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From School Level Medium of Instruction to English Medium Universities: Navigating the Transition in Bangladeshi Private Higher Education

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Abstract: English Medium Instruction (EMI) is the current standard in Bangladesh's private universities, posing challenges for first-year students from Bangla Medium, English Version, and Madrasa backgrounds. First-year transition experiences are known to influence student retention, academic adjustment, and long-term success. This quantitative study uses Schlossberg's 4S Transition Model and SRL frameworks to examine how students navigate EMI transitions. The 4S model explores students' resources and challenges during transition, while SRL models highlight their strategies for learning in EMI contexts. Using purposive and convenience sampling via a self-administered structured survey (n=765), data from seven private universities in Dhaka and Chittagong were analyzed. Results from descriptive-comparative statistics and regression analysis showed disparities across the three groups, and identified confidence, motivation, and support as predictors of successful EMI transition. The study shows that prior medium of instruction shapes students' transition to university and emphasizes the need for targeted support, better access to resources, and language-aware teaching to ensure fair learning outcomes in EMI settings.

Keywords: Self-regulated learning, English Medium Instruction, Medium of Instruction

Introduction

The language used to implement the curriculum in a school is known as the Medium of Instruction (Akter, 2024). In Bangladesh, Bangla is primarily used as the medium of instruction (MOI) in the schools regulated by the Ministry of Education. The emergence of English Version stream marked Bangladesh's educational response to the growing demand for English proficiency, where schools follow the National Curriculum of Bangladesh but use English as the MOI (Giri et al., 2023). At the tertiary level, private universities implement English as a medium of instruction (EMI) (Giri et al., 2023). The applicants of universities' admission process come from diverse educational backgrounds: English Medium (henceforth, EM), Bangla Medium (henceforward, BM), English Version (henceforth, EV) and Madrasah education. The various educational streams of MOI create differences in students' academic preparedness and English proficiency. Despite years of exposure to English, many students face linguistic and academic challenges as they transition to EMI for higher education. While studies have explored EMI implementation in secondary level, few have examined how students from different MOIs experience the transition to EMI at the tertiary level. This gap is significantly critical because first-year transition experiences are known to influence student retention, academic adjustments, and long-term success (Gale & Parker, 2014).

As such, in this study, the researcher aims to (i) identify the challenges faced by first-year undergraduate students from BM, EV, and Madrasa backgrounds in EMI universities, (ii) investigate the self-regulated learning strategies students use during transition, and (iii) provide institutional recommendations for improving EMI transition support structures and reducing inequities.

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The current study was originally developed as part of the author's postgraduate research at the Asian University for Women, Chattogram, Bangladesh, conducted in 2025. While this study offers significant insights, it focuses solely on private university students. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to students attending other higher education institutions. Additionally, the research does not account for socioeconomic variables, parental education, or prior English language training outside the formal school curriculum. These exclusions were intentional to maintain focus, but represent opportunities for future study.

Literature Review

According to studies, many students in EM courses at the tertiary level struggle to comprehend and learn from English-language lectures (Klaassen, 2001; Vinke, 1995). Language barriers between students and instructors are contributors to comprehension difficulties (Hellekjær & Hellekjær, 2015). Researchers found that EMI students in China faced language-related difficulties (Hu & Lei, 2014). Lin and Marrison (2010) discovered that Hong Kong tertiary students' academic vocabulary decreased due to the language policy transition from secondary education. Pessoa et al. (2014) investigated difficulties multilingual students encounter upon entering college, reporting the challenges of reading comprehension and academic writing in English, and lack of background information and vocabulary.

While EV education follows National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) curriculum, the books are in English except for Bengali. However, numerous spelling and printing mistakes are found in some of the books issued by the NCTB (Zaman, 2024). Roshid & Sultana (2024) suggested that EV students lack the communication skills as the environment does not encourage students to use English. Several teachers also conduct lessons in Bangla due to lack of efficiency in English.

Language proficiency, particularly in English, is a significant issue for Alia Madrasahs students (Shahabuddin, 2025). Modernized and contextual method of teaching English language is not as well maintained. Haque (2019) suggested that the growth of English proficiency has been slower due to the prevalence of traditional values of religion and economics.

Lastly, BM education adheres to the curriculum designed by the NCTB. Here, the MOI for all courses, except for English, is Bangla. However, despite years of English language education, due to exam-driven learning, limited exposure to spoken English, and ineffective pedagogy, many students from BM education struggle with comprehension, academic writing, and classroom engagement when they transition to English-based higher education (Mridula & Ahsan, 2025). Chowdhury and Kamal (2014) report that in schools and colleges, students learn English through "rote learning of grammatical rules and memorization of vocabulary." Ara (2020) discovered that speaking is not assessed at all in BM education. Students are taught grammar rules in repetition to learn the language but not to use it.

