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Bachelor Level Students' Experiences Regarding English as a Medium of Instruction

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Abstract

This study explores the students' experiences on English as a medium of instruction in education. This qualitative research used narrative inquiry as a research approach. The semi-structured interview was used as a data collection process and interview guidelines including open-ended questionnaires were used as research tools. The data were collected from the purposively selected two participants who were studying at bachelor level. This study revealed that the students account for the English medium of instruction as a supportive policy for them to be sold out in the global market, nevertheless, they experience their anxieties about this practice in and outside the educational setting.

Key Words: EMI, perceptions, anxieties, experiences, bachelor level

Introduction

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) refers to the use of the English language to instruct students in classroom activities. Madhavan and McDonal (2014) refer to EMI as a teaching subject in the English language without explicitly aiming at teaching language in the context where the English language is not the national language. Similarly, Dearden (2014) defines EMI as the use of the English language while teaching academic subjects in countries where the majority of the population does not use English as their first language. Moreover, Zhao and Dixon (2017) state that EMI is intended to instruct students using the English language while teaching non-academic subjects.

The English language has been a global language in every sector, including academia. Fenton-Smith et al. (2017) mention that EMI is not only a linguistic change but also a geopolitical, economic, and ideological phenomenon that is significantly impacting educational ecosystems. So, English is not only dominant in academic disciplines but also in many other sectors like the economy, politics, ideology, and so on. The trend of EMI implementation in education has been highly adopted in non-native countries for several decades (Shan & Li, 2018). It has been perceived that EMI has become

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a linguistic capital in today's world. Thus, EMI has been an unstoppable practice worldwide.

Since the language crucially serves the students' better learning outcomes, MI (medium of instruction) comfortability of students is to be ensured in teaching-learning activities. In other words, the students are to be at the center of educational activities in every respect, including the language of classroom teaching. I recall my almost 13 year old experience of feeling uncomfortable with the English language throughout my school journey. As I belong to the Himalayan region of Nepal and I attended a chaotic government-aided school, I hardly used to understand only four or five English language expressions; 'Thank you', 'May I come in?', 'May I go out?', and 'Good Morning' up to class eight. I used to know the words separately, but I could not combine them into sentences. Eventually, I used to be disqualified for higher classes very often. This narrative works until my School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination. I used to copy things in my exercise book from the black or whiteboard without understanding. I still remember what I was doing in the farm when I was rotting the spelling of the word 'Population' and it was the name of one book in grade 10. I never wanted to get in to the class in English. I used to feel suffocated there, as I could not understand what my teacher used to instruct us in the English language. I have no story of securing mentionable marks in the English subject. Thus, I believe that the instructional language significantly matters for an effective classroom activity; otherwise, it can create negativity in students.

A number of studies have identified students' anxieties about the language of classroom teaching. Djafri and Wimberti (2016) have found learners' highest level of foreign language anxiety, especially in reading and writing. In the same way, Siagto-Wakat (2016) has explored language learners going through shimming and shaming experiences, specifically sweating, shivering, and shattering while learning the language. Furthermore, the studies conducted in various places, such as Oman (Al-Masheikhi et. al., 2014), Indonesia (Ernawati et. al., 2015), and Bangladesh (Murtaza, 2016) have found EMI anxiety in students. Such conditions can be experienced in EMI- implemented classrooms in the context of Nepal as well. I found several studies regarding EMI practice in Nepal. Sah (2023) looked into EMI practice at university level, where students were found to have mixed feeling regarding EMI practice. Similarly, Karki (2021) also found students having a mixture of feelings towards EMI in public schools. In the same way, Ghimire (2019) found students to have positive attitude towards EMI implementation in education. However, I did not find any study that explored the EMI experience and anxieties of bachelor-level students in Nepalese education.

Purpose of the Study

1. To explore the bachelor-level students' perceptions of English as a medium of instruction
2. To identify the anxiety of bachelor-level students about English as a medium of instruction

Research Questions

1. How do the bachelor-level students perceive English as a medium of instruction?
2. What are the anxieties of bachelor-level students about English as a medium of instruction?

