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Challenges in English-Medium Instruction Classes Among Engineering Major Students at Bangladeshi Private Universities

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Abstract

Tertiary students in Bangladesh predominantly come from Bengali Medium Instruction (BMI) backgrounds and transition to English Medium Instruction (EMI) when pursuing higher education at private universities. This shift represents a critical transition phase from Bengali to English instruction. This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by Engineering major students during this transition at private universities in Bangladesh. Adopting a mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design, the study placed equal emphasis on quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were collected through a survey of 301 respondents, while qualitative data were gathered via focus group interviews with 10 respondents using a random sampling technique. Descriptive analysis of the survey data was conducted using SPSS, and the interview data were analysed thematically. The survey results revealed that students faced significant challenges in EMI classrooms, including difficulties in understanding lectures, preparing assignments, conveying knowledge in exam scripts, and delivering presentations. The interviews provided deeper insights into these challenges. This study serves as an eye-opener, emphasizing the need for solutions to address the difficulties encountered by first-year engineering students during this transitional phase. It also recommends further research to examine the effectiveness of structured bridging programs in mitigating the linguistic gaps and challenges identified in this study.

Keywords: Challenges, education, engineering major students, English medium of instruction, private universities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The medium of instruction is the use of languages in teaching and learning procedures by the learners and instructors, where the learners and instructors face various challenges in conducting the overall procedures (Hamid & Erling, 2016). Besides, according to Karim et al. (2023), teaching and learning in Bangladesh has several mediums of instruction, such as Bengali, English, and Arabic. However, the primary medium of instruction is Bengali, followed by English and Arabic as the second and the third used medium of instruction sequentially.

The medium of instruction of the target languages increases the amount of acquaintance the learners get with it and the prospects they have to communicate in it, therefore, developing their control of it (Ara, 2020). The Bengali medium of instruction in primary, secondary, and tertiary schools is one of the most widely used mediums of instruction because it is associated with lower socioeconomic conditions, where most students are from the working and middle classes (Sultana & Fang, 2024).

Bangladesh is a developing country in South Asia where most people live in rural areas with poor education facilities compared to urban facilities (Rana, 2011). The medium of English instruction is urban-based instruction. Although it has been spread in semi-urban areas, middle-class people have developed an interest in this medium of instruction (M. T. Islam et al., 2022b). Thus, the English medium of instruction is gaining popularity in primary, secondary, and tertiary schools because both learners and parents contemplate English teaching and learning as prestigious in society (M. T. Islam et al., 2022a). Moreover, English proficiency is considered a tool of success and development with prestige. Consequently, English is gradually gaining its popularity (Singh, 2017). In the last two decades, English has gained popularity due to the contribution of higher education industries, private universities in Bangladesh with the medium of English instruction, as well as public universities that partially used English and mostly used Bengali as the medium of language instruction (Sultana, 2014).

The use of Arabic medium of instruction, mostly in Madrasah-based education in rural and urban contexts, has also increased substantially in Bangladesh in the last two decades (Abdalla et al., 2004). However, this study focused on the challenges related to the medium of English instruction among engineering major students in Bangladeshi private universities because private universities have been offering English as a medium of instruction since 1992, which has significantly contributed to Bangladesh's higher education industries (Hamid et al., 2013). Currently, 115 private universities conduct the teaching and learning process in English medium instruction (EMI), where the learners are mostly from Bengali medium instruction (BMI) (Sultana, 2014). Hence, the students from Bengali medium instruction background start learning in English without the adequate bridging programme, except for the six credits hours of English teaching and learning (F. Kabir, 2021), which is considered insufficient to help the students cope with the medium of English instruction (Rumnaz Imam, 2005).

Given the fact that tertiary students in public universities in Bangladesh are mostly instructed in Bengali medium of instruction due to its partial offer of Bengali and English mediums of instruction (Hamid et al., 2013), private universities offer English as the sole medium of instruction (M. M. Rahman et al., 2021). In these circumstances, as the students acquired the English language in the mandatory syllabus designs with numerous challenging issues to being proficient in the language still, they face challenges in the English medium of instruction. Therefore, this study focuses explicitly on the first-year engineering major students' challenges during the transition phase in the English medium of instruction. The following research questions were set out to inquire about the engineering students' challenges during the transition phase in private universities in Bangladesh.

