



Exploring Language and Cultural Disconnects: Learning From BSW Students and Faculty Within an English as a Medium of Instruction Environment

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Abstract

English as the medium of instruction (EMI) is a growing global phenomenon that impacts social work educators who are teaching in second-language environments. This study used action research to explore barriers to EMI learning and teaching among students and faculty in a BSW program at a United Arab Emirates (UAE) college. Cognitive load theory provided a lens to understand these obstacles. Participants included five students and seven faculty. Findings indicated communication deficits among students and faculty, which were further influenced by the cultural environment. This study contributes to an understanding of the obstacles encountered in social work programs that use EMI.

Keywords: *English as a medium of instruction, social work, cognitive load, United Arab Emirates*

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Introduction

Globally, there is a shift towards English as the medium of instruction (EMI), or “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden, 2014, p. 2). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is no exception. English remains the language of instruction at most UAE tertiary institutions, including all three federal or public colleges and universities, yet students often arrive at colleges with weak English skills (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Gallagher, 2011; Kamal, 2018). These weaknesses in English proficiency often present challenges for social work students in mastering the knowledge, skills, and values of the social work profession. Not only do language differences create obstacles to learning, but differences in the cultural understanding of students and teachers have been noted to create obstacles in teaching (Al-Issa 2005;

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Goodwin 2013; Polleck, & Shabdin, 2013). When the cultural context is not fully considered, problems arise that transcend comprehension.

Presently, there are two Bachelor in Social Work (BSW) programs and one Masters in Social Work (MSW) program within the UAE federal higher education sector. Even though social work education has existed in the UAE since the 1960s, like other countries in the Middle East, Western-trained social worker educators continue to be recruited due to the lack of citizens with the necessary educational degrees (Crabtree, 2008; Holtzhausen, 2010; Sloan et al., 2017). Limited research in regional social work practice and lack of regional social work textbooks, written in the native language, create a reliance on British and American materials and subsequent practice models. This further exacerbates the linguistic and cultural gaps between teaching and learning (Megahead, 2017; Sloan et al., 2017).

The UAE higher education institution, where the author taught, required the use of an EMI approach (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Kamal, 2018; Siemund et al., 2020). The author observed learning and teaching challenges at the BSW level that included those experienced by students learning in a second language and obstacles to teaching experienced by instructors. In the present study, the author explored obstacles to EMI learning and teaching among students and faculty in a BSW program at a UAE college. Cognitive load theory offered a framework for understanding some of the complexities experienced by students learning and faculty teaching in a second language. This article will also offer practical recommendations for social work educators teaching in EMI settings.

Literature Review

Non-Native Language Learning

Worldwide, increasing internationalization has led to a global trend of EMI in higher education institutions. In EMI environments, students are immersed in learning English while simultaneously learning subject matter content (Chun et al., 2017; Dearden, 2014; Roussel et al., 2017). Preparing a global workforce, which uses a unifying language, can facilitate effective communication among linguistically diverse populations (Chun et al., 2017). English as a unifying language in a country, such as the UAE, where persons from over 200 different cultures live and work, could be viewed as both practical and economically beneficial (Kamal, 2018; Siemund et al., 2020; Sloan et al., 2017). Arabic remains the official language of the country, but English is needed for many facets of daily life (Kamal, 2018; Siemund et al., 2020). This English proclivity and reliance on foreign workers are reflected in higher education, where the majority of faculty are expatriates, many of whom do not speak Arabic (Kamal, 2018; Sloan et al., 2017). Indeed, higher education in the UAE is not attainable without English language skills (Siemund et al., 2020).

Although there are benefits of being able to speak a unifying language in a linguistically diverse culture, there are issues with the pervasive use of English in higher education. English is the former colonizing language and reflects in UAE higher education a “positive bias towards a Western orientation to education” (Sloan et al., 2017, p. 202). Eliminating the language of a culture from social work education can negatively impact student comprehension and linguistic identity, which in turn limits the localization of social work to specific cultural contexts (Harrison, 2007). Indeed, Belhiah and Elhami (2015) found in their study of UAE university students that a sole EMI approach to learning and teaching negatively impacted student mastery of competencies. Language, as Harrison (2007) argued, is the mediating vehicle or lens through which experience is revealed. When the mediating vehicle does not fully capture the culture and cultural explanations, students and

practitioners are more likely to rely on Western models and explanations, limiting the adaption of social work practice to the local context.