Literature Review

This study consisted of a review of relevant literature that helped to conduct this research efficiently and make a distinct comparison to others.

English Education in Nepal

Nepal has been experiencing English language teaching (ELT) practice for several decades. It started with the influence of Britain's education system as Junga Bahadur Rana (then prime minister of Nepal) visited Britain in 1850 (Whelpton, 1987). Then, with the establishment of Darbar High School in 1854, English education was introduced formally and revolved around the Royal family. Later, Tri-Chandra College (established in 1918 AD) started teaching English courses with the restoration of social equity in the country. Similarly, Tribhuvan University (established in 1959 AD) prioritised English highly in its curriculum, however, the National Education System Plan (NESP 1971-76) reduced its weightage and credit hours later. Even though English was highly demanded by educators and students in Nepalese education, the government decided to switch the English medium to the Nepali medium of instruction in schools to continue national unity. However, Tribhuvan university increased the weightage of the English syllabus (Bista, 2011) that supported ELT practice to reign in Nepalese education, setting the ground work for EMI in Nepalese education.

A decade ago, Dearden and Macaro (2016) claimed that EMI was used more in private education in many countries, including Nepal. However, the number of government-aided and community schools that had been using Nepali as a medium of instruction has started to implement an EMI policy (Ojha, 2018). There is a considerably high number of private schools, elite schools, and low-fee private schools serving the lower middle- class group to fulfil the demand for EMI in Nepalese educational context (Sah, 2022). Moreover, the national curriculum has also highlighted the importance of ELT from the first grade in order to make students able to compete internationally. Phyak

and Sharma (2020) have stated that EMI is increasingly being implemented in schools from pre-primary schools, to higher education. Thus, it is taking over other mediums of instruction in the Nepalese multilingual context.

Students' Experiences and Anxieties about EMI

The language of classroom teaching determines the effectiveness of educational activities. So, it needs to be understandable and comfortable for the students. However, the EMI classroom is drastically challenging since the students have low-proficiency and insufficient vocabulary knowledge (Phuong & Nguyen, 2019) in a non-native English-speaking country like Nepal. Moreover, Kuteeva (2020) has stated that the students are tense while conceptualising the English language and with other issues about group dynamics, social integration, learning, etc. in the EMI classrooms. However, this not always the case. Murtaza (2016) found the students have positive attitudes towards EMI and want to implement EMI continuously in order to overcome the fear of English despite their EMI difficulty.

Different studies have come up with the students' anxieties regarding EMI. Inada (2022) claims that the mismatch of proficient and low-competent students within a group makes the students anxious about English since there can be a comparison among learners. Similarly, Ernawati et. al., (2015) find the positive attitude of the students towards EMI as they perceive it as helpful for them to improve their language skills and assure a better future educational journey despite the problems with vocabulary and pronunciation skills. While the students were found positive towards EMI in different places, Munthanna and Miao (2015) identify that the students' expressed their personal preference to EMI as they took it as a strategy to live with hope and ambitions. In contrast, Al-Mashikhi et. al (2014) explored students feeling bored and avoiding classroom discussion as they fear speaking error.

On the basis of the reviewed literature, it has been realised that the EMI is trending in every corner of the world. Moreover, the students have different perceptions of EMI in various places. In the course of reviewing the literature, I did not find any research carried out on the experiences of bachelor-level students in the context of Nepal. Thus, this study is an attempt to explore the experiences and identify the anxieties of bachelor-level students regarding EMI.

Language Anxiety

Anxiety is an unpleasant state of mind. In language learning, a person's negative emotional reaction to language learning is referred to as language anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). It typically relates to language learning that involves a psychological framework

along with emotional or affective factors (Alrabai, 2015). In other words, it is the state of feeling tense in linguistic contexts such as speaking, listening, and learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). So, it is associated with the uncomfortable state of a human's feelings while learning a language.

