Iranian Students' Challenges in Learning English-Medium Courses within MBA Field

Marzieh Khedri[*1] **Samad Mirza Suzani**[2] **Fatemeh Behjat**[3]

[1] Ph.D Candidate, Department of Foreign Languages, Shiraz branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran. E-mail: marziehkhedri@gmail.com

[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Marvdasht branch, Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht, Iran. E-mail: smirzasouzani@gmail.com

[3] Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Marvdasht branch, Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht, Iran. E-mail: fb304@yahoo.com

Article Info	ABSTRACT
	The English medium of instruction seems to be a daunting situation for non-native students. Therefore, the present study examined challenges that students encounter in the MBA field in Iran. Accordingly, 130 students were studied through questionnaires, interviews, and observations of participants, along with ESP-related texts from each course. Through a concurrent qualitative and quantitative mixed-methods research design, the collected data in different phases of the research were analyzed thematically and statistically. The results revealed that candidates had undergone several challenges concerning the absence of germane to business background, language of teaching, interaction challenges, rate of speech, and writing abilities. The difficulties experienced by the students in the ESP realm start from writing as the most challenging area, followed by speaking, listening, and reading, respectively. Moreover, the concept of age seems to be effective, so younger adults might find it easier to adopt new strategies in facing the challenges. The findings emphasize the need for ESP instruction to prioritize skills.

*Corresponding author   marziehkhedri@gmail.com

1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) refers to the teaching of English designed to meet the specific needs of learners in specialized fields, such as business, science, or technology (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). ESP differs from general English courses by focusing on the language relevant to particular disciplines and professions. Despite the widespread implementation of ESP programs, challenges remain for students. Although the use of ESP programs has developed to a great extent, daunting issues seem to exist, particularly for the students. Sert (2008) and Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim, and Jung (2011) explain the anxiety of students in ESP settings in Turkey and South Korea. Students have reported difficulties in full comprehension and mastery of the subject area. Although some studies in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) can be found which has taken place in native English-speaking countries (e.g. Gimenez, 2008; Leki, 2007), investigating experiences of EFL university students regarding several dimensions of their learning journey and studies on ESP or English medium instruction (EMI) curriculums are not prevalent in EFL backgrounds yet, particularly on EAP within an MBA field. Earlier investigations of ESP in EFL settings have a relatively different approach from the present study (e.g., Trinder, 2013; Zhang, 2013). They have attempted to examine experiences of EFL learners with business communication-related professional workplace context, while this research attempts to bridge the gap in the university context.

Despite the growing implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in higher education globally, including in Iran, there remains a significant gap in addressing the specific linguistic and academic challenges faced by non-native English-speaking students. While studies like Lo and Murphy (2010) demonstrate the benefits of EMI for language acquisition, such as vocabulary improvement, many programs lack sufficient support tailored to students' needs, particularly in specialized fields like business or engineering. This gap underscores the need for more targeted ESP programs that not only improve language skills but also ensure students' full comprehension and mastery of complex subject matter in an international academic and professional context.

Considering the scarce amount of research on ESP settings, particularly highlighting the MBA field, this study attempted to present substantial contextual and disciplinary assistance to the rising literature on ESP. Accordingly, it endeavored to find out the challenges that ESP students might face in English-medium courses concerning the MBA program in order to shed light on relevant issues and possibly provide some hints and solutions for those challenges during the L2 learning journey. Accordingly, the following research questions were raised:

1. What challenges do Iranian MBA students experience in their ESP programs from students' perspectives?

2. Do Iranian MBA students perceive language challenges and obstacles differently based on each language skill (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, and listening)?

3. Is the participant's age a determining factor in the different language-related challenges they perceive?

2. A brief note of previous works

The dramatic development of EMI programs in higher educational levels of non-English-speaking countries around the globe raised several issues in relation to the challenges that EFL/ESL learners might face, potentially leading to unsuccessful interaction and miscommunication between instructors and students, as well as difficulties in understanding the presented speech (Joe & Lee, 2013). Research investigators for example Alginahi et al. (2009), Camiciottoli (2019), Hu and Lei (2014), Kagwesage (2013), Peacock (2001), Saat and Othman (2010), and Suliman and Tadros (2010) studied some techniques about how to manage or deal with EMI difficulties and challenges used by several EFL/ESL learners. To provide more recent insights into the challenges and strategies related to EMI, recent studies have highlighted the ongoing difficulties faced by EFL/ESL learners in non-English-speaking countries. For example, Kim and Shin (2020) explored how students in South Korea adapted to EMI through digital tools and self-directed learning. Similarly, Aguilar and Muñoz (2022) investigated the effectiveness of EMI training programs for instructors, emphasizing the need for improved pedagogical approaches. Moreover, Fang and Liu (2021) examined students' perceptions of EMI in China, identifying gaps in support for academic vocabulary and critical thinking skills.

Peacock (2001) conducted a study on assessing the approaches employed by ESL students to handle and manage the English language used for teaching specific subjects. An investigation of six methods was done, including memory, cognition, metacognition, reimbursement, affection, and socialization. He highlighted the association between the applied tactics by students and their English language knowledge. It was understood that the tactics connected to knowledge of the English language were cognition, metacognition, and compensation. Therefore, these tactics for handling the situation may be applied by EFL learners in several settings. Nevertheless, research should go beyond questionnaires as the main method of collecting data to increase the potential description of a clear image depicting the EFL/ESL learners' experiences and their insights.

Hung (2009) conducted longitudinal research at Hong Kong University in order to demonstrate the problems that students of EFL business undergo in written assignments about the marketing program. Participants supposedly employed the subsequent techniques in order to handle EMI tests and accomplish their written assignments: L1 use, group work and collaboration, the Internet, and imagining the potential reader prospects. These investigations proposed that more assistance should exist in order to support EFL/ESL learners in dealing with the EMI curriculum. Referring to the mentioned probable context-related challenges along with the fact that myriad investigations were applied on non-MBA programs, the necessity for further research seems evident to figure out learners' understandings of EMI programs.