Additional concerns include rapid internationalization that has led to the swift adoptions of EMI policies. A 2014 University of Oxford study, conducted by their Centre for Research and Development in English Medium Instruction, explored the rapid and global use of EMI. Of the 55 countries that participated in the study, 22 had established EMI policies (Dearden, 2014). Yet many countries lacked the infrastructure and clear guidance for EMI implementation (Dearden, 2014). Problems specific to higher education included lack of preparedness for post-secondary work due to weak English skills, weak comprehension, and poor engagement within EMI courses (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Dearden, 2014; Roussel et al., 2017). Results from a 2015 UAE Education Council survey indicated that post-secondary students did not consistently appear ready for college-level coursework, and 97.3% of 10th–12th grade teachers who participated in the survey stated that students had serious difficulties in English reading and low English literacy rates (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2015). It is not surprising then that language development is cited as a primary reason college students learning in EMI environments may be unsuccessful in their programs of study (Suliman & Tadros, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive Load Theory

Cognitive load theory was developed by Sweller and builds upon Miller’s (1956) human information processing model of how persons receive and process information (Hatague & Nabua, 2019; Sweller et al., 2019). Cognitive load refers to “the total amount of mental activity imposed on the working memory” (Genç & Gulozer, 2013, p. 171) at any given point in time (Nawal, 2018). New information is processed in the working memory, but the capacity of the working memory is limited to about two to four elements at a time (Nawal, 2018; Roussel et al., 2017; Sweller et al., 2019). Once information is processed, it is transferred to the long-term memory where it is organized into cumulative schemas and stored for later use (Kirschner et al., 2018). Information stored in the long-term memory is transferred back to the working memory for organizing and linking so new information can be understood and communication is effective (Sweller et al., 2019).

The ease of acquiring new information includes whether the information is primary or secondary. Unlike primary information that we learn through our first language—which we “acquire easily, unconsciously, and without explicit instruction merely by membership in a group” (Kirschner et al., 2018, p. 215)—information learned in school or novel secondary information requires listening, reading, writing, and explicit effort (Roussel et al., 2017). When processing secondary information that includes both content and a second language, the working memory may become overloaded, which in turn affects the amount of content learned and the speed at which the information is learned (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Roussel et al., 2017).

Sources of cognitive load imposed on the working memory include intrinsic and extraneous load (Kirschner et al., 2018; Sweller, 2010). According to Kirschner et al. (2018), “Intrinsic cognitive load deals with the inherent complexity of the information that needs to be processed” (p. 218). Specifically, the more complex the information, the higher the cognitive load. Sweller et al. (2019) provide the example of someone learning to read in English: “the written word must be processed in the working memory as multiple interacting elements” (p. 264); this can be contrasted with an English speaker who retrieves the word from long-term memory as a single element. This issue escalates when the second language has a greater linguistic difference from the first language (Gallagher, 2011; Roussel et al., 2017). The more mental energy that is required for a second language task, the less energy is available for other cognitive tasks (Nawal, 2018; Roussel et al., 2017).

Using an EMI approach with first-language, Arabic students can be challenging due to the linguistic differences between the languages and the potential for an increased cognitive load. Native Arabic learners

encounter challenges of learning a vastly different script and understanding the nuances in English–Arabic, symbol–sound correspondence (AlSaawi, 2015; Gallagher, 2011; Shukri, 2014). Examples of differences include subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, use of articles, Arabic orthography or spelling in which placement of the letter in the word is subjective, and opposite-page orientation between the two languages in both reading and writing (AlSaawi, 2015; Gallagher, 2011; Goodwin, 2013; Shukri 2014). Goodwin (2013) argues that differences are so vast between Arabic and English that native-Arabic speakers cannot rely on their first-language abilities for building second-language English competency.