People can have language anxiety as a general feeling of worry about learning any language other than their mother tongue. Young (1991) introduces six different sources from which language anxieties arise personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner's beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedure, and language learning. Anxiety, brought up by such sources, determines the learners' success in language learning. Thus, Worde (2003) states that if language anxiety impairs the cognitive function of the learners, those anxious learners may learn less and may be unable to perform well which leads to failure escalating their anxiety. However, language anxiety may vary from learner to learner where low self-confidence is a significant component of anxiety construction (Cheng et. al, 1999). So, the inability to expose oneself causes the anxiety to be more escalated hampering language learning.

Being common in all disciplines of learning, language anxiety transfers other general anxieties such as shyness, test-anxiety, uncomfortable feelings, etc. (Tran, 2012). Moreover, Naser and Nijr (2019) also claimed that anxious learners could become miserable, worried, sweaty, forgetful, and have other symptoms too. Such conditions can hinder learners' ability to learn language.

Research Methodology

In order to explore the bachelor-level students' experiences of EMI and identify their anxiety about EMI, this qualitative study employed narrative inquiry as a research approach since this study was carried out on the basis of non-numerical data or the linguistic units in spoken forms. It is an approach that offers narratives about the lived experience humans as a source of knowledge and understanding (Clandidin, 2022). In such study, semi-structured interviews could be an appropriate technique (Flick et. al, 2004) for addressing the subjective view of humans. Thus, this study used semi-structured interview as a research technique and interview guidelines including open-ended question as research tools.

I have followed the quality standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability suggested by Al Riyami (2015). Moreover, the participants in the study were two students from two different campuses in the Kathmandu valley. The participants were two in number, as this qualitative research was carried out to explore

the participants' lived experiences with the phenomena. The study used a purposive, non-random sampling procedure. Additionally, the confidentiality of the respondents was maintained by removing their personal identifiers and replacing them with referring numbers in the study. The participants were given numbers in accordance with their initial alphabet in the first name, for example P1, S2.

The questionnaire consisted of three major discursive questions along with other supportive questions that let the respondents freely opine their views in interviews. The questions, by nature, encouraged respondents to elaborate on their points and posit their perspectives on their own without any interference. The questions demanded complete knowledge, unlike one-word responses.

Regarding questions in the interviews, the first question, "What is English as a medium of instruction for you?" expected the respondents' basic understanding of EMI. The respondents were free to express what EMI meant to them.

Similarly, the second question is "Do you find EMI beneficial for you? Why/Why not?" allowed the respondents to explain the advantages of EMI for them. This question explored their certain attitudes towards EMI.

In the same way, in the third question, "Is EMI challenging for you? Why/Why not?", The respondents responded with their real feelings on EMI, as they were expected to identify their problems regarding EMI in the classroom.

The responses to the questions were analysed after organizing, coding, and thematizing.

Results and Discussion

By analysing the responses from two respondents to the interview questions, their experiences and anxieties regarding EMI have been drawn under different themes.

Students' Perceptions of EMI

Regarding the first question in the interview, both of the participants (P1 and S2) expressed their understanding of EMI. The sense of their understanding seemed to be similar. As Madhavan and McDonal (2014) defined EMI as a teaching subject in the English language without aiming at teaching language, the participants were found to be aligning with the idea. P1 stated, "The use of the English language in classroom activities is EMI" and S2 said, "EMI is the use of English in classroom activities" So, they referred to EMI as the use of the English language while carrying out the classroom activities.