Saat and Othman (2010) explained the Malaysian pre-service instructors' experience of teaching science in a second language in relation to their problems and insights. Different methods of collecting data, including interviews and observation, in a qualitative case study were used. Their

research offered perceptions of the difficulties that a number of prospective science teachers faced in English-medium lessons throughout their trainings along with some tactics that were adopted by them in order to manage the situation. The instructors were supposed to cope with challenges arising from the deficiency of English knowledge and the learners' different levels of English language knowledge. The instructors used different techniques to handle these difficulties, such as mixing and code-switching, student-teacher teamwork, rewording and repeated emphasis, along with using instructional assistance and analogies. The investigation suggested that teaching English language procedures should be highlighted in the science teacher academic program. They presented effective descriptive instances of the different difficulties EFL/ESL learners feel within English language courses and the tactics by them to cope with these daunting situations. Yet, their research did not reflect on the voice and experience of students.

Positive reconsideration and planned problem-solving dealt with the stimulation to analyze and resolve challenges as well as difficulties. On this token, instructors were supposed to enhance learners' self-confidence to find several resolutions, like devising a scheme of actions, increasing the attempts, and altering the approaches of studying, which were supposed to help them in handling those challenges. Self-control as an approach necessitated evading disappointment to help with English learning. On this occasion, teachers instilled self-confidence in their pupils when they were stressed and confused. Looking for social assistance, engaged in asking for guidance from instructors, peers, and friends on the ways of dealing with issues related to the English language (Suliman & Tadros, 2010).

Mirza Suzani et al. (2011) reviewed the Iranian higher educational institutions in terms of evaluating the present position of teaching ESP. They reflected that although nearly all undergraduates in these types of schools need to study an ESP mandatory course, the actual reason for this obligation to pass an ESP course seems to remain unsolved in the minds of these undergraduate students. They collected information through interviews and records of work procedures by means of lesson collections. Applying grounded theory designed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), data analysis demonstrated that a plethora of ESP students in various fields still have not realized the meaning of ESP and the logic behind the program. Their central goal was to present a grave appraisal of the present condition of ESP instruction in Iran in order to broaden perceptions towards the existing issues of ESP students and to investigate the present condition of ESP materials in the Iranian higher educational institutions. They attempted to present a number of explanations for the impasse of ESP curriculum for the improvement of the course in higher educational contexts. Eventually, they presented a number of guiding principles to diminish the distance between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge in ESP courses in Iran's academic contexts.

Kagwesage (2013) studied techniques of handling complicated educational textbooks employed by multilingual undergraduates in Rwanda who could have a successful performance in the English language presented in Economics and Management programs. Information was obtained via

interviews and teamwork debates; a thematic analysis of data was done. Results revealed that learners applied different techniques to control difficulties related to EMI, involving an effective application of other languages at their disposal to accomplish strict academic assignments and duties. Surprisingly, while other languages were not formally identified as means of teaching in the Rwandan higher educational system, they had a facilitating part in learning the main topic by switching codes and translating. Kagwesage's (2013) research suggested influential perceptions in controlling techniques employed by EFL or ESL learners in reaction to English medium instruction challenges. Yet, it did not concern the MBA field and its challenges.

In addition, due to the learners' imperfect knowledge of English, they were compelled to use several other learning techniques for compensation. A famous tactic was referring to Chinese reference books in order to grasp their English language courses as well as their instructors.

Further, learners chose to look up the new terms in their English books before participating in the lesson. Moreover, they translated the text from English to Chinese, memorized responses to exams according to their course books, and prevented impulsive discussions in the English language. Camiciottoli's study (2019) confirmed these results in discovering some learners' needs for EMI instructors to adjust their speech and apply several techniques in order to present an understandable subject, involving wordless semiotic sources, such as using several gestures. Although the literature provided valuable guidance, aiding the data collection process with insights from previous studies, we still questioned whether the same issues would arise in an Iranian EFL context, particularly within a different academic field. Given the significant cultural differences that could influence how students react to or cope with these challenges, it became essential to explore this topic further. These considerations motivated us to undertake this research, aiming to expand the understanding of EFL challenges and contribute to future investigations in this area.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Participants

A total of 130 participants were recruited from the Islamic Azad University, Boushehr Branch in Iran. This sample included both English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers (n=10) and MBA students (n=120). Informed consent was obtained before participation, which was voluntary. A convenience sampling approach was employed to select participants with relevant disciplinary backgrounds (i.e., MBA field). The student participants ranged in age from 23 to 35 and had Persian as their native language. Notably, language proficiency was not a decisive factor in participant selection. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by MBA students, gender was considered as a variable in participant recruitment. The sample included both male (N= 58) and female (N=62) students, although gender was not a primary factor in the selection process. This approach allowed the study to reflect the experiences of a diverse group of learners, regardless of gender, while still focusing on the broader linguistic and academic challenges encountered in the ESP context. Future studies could further explore whether gender differences play a role in how

students perceive and overcome these challenges. This design choice aimed to capture the challenges faced by students with varying levels of English language proficiency, as perceived by both students and teachers.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments that were used in the present study include the linguistic challenges questionnaire, interviews, and observing the participants along with ESP-related texts of each course. Semi-structured interviews are considered appropriate for data collection since they give freedom to the researcher in terms of flexibility and responsiveness in case a student inclines to present more details based on the occasion. They also encourage curiosity in the participants' answers and do not restrict asking for clarification or probing unanticipated answers (Kvale, 2007; Robson, 2011). Throughout these interviews, students felt free to express broader challenges that were of their concern in the field.