1. What are the students' levels of challenges in understanding lectures in English-instructed classes?
2. What are the students' levels of challenges in preparing assignments and examinations in English?
3. What is the students' level of challenges in delivering English presentations?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Bengali as a Medium of Instruction in Education

The medium of instruction in education has always been one of the most discussed topics in Bangladeshi education (Nur, 2021). Many scholars have researched this issue and raised their arguments on the current medium of instruction in Bangladesh. Many terms and materials related to education are yet to be developed in Bengali to implement Bengali as a medium of instruction in education across the educational sector in Bangladesh (T. Hossain & Tollefson, 2017). Bengali as the main language of communication in Bangladesh and some parts of India is also used as the primary medium of instruction in teaching and learning procedures (Awal, 2023; Faquiere, 2010). Language is a sensitive and sentimental issue in Bangladesh, and the Bengali nation has a unique history of sacrificing lives and establishing Bengali as the national language (Awal, 2022; R. Islam, 2009). Besides, Bengali has gained its status as a national or an official language by the first constitution of Bangladesh (Murshid, 2022). Bengali became a medium of instruction after 1972 because 98% of the people spoke Bengali, and Bengali as a medium of instruction was needed in order to form the national identity.

In addition, Bengali is used as the medium of instruction at all levels of education in Bangladesh, except for English and Arabic subjects because English and Arabic languages are also mediums of instruction implemented in Bangladesh (Karim et al., 2023). Moreover, without any recognition of multilingualism, Bengali was also taken as the medium of instruction at all education levels in Bangladesh post-independent period (S. W. Rahman, 2020). Quadrat-e-Khuda Education Commission also recommended to use of Bengali as the medium of instruction in education at all levels to make the education schemes successful (“Bangladesh Education Commission Report”, 1974). Consequently, the other ethnic communities of Bangladesh also demand their specific languages to be the medium of instruction in education because the use of Bengali as the medium of instruction in education would be a threat to their languages (Sultana, 2023). Furthermore, Bengali is the *de facto* and *de jure* national language of Bangladesh with cultural and linguistic identity as mentioned in the constitution of Bangladesh, Article 3, in which Bengali is the only official language, and it is used in the public sector, showing the power of identity, while English and Arabic languages are used as the other medium of instructions that are considered as foreign language (Hajjaj, 2022; Huq, 2020). Similarly, few sociolinguists describe current Bangladeshi society as based on a hierarchy of power, prestige, status, and privilege, which further creates inequality and division in society (Jamil, 2002).

2.2 English as a Medium of Instruction in Education

English is the popular medium of instruction in Bangladesh because it is an international language with a special status in Bangladesh (M. M. Rahman et al., 2021). The English language was introduced in the Indian sub-continent in the early 17th century, and it has been going through British Council and other organisations. (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021). However, based on this background, the English medium of instruction has become popular in Indian sub-continent (Jeyaraj, 2023). Many English-medium schools, colleges, and universities use English as the medium of instruction, especially the 115 private universities in Bangladesh (M. T. Islam et al., 2022a). In addition, many English medium school graduates attempt to get admission at the university level overseas, but very few get admission to local public and private universities due to admission procedures and students’ interest in overseas education (M. M. Rahman et al., 2021).

Thus, the English language enhances education, globalisation, science, and technology (Badwan & Badwan, 2021). Still, it has remained a source of failure, frustration, and less confidence in the success of many students in the country. English-instructed students have less knowledge about Bengali and Bangladesh but are mostly focused on Westernisation compared to the Bengali medium of instructed students (M. T. Islam et al., 2022b; Nur, 2021). The high-quality English medium schools are considered Anglophile elites, whereas the Bengali medium school produces loyal Bengalis for its low quality (M. T. Islam et al., 2022b). English medium school

students always represent hierarchy, status, and class struggles, compared to Bengali medium school students (M. T. Islam et al., 2022a). English and Bengali divisions are not the war of languages; it is a proxy representing unevaluated class positions. However, the popularity of English medium of instruction is increasing due to its use in the public sector, and establishing opportunities for the upper middle and elite classes (Gupta, 2023). The information on English medium school education can be found in T. Hossain and Tollefson (2007). However, the exact number of these schools and their enrolment sizes remain unknown because the government has no control over this stream of education (Hamid et al., 2013).

2.3 Arabic as the Medium of Instruction

Hamid and Ali (2021) stated that the Arabic medium of instruction in Bangladesh has gradually gained popularity during the last two decades because numerous *madrasah* (also spelled *madrasa* or *madrassa*, which are Islamic educational institutions) provide classes using the Arabic medium of instruction. Moreover, few public universities teach a few subjects in Arabic medium of instruction (Golam & Kusakabe, 2020). In Bangladesh, Arabic is taught in the early childhood in *maktoob* (a traditional Islamic elementary school where children, often in their early childhood, are taught basic Islamic education), which is also part of the mosque. *Madrasah* education has a traditional value in the Indian subcontinent. Besides, many parents are interested in getting religious and moral education from *madrasah*, resulting in an increase number of *madrasah* during the last two decades (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2010).