The way information is presented or elements—that are not related to the learning task, such as learning frameworks—are presented is extraneous cognitive load (Chen et al. 2017; Kirschner et al., 2018). When the working memory has to devote resources to extraneous cognitive load, fewer resources are available for intrinsic cognitive load or novel learning (Sweller, 2010). Ulijn and Strother (2012) add, “It is the extra cognitive load caused by having to process information in different discourse patterns from different cultural frameworks” that can contribute to cognitive load (p. 95).

Regarding different cultural frameworks, UAE social work students may have experienced earlier schooling that emphasized teacher-centered learning approaches or approaches in which the teacher was in charge of transmitting information, and students were expected to follow their instructions and guidance (Burt, 2004; Shukri, 2014; Vassall-Fall, 2011). A teacher-centered approach can be contrasted with student-centered learning (SCL), or learning that uses techniques that require students to take more active and autonomous roles in their learning (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). Students coming from teacher-centered learning environments may arrive at colleges without the experience or skills to engage in classrooms that use SCL approaches. This lack of experience or skills can create anxiety and increase extraneous cognitive load, as now the student is learning in a second language together with a novel teaching approach (Burt, 2004; Richardson, 2004; Vassall-Fall, 2011).

Discourse and social patterns could also be considered within the context of cultural dynamics and cognitive load. Goodwin (2013) emphasizes the importance of instructors learning the cultural dynamics of their students, so they can provide explanations using culturally relevant examples because “communication is mediated by the learners’ social and cultural identities” (p. 71). Without clarifying the dynamics, cognitive load is increased as students may interpret a situation based on their own cultural perspectives and experiences. The information they receive may not make sense within the learning context and may lead to weak comprehension (Kolikant, 2011).

Social Work and EMI

So how does EMI impact social work education in countries that use an EMI approach? Social work research addresses the implications of working with persons whose first language is not English, yet less is written about knowledge production and socialization into the social work profession when the social work student is learning in a second language (Wagner, 2018). Social work is an applied, language-centered discipline (Harrison, 2006; Watkins et al., 2018). As such, students are expected to (a) apply theory to practice situations, (b) use critical thinking skills to assess problems, (c) select interventions, and (d) engage clients at different levels of interventions (Garthwait, 2015; Watkins et al., 2018).

For students learning in a second language, a deeper understanding of the content could be inhibited by misunderstanding and miscommunication. For students who will deliver services in a first language other than English, lack of linguistic knowledge (such as how to say specific clinical terms in their first language) could also hinder communication with clients (Dearden, 2014; Estrada et al., 2018; Sevilla et al., 2018). This issue is not limited to countries that teach in a language different from their first language. In the United States, 21% of the U.S. population does not speak English at home, and well over half of those persons speak Spanish (Estrada et al., 2018). Yet Rosales et al. (2018) found that less than 10% of social work programs in the United States provided Latinx-focused content. Thus, the global challenge for social work programs is to

prepare students to competently deliver services and practice in the languages of their clients (Sevilla et al., 2018).

Methodology

This study represents the first phase of a two-phase, action-research study. Action research is research that is concerned with a specific context and problem(s) encountered within that context (Mertler, 2014). The action research framework includes four cyclical components of (a) planning the study; (b) collecting and analyzing data (together known as “acting”); (c) developing a plan or intervention, and (d) reflecting on and sharing the results (Mertler, 2014). The approach utilized within this study’s action research framework was an ethnographic, qualitative design. Qualitative data has the potential to provide multifaceted and descriptive accounts of participant experiences, or in this case, learning and teaching experiences within an EMI environment (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Yin, 2016). Ethnographic research strategies attempt to make sense of how people understand events and describe how culture influences the thinking and the behaviors of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This research received written IRB approval from the researcher’s United States (U.S.) university (exempt human subject research), as well as written approval from the Research Ethics Panel at the UAE institution where the study was conducted. The methodology was used to answer the following questions.

- What are obstacles to learning experienced by first-language, Arabic BSW students learning in an EMI teaching and learning environment?
- What are obstacles to teaching experienced by non-native, non-Arabic speaking faculty within an EMI teaching and learning environment?

Setting

This study was conducted in a 3rd-year BSW course at a federally funded higher education institution in the UAE. The institution has college locations throughout the UAE and provides a variety of applied and vocational bachelor degrees and diplomas and some master’s degrees (Kamal, 2018). A college education is free for Emirati nationals attending federal institutions; only Emirati nationals can attend these institutions, and all use an EMI approach (Siemund et al., 2020).

