

English Language Education as a Social Divider: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study explores how English language teachers and their students in Nepal have experienced about using English as a medium of instruction in their classroom. A case study was conducted at a public school in Sunsari district in Nepal where English language has been taught to the students in English medium classes and Nepali medium classes separately for some years. Class observation and in-depth interviews with the participants were devised as tools for collecting the data. Interpretive phenomenological approach helped the researcher to conclude that EMI has created a social division between the English language teachers and their students who use it and who do not in their classroom.

Keywords: English language teachers, EMI, teacher-student experiences

Introduction

English Medium of Instruction (EMI) refers to the idea of using English language for teaching academic subjects, except English itself, in “countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden, 2015, p. 2). This idea of EMI in Nepali schools run by the private sector came into existence after 1990 when the Constitution of Nepal opted for a liberal economic policy (Phyak, 2016). However, the base for EMI in Nepal started with Jung Bahadur Rana's Europe trip and his subsequent establishment of Durbar High School in 1854 as the first government-run school practicing EMI (Khatai, 2016). It is regarded as the first school in Nepal that started modern education in English medium (Poudel, 2016). Even Tri-Chandra College, the first college in Nepal, opened in 1918, practiced EMI in its initial days (Khatai, 2016).

When the Panchayat government enforced Nepali as the compulsory medium of instruction in Nepali schools between 1952 to 1990, English along with other languages were banned in classroom; however, the restoration of democracy in 1990 opened the way to establish private schools which started EMI widely (Khatai, 2016). Now, even public or community schools have opted into EMI seeing the growing attraction of the students and their parents towards the private schools with EMI. Many community schools are shifting to EMI to increase the number of students to retain

their quotas of teachers by cashing into both parents' and students' concept that EMI helps them find jobs more easily and have better access to information and knowledge (Khatai, 2016). However, the community schools do not have basic fulfilment of the requirements like educational infrastructures and qualified teachers (Sah & Li, 2017). Anyway, the issue of EMI in Nepali community schools has been a hot issue nowadays.

However, a lot of confusion exists about EMI in Nepal for some reasons. Firstly, Nepal has an economically a low- and middle-income status in the world. In Simpson's (2017) observation, the countries like Nepal go through a dilemma in their language policy. It is because they, on one hand, want to preserve their identity and originality, and, on the other hand, they want progress and new development in education and socio-economic conditions (p. 10).

In Nepal, EMI seems to have been promoted mainly by the so-called elites as a means of showing their superiority and dominance in the society (Giri, 2011, p. 217; Sah, 2023). Even the local governments who at present can formulate their own language policies have not been able to avoid English from gaining its prominence as there is an ever-growing attraction among the youths for abroad study, emigration, and foreign employment (Dhami, 2023). Therefore, EMI has been a part of language politics in Nepal.

In Poudel's (2016) observation,

English language has been a symbol of power for the rulers of Nepal at different times in the history. They learned and used English for gaining power in their politics and compete with their rivals. Therefore, observing the link between the presence of English language in education and its power effects is an aim of the present study.

The following research questions guided this study: 1) How do English medium English language teachers compare themselves with their counterparts of Nepali medium and vice versa? 2) How do English medium English language students compare themselves with Nepali medium English language students and vice versa? 3) Why do each group (Nepali or English medium English language teachers or students) perceive themselves in that way?

Literature Review

EMI has unnecessarily been promoted in public school education due to the misunderstanding of teachers and headteachers working there as they take it for a means to keep their jobs and students (Baral, 2015, p. 67). They have regained some faith of their students and parents with the use of EMI in their teaching. However, EMI has not been such a great help in the development of students' understanding and critical learning (Baral, 2015, p. 67).

The use of EMI, at present, in Nepal's public schools is unplanned and inappropriate, for it has “threatened” the existence of the other languages used in the country (Bista, 2015). Also, the

related cultures and identities have been endangered. Therefore, Bista (2015) opines that the public schools in Nepal should teach English just as an “additional language” (p. 46). However, English is being taught as a prominent language in Nepal today.

EMI has also been a hindrance to students' learning because the teachers lack readiness for it (Baral, 2015; Ojha, 2018). Most teachers cannot use EMI in their classroom effectively because they are incompetent and psychologically unprepared (Ojha, 2018). As a result, the classes at public schools with EMI have just been their “survival technique” and strategy for competing with private schools (Ojha, 2018). However, the teaching-learning activities at public schools have not been effective.

According to Rana (2018), the idea of implementing EMI in public schools is not a sensible idea (p. 51). The students have already been reading English as a compulsory subject, and English is also not compulsory in their daily life in Nepal. In fact, EMI has only promoted “English language hegemony” and has endangered “linguistic diversity” (Rana, 2018, p. 51) in the country. Therefore, a “bilingual education system” (Rana, 2018, p. 51) would be more suitable for the country.