Consequently, *madrasah* graduates are mostly active in teaching-related activities in the *madrasah* education industry (Abdullah, 2020). The number of *madrasah* education is also increasing due to the high cost of Bengali and English medium of instruction (Golam & Kusakabe, 2018). Besides, the parents recognise that the *madrasah* graduates hold more moral and religious values compared to the Bengali and English medium of instructed graduates (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2010). Moreover, the strong religious beliefs encourage people to be attracted to Arabic-based *madrasah* education (Hamid & Ali, 2021).

2.4 Medium of Instruction in Indigenous Community

Bangladesh became independent as a new nation with Bengali nationalism in 1971, but it created another level of contradiction regarding the term Bengali, which refers to nationalism for all citizens, including ethnic minorities (Das et al., 2022). Using this term, the early nationalism of post-independent Bangladesh marginalised and separated the small ethnic minorities (Hajjaj, 2022). After the independence of Bangladesh, most ethnic communities required their language to be used as the medium of instruction in education (Arafat & Tithi, 2014). However, the medium of instruction remains the Bengali medium of instruction. Therefore, students from ethnic communities can pass the primary level of education with a flexible promotional system.

Nevertheless, the ultimate problem is when the students need help in understanding the lesson content in Bengali or English (M. Z. Rahman & Huq, 2008). As a result, the students from ethnic communities do not understand the English lecture, and the teacher has to translate it into Bengali (Saha, 2023). Besides, the secondary and higher secondary books are written in Bengali, which also creates difficulties for the students to comprehend them. Moreover, in the examination, the students cannot answer the questions promptly, but the teacher frequently reports that the students still need to improve in apparent understanding and writing on an examination script. M. M. Kabir et al. (2004) also found in their research that the students from Indigenous communities experienced challenges in communication due to the flexible promotional system in Bangladesh because they were exposed to Bengali in higher secondary education.

2.5 Medium of Instruction in Bangladeshi Tertiary Institutions

The medium of instruction in Bangladeshi tertiary institutions began after the independence, while Bengali received the status as a national language following the

constitutional amendment (T. Hossain & Tollefson, 2017). The newly formed nation got motivation from the history of language, where Bengali was given higher prestige in all areas of society, especially in the education sector, but the reality turned into people with less proficiency in English language (Banu & Sussex, 2001). Moreover, English gradually became a foreign language with automatic transposition, and English was officially no longer the medium of instruction in public universities (Ara, 2020). Consequently, English language proficiency declined significantly in the country, and in the 1990s, the English language was introduced as a mandatory subject in the country's public tertiary institutions for first-year undergraduates. However, the government has ensured the balance between Bengali and English, where Bengali remains the national language of Bangladesh (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014).

On the other hand, the most significant innovation in higher education with the demand of an increasing population and the necessity of higher education is the limited number of public universities available to enhance higher education, and the political turmoil as the standard issue in public universities (Monem & Baniamin, 2010). Therefore, the government took initiatives to open the door to private sectors for expanding higher education; the government institutionalised the plan of establishing private universities through the Private University Act in 1992 (Rumnaz Imam, 2005). Until now, 115 private universities have been operating. Similarly, many unstructured English medium schools are in operation, and the government is trying to control them. The government is also monitoring the universities through the University Grant Commission. However, the concern of these universities is to provide education quality with a good command of English to fit the local and international job markets (Rumnaz Imam, 2005). As a result, the presence of the Bengali language is limited in these universities because none of the private universities offer any courses in Bengali, and they even identify themselves as English medium institutions on their websites (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014).

2.6 Engineering Major Students in Bangladesh

The background of Bangladeshi engineering major students is HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) passed in Bengali medium of instruction with English as the mandatory subject. However, the English language they acquired is considered insufficient, especially for technical education that uses English as the medium of instruction (Patra & Mohanty, 2016). Before getting admission to the tertiary level of education, most of the students in Bangladesh pass the HSC or Diploma program in Bengali medium of instruction, but they need to start their tertiary journey in the English medium of instruction (Naznin & Hassan, 2016).

Consequently, Bengali instructed background plays a vital role destructively in tertiary education because the students pursue higher education in English (M. D. Hossain, 2013). The students are, now, bound to engage themselves in reading English textbooks, listening to English lectures and tutorials, answering final exams and quizzes as well as asking questions in English (Ur, 2012). The students' background knowledge of English becomes extremely valuable, particularly in understanding the topics taught, doing well in examinations, and expressing themselves (Ali, 2011). Students come to engineering institutions at the tertiary level with various English language proficiency level (Bhuiyan, 2019). It is generally observed that students from English medium backgrounds perform better than students from Bengali medium backgrounds (Sultana, 2014).

