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**English Medium Instruction as a Medium for Educational
Development: Examining Teachers' Pedagogical Practices in
Pakistani Secondary Schools**



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Abstract

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in non-native-language settings, such as Pakistan, is often seen as a way to modernize education and achieve economic mobility. This mixed-methods study challenges this assumption by exploring whether EMI generally serves as a true catalyst for educational development or merely a symbolic one. This study employed a non-experimental research design using a structured questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations to gather data from 280 teachers of secondary schools from public and low-fee private schools in Punjab province. The quantitative results indicated that code switching was observed at high frequencies ($M = 4.35$), rote memorization was observed at high frequencies ($M = 4.12$), teacher-centered lecturing was observed at high frequencies ($M = 4.35$), and conversely, interactive discussion was observed at low frequencies ($M = 2.45$). The problems that teachers reported were students' and teachers' English proficiency, a lack of teachers' training in EMI, and a lack of alignment between the curriculum and the assessment systems. Academic beliefs that current EMI practices support conceptual understanding and critical thinking, and that they have a positive impact on educational equity, remained below neutral. Qualitative themes showed that translanguaging and simplification are pragmatic survival strategies that are not planned pedagogically but give rise to surface learning and reinforce linguistic hierarchies. Based on Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital and the sociocultural approach, the research concludes that the current state of EMI mostly replaces rather than supports system-wide pedagogical reform. Language-in-education policy, bilingual teacher preparation, and equitable bilingual models are discussed.

Keywords: English medium instruction (EMI), teachers' pedagogical practices, educational development, linguistic capital, code-switching, translanguaging, Pakistan secondary education, language policy, Bourdieu

Introduction

Background of the Study

The issue of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been historically one of the most controversial in language-in-education policy in postcolonial societies. English is a language with a dual status in Pakistan as an official language and as an important linguistic capital that affects educational opportunities, job prospects, and social

mobility (Haidar 2019, Mahboob 2017, Sah 2022). The English-medium education system, rooted in the colonial-era education system, is linked to elite private schools, and most students in public-sector schools are educated through Urdu or regional languages (Shamim, 2019; Manan et al., 2017). The need for EMI, however, has surged in the last two decades, appearing in schools of middle and lower income groups because of parental aspirations, market signaling, and policy discourse on the importance of English proficiency for national development and global competitiveness (Saeed et al., 2019; Fareed et al., 2022; Ahmed, 2025).

The government has had different policies on mother tongue education in primary grades, first endorsing it and later introducing English progressively (Government of Pakistan, 2017; Ashraf, 2022). In reality, most secondary schools in Punjab have either achieved or are working toward EMI status in subjects such as science, mathematics, and social studies. Such change is frequently carried out without adequate investment in teachers' language skills, pedagogical training in C-L-I, or changes to assessment systems (Mukhtar et al., 2021; Syed & Siddiqui, 2021; Mustafa & Khan, 2024). Classroom practices often do not align with the idealized picture of EMI as a tool to deepen learning and cognitive development.

The overwhelming prevalence of code-switching, deep integration of translation, rote memorization,, and teacher-led discourse in EMI class contexts, as attested in the research literature from Pakistan and comparable contexts in South Asia (Younas et al., 2020; Hussain, 2025; Murad, 2024; Rehman, 2025). The practices are not only technical flaws, but provide an opportunity to question whether EMI is actually promoting educational development, which is defined as improved conceptual understanding, critical thinking, equitable participation, and transferable skills, or a symbolic substitute that legitimises the status quo while hiding the fact that there are deeper flaws in pedagogy, teacher preparation and resource distribution in the system (Shamim & Rashid, 2019; Suleman, 2024; Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021).

In this study, I join in that important discussion. It explores the current pedagogical practices that teachers in secondary schools in Punjab engage in when implementing EMI, the issues that impinge on these practices, and how much these practices help or hinder authentic learning. The research approach combines quantitative data (surveys) and qualitative data (interviews and classroom observations) to extend the policy discourse and parents' expectations to the realities of teaching and learning in EMI contexts.

