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Barriers to Implementing English-Medium Instruction in Community Schools of Rural Nepal

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Abstract

In Nepal, there is a growing trend of adopting the English-medium-instruction (EMI) policy in community schools; however, some schools are withdrawing it. This study investigates the reasons for rejecting the EMI policy in school-level education in Nepal, focusing on two rural community basic schools in Lalitpur district that discontinued EMI implementation. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through interviews with head teachers, teachers, local education policymakers, and informal interactions with the School Management Committee and Parent Teacher Association chairpersons. Thematic analysis with ATLAS.ti highlighted significant issues: the schools serving disadvantaged communities lacked financial resources, making EMI inappropriate. Insufficient English proficiency among teachers and students posed major challenges, and parental support was minimal. The study concludes that successful EMI implementation requires thorough planning, contextual analysis, and stakeholder involvement. It emphasizes adapting EMI policies to local contexts and improving language proficiency to ensure effective implementation in diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Community schools, contextual irrelevance, English-medium instruction, insufficient language proficiency, minimal parental support

Introduction

When I visited the southern part of Lalitpur district in early 2023, I (the first author) stumbled upon a group of locals engaged in a casual conversation at a quaint teashop. I recognized a few familiar faces and felt at ease joining them for tea. As our discussion unfolded, the focus shifted towards the educational landscape of the village. Among the group were two teachers—a head teacher and a teacher—affiliated with a basic school in a neighboring rural municipality ward.

My curiosity grew so strong that I could not stop inquiring about the school's status. I researched aspects such as the number of students and teachers, the availability of educational resources, including textbooks, the level of student engagement in learning activities, and the degree of parental involvement in school affairs.

The head teacher lamented the alarmingly small number of students who had enrolled in his school and expressed frustration with parents' apparent lack of interest in their children's education. As our conversation progressed, I raised the topic of the English-medium-instruction (EMI) policy—a strategy that some believed could bolster the number of students. However, the head teacher opposed the EMI policy, asserting that it was unsuitable for their context, having been previously implemented and deemed a failure. He further claimed they could not consider resuming the EMI policy in the school's context.

Towards the end of our informal interaction, the head teacher mentioned that another basic school had also abandoned the EMI policy. His statement sparked a flurry of questions in my mind: What barriers hindered the sustained enforcement of the EMI policy in these schools? Why did these schools retract the EMI policy? What specific problems did the stakeholders face while implementing the EMI policy? And, What are the socioeconomic conditions of the people surrounding these schools? Motivated by these queries, we sought answers to these questions by applying the qualitative case study design, hence selecting and studying these schools that rejected the EMI policy.

Review of Related Literature

This section briefly introduces the EMI policy and its provision in Nepal and reviews the literature regarding EMI classroom practices from the perspectives of teachers and students.

English Medium Instruction Policy and Its Provision in Nepal

EMI is the use of the English language as a medium of instruction at a school where the learners are from a non-native English-speaking context. To Dearden (2014), the EMI is "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English" (p. 2). EMI is a system of using English for teaching and learning in classrooms. In a similar line to Dearden, Madhavan Brochier (2016) gives the concept of EMI as "teaching subjects using the English language without explicit language learning aims and usually in a country where a majority of the people do not speak English" (para 2).

EMI has become a worldwide issue as schools shift their medium of instruction (MOI) to English (Dearden, 2014; Hayes, 2016). It has also come to be true in Nepal. Despite the debate among educational theorists, psychologists, and research scholars about using EMI in the early grades, the stakeholders of the schools seem to be interested in implementing the policy from the early grades.

The government documents in Nepal have implicitly or explicitly provided for the EMI policy. The Ministry of Education (2007) states that the medium of school-level education can be either Nepali or English or both. At the same time, it also mentions that in the first stage of elementary education, the medium will generally be the mother tongue. The constitution of Nepal (2015) declares that the people and the communities have the right to use, preserve, and promote their languages (Government of Nepal, 2015), as mentioned in Article 32, Clauses 1 and 3.

Similarly, some of the reports of the Government of Nepal (Ministry of Education, 1997, 2003a, 2003b; 2009, for example) suggest that the Government of Nepal should systematize the language policy in line with the constitutional right to mother tongue education. School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) also proposes to adopt the EMI policy from Grade Nine only if the student's skills in English have been adequately developed through the bilingual approach and if the teachers to teach using EMI are fully proficient in English (Ministry of Education, 2016).

Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (2076 BS) offers the local governments the chance to develop education policies that consider linguistic diversity and the interests of the children. The local governments are encouraged to utilize "mother tongue (MT) and mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE); in addition to these, Nepali and English can also be used as the MOI in the schools" (p.

18). Focusing on the basic level of education, it gives the choice of either the MT of the students or the Nepali language as an MOI. However, besides these languages, it allows the use of the EMI for Mathematics and Science, which is also reflected in the local level educational regulations (i.e., Mahankal Rural Municipality, 2075 BS). A contradiction exists among the macro-level policy documents regarding the use of MOI policy in Nepal. Implementing the MOI policy in schools introduces diversity in classroom activities during practical application.

Classroom Activities in EMI Classes

Research evidence shows little interaction between and among teachers and the students in the EMI classes. Lo and Macaro (2012) found that the teachers in the EMI classes used the teacher-centred method, which allows low interaction among the teachers and students, and teachers in the CMI classes, teachers provided lots of opportunities to interact among the students in classes. It clearly shows that sufficient interactions facilitate learning in the classroom when the language familiar to the students is used as MOI. Similarly, Baral (2015) concluded that though the students of the EMI schools secured good results, they lacked creativity and did not get the opportunities to interact among the students in the classes. His findings seem similar to those of the study conducted by Lo and Macaro (2012). Using an unfamiliar language as the MOI in the classroom can create discomfort among the participants.

EMI as a Burden for Teachers

Several studies in the past have shown that EMI has created a kind of burden for teachers. Werther et al. (2014) found that the EMI policy created severe tension among the university lecturers as they were not proficient in English. Similarly, aiming to analyze the EMI situation of community schools in Nepal, Khati (2016) conducted a study collecting data from head teachers, teachers, parents, students, and teacher trainers. His finding was that the stakeholders adopted the EMI policy to increase the number of students in their schools and get job opportunities in the global market. The teachers found the EMI to be a burden in their profession and may harm the students' learning. In another study, J. Karki (2018) found similar reasons as concluded by Khati (2016) for adopting the EMI policy. The major challenge he found was difficulty delivering the content due to the EMI teachers' low proficiency in the English language, which was similar to the studies conducted by Ojha (2018) and Sah and Li (2018) in different areas of Nepal.

Trouble in Understanding the Content of the EMI Classes

Students have problems understanding the content delivered in English in the EMI classes. Some of the past studies proved it. Regarding the issue, Thapa (2016) found that students seemed to have been less interested in learning and not paying attention in the classroom because using the EMI was uncomfortable for them. She suggested that classroom teaching-learning activities could be made engaging, effective, and interactive by using the national or local language(s) whenever necessary by the teacher and students. A similar issue was researched by B. Karki (2018), who concluded that students did not participate in the classroom activities and were not interested in studying in the EMI classes because they were not able to understand the content conveyed in English, which is not used in their home and community. His finding was similar to the study by T. M. Karki (2019, 2023).

The research works concerning the EMI policy conducted so far have focused on the perceptions, challenges/problems, and ideologies of the stakeholders of the EMI schools and the identities of the EMI teachers in general. Still, less attention has been paid to exploring the contexts that mismatch the EMI policy, and as a result, the stakeholders reject the EMI policy. Therefore, the present study tried to fill this gap.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

This study employs content and language-integrated learning (CLIL) as a framework for interpreting information, simultaneously using both subject content and language in an integrated manner in teaching. The process of planning a CLIL lesson involves following six distinct planning principles, which utilize the 6Cs framework and other conceptual tools developed by Coyle (2005) and Coyle et al. (2010) and later upgraded by Couto-Cantero and Ellison (2023). The 6Cs refer to the content, communication, cognition, culture, context, and collaboration.

In the context of English medium instruction in community schools of Nepal, the 6Cs framework offers a lens to the understanding of the various crucial elements. Content pertains to the curriculum material and educational resources delivered in English, ensuring its relevance and alignment with the local needs. Communication involves the language of instruction and the diverse methods used to convey information effectively. Cognition highlights the cognitive processes involved in learning English, encompassing strategies for comprehension and expression. Culture becomes pivotal as it navigates the integration of English within the local cultural context, respecting indigenous languages and traditions.