2.7 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework to conduct a study is considered essential, particularly because it acts as a good guide and frames the research outline with a map, including a literature review, research methods, and data analysis with different types of variables (Hallinger, 2013). According to the sociologists Haralambos and Holborn (2000), a conceptual framework permits a researcher to establish links between existing research literature and the current research goal. For instance, in this study, the link among different levels of challenges encountered by engineering students found in the research literature helped the researcher reach the goal of this current research. The

following figure presents the conceptual framework, which is the combination of challenges encountered by engineering major students in the transition phase from Bengali medium of instruction to English medium of instruction.

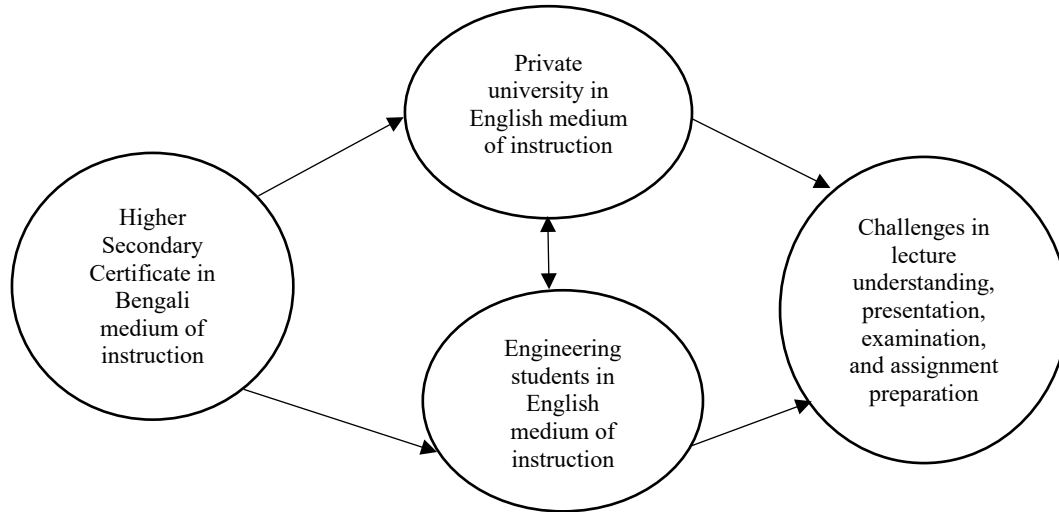


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of this study (The Authors, 2025).

3. METHODS

The study was conducted using a mixed method approach with a convergent parallel design to give equal emphasis on quantitative and qualitative data. The study was also directed to converge the results during interpretation and to draw valid and well-substantiated conclusions about the research problem (Creswell et al., 2003). To collect the quantitative data, a survey was conducted among 301 first-year engineering students. Meanwhile, to collect the qualitative data, focus group interviews with 10 interviewees were implemented in this study. The research location was in the capital city of Bangladesh, where the respondents were selected through the random sampling technique. The questionnaires were distributed randomly among first-year male and female engineering students of Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE), Computer Science Engineering (CSE), and BSc in Data Science (BSDS) from two universities, while 10 interviewees were selected randomly based on their willingness.

Table 1 contains the detailed information about the interviewees in this study. There were two focus groups (A and B) with 10 members, and each group contained 5 members. The alphabetical order, A to E, was used as the respondents' pseudonyms for both groups, and the interview data were coded as D1 to D9 in the findings section.

Table 1. Demographic information of the interviewees.

Serial number	Pseudonyms-data number	Education level	Department's abbreviation	Sex
	Focus group (A)	Bachelor (Second Semester)		
1	A-D8		EEE	Female
2	B		CSE	Female
3	C		BSDS	Male
4	D-D3		CSE	Male
5	E-D4		CSE	Male
	Focus group (B)	Bachelor (Second Semester)		
6	A-D2		CSE	Male
7	B-D1		EEE	Male
8	C-D5		CSE	Female
9	D-D6		EEE	Female
10	E-D7, D9		CSE	Male

Additionally, this study utilized self-developed questionnaires consisting of 20 items, including 5 items for demographic information and 15 open-ended questions and sub-questions for focus group interviews, specifically addressing challenges in English medium instruction. A pilot study was conducted to ensure the reliability of the questionnaires, with Cronbach's alpha measurement yielding a value of 0.803. Similarly, the interview protocols were validated by experts in the fields of language, linguistics, and medium of instruction studies.