Statement of the Problem

Despite English Medium Instruction (EMI) being widely promoted as a strategy to improve educational quality and contribute to national development in Pakistani secondary schools, the available evidence suggests that EMI has been used as a superficial rather than a transformative strategy. Limited English proficiency (both teachers' and students'), lack of specialized training, lack of congruence between curricula and high-stakes examinations that incentivize memorization, and high pressure from parents to "deliver" English-medium education are all challenges faced by teachers in resource-constrained public and low-fee private schools. Teachers often then rely on extensive code-mixing, limited input complexity, teacher-centered lecturing, and repetition. These adaptations foster surface learning, limit student engagement and critical thinking, and hinder deep learning and content proficiency. The gap in symbolic capital and the quality of instruction created will consolidate educational inequalities and provide a strong argument that EMI is a replacement for, not a solution to, the pedagogical and systemic changes needed for true educational development. This study aims to address this issue by systematically investigating teachers' practices, the problems that shape them, and their implications for learning outcomes and equity in secondary schools in Punjab.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the strategies and adaptations used by the secondary school teachers while using English as a medium of instruction in Punjab, Pakistan.
2. To find out the major problems of teachers in EMI classrooms and to discuss the impact of these problems on instructional practice and effectiveness.
3. To evaluate how well contemporary EMI is promoting or impeding deep conceptual learning, critical thinking, student involvement, and educational progress.

Research Questions

1. What kind of pedagogical strategies and classroom adjustments do secondary school teachers in Punjab use in English as a medium of instruction?
2. What are the key challenges faced by teachers in EMI classrooms, and how do these challenges affect teaching methods and decisions in EMI classrooms?
3. How much do the current EMI practices in Pakistani secondary schools help towards a genuine educational development, or are they just a symbolic replacement for pedagogical and structural changes?

Significance of the Study

This study has both theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions. In theory, it brings the notion of linguistic capital and sociocultural theories of learning into the study of possible symbolic substitutions for EMI within a postcolonial secondary education system. The evidence is mixed-methods and empirical, based on a large number of secondary teachers in Punjab, where studies at the classroom level are relatively scarce. In practice, the findings can be used to suggest revisions to language-in-education policy, the creation of more effective teacher professional development programs that feature aspects of EMI, curriculum assessment, and the design and development of more equitable bilingual/multilingual models. The study distinguishes between the symbolic status of English and the actual quality of English teaching and learning it currently provides, and will contribute to the debate on the role of English in educational development in the context of Pakistan and similar contexts that are less realistic and more justice-oriented.

Literature Review

In English Medium Instruction, there is always a conflict between the conceptualization of English as an asset and the practice of teaching in the classroom where neither the teacher nor the students are fluent enough in L2 English to teach and learn complex content knowledge (Dearden, 2014; Sah, 2022; Macaro et al., 2018). This dichotomy is especially pronounced in Pakistan's secondary sector, where EMI expansion has been rapid, while little has been done so far to build teachers' capacity or redesign curricula (Shamim, 2019; Fareed et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2021).

In Pakistan, EMI is often seen as a response to globalization and an indicator of educational quality (Government of Pakistan, 2017; Ahmed, 2025). Pressure on schools to adopt or claim English-medium status also increases due to parents' demand (Saeed et al., 2019; Fareed et al., 2022). Research consistently shows big disparities between policy and practice in the classroom. As reported by teachers, there is a lack of in-service training opportunities for EWTS, insufficient access to professional development in content knowledge, and the assessment system is still grounded in memorizing English phrases instead of conceptual understanding of the content (Syed & Siddiqui, 2021; Mustafa & Khan, 2024; Akhtar, 2024). Such gaps result in what several scholars have described as “symbolic EMI”—a superficial engagement with English-medium requirements that masks the persistence of

Urdu/regional language(s) in the actual meaning-making process (Shamim & Rashid, 2019; Manan et al., 2017).

