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The Difficulties Faced by EFL Learners When Using English as the Medium of Instruction in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the difficulties faced by English as foreign language (EFL) learners when using English as the medium of instruction in the classroom and to indicate the significance of understanding English vocabulary to assist in classrooms where English is the primary medium of instruction. Adopting a descriptive-analytical cross-sectional design, the research aims to identify the linguistic, psychological, pedagogical and contextual difficulties that hinder effective use of English for academic purposes and the medium of instruction in the classroom. To collect the quantitative data, a structured questionnaire instrument was administered to 100 EFL teachers in the Gezira State of Sudan. The questionnaire was validated by experts in the field and tested for reliability. It measured three main variables: linguistic challenges in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) classes, psychological/social aspects that impact engagement, and the potential to establish supportive teaching strategies. The study found the following: the linguistic barriers that EFL learners face in English as a Medium of Instruction settings, including vocabulary comprehension affects directly in the level of student engagement, aa well as the cultural differences affecting student engagement on classroom., as well as there are many effective teaching strategies that enhance EFL learners' engagement and understanding in EMI classrooms. The research concludes that challenges in Sudanese EMI classrooms can be addressed with a complex intervention. It suggests that EMI classrooms in Sudan require a holistic, student-centered approach that integrates language support, culturally responsive pedagogy, and institutional teacher training to foster an inclusive and effective learning environment.

Keywords: English Classroom Medium; EFL Learners Difficulties; Classroom Instructions

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1. Introduction

The use of English as a Medium of Instruction has become progressively essential in educational institutions globally, with the objective of enhancing students' English skills and equipping them for a global job market[1,2]. Nevertheless, for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), participating effectively in classrooms that utilize English as a Medium of Instruction presents numerous challenges[3]. These students frequently face obstacles in understanding intricate academic material, a predicament worsened by their limited proficiency in the English language, especially when confronted with specialized terminology and linguistic structures[4,5].

Studies, such as those by Hellekjaer[6] and Doiz et al.[7], emphasized that EFL students frequently experience both academic and psychological strain in English as a Medium of Instruction settings, given the language barrier they face. This often results in lower academic performance and decreased self-assurance, further deterring active participation and interaction in class. Research also underscores the need for supportive environments in English as a Medium of Instruction contexts, recommending the incorporation of language support programs and interactive teaching strategies to facilitate EFL students' engagement[8]. Such measures can enhance students' linguistic proficiency and, consequently, their overall academic experience. The core problem this study aims to explore is how these challenges impact EFL learners' academic success and what strategies might effectively support these students in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms. This includes understanding both the linguistic and non-linguistic barriers they face, to recommend methods to create a more supportive learning environment.

The global promotion of EMI is often promoted by neoliberal ideologies that view English as linguistic capital, vital for the economic competitiveness of the country and individual mobility in the global knowledge economy. Governments and institutions, particularly in developing nations, adopt EMI policies with the dual goal of internationalizing their higher education sectors and enhancing the employability of their graduates. This pedagogical policy shift is also profoundly political and economic, and it comes about as a reaction against English dominance in the world of academia, science, and technology. But the top-down style of implementing such policies tends to neglect the reality of the teaching-learning process at the grassroots level. As noted by Dearden[8], EMI development is typically so rapid that it anticipates both students' and teachers' preparedness, and therefore an extremely wide gap exists between what policy anticipates and what takes place in the classroom.

Teachers, while possibly proficient in the discipline but not in teaching it, end up having to deliver sophisticated content in a foreign language and more so, not even their students' native language[9]. This creates a difficult situation where learning discipline information and the cognitive strain of language processing compete, endangering the comprehensiveness of education. Thus, the projected advantages of EMI—higher English proficiency and instant global scholarly community access—are not inherently achieved and might be at the expense of content learning depth and student psychological welfare unless properly managed and supported[10].

The affective impact, for instance, of anxiety and fear of "losing face" by making errors in a public context, can foster quiet classrooms with minimal participation. Therefore, the exploration of the Sudanese EMI context requires a composite lens that calls for linguistic, cognitive, cultural, and affective dimensions with a view to appreciating obstacles to active learning and class participation[11].