Similarly, the context considers the socioeconomic, geographical, and institutional factors influencing English language acquisition and its application. Finally, collaboration emphasizes the importance of cooperative efforts among teachers, students, families, and the wider community to enhance English language proficiency in a culturally sensitive manner. Couto-Cantero and Ellison's refinement of this framework underscores the interconnectedness of these dimensions, stressing the need for a holistic approach to ensure effective EMI in Nepal's community schools, respecting local values and fostering meaningful collaboration among stakeholders.

Methodology

In the present study, a qualitative case study research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 2006) was employed in which information is collected from a "bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, . . . and reports a case description and case-based themes" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 153). In the study, the required information was collected from the two cases using multiple sources and multiple methods.

Cases, Participants, and Their Selection Procedure

The study participants were the head teachers, the teachers, and the SMC and PTA representatives of the selected schools, and the education policymakers of the local government of the respective rural municipality (see Table 1). The schools as cases and participants were purposively selected for this study.

Table 1. *Total Number of the Participants*

S N	Participants (Pseudonyms)	HS	GS	Total
1.	Head teachers (Taran, Resam)	1	1	2
2	Teachers (Raman, Gita)	1	1	2
4	PTA Chairpersons (Yaman, Bimal)	1	1	2
5	SMC Chairpersons (Sanam, Shankar)	1	1	2
6	LEPMs (Gagan, Yam)	-	-	2
Total		4	4	10

Note. PTA = Parents Teachers Association; SMC = School Management Committee; HS= Himal School (i.e., Case 1); GS = Guras School (i.e., Case 2), LEPMs = Local Level Education Policy Makers

Techniques and Tools for Data Collection

The primary data collection techniques were interviews (with the head teachers, teachers, and LEPMs) and informal interactions (i.e., Inf Int with the PTA and SMC

chairpersons). The required information was collected using the guidelines and considering the ethical issues such as obtaining the participants' consent, building trust, maintaining confidentiality, and taking various scholars' ideas (Rana et al., 2021; Ryen, 2007). The data were obtained through field notes, memos, audio record transcripts, interviews, and interaction transcripts.

Data Analysis Procedure

After collecting the data using the abovementioned tools and techniques from multiple cases, they were interpreted using ATLAS.ti—a qualitative data analysis software. First, the data was collected in multiple forms and methods using the recorded materials, which were transcribed and translated. Then, the text documents (translated data) were added to the ATLAS.ti project and the information was interpreted using the concept from various scholars (such as Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Stake, 2006) for qualitative data analysis in general.

Similarly, to interpret the qualitative data with ATLAS.ti, the notion by several scholars (e.g., Friese, 2021; Friese et al., 2018; Soratto et al., 2020) was utilized primarily to add the documents and group them, code the information, categorize the codes, and create various themes (i.e., basic, organizing, and global). The qualitative data analysis in this study proceeded via three phases: pre-analysis, material exploration, and interpretation (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Data Interpretation Procedures*

Phases	Working steps in ATLAS.ti project
First Pre-analysis	1. Creating the project 2. Writing first memos on the overall project aim 3. Adding documents (transcribed/translated data) 4. Grouping documents
Second Material exploration	5. Reading the data, selecting data segments, and creating quotations 6. Creating and applying codes initially 7. Writing memos and comments 8. Grouping the codes
Third Interpretation	9. Refining/reviewing the themes 10. Linking quotations and codes on the conceptual level 11. Generating network views 12. Extracting networks and reports

Results and Discussion

This section unveils and probes the outcomes, articulating two overarching themes: the contexts of the field study and problems with using the EMI policy. These themes are intertwined with the relevant theory and findings from prior research, offering a comprehensive analysis and discussion.

Contexts of the Field Study: Situations of the Selected Schools

Both schools were found to have more or less similar situations. They were both established in the eighties and were basic schools (Himal School: Grades ECD to five and Guras School: Grades ECD to eight). A comparable aspect is that both schools adopted the EMI policy in the early 2010s; however, Himal School abandoned it after two years, while Guras School rejected it five years after its introduction. They are both located in a hilly area in the central part of the country. Though they were close to the Kathmandu Valley, they were not quite accessible because of their location in a chaotic topographical structure. Regarding transportation, they were just linked to the municipal office through the seasonal motorway.