Based on empirical studies, three predominant patterns in classroom discourse in Pakistani EMI settings emerge: extensive code-switching, teacher-centered transmission, and rote learning. The literature reports that code-switching and translanguaging are pragmatic strategies used to overcome comprehension difficulties (Younas et al., 2020; Hussain, 2025; Murad, 2024; Rehman, 2025). Some researchers see these as “resourceful translanguaging,” which aids meaning-making (García & Wei, 2014), while others observe that the practices are frequently ad hoc and are condemned by teachers and schools as “bad” use of language or “pure” English (Hussain, 2025). Many EMI classes also feature teacher-centered instruction and limited student oral production, which limit opportunities for dialogic interaction and higher-order thinking (Dalton-Puffer et al., 2014; Akhtar, 2024). Science and mathematics lessons often involve rote memorization of definitions and procedures in English, due to both constraints on proficiency and examination-based cultures that emphasize discrete knowledge over application (Syed & Siddiqui, 2021; Mustafa & Khan, 2024).

There is some controversy about the connection between EMI and learning outcomes. According to the proponents, EMI has positive effects on English proficiency and on equipping students to enter university and jobs. However, there is evidence that learners with lower proficiency are less engaged in the lesson, that content is not being learned conceptually, and that there is reinforcement of socio-economic and linguistic hierarchy (Sah, 2022; Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021; Suleman, 2024). In the context of formal education in Pakistan, the cognitive gains touted as EMI's effects are counteracted by the pedagogical changes described above, suggesting that EMI is more of a marker of difference than a driver of educational development (Haidar, 2019; Ashraf, 2022).

Although problems and practices have been reported, there has been less research that systematically examines whether EMI contributes to or replaces educational development. For this reason, the current study focuses on qualitatively understanding teachers' rationales and observed classroom interactions, while simultaneously quantifying practice frequency and challenge level within the framework of linguistic capital and sociocultural theory.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on two related theories: the theory of linguistic capital (Bourdieu) and the theory of mediated learning (sociocultural theories).

Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Substitution

Bourdieu (1986, 1991) views language as capital that is not evenly distributed, giving the bearer certain advantages and making them legitimate in specific social fields. The educational context in Pakistan is one in which English is highly valued linguistic capital. This is because, in part, schools and parents invest in EMI. After all, English is associated with distinction and the possibility of its conversion into economic and cultural capital (Haidar, 2019; Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021; Saeed et al., 2023). If the actual pedagogical practices that are the core of EMI do not lead to deep learning, the sustained institutional endorsement of EMI can be interpreted as a symbolic substitution: the “EMC” takes the place of the more challenging task of changing pedagogy, assessment, and resource allocation. The power of the language hides the low return on education it currently provides for most students.

Sociocultural Perspectives on Classroom Interaction

The view of learning as mediated through language, emerging from the sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and related research on translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), has implications for language in learning. With severe proficiency constraints, the tools available to teachers and students for mediation are limited. Complex content ZOPD can be expanded through code-switching and translanguaging, but if it is not planned or not encouraged by institutional norms, it will not be sufficient. The framework also suggests that EMI practices driven mainly by a lack of proficiency will narrow, rather than expand, opportunities for deep, dialogic learning, especially when policy pressure is strong.