Students in EMI systems must deal with both a new academic culture and a limited vocabulary in English, which can impair performance. Lin and Morrison (2010) found that students from Chinese-medium instruction backgrounds had smaller productive and receptive English vocabularies than their peers who received EMI education. This led to lower-quality academic writing and decreased participation in the class. These results are consistent with EMI contexts in Taiwan and South Korea, where students have reported a limited academic vocabulary and trouble understanding English lectures following MOI policy changes (Yeh, 2014; Byun et al., 2011).

Previous research highlights the critical nature of the first year of university in easing transition (Krause, 2005) as it influences students' academic success, retention, and sense of identity (Kuh et al., 2011). Poor transitions often correlate with higher dropout rates, course failures, and disconnection from university life (Maree, 2015). Successful transitions are supported by strong student engagement, meaningful connections, and a sense of belonging (Krause, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg (2011) suggests how the shift in higher education settings can be disconcerting for students, affecting their sense of belonging, academic identity, and confidence (Anderson et al., 2011).

The 4S Transition Model determines that a person's capacity to effectively handle changes is influenced by four 'resources': situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, 1984).

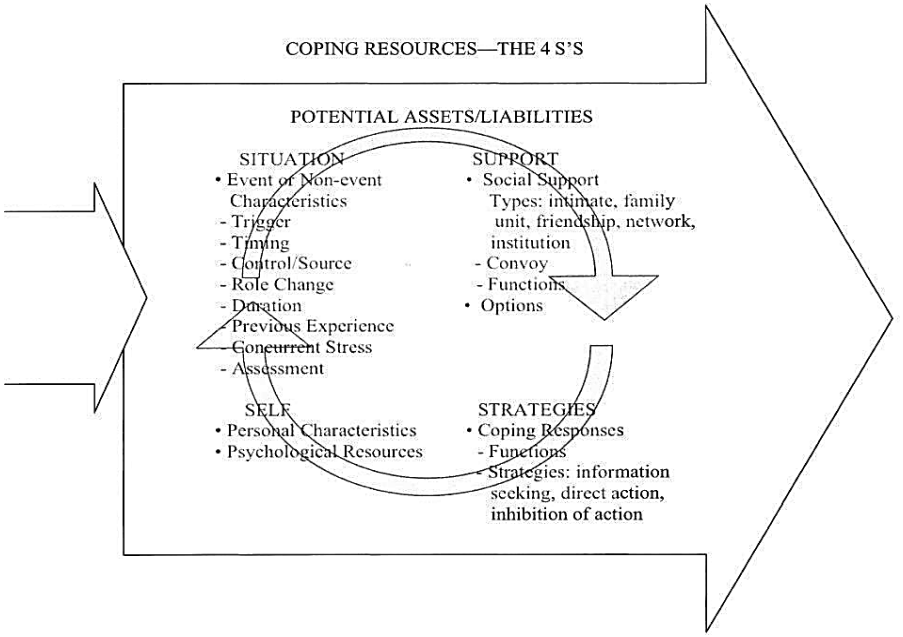


Figure 1. Coping resources—the 4 S's (Anderson et al., 2011)

''Situation' refers to the conditions surrounding the transition, whether it is perceived as positive or negative. Internal traits of the person are referred to as the 'Self' domain. 'Support' highlights the student's access to social resources during a transition. Finally, 'strategies' indicate how individuals manage the demands and stressors of a transition.

It has been noted that students achieve success in EMI when they adopt effective learning strategies (Hellekjær & Hellekjær, 2015). According to Butler and Winne's (1995) model, learning begins as students interpret their task through their knowledge and beliefs, and the requirements for a standard performance established by the teacher. Nicol and Macfarlane - Dick's (2006) model encapsulates that a student draws a personalized interpretation of a task, and adds their prior knowledge and motivational beliefs, which can significantly influence their interpretation. Lastly, Boekaerts' (1999) three-layered model makes distinction between self-initiated and teacher- initiated learning activities, since the former is driven by personal goals created by the 'self- system.' It is these goals that encourage and motivate students in their self-regulatory practices.