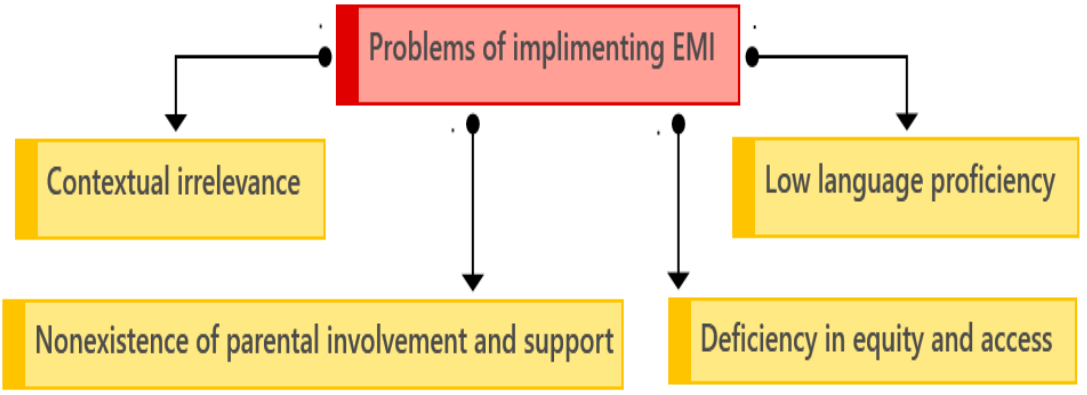
They both served around the students of 70 households surrounding the schools. The teacher-student ratio was approximately 1:9 in both. Most of the time, the schools were led under the responsibility of the SMC chairperson and the head teachers who were members of the Brahmin/Chhetri community and possessed higher HDI value than the Janajati and Dalit people (Government of Nepal & UNDP, 2014). Another similar feature of these two schools was that they served the Janajati community children. More than 65% of children were from Tamang families, who were economically poor and could not afford basic necessities such as paper, pens, and clothes.

According to Bourdieu (1977), these features represent the low-social class families who are disadvantaged in possessing cultural capital, making it difficult for lower-class pupils to succeed in the education system. A child's learning depends on multiple factors, chiefly their family, their family's behavior, socioeconomic status, behavior toward their parents, etc. Vadivel et al. (2023) found that "parents with low socioeconomic backgrounds were less interested in educating their children." Though the stakeholders of the schools have various "driving forces" to adopt the EMI policy, such as "salability of production" and "maintainability of the school," they face lots of problems in conducting the schools (T. M. Karki, 2025). The attendance of students from the low social class with low socioeconomic backgrounds in the researched areas may be the reason for the failure of the EMI policy implemented at the schools.

Problems of Using the EMI Policy

The EMI policy in Nepal's community schools faced several problems. Some associated with it include contextual irrelevance, a deficiency in equity and access, low language proficiency, and a lack or nonexistence of parental involvement and support (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Problems of Implementing the EMI Policy*



Contextual Irrelevance. The EMI policy seems to have created a disconnection between the language of instruction and the student's cultural and linguistic background. This can influence students' ability to relate to the content, leading to decreased interest and motivation in learning. In this study, both schools had more than two-thirds of the students from the Tamang community who were low economic and educational background family. Learning the content using English for those students in this context became challenging.

Regarding their learning, a teacher expressed, "Approximately 70% of the children in our school come from Tamang families, where English is their third language. Learning through English can be particularly challenging for them" (6:5 ¶ 14 in Raman, Interview). Aligning with the statement, a PTA chairperson of Guras School stated, "Teaching challenges arose due to English being the third language, hindering students' understanding in the school under the EMI policy" (8:3 ¶ 11 in Bimal, Inf Int). A teacher expressed dissatisfaction with the EMI books, citing their unsuitability for students' knowledge levels in the context, leading to difficulties in understanding and completing homework" (12:3 ¶ 12 in Gita, Interview).