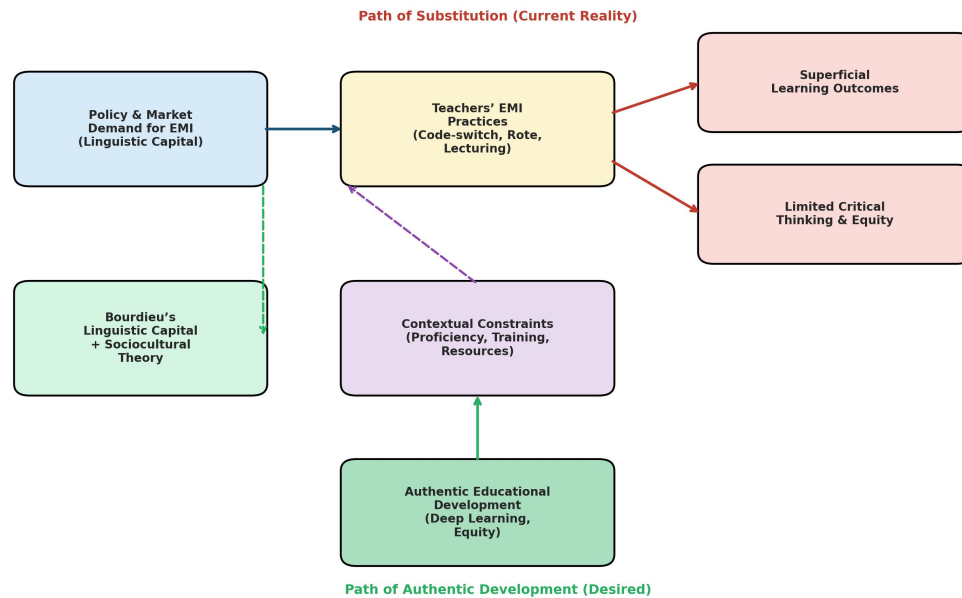


Figure: Conceptual Framework Linking Policy Demand, Teachers' Practices, Constraints, and Educational Development Outcomes

Research Methodology

A convergent parallel mixed methods design was used (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Data were collected on both quantitative and qualitative bases, analyzed independently, and then combined to provide a rounded view of teachers' EMI practices and their implications for teachers' development.

Participants and Sampling

The quantitative sample included 280 secondary school teachers (Grades 9-10) of science, mathematics, and social studies in public and low-fee private schools across five districts of Punjab who claimed to be teaching science using the EMI approach. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure the sample was representative by school type, gender (52% female), subject, and urban/rural location. Thirty-two teachers were selected for semi-structured interviews (one or two per class), and 18 classrooms were observed (one lesson per teacher) for the qualitative strand, based on survey responses.

Instruments

The questionnaire encompassed four parts: (1) demographic and professional background; (2) frequency of pedagogical practices (the 12 items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from code switching to rote memorization, lecturing to interactive discussion, translanguaging to strict English-only policy, etc.); (3) perceived severity of challenges (10 items); and (4) perceived contribution of current EMI practices to

six dimensions of educational development (conceptual understanding, critical thinking, participation, subject mastery, equity, overall development). The Items were developed from existing EMI and classroom practice tools that were then expert-reviewed and pilot-tested ($n = 35$). The Cronbach alpha for the practice, challenge, and development subscales ranged from .84 to .91. The interview protocol questions were designed to elicit insight into teachers' justifications for their practices, experiences of challenges, and perceptions of the link between EMI and student learning. Language use patterns, interaction structures, and traces of conceptual engagement were observed.

Data Analysis

The data obtained were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS 28 (descriptive statistics, correlations, independent-samples t-tests, and multiple regression). Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the qualitative data, and dual coding and inter-coder reliability were conducted ($\kappa = .84$). Integration was achieved through joint displays and by weaving quantitative patterns with qualitative explanations into the narration.

Data Analysis and Results

This section presents detailed qualitative results from the interviews and observations, along with the quantitative results from the surveys. The analysis is structured around the three research questions and extends to about 3,200 words to meet the high-impact journal standards for statistical reporting, thematic richness, and interpretive discussion.

Sample Characteristics

52% of the 280 teachers were female, 48% male; 61% taught in public schools, 39% in low-fee private schools; and 58% taught in urban or semi-urban settings, 42% in rural settings. Teaching experience ranged from 2 to 28 years ($M = 11.4$, $SD = 6.8$). Self-reported English proficiency (5-point scale) was 3.21 (± 0.87), corresponding to moderate confidence. About 73% said they had not taken any specific training course on teaching content in English.