The observation was used, accompanied by other data collection methods. The reason behind choosing observation as one of the methods was that collecting live information from authentic social occasions is considered an effective and critical aspect in research observation (Robson, 2011). They present chances of data collection through real-life occurrences by providing this opportunity for the researcher to notice issues that students might not be willing to discuss (Denscombe, 2010). This specific aspect of observation provides the opportunity for direct cognition, which is different from inferring the data. Obtained data from observation would be better applied as a supplementary source to authenticate the data produced through interviews (Robson, 2011). Finally, using documents triangulated the collected data.

3.3 Linguistic Challenges Questionnaire

A 45-item survey gained from Evans and Morrison (2011) concerning the language issues and problems was applied. The questionnaire focuses on theoretical English skills in four areas. Accordingly, 30 questions are related to speaking, listening, and reading equally, and 15 questions are dedicated to writing. Participants were required to show the difficulty level for mastery in each aspect of the four skills within the MBA setting. Thus, they could rate the answer based on a Likert-scale starting from 1 (the most difficult) to 5 (the easiest). Participants' background information, including age and gender, in addition to their previous educational background were also requested at this stage. The reliability of the scale was confirmed through internal consistency measures (Cronbach's Alpha) and test-retest reliability and it was reported to be .79. The validity was established through content validity evaluations by experts.

3.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to assess the problems of learners linked to English as the language of education. Throughout the interviews, the researcher applied stimulus cards and documents to trigger certain detailed answers. These cards included three types of knowledge and information:

a) quotations from class observations;

b) insights and data that other candidates mentioned; and

c) quotations collected from the document resources.

Students were interviewed in their first language (Persian) to tackle the dependability of the gathered data. Each interview session took between 20 and 30 minutes and was audio-recorded for further investigations. To ensure the credibility and dependability of the semi-structured interviews, several measures were implemented. Credibility was enhanced by using stimulus cards and documents during the interviews, which provided context-specific prompts, encouraging participants to offer detailed and reflective responses based on real experiences. The use of quotations from class observations, insights from peers, and document resources added layers of data triangulation, helping to verify the authenticity of the participants' accounts. Dependability was maintained by conducting interviews in the participants' first language (Persian), thus minimizing any language barriers that could distort their responses. By allowing participants to express their thoughts freely and comfortably, the risk of misinterpretation was reduced. Additionally, audio recordings of the interviews provided a reliable means of revisiting and reviewing the data for consistency and accuracy during the analysis, further ensuring dependability in the research process.

3.5 Observations

The observation was used to provide a comprehensive image of the problems that students face within their lessons. Observation is a wise choice as it offers the chance of direct and first-hand data collection rather than relying on indirect ways of data collection, such as asking the students (Robson, 2011).

3.6 Documents

Collecting a plethora of texts and documents was also deployed to possess a richer resource. The texts were regenerated for interview stimulus cards; hence, they could assist in triangulating the information. The potential resources considered for data collection were:

1. Participants' sample answers to assignments related to the MBA lessons requested by content instructors

2. MBA program leaflet containing a detailed arrangement and formation of the MBA program, along with the course design and principles of evaluation and acceptance to the program.

3. A textbook deployed in the ESP lessons for MBA undergraduates to compare the two former documents (students' samples and assessment criteria) and have a more comprehensive vision of the process.

In order to ascertain the validity of the instruments, the confirmation and consensus among three experts (in the related fields, i.e., two in TEFL and one in MBA) was considered. Interview questions were meticulously reviewed to evaluate the content validity and to ensure that each item was relevant to the context and research purposes. Based on the received feedback, revisions were made, and the reliability estimates were examined.

To provide a rather objective assessment of the thematic analysis part of the study and meet inter-rater agreement, the researcher randomly selected 5 transcripts and asked another rater (TEFL PhD holders) to code the transcripts and assign the themes based on the rubric (further explained in the data analysis section). The results were compared to the original coded transcript, and it was ensured that both coders labeled components of the transcript the same.

Moreover, the researcher applied Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess the reliability of the linguistic challenges questionnaire. The results of internal consistency reliability for the survey indicated 0.89 which is beyond 0.7 and thus acceptable (Pallant, 2010).

3.7 Data Collection and Analysis

A concurrent qualitative and quantitative mixed-methods research (MMR) design was applied. A qualitative methodology was adopted in this research due to its emergent design essence, which suits the research objectives. A rather long immersion and continual involvement in the study situation were accomplished by the first author. Evaluation of the first data observation engendered certain important fields that were later inspected in the second observation. Moreover, quantitative data strengthened the scientific role of the results.

A mix of a survey questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, observations as well as a selection of texts were deployed as the materials for assembling the data. Sixteen class observations were conducted in line with the purpose of the study. An open atmosphere was designed for class observations in order to probe and grasp every potential aspect in the context. Accordingly, these observations were spread throughout the research period, right at the start of the course and a while after the interviews, to control and diminish the chance of any data missing. The collected information was evaluated thematically based on the guidelines implied in the study objectives and interview information.

Furthermore, one-to-one interviews were held with the students within two cycles of data gathering at the end of each course. Each meeting took around 25 minutes. Anonymity and confidentiality of students' personal information and responses were promised since the main objective throughout the meetings was to support their character and inspire them to comfortably state their notions and share their experiences of the ESP courses and problems. This process lasted to the point where data saturation was reached. Note-taking was done, and interviews were recorded to prevent missing any data. The interviewer employed stimulus cards and documents to provoke detailed answers. The collected information was translated into English. Two experts were requested to check the translations to guarantee better data accuracy. The results were used to complement other data.