The BSW program began in 2010 in a women’s college, grew quickly, and expanded to a second women’s college within the same higher education system. The program had a combined enrollment of approximately 150 students at the time of the study. Students enrolled in the social work program were all female, all Emirati national students, with an age range of 18–30.

Emirati students graduating from high school are required to take a federal exam, the Emirates Standardized Test (EmSAT), which includes an English test component (Kamal, 2018). To gain entry into the college and program, a minimum EmSat score of 850 was required. Thus, students entering the social work program had obtained needed proficiency scores on the EmSAT, or accepted equivalencies on the English qualifying exam: International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

Teaching faculty in the social work program were all expatriates, educated in Western universities, and trained in Western teaching approaches, such as student-centered techniques.

Participants

The sample for this study was a purposive sample or nonprobability sample in which participants were selected due to accessibility (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants included five student volunteers who were enrolled in the BSW social work program and who would be part of a future BSW Semester 5 course. Additional recruitment considerations included asking students of different ages and enrollment statuses to participate in order to gain possible alternative perspectives of obstacles to learning. Participants were recruited in person and confirmed through a follow-up email. Written permission was obtained before the interviews, and none of the participants dropped from the study. All interviews were conducted orally and used both an audio file and written documentation to capture the data. Names were changed to protect participant confidentiality.

Table 1.1. *Student Participants*

Student	Age Range and Status
Amna	25–35 Returning Student
Bakhita	20–25
Cala	25–35
Dalal	20–25
Eiman	25–35 Returning Student, Student with Disabilities

Seven faculty volunteers were recruited to participate in an open-question survey and focus group. Faculty were chosen based on one or more of the following considerations: (a) full or adjunct social work faculty, (b) currently or previously taught courses in the social work program, (c) taught social work students in courses other than a discipline-specific course, or (d) advised social work students. Three males and four females from six different countries comprised the faculty sample.

Other sampling considerations included recruiting faculty who were non-native Arabic speakers, as a potential barrier could be an instructor who would not be able to translate vocabulary from English to Arabic. Additionally, experience or lack of experience could potentially mitigate or exacerbate second-language learning issues. Thus, faculty were selected based on a diversity of experiences teaching in a second-language learning environment. Faculty experience ranged from 1–13 years of teaching in second-language learning environments. Written permission was obtained before the focus group, and names were again changed to protect participant confidentiality.

Table 1.2. *Faculty Participants*

Faculty	Gender	1–3 years teaching in a second-language environment	4–7 years teaching in a second-language environment	8+ years teaching in a second-language environment
Instructor A	Female			X
Instructor B	Male	X		
Instructor C	Male	X		
Instructor D	Female		X	
Instructor E	Male			X
Instructor F	Female	X		
Instructor G	Female		X	

Procedures

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview format was used in both student interviews and the faculty focus group. This is a format in which predetermined, open-ended questions are asked of each participant, but the interviewer can deviate and ask follow-up questions to gain more information or insight about a response (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Due to varying levels of English among the students, a faculty member who was a native-Arabic speaker translated during the interviews.

Data sources included five face-to-face student interviews and a faculty focus group. An interview format was used with students instead of a focus group due to timing considerations, as most of the students did not drive and came and left the campus at different times. The same interview format was used with each student.

Students were asked a question in English, followed by the translator's oral translation of the question in Arabic. Follow-up questions depended upon the student responses. Four out of five students mostly responded to questions in a mixture of Arabic and English. One student answered questions in English only.

Seven faculty participated in the recorded faculty focus group. The focus group met during an early afternoon in an empty classroom at the college and met for approximately 90 minutes. Initial open questions were asked that allowed the group to answer and respond to each other. Follow-up questions were often more specific and used to garner more focused responses (see DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Student and faculty data were transcribed verbatim (see Yin, 2016). First cycle coding used *in vivo coding* or *verbatim coding* that uses a word or short phrase to describe the code from the language of the participant (Saldana, 2016). Using the participants' own words gave voice to the participants (Saldana, 2016). Each sentence was coded and numbered to promote trustworthiness (see Saldana, 2016).