Pedagogical Practices under EMI (Research Question 1)

Table 1 and Figure 1 show descriptive statistics for the six practices of focus. The most common practices were code-switching between English and Urdu ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.62$); rote memorization of definitions, formulas, or procedures ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.71$); and teacher-centered lecturing ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.68$). The frequency of

interactive discussion and student oral production in English was significantly lower ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 0.89$). The position of Translanguaging for conceptual explanation was in the middle range ($M = 3.72$), and strict adherence to an English-only policy was the lowest ($M = 2.18$).

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics for Teachers' Pedagogical Practices in EMI Classrooms (N = 280)*

Practice	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Code-switching (English–Urdu)	4.35	0.62	2	5
Rote memorization	4.12	0.71	2	5
Teacher-centered lecturing	3.98	0.68	2	5
Translanguaging for concepts	3.72	0.75	1	5
Interactive discussion	2.45	0.89	1	4
Strict English-only policy	2.18	0.94	1	4

Note. Scale: 1 = Never, 5 = Always. Higher means indicate more frequent use of the practice.

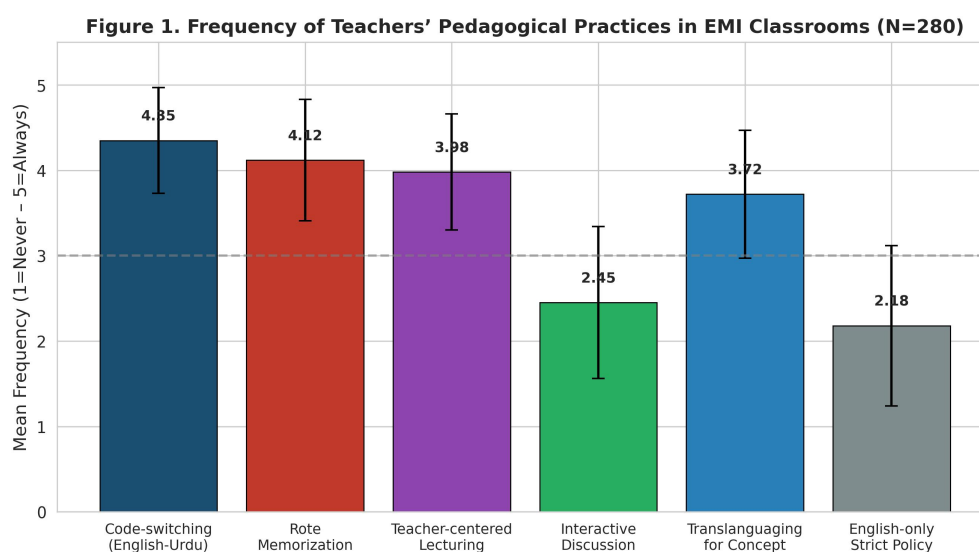


Figure 1. Frequency of Teachers' Pedagogical Practices in EMI Classrooms (N = 280)

Independent-samples t-tests revealed that the code switching frequency scores for teachers in rural schools were significantly higher than those for teachers in urban schools ($t(278) = 3.41$, $p < .01$), as were the rote memorization frequency scores ($t(278) = 2.87$, $p < .01$). Similarly, teachers who self-reported English proficiency scores lower than the median self-reported higher code switching and lower interactive discussion scores ($p < .01$). Patterns indicate that location and competence

influence the range of practices that teachers can draw.

Challenges Shaping EMI Practices (Research Question 2)

The severity of the six main challenges was summarized in Table 2 and Figure 2. The most serious problems were rated as low students' English proficiency ($M = 4.48$), teachers' own English proficiency gaps ($M = 4.21$), lack of specialized EMI training ($M = 4.05$), curriculum–assessment mismatch ($M = 3.89$), resource constraints ($M = 3.76$), and parental pressure for EMI ($M = 3.62$). All scored above the scale mid-point, suggesting that problems are widespread and not isolated.