This study addresses the challenges of Sudanese EFL learners face in engaging effectively in classrooms where English is the primary medium of instruction. For many EFL students, English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms present a dual challenge: they must acquire new academic content while simultaneously developing their English language proficiency. This can lead to significant issues, including comprehension difficulties, limited vocabulary, and difficulties understanding complex academic terms. Additionally, the psychological effects of EMI can impact students' confidence and willingness to participate, as many EFL learners feel anxious or insecure about their language skills. This often limits their classroom engagement and affects their overall academic performance[12]. The objective of this research is to explore and understand the challenges that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners encounter in classrooms where English is used as the primary medium of instruction. So specifically, this study aims to:

1. Identify the linguistic barriers that EFL learners face in English as a Medium of Instruction settings, including

vocabulary comprehension.

2. Examine the cultural differences affecting student engagement on classroom.

3. Recommend effective teaching strategies that enhance EFL learners' engagement and understanding in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language Proficiency, Culture and Comprehension Barriers

Language proficiency is the key factor in the success of EMI classrooms. When students have a limited academic vocabulary, they often struggle to decode lectures, understand textbooks, and participate in discussions. Several studies highlight that insufficient language proficiency is one of the most significant barriers EFL students face in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms. Students with limited English skills struggle to understand lectures, academic texts, and technical jargon, which in turn affects their engagement and academic performance. For instance, Hu and Lei found that students in English as a Medium of Instruction programs at Chinese universities frequently reported difficulties in grasping complex concepts due to language barriers, leading to decreased motivation and increased cognitive load[13]. This study illustrates the impact of language limitations on students' comprehension and engagement, which can undermine the effectiveness of EMI as an instructional strategy.

Language barriers remain a primary challenge in English as a Medium of Instruction settings, particularly when learners face gaps in vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and academic language. Ball and Lindsay[14] found that students in EMI settings who lack a strong command of academic vocabulary often struggle to follow lectures, participate in discussions, and comprehend reading materials. This struggle can lead to lower academic performance and heightened stress. Similarly, Fang and Baker observed that EFL learners in English as a medium of instruction classrooms frequently encounter difficulties with discipline-specific vocabulary, leading to frustration and disengagement[15]. These vocabulary gaps limit students' ability to grasp essential concepts, affecting their overall learning experience.

Additionally, the challenge of vocabulary acquisition

in EMI entails more than just adding new lexis; it also includes the mastery of the intricate, semantic networks and collocations unique to each academic discipline. Students may have an adequate general service vocabulary but not the technical vocabulary required to unpack complex academic texts, and this might subsequently initiate an avalanche of mis-understandings, where a mis-understanding of even one key term can render the rest of the lecture or reading inaccessible. This gap in vocabulary causes ongoing misunderstanding. When students cannot understand important academic terms, it affects how well they grasp entire lessons. As Nation noted, effective vocabulary acquisition, within an academic framework, is a deliberate process that entails targeted instruction in addition to multiple exposures to the academic lexis in a variety of contexts — something that is often missing in EMI contexts, which remain focused on the essential task of content delivery[16]. If academic vocabulary is not intentionally included in the curriculum, students are left to infer word meaning based on context. This is inefficient as a strategy for acquiring academic vocabulary, and particularly unreliable for low-frequency academic words. This indicates that EMI lecturers must move beyond simply being pedagogical content specialists, and must begin to function as linguistic mediators, developing the linguistic capacity of their students to assist with the often-described overwhelming advanced academic text complexity.

2.2. Cultural and Psychological Dimensions

Cultural factors also play a role in shaping how EFL learners engage in English as a medium of instruction classrooms. Studies show that students may experience language anxiety and fear of making mistakes, which can limit their participation in class discussions and group activities. Cultural norms and emotional factors greatly impact classroom participation in EMI contexts. Kim and Elder found that Korean students in English as a medium of instruction settings often felt self-conscious and anxious, fearing judgment from peers and instructors[17]. Teachers see this hesitation in Sudanese learners as connected to both a lack of confidence in their language skills and a respect for authority. This fear of failure hinders active engagement and prevents learners from fully participating in the learning process.