Methodology

The researcher used a quantitative, descriptive-comparative design to explore how first-year undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds adjust to EMI at private universities in Bangladesh. A 25-item structured questionnaire (Cronbach alpha=0.766) was designed to investigate academic, linguistic, social, and strategic challenges experienced by students (n=765) from seven private universities in urban Dhaka and Chittagong. The study participants were selected through purposive and convenience sampling via self-administered participation to ensure representation from the three MOI groups, 68% BM (n = 522), 25% EV (n = 190), and 7% Madrasa (n = 53). The analytic framework is guided by the research objectives and two theoretical frameworks: 4S Transition Model and Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) models. Descriptive and inferential statistics focus on identifying challenges across different MOI groups and exploring patterns in students' EMI transition experiences.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (Mean, SD, Variance, and Skewness) of key academic, motivational, SRL, and support variables across MOI groups

ITEM	BM		Madrasa		EV	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Confidence	3.6	1.089	3.38	1.274	4	1.369
Communication	3.21	1.141	3.11	1.311	3.84	1.353
Difficulty	2.93	0.962	3.08	1.158	2.53	1.409
Extra Help	2.89	1.052	2.58	1.117	3.47	1.34
Doubt	3.03	1.105	2.83	1.252	3.36	1.226
Motivation	3.74	1.04	3.4	1.147	3.82	1.434
Only English	3.34	1.182	3.28	1.406	4.11	1.261
English Bangla	4.04	1.197	3.81	1.303	3.81	1.276
Resilience	3.81	0.912	4.23	0.824	4.14	0.935
Growth Mindset	4.39	0.759	4.23	0.669	4.36	0.704
Adaptability	4.02	0.839	3.92	0.917	4.12	0.903
Persistence	4.16	0.853	3.98	0.93	4.16	0.912
Goal Setting	3.7	1.085	3.53	1.219	3.6	1.176
Strategizing	3.72	1.109	3.28	1.166	3.56	1.129
Seek Help (Teacher)	3.93	0.97	4.38	1.042	3.79	1.181
Seek Help (Friend)	2.96	0.97	4.19	0.962	3.74	1.05
Seek Help (Classmate)	3.55	1.071	3.89	1.068	3.46	1.22
Seek Help (Family Member)	3.14	1.326	3.47	1.042	3.02	1.422
Reflection	3.59	1.08	2.94	1.25	3.34	1.205
Peer Support	3.73	1.037	3.75	0.949	3.84	1.092
University Support	3.99	1.114	3.91	1.097	4.06	1.047
Teacher Support	3.98	1.145	3.62	1.078	3.79	1.194
University Resources	3.59	1.144	3.47	1.25	3.85	1.31
Family Community	3.66	1.115	3.47	1.25	3.78	1.277
Overall Performance	3.6	1.001	3.42	1.322	3.96	1.081
Overall Transition	3.78	1.049	3.51	1.219	4.08	1.197

Table 1 above presents the descriptive statistics for all key variables across the three MOI groups.

Table 2. Summary of group differences in overall EMI transition score by MOI

Item	BM Mean	Madrasa Mean	EV Mean	F (2, 762)	p	Partial η^2	Significant Pairwise Differences (Tukey HSD)
Overall Transition Score	3.78	3.51	4.08	7.860	0.00042	0.020	EV>BM (.003), EV>M (.002)

EV students reported smoother transitions (M=4.08, SD=1.20), reflecting their prior exposure to English for both academic content and communication (Lin & Morrison, 2010) and benefiting from higher alignment with EMI pedagogies. The classic ANOVA also shows significance, $F(2, 762) = 7.860$, $p < .001$, with a partial $\eta^2 = .020$, indicating that students' prior MOI explains 2% of the variance in overall transition scores. This effect size is considered small (Cohen, 2013), suggesting that while MOI plays a role, other factors influence transition success. Tukey HSD post hoc comparisons revealed that EV students reported significantly smoother EMI transitions than both BM ($p = .003$) and Madrasa students ($p=.002$) students. However, the difference between BM and Madrasa students is not statistically significant. In contrast, Madrasa-background students faced the greatest challenges, including low academic confidence ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.27$) and motivation ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.15$), with minimal engagement with SRL strategies; reflection at ($M = 2.94$, $SD =1.25$), goal setting ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.22$), and strategizing ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.17$). The findings highlight gaps in strategy awareness

and self-regulation practices. Their prior schooling offered limited English exposure and emphasized memorization over autonomy, restricting preparedness for university-level EMI.

Table 3. Chi-Square Test of independence between MOI and SRL strategy use

	Value	**df**	**Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)**
Pearson Chi-Square	30.705[a]	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	30.053	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.943	1	.026
N of Valid Cases	1237		
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.46.			