Phyak's (2018) position on EMI is also similar to Rana's (2018). He also thinks that implementation of EMI at public schools is an “unplanned expansion of English” that has created “pedagogical difficulties” (p. 65). He

recommends “translanguaging” (Phyak, 2018, p. 65) as a solution to this problem as it promotes student participation and deeper involvement in a given topic with their prior knowledge and understanding on it.

A few studies have been conducted with teachers and students to explore their real feelings about EMI (Joshi, 2020; Saud, 2020; Sah, 2022), but these studies have not explored the English language teachers' personal views and experiences. Their findings are equivocal to the findings of the previous studies. However, these studies are more specific on the classroom delivery of EMI teachers and the problems of their students.

In Sah's (2022) observation, EMI has been a means for the public schools to cover their weakness by distributing the idea that English medium would improve the quality of their education (p. 223). However, EMI has not been more than a support to “neoliberal rationalism” (Sah, 2022, p. 223; Saud, 2020, p. 329) that helps grow “social and educational inequalities” (Sah, 2022, p. 223). Moreover, EMI has not been able to secure the quality in education as there is a 'gap' between how it is perceived and how it is being practiced in the classrooms (Saud, 2020, p. 329).

This study was conducted in an effort to understand the reality of EMI in practice at public schools and to observe how it has played the role in shaping the perspectives of the concerned teachers and students. This study includes the

perspectives on EMI of even those teachers and students who do not use it in their classrooms.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study conducted with constructive approach conceived and prescribed by Merriam (1998) as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon” (p. xiii) whose reality has “multiple interpretations” (p. 22). A public school in Sunsari district of Koshi province was taken as a case for this study. The school was chosen as the research field particularly since it has been running both Nepali and English medium classes. The research participants were chosen on the basis of purposive sampling. Among the participants, four were teachers (two of them teaching in Nepali medium classrooms and two others in English medium classrooms) and four students of Class 10 (two of them attending English medium classes and two others in Nepali medium classes). To ensure gender equality, one male and one female participant from each category were chosen.

One by one in-depth interviews with all the research participants were conducted for collecting their views. One English medium class and one Nepali medium class were also observed by the researcher in a non-participatory way. The data collected were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological approach.

Results and Discussion

Four teachers and four students of both the Nepali and the English mediums, the research participants chosen on the basis of purposive sampling, shared their different experiences regarding the medium of instruction in their English language classes. Though all the teachers, two males and two females, had been teaching the students of the same level using the same curriculum and textbook, the language of medium of instruction, i. e. English, has been observed to have created the differences. Similarly, the students attending the Nepali medium classes (one male and one female) had also different experiences from those attending the English medium classes (one male and one female). The experiences of the participants were further consolidated through the non-participatory observation of the English and Nepali medium classes.

Superiority Vs Inferiority Complexes

Both the male and the female English language teachers of Nepali medium (NMT 1 and NMT 2) were found to have less self-respect for themselves than those teaching in English medium (EMT 1 and EMT 2). It is because the Nepali medium teachers felt they were less competent in English than their counterparts in English medium due to the lack of proper environment for practicing the language. The Nepali medium English language teachers had to use Nepali most of the time inside and outside their classrooms because, on one hand, their students were very poor at English, and, on the other hand, they

lacked colleagues or ideal situations for practicing English. As a result, their confidence had been very low. NMT 2 expressed her worry

I feel very poor at English myself. I lack confidence. Previously, my English was fluent and good. It is too much difficult now to keep up myself. Most of the time I have to use Nepali language in English classroom. Now, I cannot even speak confidently because most of the time I have to use Nepali language in my classes.

Due to the low competence and confidence in English, NMT 2 sometimes felt she had been insulted by other English language teachers who taught in English medium classes and could speak English better than her. She felt inferior to her English medium colleagues. She had also been much worried about the future of her career as she had a feeling of insecurity. It was due to the decreasing number of students in Nepali medium every year.

The low self-esteem of the Nepali medium English language teachers was also reflected in their classrooms. During the class observation, the teacher (NMT 2) mostly spoke in a low voice. She frequently used Nepali for giving the instruction to the students who remained mostly inactive and unresponsive when the teacher spoke English only. The teacher herself seemed not so much confident and comfortable while speaking English in her class.

On the other hand, both the male

and the female English language teachers (EMT 1 and EMT 2) who taught in English medium classes at the same level at the same school seemed more confident, happier, and more comfortable at their job. Both teachers felt easy to conduct their classes as their students were good at vocabulary and could easily understand what they spoke. In comparison to their Nepali medium counterparts, they seemed more confident with better grasp of lesson content and language competence. They also felt better exposed to the international affairs due to their confidence in English language.