Additionally, cultural differences in classroom communication styles can lead to misunderstandings and discomfort,

as students may not be accustomed to the interaction patterns typically found in English as a Medium of Instruction environments. Performance anxiety and communication apprehension are significant factors affecting EFL students' engagement in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms. The study by Horwitz et al. on foreign language anxiety introduced the concept of "communication apprehension," which has since been widely applied in EMI research[18]. They noted that students' fear of negative evaluation and self-perceived inadequacy in language skills contribute to high levels of anxiety, impacting their ability to speak and engage openly in class.

Recent research by Liu and Jackson supported these findings, showing that high anxiety levels lead to "passive learning" behaviors where students are reluctant to ask questions or participate in interactive discussions. Anxiety is not simply a psychological state of mind in EMI classrooms but it is heavily informed by cultural narratives around education and authority[19]. For many cultural communities, classrooms are hierarchical spaces where the teacher is the knowledge authority and students are expected to listen to and absorb the information without making challenges or co-constructing it. Students transitioning into an EMI space where Western values of critical questioning and participatory debate are promoted inevitably have cultural dissonance affecting their experience.

The discomfort that comes from the students not knowing the proper way to use the language is made worse by their not knowing the culturally appropriate way to speak up, which adds cultural hesitation to the language hesitation. Christ stated that "double anxiety," caused by both linguistic insecurity and cultural dissonance, would silence students far more than the linguistic risk alone[20]. The anxiety with making a language mistake is deepened with the fear that classmates or, worse, the teacher finds you acting inappropriately according to your cultural standards, leading to intense withdrawal and disengagement.

To sum up, addressing participation anxiety in EMI is the need for a culturally responsive approach that respects the differences between students' educational histories and a Western model and tries to bridge those two instead of waiting for students to assimilate into a singular, monolithic Western interaction.

2.3. Cognitive Overload and Linguistic Complexity

Cognitive load theory suggests that learning in a non-native language requires additional mental effort, which can lead to cognitive overload. Chandler and Sweller introduced this theory, which has since been applied to understand the challenges English as a Medium of Instruction students face[21]. Research by Tatzl showed that students in English as a medium of instruction programs often experience cognitive overload due to the dual demands of language processing and content comprehension[22]. Teachers often say that students spend a lot of their mental energy figuring out English instead of understanding the content[23]. This overload can impair learning by causing students to focus on linguistic decoding at the expense of understanding academic content.

The academic language required in English as a Medium of Instruction settings often presents distinct challenges for EFL learners, who may be more accustomed to conversational English rather than formal academic discourse. According to Cummins, students generally require a higher level of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) than Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) to succeed in academic settings[23]. EFL learners often struggle to understand complex syntax, specialized terminology, and abstract language common in higher education. A study by Evans and Morrison confirmed that EFL students, particularly those with limited academic English exposure, experience significant difficulties in understanding lectures, writing assignments, and comprehending required readings in EMI contexts[24]. Sudanese EMI teachers confirm that even when students understand basic classroom communication, they find it difficult with abstract academic conversation.

2.4. Interactional and Cultural Constraints on Classroom Communication

Interaction is an essential component of learning, especially in language acquisition contexts. In English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms, however, EFL students often report fewer opportunities to interact due to linguistic challenges and large class sizes, which limit personalized instruction. Chen and Kraklow found that EFL learners in

English as a medium of instruction courses are less likely to engage in discussions or ask questions due to fear of negative evaluation and a lack of confidence in their language abilities[25]. This limited interaction can further exacerbate feelings of isolation, leading to a cycle of disengagement and passive learning.

Differences in cultural norms regarding classroom communication can also hinder EFL students' engagement in English as a medium of instruction settings. In collectivist cultures, where respect for authority is highly valued, students may feel hesitant to participate actively or challenge instructors, a common expectation in Western educational settings. Tran explored the experiences of Vietnamese students in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms in Australia, finding that students struggled with the expectation to participate actively, ask questions, and challenge ideas, as these behaviors conflicted with their cultural norms[26]. Such cultural misalignments can discourage EFL students from fully engaging, affecting both their learning experience and academic performance.