These statements indicate that the linguistic backgrounds of the students play a positive role in teaching-learning activities and sustaining the policy and the programs implemented in the schools. Possibly, due to the context of the irrelevance of the EMI policy in the school, the stakeholders withdrew the EMI policy they implemented in the school. This finding is informed by Couto-Cantero and Ellison (2023), who explained that in the practice of CLIL, the lessons taught using the foreign language are influenced by the context, i.e., the background or the environment in which the learners found themselves. This is also consistent with the study by Ghimire (2019), who explained that learning became complicated for the students because of the learning context. The "importance of culture" is also said by D. Rai et al. (2023) in English language teaching classrooms to "motivate the students" in learning (K. R. Rai et al., 2022). The central point is that if the learning context is different from the context of the learners, it might not be as fruitful as desired.

Deficiency in Equity and Access. The EMI policy could create disparities among students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds or with limited exposure to English outside of school. Students who are not proficient in English may struggle to keep up with the curriculum, leading to unequal educational opportunities. Most of the students in both schools in the present study came from marginalized backgrounds or had limited exposure to English outside of school. The teachers felt that they were having problems teaching English to these students.

A PTA chairperson mentioned, "EMI in our school encountered issues due to parental unawareness, especially among economically disadvantaged Janajati families, hindering students' education" (4:2 ¶ 10 in Yaman, Inf Int). The SMC chairperson of Himal School highlights the disparity between privileged and marginalized students, noting that the "Tamang children take about two years to adapt to new friends and the Nepali language. This results in slower learning, hindering the Tamang students' progress in EMI classes compared to native Nepali speakers (5:3 ¶ 12 in Sanam, Inf Int).

The issue was similar to Guras School; concerning the issue, the head teacher expressed, "School faces challenges with students from low educational backgrounds, using Nepali as a second language; teaching in English (EMI) is complicated." He added, "Only a few Brahmin/Chhetri families students can read English textbooks as they receive English language support at home" (7:2 ¶ 11 in Resam, Interview).

Due to the unavailability of additional facilities to support the students from the marginalized community, these students could not progress in their learning in the EMI classes (Maharjan & Bhattarai, 2016), resulting in the EMI policy being discarded from the schools. This finding corroborates the statement by Cherry (2022) that realizing a weak sense of self-efficacy, the stakeholders of the schools avoided the challenging tasks (i.e., the EMI policy) and believed that the complex tasks and situations were beyond their capabilities.

Low Language Proficiency. Many teachers and students in community schools may not have sufficient proficiency in English. This can lead to difficulties in understanding and effectively delivering instruction in English, resulting in reduced comprehension and engagement in the teachers and the students.

A participant shared his experiences of problems while teaching English: "Teaching Social Studies using EMI proved challenging for me." For instance, "in the lesson 'My Family,' a picture of a family is presented with a paragraph to be completed, we were able to teach and complete it within ten minutes, even though the curriculum allocated five periods for it." He added, "The problem lies in how we can spend five periods teaching about a picture using English" (1:3 ¶ 12 in Taran, Interview). He opined that he could explain this picture well by engaging his students while using the Nepali language.

A participant faced challenges teaching Social Studies and Science through EMI, citing impracticality in explaining local values and festivals in English. He emphasized difficulties discussing celebrations like 'Lhosar,' which are better expressed by students in Nepali. Similarly, in Science classes, "explaining the function of a 'dhiki' [wooden rice husking machine] becomes extremely challenging in English, whereas it can be easily explained and understood in Nepali" (7:5 ¶ 14 in Yam, Interview).

Reception through Nepali in the EMI classes can be possible, but writing in English has become more problematic for the students. A teacher, aligning with the above participants' statements, shared her experiences of the EMI classes that "students faced challenges in writing homework and exam responses in English despite using Tamang or Nepali as supportive languages" (12:6 ¶ 15 in Gita, Interview).

A local-level policymaker opined that the English language proficiency of teachers became a significant problem in implementing the EMI policy in community schools in the research context. He says, "The proficiency of teachers in the English language is

a challenge, particularly among older generation teachers who have been accustomed to teaching in the Nepali language and have not upgraded their English language skills" (13:1 ¶ 10 in Gagan, Interview).