The survey was administered via Google Forms and distributed among the students to collect data, while the focus group interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded for transcription and translation. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive analysis in SPSS (version 26), the latest version available at the time of the study. Thematic analysis was employed for the qualitative data to corroborate the quantitative findings. Key codes were generated based on repetitions and emphasis in participants' speech during the interviews to support the identified themes.

4. RESULTS

The findings are organized into three sub-sections corresponding to the formulated research questions: challenges in understanding lectures delivered in English, challenges in preparing assignments and examinations in English, and challenges in delivering presentations in English. Each sub-section integrates both quantitative and qualitative findings. A mean score between 1 and 1.99 indicates a low level of challenge, while mean scores between 2 and 2.99 and between 3 and 4 represent moderate and high levels of challenge, respectively.

4.1 Challenges in Understanding Lectures in English

The findings for the first research question highlighted the challenges students faced in understanding lectures in English-medium instruction. Table 2 outlines the level of challenges in this area, which includes five individual items. All five items were reported at a moderate level of difficulty, with slight variations in mean and standard deviation (SD). Fully English-delivered lectures were moderately challenging for the students ($M=2.45$, $SD=.79$). Students also reported moderate challenges ($M=2.78$, $SD=.75$) in expressing their opinions in English during class discussions. Additionally, a lack of grammar knowledge posed a moderate challenge ($M=2.64$, $SD=.71$), which hindered their comprehension of lectures. The challenge of understanding specific explanations in English was also rated as moderate ($M=2.34$, $SD=.71$). Similarly, the item "lecturers use unfamiliar words in speaking" reflected a moderate level of difficulty ($M=2.56$, $SD=.75$) for students in English-medium private universities in Bangladesh. In all cases, the standard deviation values were within an acceptable range, indicating minimal variation in the students' responses.

Table 2. The level of challenges in understanding lectures in English (N=301)

Items/challenges in understanding the lecture	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Level
Lectures are fully delivered in English	1.00	4.00	2.45	.79	Moderate
Expressing my opinion in English	1.00	4.00	2.78	.75	Moderate
Lack of grammar knowledge hampers me	1.00	4.00	2.64	.71	Moderate
Understanding specific explanations in English	1.00	4.00	2.34	.71	Moderate
The lecturers use unfamiliar words in speaking	1.00	4.00	2.56	.75	Moderate

Similarly, the in-depth focus group interviews, conducted to validate the survey findings, revealed that students faced challenges in understanding lectures because the lecturers delivered both the lectures and materials entirely in English. This created difficulties for students in comprehending the content effectively. The following excerpt illustrates how Respondent B from Focus Group B described his experience:

- (1) Due to my vocabulary shortage, I need help understanding many parts of the lecture. I cannot express my opinion due to the shortage of vocabulary; I have less confidence and shyness about making errors in sentence construction. (Respondent-B, Focus group-B)

The student struggled to convey his ideas and opinions due to a limited English vocabulary. Additionally, he lacked confidence because of his shyness about making errors in English sentence construction. Similarly, another respondent, Respondent A, demonstrated strong subject knowledge in areas such as Bangladesh Development Studies (BDS). However, his insufficient English proficiency significantly hindered his ability to present his knowledge in the classroom. He was unfamiliar with subject-specific terms and terminologies in English, which further impacted his understanding of the lectures.

- (2) I am good at BDS (Bangladesh Development Studies). I had good results in the Bengali medium of instruction for this subject, but in the English medium of instruction, I can hardly apply my prior knowledge of BDS because I don't know many words and terminologies of BDS in English, which hampers my lecture understanding. (Respondent-A, Focus group-B)

Respondent D stated that he excelled in Math when taught in the Bengali medium of instruction but faced significant challenges in the English medium due to its specific mathematical terminologies. He struggled to grasp these terminologies at the tertiary level of education in the English medium. As a result, he had to translate the terms into Bengali to understand them properly.

- (3) I am skilled in Math in Bengali Medium of instruction. However, I am facing challenges in the English medium of instruction because I am hardly familiar with a few English terminologies, names, and actions in English, so I miss many points, ideas, and thoughts in Math class when translating my Bengali-based ideas and thoughts into English, but the meaning becomes changed. (Respondent-D, Focus group-A)

Respondent D explained that he had excelled in Math when it was taught in the Bengali medium of instruction but encountered significant difficulties in the English medium due to the use of specific mathematical terminologies. He found it challenging to comprehend these terminologies at the tertiary level in the English medium. Consequently, he had to translate the terms into Bengali to fully understand them.