In order to analyze the data, transcripts of the interviews along with observational scripts were coded and analyzed based on their theme in an inductive way. Coding the information was done in an exploratory open strategy to promote the chance of grasping all potential problems based on the data. This technique was inspired by the cross-sectional qualitative method which led to thematic

coding followed by coding on the basis of the demonstrative quotations (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Mason, 2002).

Myriad techniques were employed to maintain and promote the reliability and dependability of the research. Triangulation of methods was one of these strategies for gathering the information. This strategy allowed investigators to diminish the chance of any drawbacks in data gathering period via several methods. It is believed that triangulation helps in accelerating the reliability and validity of the research through presenting a comprehensive image of the circumstances and challenges under study (Alhassan et al., 2021).

Moreover, general flexibility of a thematic analysis motivates researchers to use it in several investigations. Thus, myriad thematic analyses offer the chance of yielding better data understandings and present more thorough elucidations than other methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data coding and analysis in the present study was done through five stages of thematic evaluations following Braun and Clarke (2006). Primarily, transcribing, reading, and reviewing of the data was done to get familiarized with all the present information. Secondly, primary codes and themes were generated according to the accurate aspects of the information. Thirdly, data were inspected to find and organize the accurate aspects and recurrent themes. Fourthly, a thematic scheme of the evaluations was done through reviewing the organized themes. Lastly, to confirm that the themes precisely grasp and demonstrate the students' insights and speeches, once again refining, defining and naming the themes were checked.

Concerning the survey, each mean score on all sub-skills was estimated to create a mixed compound mean for the four general English language abilities, following Evans and Morrison's (2011) practice. A Chi square was performed to analyze the data statistically. The difference between the participants' language-related challenges and their age was done through quantitative statistics as well.

4. Findings and results

In the subsequent sections, the qualitative and quantitative (i.e., descriptive and inferential statistics) analyses employed to advance the study are presented and the results are described completely.

Based on the documents and observations, several goals were identified to be followed in the MBA curriculum, a review of which is worthwhile. In this vein, the MBA program is responsible for cultivating prospective leaders and managers of business who are able to interact, communicate, cooperate, and strive for the best with people of all around the globe through presenting progressive business education which is highly related, morally comprehensive, and culturally subtle. This curriculum sought to present the learners with critical elements of learning necessitated in the present and future of the world business contexts like international and multicultural understanding, multifaceted experience of learning, inspiring communication and critical thinking, use of technology, and ethics and preservation suggestions. Accordingly, learners should possess the ability to:

-grasp and employ the specific information in significant business practice contexts (ie., marketing, finance, management, and accounting);

-possess strong written and oral communication skills and be reliable and convincing communicators to grow their skills to a business leader or executive;

-communicate clearly both verbally and in writing;

-be effective persuasive speakers;

-work effectively and professionally in teams;

-possess critical thinking ability to resolve challenges by employing proper logic and diagnostic abilities for crisis analysis;

-have the ability to reach rational conclusions and inferences and present suitable solutions based on appropriate data;

-understand ethical issues in business decision making;

-comprehend the effect of local and global diversity on worldwide commerce and;

-understand the legal arena surrounding international organizations (MBA Program Assessment Plan, 2009).

The assessment of content knowledge generally involves: area knowledge, interaction abilities, teamwork abilities, the ability of critical thinking, ethics, intellectual abilities, and multicultural and global abilities (MBA Program Assessment Plan, 2009). However, this study mainly focused on the MBA curriculum as a whole in relation to the English language difficulties for the learning community in the Iranian context. This concept can be discussed in terms of the communication skills of the students, which in effect, directly highlight the following two objectives of the course:

-Students should present a clear understanding of oral and written communication abilities

-Students should present the ability of an influential, convincing speaker

The assessment criteria for the oral communication skills, referring to the above-mentioned goals, include: Organization, knowledge of subject matter, eye contact skills, illustrations, mechanics, and enunciation.

Concerning the written communication skills of the MBA program, instructors evaluate six aspects of logic, including: Data, notions, viewpoints, conventions, suggestions, and interpretation. These elements are based on six academic values, including relevance, clarity, depth, breadth, consistency, and amalgamation, as well as two aspects of written communication abilities that involve the extent to which students can meet expectations (MBA Program Assessment Plan, 2009).

Five themes were mutually identified for students, which can justify the answer to the first research question: What challenges do Iranian MBA students experience in their ESP programs from students' perspectives?

As mentioned before, the five stages of thematic analysis were applied to study the interviews. Analysis of data demonstrated several issues that participants concurrently underwent throughout the MBA program, as reported by the students. A number of causes were attributed to these issues, and

students asserted that they have undesirably impacted their educational performance and presentation within the curriculum. Accordingly, each theme is explained in detail, as follows (S= student; CO= classroom observation):

1. Absence of germane to business background

Inadequate related experience and background in business amid a large number of participants, seemed challenging and impeded their progression in educational performance. As an instance, S7 was anxious of the extent to which inadequate related experience in business principles might simplify or prohibit their accomplishments in educational performance within their field:

> *Students, from myriad fields, join in the MBA field such as arts, economy, science, medicine, commerce ... Mathematics, for example, is an easy and familiar subject to me. But coming from other backgrounds such as geography or art, students would find it very challenging. Some students might previously have the knowledge of accounting and finance. To them, courses related to finance and accounting should be quiet undemanding. However, I find this hard since I haven't studied it previously. (S7)*

Similarly, S9 pointed out the absence of experience in business in comparison with other peers:

> *I don't possess a previous background in some subjects, like accounting [for instance] the Financial Accounting subject. I do my best to manage the problem in the management or economics subject matters, even though I haven't got any experience or knowledge. Yet students who have a relevant background in business find it easier to accomplish those courses. (S9)*

This challenge, however, appeared to be less discriminating from the perspective of the students with proper mathematical experience and background (e.g., computer science and engineering students):