A Chi-square test of independence (Table 3) revealed a statistically significant association between MOI and reported SRL strategy use, $\chi^2(6, N = 1237) = 30.71$, $p < .001$. This indicates that the SRL strategies reported by students are not randomly distributed across MOI groups. Additionally, the Linear-by-Linear Association test was also significant ($\chi^2 = 4.94$, p = .026), suggesting a potential trend in SRL strategy use across MOI categories.

BM students, though less confident (M = 3.60, SD = 1.09), showed notable adaptive behaviors, including goal-setting (M=3.70, SD=1.09) and strategizing (M=3.72, SD=1.11), alongside increased study time and use of online resources. These patterns align with research showing that motivated students can compensate for gaps using SRL strategies (Menéndez et al., 2018).

Table 4. Chi-Square Test of independence between medium of instruction and biggest challenges faced

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	30.261a	12	.003
Likelihood Ratio	29.084	12	.004
Linear-by-Linear Association	.289	1	.591
N of Valid Cases	1161		
a. 3 cells (14.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .50.			

A Chi-Square test of independence showed a statistically significant association between students' MOI background and the EMI transition challenges reported, χ^2 (12, N = 1161) = 30.26, p = .003 (Table 4). This suggests that the nature of challenges experienced during the transition varied across MOI groups. For BM students, the shift from exam-driven, teacher-centered classrooms to communicative, discussion-based EMI settings imposed a cognitive and affective load. This mismatch often results in linguistic anxiety and reduced classroom participation (Pessoa et al., 2014). Madrasa students face even greater cultural distance, reporting difficulties in peer interaction, mixed-gender settings, and adapting to collaborative learning (Wong et al., 2018). These patterns reflect how students who lacked psychological readiness and access to supportive networks experienced heavier "transition load."

Table 5. Chi-Square Test of independence between MOI and self-perceived academic performance

	Value	**df**	**Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)**
Pearson Chi-Square	53.334[a]	8	.000
Likelihood Ratio	48.087	8	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	14.466	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	765		
a. 2 cells (13.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.70.			

The chi-square tests result revealed a statistically significant association between MOI and self-perceived academic performance, $\chi^2(8, N = 765) = 53.33$, $p < .001$ (Table 5). Cross-tabulation revealed that EV students were most likely to report "Excellent" or "Good" academic performance, while BM and Madrasa students more frequently selected "Average" or "Below Average." Madrasa students primarily ranked themselves in the lower performance categories. These differences are statistically significant and align with previous research linking language proficiency and academic literacy to academic success in EMI settings (Dafouz et al., 2014).

Lastly, guided by SRL models and Schlossberg's 4S Transition Model, eight predictors were analyzed in the multiple regression model: confidence in English proficiency, motivation influenced by EMI, strategizing for academic goals, reflection on learning, practice of seeking help, extra help needed for EMI, overall support sought and received, and preference for English-only lectures.