The effect of cultural communication norms is particularly evident in our interpretations of silence. In Western academe, silence is often interpreted as a lack of preparation, understanding, or interest on the part of the speaker. In contrast, many East Asian, African, and Middle Eastern communities regard silence as an accepted way of engaging in communication and a communicative practice in itself that is used to express respect, as part of a period of deep thought, or a pause before speaking[27].

In the case of a typical Sudanese student, for example, silence may indicate respect and consideration of the teacher rather than disengagement. Consequently, the demand within EMI classrooms for students to think on their feet and verbally articulate their ideas immediately becomes a tremendous source of anxiety for students from these kinds of communities, and compels them to work outside of cognitive and communicative styles that the students have developed. Therefore, this creates a fundamental mismatch in the "politics of talk", leading to an intrinsic barrier to inclusion. An instructor who is unaware of these cultural markers may notice the students' silence but fail to recognize that their performance is conscientious; rather, the instructor may perform the role of gatekeeping and interpret the students' behavior in terms of a deficit.

To this end, an effective EMI pedagogy must foster cultural meta-cognition among educators, or an educator's ability to recognize participation patterns that may be culturally influenced, and provide alternative ways for students to demonstrate engagement that do not prioritize immediate verbal contribution.

2.5. Psychological Impact and Institutional Support

Studies reveal that language barriers in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms can lead to increased psychological stress, impacting students' emotional well-being and academic performance. Dörnyei suggested that language anxiety, particularly among less proficient EFL learners, can negatively affect motivation and willingness to communicate[28]. Tsui's research on Chinese EFL students further supports this, showing that students often experience "language shame" due to fear of making mistakes, which can lead to long-term disengagement from classroom interactions[29]. This emotional strain is particularly problematic in English as a Medium of Instruction settings, where students are expected to perform academically while navigating these linguistic and psychological challenges.

Institutional support, including language development resources and faculty training, plays a critical role in helping EFL learners overcome challenges in English as a medium of instruction environments. Airey argued that universities offering specialized support services, such as language labs and academic workshops, help students build the necessary academic and linguistic skills to succeed in English as a medium of instruction programs[30]. Additionally, faculty training on inclusive pedagogical strategies for English as a Medium of Instruction has shown promise in improving student engagement. Helm and Guarda highlighted that instructors trained in techniques such as content scaffolding and interactive teaching methods are better equipped to support EFL students, making EMI classrooms more accessible[31]. To sum up, in Sudan, the implementation of EMI is still developing, and support from institutions is limited. Teachers often improvise by using bilingual explanations or visual aids to overcome language barriers. These practices highlight the need to create a national EMI framework that includes both language and teaching skills development.

2.6. Strategies for Enhancing Engagement in English as a Medium of Instruction Classrooms

To address the engagement challenges in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms, educators have explored several strategies to make learning more accessible for EFL students. These include using simplified language, allowing code-switching (alternating between English and students' native languages), and incorporating visual aids. Dearden[8] argued that allowing occasional use of the mother tongue can help bridge comprehension gaps without compromising the immersive experience of English as a medium of instruction. Additionally, active learning techniques, such as group discussions and problem-solving tasks, can promote greater engagement and help students practice English in a supportive environment.

Multimodal scaffolding is a highly effective approach for promoting engagement and reducing cognitive overload. This promotes understanding and learning of academic material when delivered through several supporting modes—in addition to language—that complement one another, such as visually (e.g., graphs, charts, and concept maps), auditorily (e.g., recorded lectures and articulating words clearly), and kinesthetically (e.g., teaching through hands-on activities). As Mayer promised in his Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, students will learn at a deeper level when they engage with either words or pictures rather than just words, since both feed into the dual coding framework[32].

In an EMI context, a complex scientific process presented in English becomes much more accessible when it is described in English on the screen or the board, accompanied by a diagram or short animation. By introducing visual modes of engagement in addition to verbal, the cognitive load placed on the learner through language is offset because the learner is now engaging not only through words but comprehending meaning through non-linguistic means.