The finding is consistent with several studies (e.g., Baral, 2015; Joshi, 2019; J. Karki, 2018; Ojha, 2018; Sah & Li, 2018) which suggested that because of the teachers' low proficiency in English teachers faced many challenges to teach the content in English and Luitel et al. (2023) that teachers allow students' first language for "increasing students' understanding" because of the low proficiency in English language. Further, communication in the EMI classrooms involves determining the language students need to work with the content, vocabulary and phrases, specific grammatical points, and other practical activities like discussion and debate with the supplementary materials in a gender-balanced way in the classroom (Ayapova et al., 2021; Coyle, 2005, 2007; R. D. Karki & Karki, 2020; T. M. Karki, 2018). On the contrary, in the research context, none of the actions and activities provided by Ayapova et al. and Coyale were possible due to the lack of English language proficiency in the students and teachers in the EMI classes. The study also informed us that after realizing the English language was a barrier to learning, the school stakeholders terminated the EMI policy.

Nonexistence of Parental Involvement and Support. When instruction is primarily in English, parents who are not fluent in English may face challenges supporting their children's learning at home. In some places, parents are also found to be reluctant to give their children education. These conditions cause a lack of support and can negatively influence students' academic progress and achievement. Schools in these contexts have problems implementing and continuing the policies and programs adopted.

The participants in the study shared varied experiences regarding parental involvement in their children's education. A schoolteacher highlighted challenges, citing irregular student attendance as a hindrance to effective EMI implementation. According to him, "approximately 44% of the students were frequently absent, engaging themselves in recreational activities throughout the day, with parents seemingly overlooking these behaviors despite awareness" (6:2 ¶ 11 in Raman, Interview). This type of ignorance of the parents towards their activities was severe for the children's education as well as the programs of the school.

The head teacher of Guras School had similar experiences. He says in his school, "Most students from poor educational backgrounds struggle with Nepali as a second language; teaching with EMI poses additional challenges." He further explained, "Only a few students, mostly from the Brahmin/Chhetri families, can read English textbooks, and those who are weak in their study do not receive English language support at home" (7:2 ¶ 11 in Resam, Interview).

A participant revealed unique spending habits among local parents, noting their reluctance to allocate funds for buying desirable education materials while readily investing in food and entertainment. He expressed, "These parents often refrain from participating in school meetings and express negative opinions about teachers and the school interactions in the village" (8:1 ¶ 9 in Shankar, Inf Int). Another serious information about some parents' ignorance of their children's participants was that "parents allowing nighttime phone use often leads to children sleeping until 11:00 am or even noon the next day, frequently causing them to skip classes. This reflects a troubling indifference toward their children's behavior" (5:4 ¶ 12 in Sanam, Inf Int). These types of unsupportive behavior of the parents led the school to withdraw the EMI policy.

A teacher from Guras School recounted a notable incident related to the implementation of EMI, where the parents resisted extra costs for books from private publishers. A parent accused teachers of receiving commissions, expressing strong objection and threatening that he would transfer their children to a school without additional book charges. This unexpected challenge highlights the reverse impact of EMI on student enrollment, contrary to the anticipated increase due to unforeseen financial burdens (12:2 ¶ 11 in Gita, Interview). This finding was informed by (Shah, 2020), who explains that when parents are unaware of their children's interests and reading habits, there becomes a gap in parental knowledge about their children's educational preferences. As a result, the learners are indifferent to learning. These types of indifferent behavior of parents towards their children's education can discourage them from adopting the new policies and programs in schools. This finding aligns with the study conducted by AlBakri (2017), which stated that uninterested students, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and unsupportive parents weakened the knowledge level of the students and the educational policies and programs as a whole.

Conclusion

Based on a qualitative multiple case study research design, this study examined removing the EMI policy in basic community schools in a rural municipality. Both schools, situated in a rural hilly area, catered to socially, financially, and educationally disadvantaged individuals. The research uncovered the unsuitability of the EMI policy for this context, emphasizing low English language proficiency among teachers and students as the major barrier, impeding the policy's continuity. Additionally, inadequate parental support further complicated the challenges. Despite recognising the global importance of EMI, the head teachers and the teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the teaching-learning aspects during implementation.

The study highlights the importance of stakeholders' active engagement and collaboration for the sustainability of the EMI policy in basic community schools. Effective communication and discussions are crucial for acknowledging cultural and contextual factors and respecting and incorporating the stakeholders' ideas. The findings suggest that careful planning, considering the existing circumstances, and involving stakeholders in multiple community interactions can lead to the practical and sustainable implementation of the EMI policy in basic community schools, thus fostering a sense of self-efficacy and indicating potential program success.

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