English language teachers of English medium classes had also felt better respected in their society. The parents and the students had more attraction towards English medium and more respect to English medium English language teachers; therefore, the number of English medium students increased every year.

The English medium English language teachers' opinion on their colleagues who taught in Nepali medium classes revealed their superior feeling. EMT 1's view on his Nepali medium counterparts was that

Nepali medium teachers never make their students practice. They rarely give home assignment to their students. The teachers themselves do not know the content properly. The Nepali medium teachers are, in most cases, poor at writing. They don't know the content for writing properly. Their speaking capacity is

also poor, and use mostly grammar translation method. They lack practice.

The Nepali medium teachers must enrich themselves with vocabulary. They should develop their writing skills. They should explain more about topic and lesson to their students. They should use grammar translation less. Generally, the Nepali medium teachers don't give chance to the students for speaking. They don't provide feedback to their students.

In this way, the English medium English language teachers felt themselves superior to the Nepali medium English language teachers though they worked at the same school.

Similar situation was found between the students attending English language classes in Nepali medium (SNM 1 and SNM 2) and the students attending English language classes in English medium (SEM 1 and SEM 2). Though the interviewed students (two males and two females) were studying in the same class, they had very different perceptions about themselves due to the medium (English or Nepali) they had chosen to attend the classes.

Both students of Nepali medium (SNM 1 and SNM 2) felt poor at English, and inferior to their English medium counterparts. SNM 1 had felt that her teachers had given them little attention and were little serious about their study. Mostly they had to study themselves. If they protested or raised voice against

their teachers' lack of proper care to them, they would be suspended. "If we are suspended," SNM 1 expressed her anxiety, "we have nowhere to go and continue our study." She said she and her classmates had always felt insecure and humiliated due to their parents' poor economic condition.

Nepali medium students also felt 'humiliated' by the English medium students. They thought their English medium friends were more adaptable to today's world because of the language skills they had acquired in English. They thought that the English medium students were more talented than them, and were more value-seeking than them.

On the other hand, both the students of English medium (SEM 1 and SEM 2) expressed that they were proud of being English medium students of a public school. They felt happy and satisfied because of the exposure they had got in English language. They expressed their confidence at getting better jobs than their Nepali medium classmates in national and international companies because of their English competence. The parents of both students were well-educated and well-established in the society.

The superior feeling of English medium students was revealed through their opinion about themselves and about their counterparts in Nepali medium. They felt more cared and better treated by both their parents and their teachers. Therefore, they felt more privileged while their classmates in Nepali medium

needed improvements.

More Vs Less Exposure to English Language

The Nepali medium English language teachers felt that they had very little exposure to English both in classroom and with their colleagues. This 'little exposure' was responsible for their lack of enough competence.

First, the Nepali medium English language teachers thought that they did not have proper environment for practicing English language. They complained that their students were often very poor at English. As a result, they had to use Nepali most of their time, more than ninety percent of the total period of a lesson, in the classroom. Because of their habit of using Nepali language while teaching English, they thought their own confidence in speaking English had become very low.

Both NMT 1 and NMT 2 informed that they often took help of ICT tools and other materials in the class. However, they could not deliver their lessons effectively without speaking Nepali in classroom.

Similarly, the Nepali medium students also revealed that they mostly could not understand their teachers' instructions in English. So, they often demanded for translation in Nepali. They could not even speak a single sentence in English because they generally had no exposure of English at home or at school properly. They tried hard, but their family environment or condition was not

supportive in their learning of the skills of English language.

During the class observation, no Nepali medium student was heard speaking English in loud and clear voice though they seemed to be trying hard for it. They did not participate in the class so much despite the teacher's several repeated demands and instructions in English. However, when the teacher gave the same instructions in Nepali, the students became active consolidating the idea that they could understand English very little.

On the other hand, the English language teachers (EMT 1 and EMT 2), who taught in English medium classes, felt easy to conduct their classes due to their students' good competence in English. The students could understand them speaking English. They also felt that they had better exposure to the international affairs due to their competence in English language.

Both EMT 1 and EMT 2 had got sufficient opportunity to practice English with their colleagues and students. They even felt that they had been better respected by the society due to their English-speaking ability.

Similarly, both English medium students revealed that they had got a good exposure to English both at school and at home. The parents of both students were well-educated and well-established in the society. They had a good understanding of the value of education in life. "My parents are well-educated," SEM 2 expressed

happiness about her exposure to English at home, "Therefore, I can practice speaking English with my parents."