The concept of socio-cultural identity has a profound impact on how EFL learners perceive themselves and interact in English as a Medium of Instruction settings. Studies by Pavlenko and Norton suggested that learners in English as a Medium of Instruction environments often face identity conflicts, as they navigate between their native cultural identities and the expectations of English-speaking academic environments[33]. EFL students may feel pressured to adopt Western communication styles or academic norms, leading to feelings of cultural alienation. Similarly, Morita noted that Japanese EFL learners in Canadian English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms struggled with negotiating their identities and cultural norms, often feeling marginalized or out of place, which impacted their willingness to participate and learn[34].

The role of institutions in supporting EFL learners in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms is increasingly recognized as critical. Research by Macaro et al. indicated that institutions offering language support programs, such as academic English courses and tutoring, help mitigate some of the challenges faced by EFL students[35]. The authors found that structured language support not only improved students' language skills but also enhanced their confidence and participation in English as a medium of instruction classrooms. Additionally, teacher training programs that focus on developing EMI-specific pedagogies have been shown to support instructors in delivering content effectively to EFL students[36].

Collaborative learning and scaffolded instruction are instructional strategies that research suggests can enhance EFL learners' engagement in English as a Medium of Instruction settings. Studies by Gibbons demonstrated that scaffolded instruction—where instructors provide gradually decreasing support as students gain skills—can help EFL students develop linguistic and content understanding[37]. Similarly, collaborative learning, where students work in groups to solve problems or discuss topics, encourages peer support and reduces performance anxiety, as reported by Barkley[38]. Both strategies help students feel more supported and capable, leading to greater engagement in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms.

In summary, the literature on English as a Medium of Instruction and EFL learners underscores multiple challenges that impact students' academic and emotional engagement in English as a Medium of Instruction settings. These include language barriers, cognitive and psychological challenges, socio-cultural identity conflicts, and varying levels of institutional support. To create more inclusive English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms, educational institutions must prioritize providing targeted support services and training for both students and instructors. Additionally, adopting tailored instructional strategies—such as scaffolded instruction, col-

laborative learning, and peer interaction—can help mitigate these challenges, fostering a more supportive environment for EFL learners in EMI settings.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

The study used a descriptive, analytical, cross-sectional research design to explore the perspectives of Sudanese EFL teachers regarding their experiences of their students in EMI classroom settings. It aimed to gain a deeper understanding of both the frequency and nature of the challenges faced by students, when participating in classrooms where English is the sole medium of instruction, as reported by their teachers. To accomplish its aims, the research employed a descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing a questionnaire administered to teachers to tackle the research questions and objectives. The study was conducted at the Elkremiet Primary school-Almanagil Locality- Gezira State, Sudan.

3.2. Instruments

Survey: A structured questionnaire was distributed to 100 English language teachers of both genders (male and fe-

male) to gather quantitative data on the common challenges they observe their students facing, such as language anxiety, comprehension difficulties, and interaction barriers. The survey consisted of Likert-scale questions to assess the frequency and severity of these challenges. The questionnaire was reviewed by three assistant professors who specialize in English language teaching. Their feedback confirmed that the items were clear, relevant, and linguistically appropriate. The study focused on three key aspects concerning the challenges of Sudanese EFL learners at the primary school level, as perceived by their teachers. Firstly, it examined teachers' perception of students' opinions regarding the linguistic barriers that EFL learners face in English as a medium of instruction settings, including vocabulary comprehension and language fluency, encompassing items 1 to 4. Secondly, it examined the psychological and social factors affecting student engagement, such as confidence issues, participation reluctance, and the impact of cultural differences in the classroom, from the teachers' viewpoint (addressing items 5, 6, 7, and 8). Thirdly, it examined the teachers' opinions on effective teaching strategies and support programs that could enhance EFL learners' engagement and understanding in EMI classrooms. The teachers' questionnaire is briefly summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Variables of teachers' questionnaire.