Additional rounds of coding used patterned coding with the goal of aggregating codes to categories (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Patterned coding was completed using constant comparison or going back and forth between the data to consider different relationships among the data. During this process, major themes, "rules, causes, and explanations in the data were identified" (Saldana, 2016, p. 296).

Member checking and peer debriefing were implemented to establish trustworthiness. Dependability was addressed through the development and application of a codebook and cross-checking of coded data by a second faculty member (see Creswell & Poth, 2018; 2014; Mertler, 2014).

Student and faculty themes and codebook examples are provided in the following tables.

Table 2.1. *Student EMI Learning Obstacles*

Theme	Emergent Subthemes	Example
EMI learning obstacles Theme references experiences students may encounter when learning and communicating in an EMI environment.	“We understand something different.” This subtheme refers to both instructors and persons in the community who do not understand the student.	Bakhita [Spoken by translator]: “She understands the question well, but when she writes, the teacher understands something different than what she meant.”
	“Asking is not something appropriate to do.” This subtheme refers to the influence of the cultural context on communication.	Researcher: What do you do when you do not understand the teacher? Amna : [Spoken by translator] “Other students may prevent you from talking to the teacher about changing her style; they think it is not something appropriate to do.”
	“It takes a long time to translate.” This subtheme references problems in translating English to Arabic and Arabic to English.	Cala [Spoken by translator]: “The Google Translate will not give me the correct answer. It will give me a different answer. So, I have to add words.”
	“No activities make it very difficult.” This subtheme referred to negative learning experiences.	Bakhita [Spoken by the translator]: “Long lectures are hard. Very quickly they feel very bored, and it just comes to a point where they just want to leave the class. No activities make it very difficult.”

(Wagner, 2018)

Table 2.3. *Faculty EMI Teaching Obstacles*

Theme	Emergent Subtheme	Example
EMI teaching obstacles Theme references experiences instructors may encounter when teaching and communicating in an EMI environment.	“We are all English teachers even if we are not.” References the need for some English language assistance in all courses.	Instructor E : “We are to support them, so every lecture we are an English teacher whether we are qualified to be or not.”
	“They can do well with what they memorize.” References traditional student approaches to learning.	Instructor A : “They are quite good at terminology because they are good at rote learning, but they don’t actually understand.”
	“You have to approach things carefully.” Reference to careful filtering of language due to the cultural, Islamic Context.	Instructor G : You have to approach things carefully. It’s your approach to it. In my country, you could lecture on a topic. You did not have to excuse yourself from the topic.
	“Students must identify positively with you.” References how relationship building or identification with the instructor is needed for learning in the cultural context.	Instructor G : They need to identify with you and understand you are not here in judgment of them. It’s more important here that they identify positively with you. It is the way you have to navigate the topic.

(Wagner, 2018)

Findings

Student Interviews

Identified major themes for student interviews included EMI learning obstacles and experiences (Wagner, 2018).

Understands something different. One of the most frequently expressed obstacles noted by students were perceptions that they understood content and concepts, but their instructors did not understand them due to linguistic barriers. Bakhita, for example, expressed that when she wrote on themes or questions provided by the instructor, the instructor understood “something different than what she meant.” Yet students also shared practice concerns of working with first-language Arabic speakers who might not understand them. As Cala stated [spoken by translator]:

It is difficult when we finish studies, and we will work. Who will we work with? We will work with Arabic people. They will not know what we are talking about. When we translate some of the social work words they do not know, I have to translate and find the right words for practice. We will not know the right Arabic words.

Cultural context and communication. Students also expressed obstacles to communication influenced by culture. Students talked about hesitations in asking questions or providing feedback to the instructor about pedagogical issues, such as rate of speech. This was described as “something that is not appropriate to do.” Yet students also expressed concerns that questioning the instructor was ultimately not helpful. As Dalal expressed, “I ask my friends what the miss is saying and translate. I also use Google Translate. Because I think the teacher already explained, and I did not get it. So whatever she gives me, I will not understand.”