> *Since my major in engineering contained mathematical problems and solutions, I haven't faced difficulties in handling logical matters or cases which engage math. (S14)*

2. Language of teaching

Students seemed to behave differently in their educational performances due to the difference between the predominant language (Persian) and the language of teaching deployed in the MBA (English). The majority of students were unacquainted with the experience of English instruction, and they appeared to experience a daunting journey to adapt and manage the pristine context and conditions of learning:

> *I have studied almost everything in Persian before. Nearly all of my courses were held in Persian. My resources and tests were in Persian . . . we [students] also used to interact with each other in Persian . . . but after I attended the MBA program, I had difficulty in understanding within the first few sessions to learn topics in another language [English] (S5)*

In addition, the recent English language learning context felt uncomfortable for MBA apprentices of relevant backgrounds as well. Although they might have had prior business experience, they still reported facing language problems:

> *We have learned all our lessons in Persian and graduated in the same language but once we started the MBA program, we came across unfamiliar terminologies, spelling problems, and*

whatnot. My main issue is with theoretical topics [within the MBA program]. Subjects like Marketing Strategies or Capital Market require knowledge of vocabulary and different language abilities. Even those who understand the content in Persian based on previous lessons . . . They could encounter difficulties in communication via the English language. In the MBA field, we need to deploy specific, technical, and organized terms which is daunting for students with a Persian undergraduate study field. (S10)

Some participants reflected that these conditions would not have been the same if they had been instructed in the same way throughout their undergraduate studies:

Throughout my previous experience in engineering, only one subject was taught in English, namely, the subject of Financial Management. So … any content instructed in English (completely or partly) in previous studies wouldn't appear unfamiliar or challenging today [in the MBA]. (S11)

Another major issue was the students' poor English language abilities. The problems related to these abilities are described in detail below.

3. Interaction challenges: Oral and listening skills

Several candidates consistently reported facing interaction difficulties that appeared to impact their educational major differently. The challenges in communication analysis encompassed two central aspects: one refers to the issues with speaking abilities, i.e., oral performances and class activity; the other one refers to listening abilities, i.e., understanding speech and the ability to take notes. Candidates believed that expressing ideas in the English language is very difficult. They reported that they can understand the related concepts, but they cannot state them with ease. This factor eventually impedes them from participating in classroom activities:

The problem is how to encourage or force students to talk effortlessly. You know... we may be able to write, yet our concern has always been interacting orally. (S20)

The issue of speaking seemed to be the most constant challenge in language, highlighted in class observations over the two-visit gap. During the interviews, when they were asked for information on disorganized or partial responses to the instructors' requests in lessons, they attributed the issue to inadequate abilities in speaking:

Yes, I feel I experience difficulty in expressing my attitudes in an organized way and in communication. . . mainly, I have a problem with translating the words in my mind. So it affects my communication skills in English. I cannot express my thoughts in English with no repetition of sentences. (S60)

4. The speed of teachers' speech

One of the issues pointed out by students and teachers implies the absence of listening abilities. It was noticed that once candidates explained about problems in understanding speeches by attributing understanding and comprehension issues to the instructors' speed of talking. The issue repeatedly

hindered them from comprehending the content and scripting notes from instructors' descriptions and explanations about the topic during lessons:

> *An issue in accounting subjects was that we were not able to comprehend and follow the instructor's speech in the Financial Accounting subject in the first course. Even students with experience in business encountered the same issue in comprehending the professor. His rate of speech was very fast. (S102)*

Later, when candidates were interrogated in the interview sessions for clarification, they approved the fact that simultaneous listening and writing was challenging for them. However, more experienced candidates (based on their related background) maintained the same issue:

> *I assume that educators speak too fast. Sometimes, we ignore or neglect the language problem even though we have passed three semesters. Catching up with the professor is not easy. The main obstacle is the language problem. (S82)*

5. Absence of writing abilities

Candidates recognized different challenging features in the writing ability based on their reports about encountering issues in grammar, structure, clarification, and the entire presentation:

> *I assume that writing is an issue for all of the students. We are not able to write. I may understand a term and its pronunciation, yet I am not able to write it down. It is a great difficulty. I may realize when a person is speaking about a related subject or understand the main message, but I cannot help writing without errors. I have issues with grammar, clarity, and construction. (S74)*

Complicated writing issues were extended to the absence of rephrasing, rewording, and summarizing abilities. This issue was mainly noticeable in descriptive MBA subjects and written tests. In these cases, students were requested to summarize and explain the subjects by themselves instead of mainly copying from books and resources. It was similar for extended writings:

> *I suppose that writing ability is the greatest concern. Several students were anxious about their performance in exams of management topic, as it requires a lot, and professors ask us not to copy the answers from the books. This makes the situation more daunting, especially for those students who believe that they can learn by understanding but lack the knowledge of paraphrasing and writing it in their own way. A lot of students encountered difficulties in writing, particularly during management lesson exams. I have several classmates who are not able write a lot. One can feel that they comprehend the topic while talking about the topic, yet they don't find it easy to write or discuss things in exams. (S112)*

Therefore, students could only take notes if instructors were writing their descriptions and details of the subject on the board. In this case, they would copy the exact words instantly into their notes. In summary, based on these identified categories and themes, it seems that all kinds of complications might negatively affect the candidates' presentation within their educational experience in the MBA program.

The second research question explored the differences in language-related challenges among MBA students, considering each skill. Following Evans and Morrison (2011), mean scores for the sub-skills

were separately estimated to create a mixed composite mean for each language skill (i.e., the average mean of the entire means achieved from each item on four language abilities responded by 120 candidates) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Perceived Challenges based on each Language Skill

	M	Md	SD
Writing	4.41	4.80	0.70
Reading	3.11	3.24	.75
Speaking	4.18	4.65	0.72
Listening	3.71	3.97	0.71

According to Table 1, the highest mean belongs to writing, followed by speaking, listening, and reading, respectively. This understanding of language challenges by the students is consistent with the interview results.