Variable Measure	Measure By
1. Identify the linguistic barriers that EFL learners face in English as a Medium of Instruction settings, including vocabulary comprehension.	Items 1 to 4
2. Examine the psychological and social factors affecting student engagement, such as cultural differences on classroom.	Items 5, 6,7 and 8
3. Recommend effective teaching strategies and support programs that could enhance EFL learners' engagement and understanding in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms.	Items 9, 10, 11 and 12

3.3. Participants

The participants in this study were EFL 100 EFL teachers from Elkremiet Primary schools. A purposive sampling technique was used to select these teachers, who were responsible for teaching different grade levels where English is used as the primary language of instruction. The teachers were chosen randomly from the specialized English language staff (both Male and Female). **Table 2** clarifies the distribution of gender among a sample of 100 teachers. Among these, 48 participants were identified as male, constituting 48% of the total sample, whereas 52 participants were identified as Fe-

male, constituting 52% of the total sample. The participants were recruited from three teaching levels, i.e., 5th, 7th and 8th grades. **Table 2** illustrates that 40% of the participants teach the 5th degree, while 44% teach the 7th degree and 16% teach the 8th grade. Such a gender and levels distribution could possibly affect the various aspects of the study or research being conducted, as gender and demographic factors may play a significant role in influencing viewpoints, experiences, and reactions to specific questions or subjects. Consequently, researchers must take these demographic variations into account when analyzing and interpreting the data gathered from their studies.

Table 2. Distribution of the teacher sample according to gender and teaching grades.

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	48	48%
	Female	52	52%
	Total	100	100%
Level	5th Degree	40	40%
	7th degree	44	44%
	8th degree	16	16%
	Total	100	100%

3.4. Validity and Reliability

According to the researcher, the questions and replies were constructed with suitable purposefulness, flexibility, clarity of the aims, and openness to different methods to achieve the responses. The panel of three assistant professors with expertise in the English language verified the questionnaire. They used the following standards to inform their points of view:

i.   The assertions, items, and directions' clarity.

ii.   The objects' ease of use and their relevance to the topic.

iii.   The wording employed.

Options are specifically provided for the sample, allowing for the capacity to attentively listen to the recommendations of policy makers, pose insightful inquiries, and engage in open dialogue with some of them when the researcher is prepared. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed through a pilot study. The questionnaire was initially administered to a sample of 20 teachers who were subsequently excluded from the final administration. The researcher inquired about the clarity of the items from these teachers. The objective was to evaluate the teachers' comprehension of the questionnaire items and to identify any issues that required rectification prior to the final administration. The teachers' questionnaire was distributed to them via their WhatsApp group. Ethical considerations were meticulously addressed in this study. The researcher obtained permission from the Administration of the Primary School to conduct the study. Furthermore, the teachers were informed about the purpose of the study. Their consent to participate was confirmed, and they were assured that their responses would be utilized solely for this study. They were instructed not to include their names. Once the questionnaire versions were administered, they were provided with ample time to respond and complete the questionnaire.

3.5. Data Analysis

As this study is purely descriptive, descriptive analysis is used to process the data. Frequency and percentages were used to show the teachers' degree of agreement with the research items. Inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis, are used to explore relationships between students' English proficiency levels and the specific challenges they face, and Key themes related to language barriers, classroom participation difficulties, and emotional responses are identified and explored.

4. Results

The data collected from the teacher questionnaire, which contained 12 items divided into three sections corresponding to the research objectives, are presented in the following tables and summaries. It is important to note that all results reflect the perceptions and observations of the teachers, not direct responses from students.

RO 1: Identifying the linguistic barriers that EFL learners face in EMI settings, including vocabulary comprehension (as observed by teachers).

As shown in **Table 3**, a strong majority of teachers (87% agree/strongly agree) observed that students face significant difficulties in understanding specialized subject-specific terminology. An even higher percentage (92%) reported that the pace of speech and instructors' accents pose a major challenge to comprehension. Furthermore, 88% of teachers agreed that students lack the breadth of vocabulary necessary to follow EMI lectures, and an overwhelming 96% confirmed that idioms and colloquialisms are a notable source of confusion for learners.