Long time to translate. Particularly debilitating obstacles were translation problems. Students stated that they translated their reading and course materials word for word at the beginning of their college courses. An example is Amna, who stated [Spoken by translator], “in the beginning, she translated word by word, and this took a very long time.” Yet even with their translation attempts, students described a lack of congruity between languages, as well as words and phrases, that did not always translate from one language to another due to what Khalifa (2015) describes as “words only loosely overlap but do not match” (p. 3).

No activities make it difficult. Students expressed difficulties in sitting through lectures in a second language. While they were not particularly comfortable asking questions, lectures were seen as an ineffective way of learning. Amna spoke of the difficulties of sitting through long lectures, while Cala pointed out feeling unmotivated to learn when lectures were the primary teaching strategy. Instead, students sought connections. Dalal for example stated she liked to hear stories and examples. “The teacher gave us a lot of stories and examples. I feel like when the teacher explains, I imagine in my own life, something happens like this. When she gives us real examples.” Cala was more specific, asking for case samples from her culture: “Examples from you and from here. It is the same—if we hear the examples we can remember on a test. It sticks in our minds.”

Faculty Focus Group

Identified theme from the faculty focus group included: EMI teaching obstacles and experiences (Wagner, 2018).

We are all English teachers even if we are not. Instructors expressed difficulties in meeting course-learning objectives and assisting student comprehension and engagement in a second language environment. As Instructor B stated:

I may know the meaning or translation to the word . . . but when I get into an example, it requires another level of understanding before I bring the students to understand. First they have to

understand the term, then they have to understand the example in the use of the term; I have to go into several levels to help students understand.

Yet Instructor D went further and explained difficulties when assisting students to understand social work concepts in a second language: “Social work discipline-specific language and translation—interpretation of the words—are problems. I emphasize the use of certain terminology. When they grasp the terminology, but they don't make the link to the content, then it is watered down.”

They can do quite well with what they memorize. This theme referenced how instructors perceived students learned best. Instructors highlighted K–12 UAE student experiences of rote memorization. As Instructor E stated, “they can do well with what they memorize but application is hard.” This is connected to teaching problems of contextualizing information and application to the local context. Instructors also highlighted other difficulties that linked to student pedagogical and cultural experiences of learning versus their pedagogical philosophies of learning. As Instructor A asserted, how students traditionally understood teaching and learning conflicted with their philosophy (and the teaching philosophy of the college) of a student-centered approach. Instructor D added: “Students do not understand their role as learners,” referring to the college’s student-centered learning model.

You have to approach things carefully. This theme referred to the filtering and care that needed to take place before introducing concepts that could be considered culturally inappropriate or taboo. As Instructor D explained:

We talk about issues and social problems in a broader context.... An example was I was talking about various family forms, relationships, and partners. Students said to me that does not happen in our society. That is out there and does not relate to us. I find myself challenged in those situations to think this through very thoroughly and be careful how I say it.

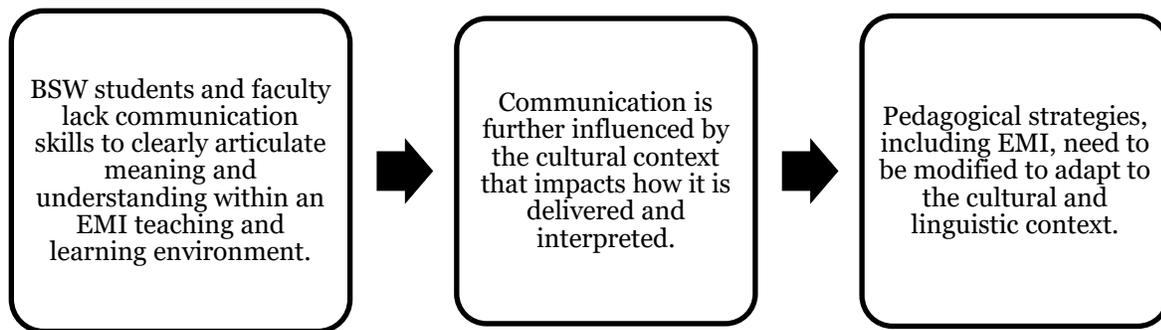
Thus, more than a linguistic issue, Instructor D highlighted what Crabtree (2008) refers to as the “tensions felt between ontological realities of social needs and the prevailing perception of what is culturally appropriate in terms of professional training and practice” (p. 537). Instructors expressed difficulties in balancing cultural appropriateness with the training needed for practice.