4.2 Challenges in Preparing Assignments and Examinations in English

This section presents the findings from the second research question, which explored the challenges in preparing English assignments and examinations. Table 3 highlights the level of challenges in this area, with the variable consisting of five individual items. The results indicated that all five items were at a moderate level, with slight variations in mean and standard deviation (SD). Understanding questions in English posed a moderate challenge for students ($M=2.62$, $SD=0.68$). Similarly, a shortage of vocabulary, which hindered the students' ability to convey their ideas, was also a moderate challenge ($M=2.96$, $SD=0.64$). Demonstrating subject knowledge in exam scripts presented a moderate level of difficulty ($M=2.83$, $SD=0.59$), impacting their performance in assignments and examinations. Additionally, the students faced moderate challenges with proper sentence construction in English ($M=2.82$, $SD=0.68$). Spelling mistakes in writing were another moderate challenge ($M=2.70$, $SD=0.78$), further complicating their efforts in English-medium instruction at private universities in Bangladesh. In all cases, the SD values were within an acceptable range, indicating minimal variability in the responses.

Table 3. The level of challenges in preparing assignments and examinations (N=301).

Items/challenges in assignments and examination	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Level
Understanding questions in English	1.00	4.00	2.62	.68	Moderate
A shortage of vocabulary hampers to convey ideas	1.0	4.00	2.96	.64	Moderate
Demonstrating subject knowledge in the exam script	1.00	4.00	2.83	.59	Moderate
Grammatically proper sentence construction	1.00	4.00	2.82	.68	Moderate
Spelling mistakes in writing	1.00	4.00	2.70	.78	Moderate

The findings in Table 3 were supported by the interview results. Respondent E, during the focus group interview, shared that insufficient practice in writing and a lack of grammatical knowledge caused significant difficulties in preparing assignments and examinations in English. He often felt confused by common grammatical errors. As a result, he recognized the need to improve his English writing skills, particularly for assignments and exam scripts.

- (4) I was good in Bengali medium of instruction, but suddenly, in English medium of instruction, which was challenging to me because I make mistakes in writing in English because I am not good at English grammar, and I cannot convey my ideas in the exam script due to word limit in English. (Respondent-E, Focus group-A)

The respondent lacked confidence in writing due to insufficient grammatical knowledge in English, which hindered his ability to convey ideas effectively in assignments and exam scripts. Additionally, Respondent C stated that the teacher's expectations were high, but she was unable to meet them because of the language barrier. As a result, she faced significant challenges in fulfilling the teacher's expectations in both assignments and examinations.

- (5) The course instructor hopes that I will perform well in the exam and prepare assignments, but due to my poor English language skills and spelling errors, I cannot fulfil the expectations of the lecture and mine. (Respondent-C, Focus group-B)

The respondent expressed feeling shy and self-conscious because she was unable to meet the course instructor's expectations due to her limited English proficiency. Additionally, Respondent D mentioned facing challenges with spelling mistakes in assignments and exam scripts. She noted that while she had no difficulties with Bengali writing, English writing posed significant challenges for her. As a result, she made efforts to improve her command of English writing.

- (6) I am good at Bengali; if I could answer in Bengali, I could get an A+ in all subjects, but due to the medium of English instruction, I need to get higher scores in all subjects. So, I need more knowledge of English to improve my academic score. (Respondent-D, Focus group-B)

This respondent had achieved the highest marks in all subjects in the HSC examination, which was conducted in the Bengali medium of instruction. She felt confident that she would also attain the highest scores at the tertiary level if the assignments and examinations were conducted in the Bengali medium. Her main challenge in the English medium of instruction was frequent spelling mistakes, which she found to be a barrier to her academic progress.

4.3 Challenges in Delivering English Presentation

The results for the final research question describe the challenges students faced in delivering English presentations. Table 4 presents the level of challenges in delivering English presentations, with five individual items. Two items were rated at a high level of challenge, while the other three items were rated at a moderate level, with slightly different means and standard deviations (SD). Lack of confidence in English was considered a highly challenging factor for the students ($M=3.04$, $SD=.71$). In contrast, students faced a moderate challenge ($M=2.92$, $SD=.80$) in delivering presentations in class due to shyness, fear, and anxiety. The need for a larger English vocabulary was also rated as a high challenge ($M=3.03$, $SD=.64$), which hindered students' ability to deliver presentations effectively. Additionally, students faced moderate challenges ($M=2.98$, $SD=.74$) related to mental stress during English presentations. The challenge of presenting ideas, thoughts, and opinions in English was also rated as moderate ($M=2.72$, $SD=.69$). In all cases, the SD values were within an acceptable range, indicating minimal differences in the responses.

Table 4. The level of challenges in delivering a presentation (N=301).