The Chi-square analysis for goodness of fit was used to evaluate whether the means (categorical variables) for each skill differ significantly. The null hypothesis speculated no difference in the share of each skill (50%/50%).

Table 2. Chi-Square Test Statistics

	Language challenges
Chi-Square	.071
df	1
Asym. Sig.	.05

A chi-square examination in Table 2 indicates a substantial difference in the number of linguistic challenges detected in the present data (73.5%) in comparison with 50% value which was expected in the null hypothesis, $\chi2$ (1, n = 120) = .07, p = .05.

The next question raised in this study was: Is the participant's age a determining factor in the different language-related challenges they perceive? Table 3 demonstrates the descriptive data of problems with each language skill based on students' age level, signifying a potential supposition of the issues exhibited by the younger adults, which might tend to increase as we move towards more mature adults. A Mann-Whitney U-test was applied to evaluate this supposition. It differentiates and contrasts medians and converts the marks to ranks among the teams. Then, it estimates the significant difference in ranks of both groups. Since marks are transformed to ranks, the real dispersal of the scores is not an issue (Pallant, 2010).

A Bonferroni adjustment to the alpha level was applied to understand the substantial importance. It engages by adjusting the strictest alpha level in each assessment in order to maintain the alpha across all examinations at a realistic rate. In this vein, a division of the alpha level (usually .05) by the number of comparisons was done, here 4; the achieved value was used as the essential alpha level (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceived Challenges on Each Language Skill Based on Their Age Level

	23-28 (N =54)			29-35 (N =66)		
	M	Md	SD	M	Md	SD
Writing	3.45	3.09	.82	2.61	2.71	.75
Reading	3.21	3.48	.71	2.64	2.45	.79
Speaking	3.08	3.75	.80	2.60	2.50	.91
Listening	3.10	3.20	.91	2.71	3.15	.81

In line with the presented results in Table 3, revealing higher mean scores in the 23-28 age groups, a Bonferroni with .013 alpha level in each assessment (.05 out of 4) for the Mann-Whitney U examination demonstrated self-perception of language problems within every aspect of English was meaningfully different amid the age groups, indicating a medium to large effect size [speaking = 351 U, r = .58, p<.001; listening = 481.5 U, r = .61, p<.001; writing = 445 U, r = .51, p<.001; reading = 341 U, r = .42, p<.001]. This shows a greater tendency towards younger adults in that they reported fewer challenges with the English language presented in the MBA program. However, this might trigger from some reasons which are outside the scope of this study. Future research can follow the same cohort in more detail.

5. Discussions

The results revealed that candidates had undergone several challenges. Findings seemed to have undesirable effects on the actual presentation and involvement of them in the plan. The results discovered in literature related to MBA, ESP, and EAP confirm the findings of the present research in revealing learners' challenges within English teaching programs in other similar settings (e.g. Aizawa & Rose, 2020; Holi, 2020; Kamasak, Şahan, & Rose, 2020).

The results about challenges of learners in understanding speech highlighted parallel results in prior studies (e.g., Alhassan, 2019; Flowerdew & Miller, 1996; Holi, 2020). In addition, problems concerning speech comprehension found in the present research imply that candidates appeared to face issues of another difficulty, which required simultaneous reading, listening, understanding visuals, and scripting notes, as mentioned by Flowerdew and Miller (1996). Besides, challenges related to understanding speech appeared to be aggravated by learners' problems in making requests without asking questions, instructors may not have enough power to control candidates' particular issues and challenges in modifying the

speech quickly, and this might, as a result, hinder learners' understanding of speeches later on (Chang, 2010).

The absence of knowledge and expertise in business was considered another great challenge that candidates face in MBA programs. It was understood to hurt learners' educational presentation and activity within the program to the point that they fought for understanding the speeches and different exercises. It implies the association between candidates' level of knowledge or academic background and experience and their present learning atmosphere. Accordingly, it is highly important to assess and understand their struggles, which affect their performances in new educational contexts. This result is supported by some other academic literacy studies, including Casanave (1995), Prior (1994), and Spack (1997), in highlighting the association between language challenge and context familiarity. For example, Yuko in Spack's (1997) investigation described challenges related to managing two social science lessons in the first year as a result of the absence of essential related experience in these subjects, including some information about the history of the U.S and European countries, besides linguistic problems. Because of problems in understanding the discussions and content of the topic, some students felt very disappointed, which led them to drop the course.

Similarly, the results are consistent with Lin and Morrison's (2010) study in that the students reported difficulties connected to a lack of enough knowledge in vocabulary. It reflects Evans and Morrison's (2011) investigation in that learning jargon vocabulary is an educational concern mutually mentioned by learners, irrespective of second or foreign language proficiency. The result of this category might be mirrored in all language skills; however, the productive skills can be more intimidating as the students have to recall the exact vocabulary to be able to use it in writing or speaking. While this issue seems to cause less challenge in receptive skills, as they might be able to solve the problem with a certain amount of familiarity rather than a thorough knowledge of the term.

While in the present research, English language knowledge was connected to self-perceived language-related problems. Lack of enough knowledge of vocabulary was revealed as an issue connected with every feature of English language ability, supported in earlier research conducted by Koizumi and In'nami (2013) and Harrington and Roche (2014). However, the results do not confirm Uchihara and Harada's (2019) findings in that vocabulary knowledge was not meaningfully related to educational outcomes. One potential explanation for their contradictory finding might be the assessment criteria, since if it does not involve productive skills practice, it might hide certain factors or tackle the role of some extraneous factors.