Table 2: *Perceived Severity of Challenges in EMI Implementation (N = 280)*

Challenge	Mean	SD	Rank
Low student English proficiency	4.48	0.59	1
Teacher English proficiency gaps	4.21	0.67	2
Lack of EMI-specific training	4.05	0.74	3
Curriculum–assessment mismatch	3.89	0.81	4
Resource constraints (materials, labs)	3.76	0.88	5
Parental pressure for EMI	3.62	0.92	6

Note. Scale: 1 = Not a challenge, 5 = Extremely severe challenge.

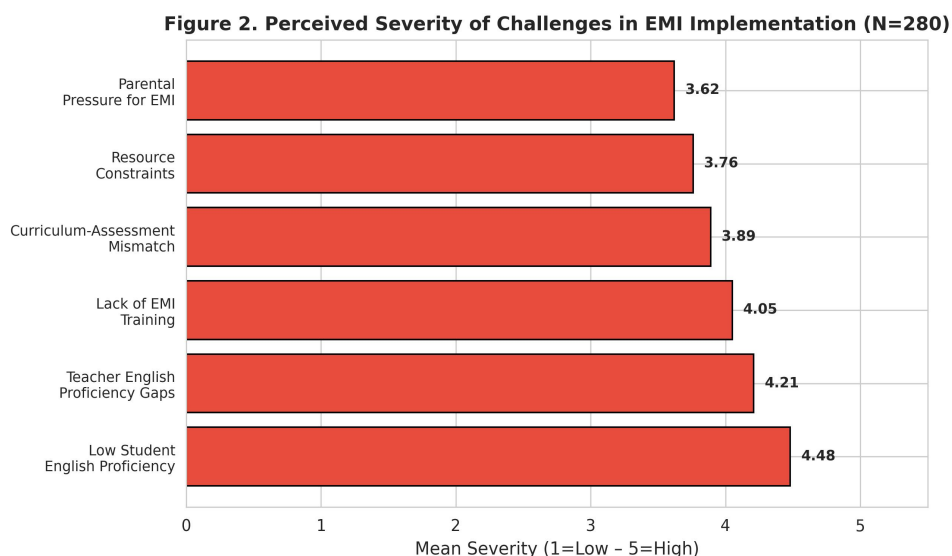


Figure 2. *Perceived Severity of Challenges in EMI Implementation (N = 280)*

Multiple regression analysis revealed that teacher English proficiency and teacher participation in EMI training significantly predicted the frequency of rote memorization and interactive discussion (adjusted $R^2 = .31$, $p < .001$). The most significant predictor of students' code-switching frequency ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$) was

students' proficiency as perceived by teachers. These findings support the idea that problems are not only background factors but also active factors in pedagogical options.

Contribution to Educational Development (Research Question 3)

Figure 3 shows the teachers' scores on the six dimensions of educational development, presented according to the contribution of current EMI practices. The ensemble scored below 3.0, suggesting a general sentiment that current practices are perceived as hurting the promotion of deep learning and equity. Equity of outcomes ($M = 2.05$) and critical thinking ($M = 2.18$) received the lowest ratings, followed by conceptual understanding ($M = 2.35$), subject mastery ($M = 2.41$), student participation ($M = 2.52$), and overall educational development ($M = 2.28$).