Items/challenges in presentations	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Level
Lack of confidence in English	1.00	4.00	3.04	.71	High
Shyness, fears, and anxiety to speak in English	1.00	4.00	2.92	.80	Moderate

Table 4 continued...

Shortage of English vocabulary	1.00	4.00	3.03	.64	High
Mental stress in presentation	1.00	4.00	2.98	.74	Moderate
Presenting ideas, thoughts, and opinions in English	1.00	4.00	2.72	.69	Moderate

Similarly, Respondent E in the focus group interview expressed that he needed more confidence in delivering English presentations due to a lack of vocabulary, shyness, and insufficient practice. The respondent's shyness about his accent and pronunciation demotivated him from delivering English presentations. Furthermore, the shortage of vocabulary became a barrier to expressing his opinions clearly.

- (7) I got stuck during the presentation because of shyness, fear, and anxiety related to my accent, pronunciation, vocabulary shortages, and lack of practice. I lose confidence and start trembling. (Respondent-E, Focus group-B)

A shortage of vocabulary and lack of practice made the students feel unconfident during English presentations. Similarly, Respondent A shared that the audience laughed at her due to mistakes in sentence construction and pronunciation, which caused her to lose confidence in her English presentation. When her anxiety became overwhelming, she began to shake, her voice faltered, and she even became completely speechless in front of the audience because some of her classmates laughed at her during the presentation.

- (8) During my last semester presentation, a few classmates were laughing at my mistakes related to accent and pronunciation. So, I got stuck, and my body was shaking due to fear and anxiety, and my voice got down. (Respondent-A, Focus group-A)

In addition, Respondent E explained that his mental stress increased when delivering presentations in English. He needed to put in more effort to remember his ideas and thoughts. He also mentioned that he would experience less mental stress if the presentation were in Bengali. As a result, he faced significant challenges and struggled to deliver the speech due to his anxiety.

- (9) I forget the ideas, thoughts, and opinions which I arranged before starting the presentation because of mental stress and anxiety. I always think the audience will laugh at me if I make any mistake. (Respondent-E, Focus group-B)

The respondent lost the ideas he had prepared for the presentation due to his mental stress and anxiety. Furthermore, he feared that the audience would laugh at him if he made any mistakes. Therefore, fear, shyness, mental stress, and anxiety were major obstacles that hindered his performance in English presentations.

5. DISCUSSION

Many studies have been conducted on English language proficiency related to challenges during the transition phase, but this research focuses on the overall dimensions of English language proficiency in listening (understanding lectures), speaking (delivering presentations), reading (preparing for examinations), and writing (writing exam scripts) (M. S. Islam & Stapa, 2021; Nimat, 2013). Similarly, Tanzin (2023) found that students at the tertiary level encounter listening and speaking barriers during their higher education journey. The first research question in this study, What are the students' levels of challenges in understanding lectures in English-instructed classes?, encompasses both listening and speaking. In terms of research methodology, most existing studies were qualitative. However, this current research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative findings. Additionally, the participants in this study were all from the same university; including participants from different educational institutions would have made the study more inclusive. Furthermore, only a few quantitative studies were found in the literature, which limits the ability to compare the current findings with

previous research. On the other hand, numerous qualitative studies were found, providing valuable context for comparison with the current research.

The results of this study align with existing research, which highlights that Bengali medium instruction is a sensitive issue in Bangladesh's education policy, given that it is the only country where lives were sacrificed for the Bengali language (Hamid & Rahman, 2019). The literature also indicates that after the independence of Bangladesh, the country aimed to establish a completely Bengali medium of instruction and used it consistently for nearly two decades. This led to a decline in the number of graduates with the expected level of English proficiency (T. Hossain & Tollefson, 2017). Subsequently, the government made English mandatory at the tertiary level (Rumnaz Imam, 2005). However, the situation has changed significantly in the past two decades, with many English medium schools, colleges, and universities now operating across the country. Still, the secondary education system predominantly uses Bengali medium instruction, and there is a need for more tertiary institutions in Bangladesh, as the number of available public universities is insufficient to accommodate the large student population (Karim et al., 2023).

As a result, the government passed the Private University Act in 1992, which allowed for higher education in English medium institutions. However, this transition from Bengali medium instruction at the secondary level to English medium instruction at the tertiary level presents challenges for students. Therefore, the findings of this study align with the existing literature, as students faced various types and levels of challenges during this transition period. This study focused on the challenges related to English medium instruction at the tertiary level, specifically among engineering students in Bangladeshi private universities. The specific challenges identified in English medium instruction are discussed in the following section.