Table 3. Teachers' Reported Views on Students' Vocabulary Comprehension Challenges in EMI Settings.

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Specialized terms used in different subjects can be difficult for learners to grasp.	75%	12%	6%	4%	3%
The fast-paced speech or various accents of the instructors make it hard to follow along.	83%	9%	3%	3%	2%
Learners might not have a broad enough vocabulary to fully understand lectures.	72%	16%	6%	3%	3%
English is rich with idioms and colloquial phrases that might confuse learners.	85%	11%	1%	1%	2%
Total	**78.75%**	**12%**	**4%**	**2.75%**	**2.5%**

RO 2: Examine the psychological and social factors affecting student engagement, such as cultural differences in the classroom (as reported by teachers).

The results in **Table 4** indicate that teachers perceive cultural factors as highly influential. 89% of respondents agreed that cultural background affects engagement levels. A significant 92% agreed that the stigmatization of errors, particularly noted in Arabic-speaking contexts, leads to hesitancy in participation. Additionally, 94% of teachers recognized that cultural norms surrounding active participation and questioning impact how students engage, and 92% affirmed that culturally influenced perceptions of the teacher's role (e.g., as an authority figure) directly affect students' willingness to participate in class.

Table 4. Teachers' Views on Cultural Factors Affecting Students' Engagement.

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Students from different cultural backgrounds may have varying levels of engagement.	76%	13%	6%	5%	0%
In cultures where errors are stigmatized, students might be more hesitant to engage.	81%	11%	3%	1%	4%
Some cultures encourage active participation, which influences engagement.	79%	15%	4%	2%	0%
The perception of the teacher's role varies across cultures and affects engagement.	82%	10%	3%	2%	3%
Total	**79.5%**	**12.25%**	**4%**	**2.5%**	**1.75%**

RO 3: Recommend effective teaching strategies and support programs that could enhance EFL learners' engagement and understanding in EMI classrooms (based on the teachers' opinions).

As presented in **Table 5**, there was strong consensus among teachers on strategies to improve EMI. 94% endorsed group work and collaborative projects. 93% agreed that interactive activities like debates and role-plays are effective. The use of educational technology tools was supported by 91% of respondents, and 91% also emphasized the importance of providing specific, constructive feedback to guide student learning.

Table 5. Teachers' Views on Effective Teaching Strategies for EMI Classrooms.

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Encouraging group work and collaborative projects helps engagement.	77%	17%	2%	2%	2%
Incorporating debates, role-plays, and problem-solving tasks makes learning interactive.	85%	8%	4%	3%	0%
Using educational technology tools makes lessons more engaging.	81%	10%	2%	4%	3%
Providing specific feedback on assignments guides students' learning.	78%	13%	6%	2%	1%
Total	**80.25%**	**12%**	**3.5%**	**2.75%**	**1.5%**

5. Discussion

The results of this study illuminate the complex interplay of linguistic, psychological, and cultural barriers that Sudanese EFL learners face in EMI classrooms, while also highlighting pedagogical pathways forward. The findings strongly align with and can be interpreted through the lens of the existing literature on EMI.

First, the overwhelming agreement on vocabulary-related challenges (RO1) directly corroborates the literature on language barriers in EMI[14,15]. The struggle with specialized terminology and fast-paced speech confirms Evans and Morrison's[24] findings on the distinct challenge of academic language proficiency (CALP) compared to conversational English (BICS), as per Cummins[23]. The confusion caused by idioms further exacerbates the cognitive load on students, supporting the application of Cognitive Load Theory[21,22] in this context. Students are simultaneously decoding language and processing complex content, leading to potential overload and hindered comprehension.

Second, the findings on psychological and cultural factors (RO2) provide empirical support for the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review. The hesitancy to engage due to the fear of making mistakes resonates deeply with the concepts of foreign language anxiety and "communication apprehension"[18,29]. The cultural dimension is critical; the data on the stigmatization of errors and the perception of the teacher's authority figure align with Tran's research on cultural misalignment[26]. For Sudanese learners, whose culture may emphasize respect for authority and where making errors might be stigmatized, the Western pedagogical expectation of active questioning and debate can create a significant barrier to participation, leading to the "passive learning" behaviors noted by Liu and Jackson[19].