Must identify positively with you. This theme referred to an additional cultural issue in teaching: the importance of building and maintaining a positive connection with students. As Instructor A stated, “here I find I have to become more warmer and friendlier to overcome certain barriers. To reach them more,” or as Instructor G argued, “a warmer relationship with students assisted instructors in navigating difficult topics.”

This theme also highlighted cultural differences between faculty from various cultures who applied differing emphases on a hierarchal relationship with students versus a warmer relationship with students.

Comparison of Student and Faculty Findings

Categories for students and faculty were analyzed to understand how they related to each other. Patterned coding was used to assess commonalities and “as a stimulus to develop a major theme, a pattern of action, a network of interrelationships” (Saldana, 2016, P. 238).

Figure 1. *Comparison of Student and Faculty Findings*

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand obstacles to teaching and learning within a BSW, EMI environment. Cognitive load theory provided a framework to consider inherent difficulties in learning in a second language and potential techniques to address these difficulties. In this study, a reliance on English language communication during teaching and learning was identified as an obstacle to meaning and understanding, yet findings indicated communication was also influenced by the cultural context.

The English language challenges were identified as significant concerns by both students and faculty. Student concerns included laborious translation challenges in which some of the students interviewed translated their study materials word for word, only to have trouble in oral and written communication. This example highlights the point that cognitive load is increased when the first language, such as Arabic, has a greater linguistic difference from the second language, and speakers cannot rely on their first-language abilities for building second-language competency (Gallagher, 2011; Goodwin, 2013; Roussel et al., 2017).

Practice concerns were also noted, such as Cala's point that the students needed to know first language social work terms: "We will work with Arabic people. They will not know what we are talking about." Sevilla et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of language in delivering culturally competent services and the erroneous assumption that students will already know clinical terms in their first language.

Instructors also struggled with (a) EMI instruction (pointing out that "every lecture, we are an English teacher whether we are qualified to be or not"), (b) the danger of concepts being superficially covered, and (c) problems helping students understand discipline-specific vocabulary. Dearden (2014) hypothesized that instructors teaching in EMI environments need skills similar to English as foreign language (EFL) teachers that could include modifying how they teach to ensure engagement and comprehension. For social work instructors in EMI environments, this calls for a teaching role modification that includes assisting students with English language comprehension (Dearden, 2014). Yet, as suggested previously, students need to gain skills to deliver services competently in the language of their clients.

Communication was also influenced by the cultural context, or *how* communication was delivered and interpreted. Students appeared to have different cultural understandings of teaching and their roles as learners when compared to the instructors. An example was Instructor B, who pointed out that students had a "you teach, we learn mindset." The use of teacher-centered approaches (or a more passive learning style) is common in the Middle East, and the use of culturally different teaching approaches could increase the potential for extraneous cognitive load if adequate scaffolding is not introduced (Burt, 2004; Shukri, 2014;

Ulijn & Strother, 2012). Thus, a more directive pedagogical approach could be needed when students engage in active learning activities.

Like students, instructors also discussed their difficulties with navigating culture and communication, such as points made by Instructor D and Instructor G: that you had to approach topics carefully. Similarly, Instructor G suggested that without building a personal connection, course topics could negatively influence the instructor. “It’s more important here that they identify positively with you,” Instructor G said. “It is the way you have to navigate the topic.” These communication difficulties were heightened when the discussions included culturally sensitive topics. As Instructor D pointed out, students had difficulties making connections between some social issues and their society. Students were contextualizing their learning “according to a cultural perspective different than that expected by the teacher” (Kolikant, 2011, p. 544), again highlighting extraneous cognitive load problems due to processing information from differing cultural frameworks (Ulijn & Strother, 2012). Yet students did verbalize a desire for connection to their learning. Students highlighted connection when they pointed out the importance of examples to further their learning, such as instructor experiences or case studies that linked to UAE culture.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

The following recommendations consider how social work educators can bridge pedagogical gaps for students studying in EMI environments, where EMI is mandated and/or a lack of teaching resources prohibits first language instruction. Recommendations include both pedagogical and structural ones.