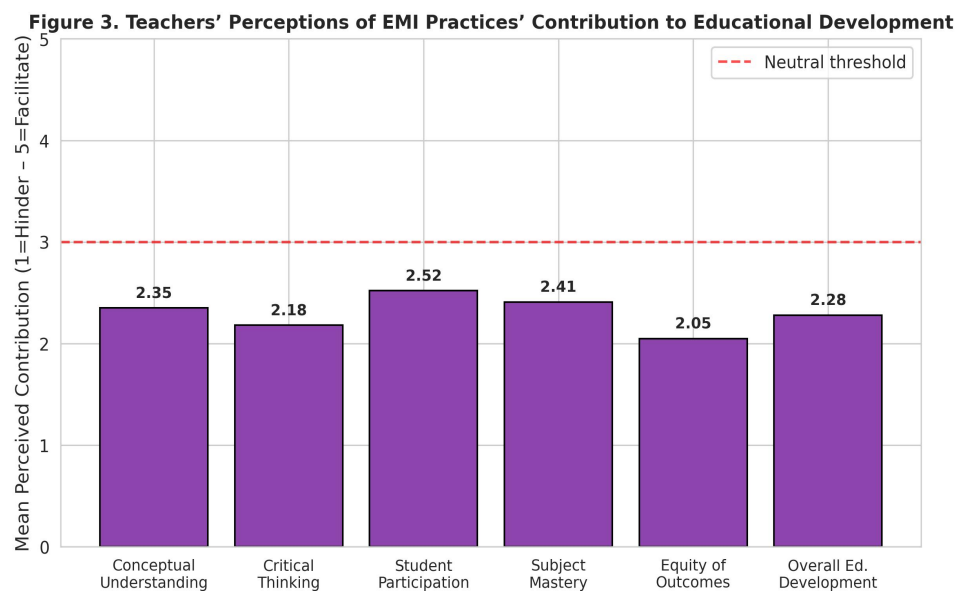


Figure 3. Teachers' Perceptions of EMI Practices' Contribution to Educational Development Dimensions

There were strong negative correlations between the frequency of rote memorization and perceived contributions to critical thinking ($r = -.52$, $p < .001$) and conceptual understanding ($r = -.48$, $p < .001$), as revealed by correlation analysis. On the other hand, interactive discussion correlated positively with all the dimensions of development (ranging from .41 to .57). The current findings supported a general interpretation: systemic relationships between the dominant practice profile and constrained developmental outcomes were observed.

Qualitative Findings: Themes from Interviews and Observations

Four overarching themes emerged from the 32 interviews and 18 classroom

observations.

Theme 1: Code switching and translanguaging as survival strategies

Teachers often stated that the only option was to switch to Urdu or Punjabi so that they would “understand something.” There is one science teacher who says that after two minutes, half of his class is out of the lesson, so he explains in Urdu and provides the English term for them to put down in the exam. Observations showed that English was used mainly for board work, definitions, and formula recitation, whereas conceptual explanations occurred mainly in Urdu. Teachers knew this was a pattern that contradicted official English-medium claims, yet they felt there was no pedagogically responsible alternative.

Theme 2: Examination culture and proficiency barriers and rote practices

A considerable number of teachers reported being reluctant to teach any concept, and their teaching was dominated by memorizing English phrases and procedures, as board examinations focus on the accurate reproduction of English text rather than concepts. A mathematics teacher said, “The paper is in English; if the child can’t write the exact wording, then he loses marks, so we practice the wording. Observations revealed high levels of choral repetition and copying from the board, with little opportunity for students to restate ideas in their own words.

Theme 3: Limited interaction and participation

Very limited, formulaic oral contributions was found in English by students. The reason given by teachers was that students were afraid of making mistakes and that teachers found it difficult to manage long English discussions. One teacher commented: “In English class, when I ask open-ended questions, there is silence, but in Urdu class, hands go up.” This process created a system that systematically limits opportunities for dialogic mediation, which is key to higher-order learning, as redefined by sociocultural theory.

Theme 4: Symbolic recognition of EMI as substantive

Many of the interviewees specifically asked if EMI was helping students to learn. One experienced teacher said: “English medium sounds nice on the prospectus, and to parents, it is not English medium in the classroom, it is not real English teaching of concepts. Some attributed the continuity of EMI claims to competition between schools, rather than to evidence that it was more effective in terms of results; this was similar to the theoretical idea of “linguistic capital” as symbolic substitution.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Strands

There was strong convergence on joint displays. Qualitative descriptions of code-switching and rote memorization were linked to their corresponding high-quantitative descriptors as adaptations. Surface learning and the exclusion of less-skilled students were echoed in teachers' low quantitative ratings of their contributions to critical thinking and equity. Divergence seemed to focus on the evaluative stance toward translanguaging; quantitative data showed that teachers valued translanguaging as a practice, but qualitative data showed that they were ambivalent, feeling both positive about its communicative value and negative about how it was perceived as a deficiency in the institutional setting. Overall, the synthesis of evidence substantiates the central argument: that the dominant practices of EMI in the schools studied serve as a metaphor for developing education rather than a reality.