Finally, the strong teacher consensus on effective strategies (RO3) offers practical solutions grounded in pedagogical research. The advocacy for collaborative learning and group work supports Barkley's[38] findings that such activities reduce anxiety and foster peer support. The endorsement of interactive tasks and technology aligns with recommendations for using scaffolded instruction[37] and multimodal tools to make content more accessible[39]. The emphasis on specific feedback is a key component of creating the supportive environment necessary to build student confidence and mitigate the psychological strains identified in the study[28].

In conclusion, the challenges Sudanese EFL learners face in EMI are not merely linguistic but are deeply entwined with cognitive, psychological, and cultural factors. Therefore, effective mitigation requires more than just language support; it demands a culturally responsive pedagogical approach. Instructors must be trained in strategies that reduce cognitive load, alleviate anxiety, and bridge cultural gaps in classroom communication. Institutional support, through faculty development and resources that promote the strategies identified herein, is essential to transform EMI classrooms into inclusive and effective learning environments for all students. Teachers, on the other hand, see EMI success as relying not just on student skills but also on support from teaching methods and the institution. The study focused on students, getting a clear view of classroom dynamics that are often missed in discussions about EMI policies.

6. Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the challenges faced by Sudanese EFL learners in classrooms where English is the medium of instruction (EMI). The findings confirm that these challenges are multifaceted, encompassing significant linguistic barriers, profound psychological anxieties, and deeply ingrained cultural norms that collectively hinder effective student engagement and academic success.

This study concludes that Sudanese EFL learners face significant linguistic, cultural, and psychological challenges in EMI classrooms, including vocabulary deficits, anxiety, and passive learning behaviors. However, it also identifies practical solutions, emphasizing interactive, student-centered strategies like collaborative learning and educational technology. A holistic approach that combines language support with culturally responsive pedagogy is essential. Institutions should invest in teacher training to equip educators with skills to scaffold content and foster supportive environments, ultimately transforming EMI classrooms into inclusive and effective spaces for all students.

Ultimately, this study underscores that addressing the challenges of EMI requires a holistic and empathetic approach. It is not sufficient to focus solely on improving students' English proficiency. Instead, educators and institutions must actively work to create a supportive and culturally sensitive learning environment that reduces anxiety, values

gradual progress, and acknowledges the complex interplay between language, culture, and identity. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that higher education institutions in Sudan invest in comprehensive teacher training programs focused on EMI-specific pedagogies. Such programs should equip instructors with the skills to scaffold content, design interactive lessons, and foster a classroom culture where students feel safe to participate. Future research could longitudinally track the impact of these implemented strategies on student performance and confidence, providing further evidence for refining best practices in the Sudanese EMI context.

This study has several limitations despite its contributions. It mainly relied on self-reported data from students, which may have biases like social desirability or inaccurate self-assessment. The research was conducted in only one institution, which may limit how the findings apply to other contexts within Sudan. Since the study used a cross-sectional design, it captured data at a single moment, making it hard to see changes over time or establish cause-and-effect relationships.

Future research should use longitudinal designs to track how EFL learners' experiences and challenges change over time. This would provide better insights into the long-term effects of EMI on student outcomes. Expanding the study to include several institutions from different regions of Sudan would improve the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, using mixed-methods approaches that combine both qualitative and quantitative data could help deepen the understanding of the involved complexities. It would also be helpful to investigate the views of instructors and administrators to get a complete picture of the EMI experience. Lastly, exploring the impact of specific interventions, like targeted language support programs or cultural competence training for teachers, could provide practical strategies to address the identified challenges.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Tabuk University.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants gave informed consent before participation.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions related to participant confidentiality. The dataset includes sensitive information from classroom assessments and surveys involving identifiable student responses. However, anonymized excerpts from the qualitative data and summary statistics of the quantitative data may be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to approval by the institutional ethics committee and in accordance with participant consent agreements.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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