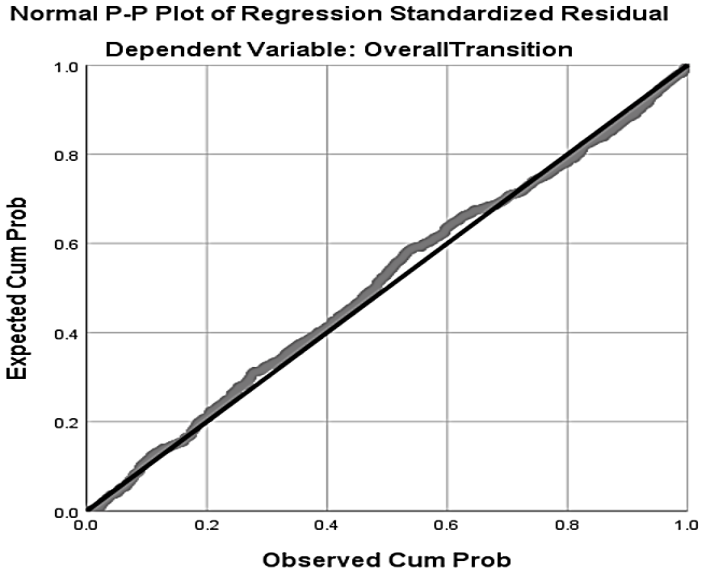


Figure 1. Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual

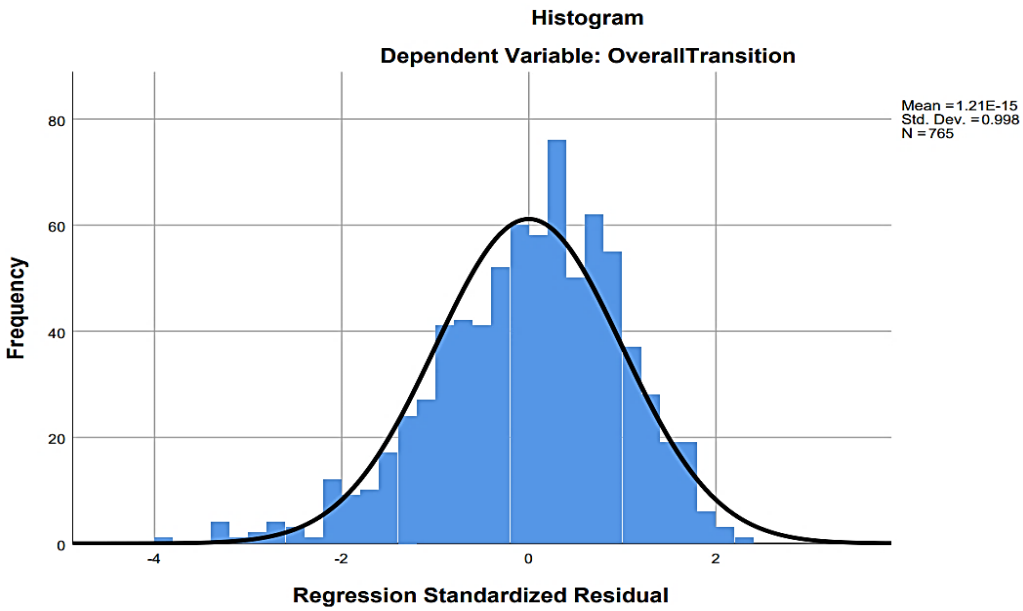


Figure 2. Histogram of Standardized Residuals for Regression Model

Table 6. Regression Coefficients, Significance, and Multicollinearity Diagnostics predicting overall EMI transition success

Predictor	Beta	p	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Tolerance	VIF
Confidence	0.233	<.001	0.153	0.281	0.799	1.252
Extra Help	-0.019	0.579	-0.080	0.045	0.875	1.142
Motivation	0.254	<.001	0.174	0.312	0.731	1.369
Only English	0.015	0.642	-0.044	0.071	0.888	1.126
Strategizing	0.093	0.014	0.019	0.165	0.693	1.444
Seeking Help	-0.023	0.490	-0.107	0.052	0.863	1.158
Reflection	0.009	0.809	-0.063	0.081	0.721	1.387
Support taken and received	0.125	<.001	0.080	0.281	0.771	1.297
Model Summary: R^2 = .258, Adjusted R^2 = .251, F(8, 756) = 32.92, p < .001, Durbin–Watson = 1.79.						

The regression model is statistically significant, explaining 25.8% of the variance in EMI transition success by the combined effect of the eight predictors. The remaining variance is attributable to factors not included in the model. This level of explained variance is considered acceptable for social science research (Ozili, 2023), given the number of predictors (n = 8) and the sample size (N = 765), which meets the recommended criterion of $N \geq 8m + 50$ (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Confidence and motivation are the dominant predictors, emphasizing that psychological readiness underpins adaptive learning in EMI contexts. Students who believe in their capability and perceive value in the new environment are more likely to engage actively and persist when challenges arise. Motivation also helps students develop SRL strategies and show willingness to seek feedback, suggesting that internal drive is a gateway to effective self-regulation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study emphasizes that EMI transition extends beyond language proficiency, involving psychological readiness, motivation, and equitable access to learning resources. To reduce systemic disparities, private universities should implement targeted orientation programs, integrated language support, and mentorship tailored to students' educational backgrounds. Such interventions can transform EMI from a barrier into a bridge for inclusive academic success in Bangladesh's higher education sector. To ensure that institutes acknowledge the challenges faced by students experiencing a transition in MOI, this study makes some recommendations. Firstly, universities should include admission test diagnostics into an early-warning system run by academic advising and language centers to create differentiated orientation workshops aimed at English language proficiency. Moreover, activities and rubrics for English for Academic Purposes course should be focused on skills of academic writing, reading comprehension, and communication to allow flexibility on content. This maintains students' motivation while improving linguistic proficiency. Additionally, all presentations and graded assignments must be in English, however instructors should allow bilingual brainstorming in certain instances so students can discuss complex ideas in Bangla in small groups. This will encourage exchange of ideas while building confidence maintaining EMI as the instructional standard. The study finally recommends establishing departmental peer-mentoring initiatives that pair senior students with freshmen, with selected mentors receiving training in culturally sensitive teaching to promote help- seeking behaviors and foster a stronger sense of belonging.

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