5.1 Challenges Related to Understanding English Lectures

This section discusses the findings related to the first research question, which specifically focused on students' ability to understand lectures in English-medium-instructed classrooms at the tertiary level. According to Yasmin et al. (2024), students at the tertiary level face various challenges, including issues related to shyness and anxiety. These findings are consistent with previous research, which indicates that understanding lectures is closely linked to listening ability and vocabulary proficiency (Dang, 2022).

Moreover, the lectures were fully delivered in English, which posed a challenge for students who were previously instructed in Bengali. These students had to suddenly adapt to an English-medium environment without sufficient bridging programs to ease the transition. As a result, they struggled to understand certain explanations in English due to unfamiliar vocabulary used by the lecturer. Additionally, a few grammatical errors hindered the students' ability to express their opinions effectively in class. Similarly, previous research has shown that students often struggle to understand lectures due to a lack of vocabulary (Siddiqua, 2016). The literature also indicates that teachers face challenges in delivering lectures in English, leading some to revert to using Bengali during class (Aziz, 2017).

5.2 Challenges Related to Preparing English Assignments and Examinations

In response to the second research question, the findings of this study were consistent with existing literature, which indicates that students often face difficulties in preparing assignments and writing exam scripts in English-medium instruction. Specifically, students need a broader vocabulary to effectively convey their ideas in assignments and on exam scripts (M. A. Alam & Ashrafuzzaman, 2018). Although students possessed a solid understanding of the subject matter, errors in sentence construction and spelling mistakes often hindered their ability to express their thoughts clearly.

Similarly, previous research has highlighted the challenges faced by engineering students, particularly during the first semester in Bangladeshi private universities, as they navigate this transitional phase (G. M. Alam & Forhad, 2021). Moreover, this study found that students

struggled to understand examination questions in English and to appropriately interpret the information in various parts of the exam questions. This finding aligns with the broader body of research on challenges in English-medium instruction. For example, [Karim et al. \(2023\)](#) discussed how writing in English becomes particularly difficult for students from a Bengali-medium background when they are placed in English-medium classrooms. Additionally, this study found that students needed to improve their English grammar skills. They also faced challenges in conveying their ideas in exam scripts due to a shortage of English vocabulary. This finding represents a new contribution to the literature, particularly because previous studies on this issue are scarce.

5.3 Challenges Related to Delivering English Presentation

In response to the third research question, this study found that delivering presentations in English was the most challenging task for students. They lacked confidence in several areas, including pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, appropriate accent usage, and generating suitable ideas. These findings are consistent with previous studies in the literature ([Al-Harun et al., 2016](#)). Additionally, students' shyness when delivering English presentations contributed to mental stress and anxiety ([Alharbi, 2021](#)). As a result, they struggled to perform well in English presentations, although they were more confident and able to deliver effective presentations in their native language.

This study further concluded that students' lack of confidence in English was a significant barrier to performing well in English presentations, with shyness, fear, and anxiety acting as the primary obstacles. The findings also align with existing literature, which highlights how a shortage of English vocabulary prevents students from accurately conveying their ideas, thoughts, and opinions in English ([Alfaki, 2015](#)). Furthermore, mental stress during presentations was identified as a serious issue in the literature ([Raj et al., 2021](#)). Similarly, this study found that this issue is particularly prevalent in Bangladesh, where the extensive use of English as a medium of instruction in private universities has exacerbated the challenge, an important contribution of this study to the existing literature.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights for students, educators, and decision-makers by highlighting the challenges students face during the transitional phase from Bengali to English as the medium of instruction, which can hinder academic development for those with low English proficiency. At the tertiary level in Bangladesh, the medium of instruction varies depending on the type of institution. Public universities predominantly offer instruction in Bengali, while private universities typically use English as the medium of instruction. Due to limited facilities in public universities and the growing interest in English-medium education based on North American syllabi, many students opt for private universities despite the higher costs. As a result, students encounter significant challenges during the transition from Bengali to English as the medium of instruction. These challenges include difficulties in understanding lectures, preparing assignments, answering exam scripts, and delivering presentations. Feelings of shyness, fear, and anxiety further compound these challenges during this transitional phase.

However, this study has some limitations. First, the participants were all from the same university, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Including students from various educational institutions would make the study more comprehensive. Additionally, this study did not investigate the influence of students' native language (Bengali) or prior knowledge on their academic performance. Future research could address these gaps by examining students from diverse academic disciplines and institutions across Bangladesh. Moreover, future studies could explore the effectiveness of structured bridging programs aimed at minimizing the linguistic gaps and challenges identified in this study. Such programs could help ease the transition to English-medium instruction, thereby improving students' academic performance and overall experience.

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