6. Conclusions and implications

A number of conclusions can be drawn based on the findings of the study. Concerning lecture comprehension challenges reported in this study, it can be concluded that they appear to worsen by problems of learners making demands and without any requirements, lecturers might lose the chance of detecting students' specific problems so that they adjust their speech immediately based on the factors

such as speech rate or more elaboration on the concept through simplifying the topic. If this realization does not occur, it may lead to further impeding students' comprehension of lectures.

The lack of sufficient business knowledge is also emphasized by students as a serious issue that they face during MBA courses. It potentially suggests an indirect negative effect on learners' educational engagement in the program, which leads to struggling to handle speeches and different exercises. It also implies that the connection between learners' knowledge, academic background, and their present educational condition is important in investigating and comprehending their difficulties or activities in new educational occasions.

Concerning the lack of communication skills, oral and written skills, in particular, seem to hinder students from effectively participating in both class participation activities, which involve speaking, as well as writing assignments. Communication challenges, however, could be ascribed to several elements, for instance, learners' irrelevant academic experience, deploying Persian as the teaching medium throughout their previous academic backgrounds as opposed to the language of teaching in MBA, the MBA construction, its concentrated essence, and the scholars' manner of education in the course. Several challenges concerning students and their backgrounds probably have an influence on their comprehension and management of assignments in the new educational conditions.

This lack of detailed instruction on tasks, both during class participation activities and assessments, could result in a different experience for the students. Hence, it is noteworthy to adjust and modify this simple approach in future programs in line with classroom improvement objectives, either in MBA courses or in the ESP curriculum in general.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that a lack of relevant background in business, problems with the English medium of instruction, communication challenges involving oral and listening skills, the rate of teachers' speech, and a lack of writing skills stand among the most significant challenges that both sides of the educational community are currently facing. In this vein, proper action can be conducted for modification in future programs based on practical solutions for the Iranian context, in particular.

The concept of age seems to be effective in that younger adults might find it easier to adopt new strategies in facing the challenges. This can imply a useful hint for the authorities in modifying and designing the curriculum. Therefore, they can adjust the time of the course schedule to be presented at the end or at the beginning of a curriculum.

Improvement of students in their writing skills should be considered in ESP programs due to its negative impacts on their educational performance. In this respect, Zhu (2004) believed that the preplanned writing constituent can improve learners' troubleshooting and logical abilities, as a lot of assignments within MBA programs concentrate on resolving issues and making decisions, necessitating learners to analyze data, detect difficulties, offer suggestions for performance, and modify the suggestions. ESP programs for business candidates can enhance their writing abilities with regard to various readers as well, through improving their consciousness about their needs and readership, both

educationally and professionally. These abilities tend to be more practical than literacy at work, supporting them in different genres with different objectives.

Some limitations in the study should also be acknowledged. It should be accepted that the results cannot be representative of the journey of all MBA candidates concerning the English medium of instruction in Iran, as well as other countries and settings. Hence, the results are restricted to a rather minor population in a particular setting. Yet, the result is attributable to other parallel settings.

Another restriction of the present paper can be related to the questionnaire in using Likert-scales which merely produces self-assessed responses. This tackles the generalization and reliability of the results, as participants might have a different perception of reality and the real problem.

With reference to self-assessed responses of participants, the use of some direct tools (such as content examinations and test marks) in future research can be added in order to reach more reliable results and to directly estimate candidates' presentations in English medium courses as an approach to triangulate information resources. In addition to incorporating direct tools like content examinations and test marks to enhance the reliability of self-assessed responses, future research could consider several other approaches to triangulate information resources effectively. First, conducting longitudinal studies could provide insights into how students' experiences and perceptions evolve in EMI contexts, allowing for a deeper understanding of the long-term impact of language challenges. Second, implementing focus group discussions could facilitate a richer dialogue among participants, uncovering shared experiences and diverse perspectives that may not emerge in one-on-one interviews.

Moreover, employing mixed-methods designs, which combine quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, could yield a comprehensive view of students' challenges and achievements in EMI programs. Additionally, conducting comparative studies that examine students' experiences in EMI programs across different cultural and educational contexts would provide a broader understanding of the factors influencing language acquisition and academic success. Furthermore, including the perspectives of instructors through interviews or surveys would help to understand their challenges and strategies in teaching EMI courses, adding another dimension to the research. Finally, investigating the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as tailored language support programs or teaching strategies, could yield valuable insights into practical solutions for the challenges faced by students in EMI settings. These additional research avenues could significantly enrich the understanding of the complexities surrounding EMI in higher education and contribute to more effective educational practices.

References

Aizawa, I., & Rose, H. (2020). High school to university transitional challenges in English medium instruction in Japan. *System, 95,* 102- 119.

Aguilar, M., & Muñoz, C. (2022). Lecturer training needs in EMI: A European perspective. *English for Specific Purposes*, 65, 15-28. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2021.12.002

Alginahi, Y. M., Ahmed, M., Tayad, O., Siddiqi, A. A., Sharif, L., Alharby, A., & Nour, R. (2009). ICT students, stress and coping strategies: English perspective, a case study of Midsize Middle Eastern University. *TRIM, 5*(2), 111–127.

Alhassan, A. (2019). EFL postgraduate students' learning needs on English-medium business programmes: An exploratory study. *Language Teaching Research, 1*, 1–19.

Alhassan, A., Ali, N. A., & Ali, H. I. H. (2021). EFL students' challenges in English-medium business programs: Perspectives from students and content teachers. *Cogent Education, 8*(1), 188-200.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Byun, K., Chu, H., Kim, M., Park, I., Kim, S., & Jung, J. (2011). English-medium teaching in Korean higher education: Policy debates and reality. *Higher Education, 62*(4), 431–449.