Both the students of English medium expressed their confidence at getting better jobs than their Nepali medium classmates in national and international companies because of their competence and exposure to English.

Both students believed that anyone could improve his or her language skills with practice and more exposure to the language through various media. They thought that Nepali medium students were poor at English because they often did not practice it. SEM 2 opined

It's partially true that the English medium students are better just because they come from rich families. Nepali medium students can also manage many materials if they put more efforts on learning the language. If they want, they can manage to learn English by any means and media. There are many ways to learn English nowadays.

Content-Laden Vs Competence-Oriented

The choice of medium language, i. e. English or Nepali, has affected even the teaching-learning process of the two groups. Despite being a teacher of English language, NMT 2 had an opinion that she had to focus in her classroom on teaching contents to the students using Nepali so that they could understand the lessons easily. She had to complete the

course on time and help her students pass the exams. Therefore, she felt that her own level in English had decreased. She thought she had better English when she had just graduated and was new in teaching profession.

Both English and Nepali medium teachers of English language opined that the Nepali medium students knew more content than English medium students because of their engagement in self-study and wide exposure to everyday life situations. On the other hand, majority of English medium students were exam-oriented. They often learned parroting the contents without having experienced the real-life situations. "Though Nepali medium students are poor at English language," NMT 2 shared her observation, "They are more knowledgeable and better at understanding ethical values." She expressed her confidence for her students getting jobs more easily than English medium students who generally would prefer going abroad for higher studies.

Satisfied Vs Dissatisfied

The Nepali medium English language teachers were found to be dissatisfied at their present situation at their job; whereas the English medium English language teachers were found happy and satisfied.

The factors like the lack of proper English environment, low competence of students, lack of opportunities to practice English, and their decreasing competence and confidence of the language contributed to the Nepali medium

teachers' unhappiness. The humiliation or insult from English medium colleagues has added to their woe. NMT 2 expressed her worry that she could not speak English confidently because most of the time in her classroom and in the school premises she had to speak Nepali language. Therefore, she was anxious of her future as an English language teacher.

However, the English language teachers who taught in English medium classes were happy and satisfied with their profession. Their competence in the language, their dominance in the profession, the competence of their students, and the exposure and environment they enjoyed in the school, and the respect they got in the society had contributed to their high satisfaction level.

Similarly, the Nepali medium students were also found relatively less satisfied about their present situation. The lack of proper care and good treatment from their parents and their teachers, their compulsion for self-study, and their feeling of humiliation and insecurity due to their poor economic background contributed to this situation.

SNM 2, a first position holder in his class, had observed that the main cause of this difference between them and their English medium friends was their parents' low economic condition. He opined

Our parents pay less attention to us. They are mostly busy at work and have no understanding about the value of education. Teachers also pay less attention to us.

English medium friends' parents and teachers pay more attention to them. Their parents are richer and have better understanding of the value of education. Therefore, their parents spend more money in their education.

On the other hand, both the English medium students were found to be happy and proud of their present status. The competence and exposure they had got in English at home and at school, their better job prospectus, their possibility of migrating to foreign countries, and the care and good treatment they had got from their family and their teachers had boosted the level of their happiness and satisfaction.

Good Vs Poor Family Backgrounds

Both Nepali medium English language teachers and English medium teachers had almost the same opinion about the family backgrounds of the students. In their observation, the Nepali medium students often came from poor family or economic background. Hence, their background contributed to their poor performance in English with low competency, especially at writing and speaking.

On the other hand, most English medium students came from well-to-do families with more exposure to English language. Therefore, they had good vocabulary and a high competence in grammar. As a result, the English medium students did better at writing and understood the lesson far more easily and better than the Nepali medium students.

However, both the teachers and the students of English medium thought that the Nepali medium students could improve their English language skills using various media. They just need to boost up their spirit for the practice.

Conclusion and Implications

This study explored a vast difference between perspectives of the teachers and the students of English and Nepali medium classes. The views of the teachers and the students of both English medium and Nepali medium were categorical and meaningful. Both the English medium English language teachers and students were found happier and more confident than their Nepali medium counterparts. Both the English medium English language teachers and their students had a perception of their Nepali counterparts as less competent, less confident, and less qualified. On the other hand, the Nepali medium English language teachers and their students were found humiliated, less confident, and less facilitated than their English medium counterparts.

The implication of the present research may be that if these differences continue in the secondary level education of public schools, the differences may permeate into the society level and slowly up to the national level which can be dangerous for the social and national integrity in future. The study implies that EMI in school education has been a means to perpetuate class division in the Nepali society. Those who teach and are educated in English medium feel being

the upper-class people, and those who teach and are educated in non-English medium feel belonging to lower class people.

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