary and will not affect you in any way. We have been authorised by the research committee of the University of Botswana to carry out this study. Be assured that your responses will be treated confidentially, as this is a private study.

#### Section 1:

Age-----Gender-----  
-----

Level-----Programme-----  
-----

Country----- Region in Botswana-----  
-----

1<sup>st</sup> language-----2<sup>nd</sup> Language -----3<sup>rd</sup> Language-----  
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#### Section 2

1. **How comfortable do you feel speaking English in academic settings?**
  - Very comfortable
  - Somewhat comfortable
  - Not comfortable
  
- **The English language is the medium of instruction in the University of Botswana. List all the problems you have encountered with understanding instructions in English (if any) at UB**



- **What strategies do you use to cope with the use of English in your courses?**

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**Thank you for your participation**

## Appendix 2

### FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

This interview is designed to elicit data for a study on the use of English as a medium of instruction in the University of Botswana. The study aims to investigate the challenges first-year students encounter using English as a medium of instruction and the strategic interventions to overcome the challenges. The study also examines the opportunities the English language offers as a global language.

Participation is voluntary and will not affect you in any way. We have been authorised by the research committee of the University of Botswana to carry out this study. Be assured that your responses will be treated confidentially, as this is a private study.

### QUESTIONS

1. What challenges do you face using the English language as a medium of instruction in your studies?
2. Do you think English should continue being used as a medium of instruction at the University of Botswana?
3. What are your reasons for your answer to question 2?
4. How can the challenges faced by first-year students using the English language as a medium of instruction be solved?