The first recommendation is the importance of strengthening language scaffolding. Roussel et al. (2017) argued for explicit language instruction within content courses to decrease cognitive load. A beginning step is ensuring materials are easily translatable and/or shortening presentations to get rid of non-essential information. Just as important is embedding first language keywords in teaching materials to assist students in understanding terms and concepts in context (Proctor et al., 2007; Madriñan, 2014; Wagner, 2018). Proctor et al. (2007) suggested introducing keywords, such as social work discipline terms, at the beginning of a text or presentation that include translation in the first language. In electronic environments, these key terms can be hyperlinked to the first language translation to improve comprehension and decrease cognitive load (Proctor et al., 2007). Embedding first-language words also helps to develop culturally competent social work practice through explicitly teaching first-language terms that could be used in practice, such as confidentiality (Lusk et al., 2014; Sevilla et al., 2018).

This leads to a second recommendation: a call for structural curriculum change and/or modifications. Although limited staffing and resources might influence how social work education is delivered, providing students with practice knowledge in the first language of their clients is imperative for competent practice. Thus, at minimum, EMI social work programs should consider providing some or all the *practice courses and field seminars* in the first language of the country and/or their clients. Indeed, some first language instruction should be provided in every course throughout the curriculum. For example, programs can use dual-language instructors when, as in this study, native Arabic-speaking faculty were limited. Pairing a monolingual English speaking faculty member with a native UAE faculty member or graduate assistant could provide needed linguistic and cultural support. Examples include (a) translation of materials, adding key first-language terms and concepts to teaching materials, (b) cultural guidance, and (c) assistance with class activities, such as role-plays, so students could practice in their first language.

An additional consideration is the alignment of pedagogical strategies with the cultural context to decrease extraneous cognitive load. Social work students coming from passive learning environments may be unfamiliar with student-centered pedagogical approaches and expect greater involvement from their instructors. These circumstances require more guidance, such as (a) an orientation of expectations at the beginning of the semester, (b) information on course structure, and (c) teaching approaches (Al-Issa, 2005;

Wagner, 2018). Additionally, when implementing course activities, a systematic or more directive approach is often needed for activities, such as collaborative or group learning. Groupwork examples could include clearly delineating group tasks and assisting groups with assigning roles and tasks for individual members (Baeten et al., 2016).

Interestingly, collaborative teaching approaches have the potential to reduce cognitive load. Kirschner et al. (2018) argued that obtaining information from others during collaboration is different from secondary information that is acquired through traditional instruction. Collaborative teaching increases the breadth of information available and appears to increase the ability to process new information through distributing elements to be learned among the group, thus “reducing the cognitive load on a single working memory” (Kirschner, 2018, p. 220).

Finally, continually contextualizing social work education and providing case studies, examples, and problems from local communities not only assists students in gaining relevant knowledge and skills but also has the potential to reduce cognitive load (Kolikant, 2011; Ulijn & Strother, 2012). Human simulations, for example, in which actors present and participate with students in culturally relevant role-plays, could provide rich, cultural examples. Students could interact in their first language, with actors portraying clients, and gain opportunities to increase competencies and adapt their practice to the local context (Colvin et al., 2020).

Limitations

This research study included several limitations, such as a possible researcher-participant language barrier and the use of a translator. Squires (2009) reminded that language changes during the translation process increases the potential for misunderstanding, thus member checking was completed to mitigate this limitation. Additionally, the sample size was small. Therefore, the study results cannot be generalized beyond the research participants, so the details provided in this article could potentially assist the reader in determining if the knowledge is deemed transferable. Finally, obstacles in the learning and teaching environment were only explored through self-reports of a small sample of students and faculty. Future studies could use a quantitative design with a larger sample size to investigate student and faculty perceptions of EMI obstacles.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand teaching and learning obstacles experienced by BSW students and faculty within a UAE EMI learning environment. Cognitive load theory provided a lens to view learning and teaching challenges, as well as methods to mitigate these challenges. Findings highlighted implicit and explicit communication obstacles, suggesting the need to consider pedagogical strategies, such as English language scaffolding, increased use of the first language in teaching, and explicit links to the cultural context.

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