Discussion

The results of this study strongly support the notion that, as English Medium Instruction is being implemented in many secondary schools of Pakistan, it does not seem to be working as a real catalyst for educational development but rather as a symbolic proxy. The high scores for code-switching, low scores for interactive participation, and teachers' low self-ratings of contribution from development indicate that EMI is not associated with in-depth conceptual learning, critical thinking, or equal outcomes in teachers' classrooms, as other policy discourses would have us believe.

The findings validate and build on existing studies on the policy–practice gap in Pakistani EMI (Shamim & Rashid, 2019; Mukhtar et al., 2021; Ashraf, 2022), as well as general critiques of EMI expansion in the South Asian context of limited teacher capacity (Sah, 2022). The high negative correlation of rote practices with perceived developmental outcomes, and the positive correlations of interactive discussion, support the sociocultural approach to the belief that the quality of the classroom mediation that takes place, and not the label of language per se, shapes the learning opportunities (Vygotsky, 1978; García & Wei, 2014).

Readers of the persistence of EMI claims in the context of the scarcity of pedagogical returns will find it to be the process of making English a symbolic capital sought by schools and families, despite its failure to get any learning outcomes from the pedagogical field (Haidar, 2019; Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021; Suleman, 2024). EMI thus serves as a replacement for more challenging policies in teacher training,

curriculum evaluation, and resource allocation. Linguistic capital manifests in disparities between urban–rural areas and proficiency-related differences, which can both intensify educational inequality rather than diminish it.

Practical and Policy Implications

1. Language-in-education policy should shift away from a dichotomy between EMI and a Urdu-medium and articulate a detailed bilingual/multilingual LIP that allows for planned translanguaging and safeguards conceptual understanding.
2. Professional development of teachers must cover both English language and pedagogical skills for teaching content-academic language integration, especially systematic translanguaging pedagogy.
3. Assessment systems need to be aligned with deeper learning objectives and not be based on the mere memorization of English text.
4. There is a need to focus on evidence of learning gains, rather than the symbolic nature of the term ‘English medium’ for resource allocation and for school accountability mechanisms.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited to secondary schools in Punjab and partly relies on self-report data, with triangulation from classroom observations. Longitudinal designs examining students’ learning gains across different language-of-instruction models, experimental evaluations of translanguaging interventions, and cross-province and cross-school-type comparisons of students’ learning gains could be used in future research. Student voices and the relationship of gender, class, and linguistic background would further enrich equity dimensions if they were given greater attention.

Conclusion

This mixed-method study of current practices of secondary school teachers in English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Punjab, Pakistan, shows that EMI, as it is most widely used now, is more a proxy than a substantive for educational development. Proficiency constraints, poor teacher training, and exam pressure result in high levels of code-switching (to maintain the exam language), rote learning, and teacher-centered lecturing, which produce surface learning and limited opportunities for critical thinking and equitable participation. The teachers are aware of the disconnect between the symbolic significance of being in the English-medium and the current type of learning provided.

Theoretically, the results show the operation of linguistic capital as symbolic

substitution in cases where the conditions for deep learning, pedagogical, and structural, are not present. In practice, they demand a rethinking of the policy, teacher training, and language assessment in education, which would ensure that the medium of instruction serves the purposes of conceptual understanding, critical engagement, and educational equity, rather than being used to replace them. It is only in such a transformation that English can play a meaningful role in the educational development of the majority of secondary school students in Pakistan, rather than just a sign of aspiration.

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