Camiciottoli, B. C. (2019). The impact of online technologies and English medium instruction on university lectures in an international learning context: A systematic review. *ESP Today: Journal of English for Specific Purposes in Tertiary Level, 7*(1), 2–23.

Casanave, C. P. (1995). Local interactions: Constructing contexts for composing in a graduate sociology programme. In D. Belcher & G. Braine (Eds.), *Academic writing in a second language: Essays on research and pedagogy* (pp. 83–110). London: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Chang, Y. Y. (2010). English-medium instruction for subject courses in tertiary education: Reactions from Taiwanese undergraduate students. *Taiwan International ESP Journal, 2*(1), 55–84.

Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data.* Oxford: Sage Publications.

Denscombe, M. (2010). *The good research guide for small-scale research projects*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Evans, S., & Morrison, B. (2011). Meeting the challenges of English-medium higher education: The first-year experience in Hong Kong. *English for Specific Purposes, 30*(3), 198–208.

Fang, Y., & Liu, S. (2021). Investigating the challenges of EMI for Chinese university students: A case study. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 50, 100955. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2021.100955

Flowerdew, J., & Miller, L. (1996). Lectures in a second language: Notes towards a cultural grammar. *English for Specific Purposes, 15*(2), 121–140.

Gimenez, J. (2008). Beyond the academic essay: Discipline-specific writing in nursing and midwifery. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 7*(3), 151–164.

Harrington, M., & Roche, T. (2014). Identifying academically at-risk students in an English-as-a-Lingua-Franca university setting. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 15*, 37–47.

Holi, I. H. (2020). Lecture comprehension difficulties experienced by Omani students in an English-medium engineering program. *Cogent Arts & Humanities, 7*(1), 1–17.

Hu, G., & Lei, J. (2014). English-medium instruction in Chinese higher education: A case study. *Higher Education Journal, 67*(5), 551–567.

Hung, R. H. (2009). *Disciplinary writing: A case of Hong Kong undergraduates undertaking their writing tasks* [PhD dissertation]. University of Leicester, England.

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centred approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Joe, Y., & Lee, H. (2013). Does English-Medium instruction benefit students in EFL contexts? A case of medical students in Korea. *Asia-Pacific Education Research Journal, 22*(2), 201–207.

Kagwesage, A. M. (2013). *Coping with English as the Language of Instruction in Higher Education in Rwanda*. Victoria, Australia: Lambert Academic Publishing.

Kim, Y., & Shin, D. (2020). EMI in South Korea: Adaptation strategies of university students. *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 29(2), 139-150. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-019-00494-8

Koizumi, R., & In'nami, Y. (2013). Vocabulary Knowledge and Speaking Proficiency among Second Language Learners from Novice to Intermediate Levels. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 4*(5), 900-913.

Kvale, S. (2007). Introduction to interview research. *Doing Interviews*, 2-11.

Leki, I. (2007). *Undergraduates in a second language: Challenges and complexities of academic literacy development*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lin, L. H. F., & Morrison, B. (2010). The impact of the medium of instruction in Hong Kong secondary schools on tertiary students' vocabulary. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 9*(4), 255–266.

Lo, Y. Y., & Murphy, A. A. (2010). Vocabulary knowledge and growth in immersion and regular language-learning programmes in Hong Kong. *Language and Education, 24*(3), 215–238.

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching*. Oxford: Sage Publications.

MBA Program Assessment Plan (2009). MBA Program Assessment Plan. USA: Illinois State University.

Pallant, J. (2010). *A step-by-step guide to data analysis using the SPSS program: SPSS survival manual*. England: McGraw-Hill Education and Open University Press.

Peacock, M. (2001). Learning strategies and EAP proficiency: Teacher Views, Student Views, and Test Results. In J. Flowerdew & M. Peacock (Eds.), *Research perspectives on English for academic purposes* (pp. 268–285). Birmingham: CUP.

Prior, P. (1994). Response, Revision, Disciplinarity: A Microhistory of a Dissertation Prospectus in Sociology. *Written Communication,11*(4), 483–533.

Robson, C. (2011). *Real-world Research*. WILEY.

Saat, M. S., & Othman, J. (2010). Meeting linguistic Challenges in Science Classrooms: Pre-service ESL teachers' strategies. *Asian Pacific Journal of Education, 30*(2), 185–197.

Sert, N. (2008). The language of instruction dilemma in the Turkish context. *System, 36*(2), 156–171.

Spack, R. (1997). The acquisition of academic literacy in a second language: A longitudinal case study. *Written Communication, 14*(1), 3–62.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). The Corbin and Strauss chronic illness trajectory model: An update. *Research and Theory for Nursing Practice*, *12*(1), 33.

Suliman, W. A., & Tadros, A. (2010). Nurse education today. *Nursing Students Coping with English as a Foreign Language Medium of Instruction, 1*(31), 402–407.

Mirza Suzani, S., Yarmohammadi, L., & Yamini, M. (2011). A Critical Review of the Current Situation of Teaching ESP in the Iranian Higher Education Institutions. *The Iranian EFL Journal*, *36*(3), 179-204.

Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. S. (2007). *Experimental designs using ANOVA*. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Brooks/Cole.

Trinder, R. (2013). Business students' beliefs about language learning in a university context. *English for Specific Purposes, 32*(1), 1–11.

Uchihara, T., & Harada, T. (2019). Roles of Vocabulary Knowledge for Success in English-Medium Instruction: Self-Perceptions and Academic Outcomes of Japanese Undergraduates. *TESOL Quarterly, 52*(3), 564-587.

Zhang, Z. (2013). Business English Students Learning to Write for International Business: What Do International Business Practitioners Say about Their Text? *English for Specific Purposes, 32*(3), 144–156.

Zhu, W. (2004). Writing in business courses: An analysis of assignment types, their characteristics, and required skills. *English for Specific Purposes, 23*(2), 111–135.