As the interview had aimed at exploring the participants' views on EMI, additional questions were asked for their thoughts on the importance of EMI education. Regarding this intention of the interview, P1 highlighted the benefits of EMI with strong passion as she raised her eyebrows while answering the question. She said, "There are many advantages of EMI for today's generation" (raising eyebrows). It showed the EMI craze for youngsters. As the English language is an international language (P1), people use English anyhow (S2) even though they are not competent at it. The participant added, "People can watch international shows, explore other countries, and most of the great people speak English". The English language has been significantly influencing people these days. P1 continued, "Most of the people prefer to speak in English. The irony is that Nepali children nowadays do not pass or secure good marks in Nepali subjects". This expression showed that the students expect benefits from EMI in many ways. It is used in the country considerably "...because it has the biggest value for the future since it is an international language" (S2). The students are benefited by other countries regarding "...learning materials as most of the research works are done in other countries where English has been taking over other languages" P1. Thus, EMI has been considered a tool to access internationally available learning materials.

S2 said, "EMI has also been supportive to English learning in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. and for working abroad, communicating with people from all around the world and it also levels up the study and confidence of the students". Thus, EMI seemed to facilitate students to communicate with people worldwide. So, the EMI helped the students to be able to work in the global market, and because of that, the students are advantaged with their bright future.

The popular EMI policy offers different benefits. The data indicates that EMI policy has given access to quality education for the students, along with building their confidence. In the statements regarding the importance of EMI, S2 said, "To work abroad, and to communicate with people from all around the world, we need English". This statement indicated that college students highly prefer EMI in education. In this globalizing world, people want to expand their knowledge and work globally. Since English is a common language (S2), it works for the people's desire to work worldwide rather than working in a small geographical territory. The data indicated a higher demand for EMI in education to learn the English language than to learn content. Moreover, they seemed worried, measurable (Naser & Nijr, 2019), shy, and uncomfortable (Tran, 2012) with EMI and perceived it as challenging along with being advantage us.

Students' EMI Anxieties

Regarding EMI difficulties or challenges for students in the classroom, both of the

participants shared different sufferings and anxieties regarding EMI in the classroom. Low proficiency and insufficient vocabulary knowledge (Phuong & Nguyen, 2019) created a challenging environment for the student. The data show that the students had a mixture of feelings regarding EMI practice in the classroom. P1 stated, “EMI is not very challenging either.” Even though the students perceive EMI as challenging, they positively deal with the challenges they face.

S2 mentioned that EMI is challenging as it creates problems in understanding the content and teachers’ talk in English. P1 had feeling of guilt and instant regret after the mistakes that were made in the college group because of his low proficiency in English. The students felt hatred for EMI. P1 shared, “I could not make it, how to talk, how to read, how to speak, how can I learn these many things and how ?” Such feelings create language anxiety in students. As they had to understand the content rather than enjoying EMI in the class, they focused on the content taught by the teachers. However, the students misunderstand the things (S2) in the classroom. This type of action leads the students to feel low sometimes (S2). As they did not meet the standard of English (S2), they often felt anxious. Thus, the students who do not meet their expectations of being as proficient as the native speakers of English, they start to feel hesitate. As Al-Mashikhi et. al (2014) have found students separating themselves from the discussion as they feel uncomfortable in the target language, the participants in this study also felt instant regret after making mistakes while talking to the colleagues in the group.

The responses mentioned above support the idea that the students suffer from EMI practice because of their low proficiency in English. Though Djafri and Wimberti (2016) have found learners’ having language anxiety, especially in reading and writing, this study has found the learners being more anxious about speaking. Moreover, Siagto-Wakat (2016) experienced learners shimming and shaming while learning language; however, this study has found the learners staying unspoken in the classroom instead. Among the types of anxiety sources introduced by Young (1991), this study found the participants’ anxiety to be borne from their personal beliefs about language learning that lead them to fail (Worde, 2003) in their academics.

EMI Preference of the Students

The interview consisted of the questions of whether the students favor EMI implementation in education in order to identify their preference. The data showed that the students support the EMI policy more than the Nepali medium of instruction. Regarding the attitude towards EMI, both of the participants were found to be positive despite their low confidence (Cheng et. al., 1999) in speaking English. P1 Mentioned, “I like EMI in education from the early grades”. It seemed important to implement EMI

in the college or the schools because it helps "... to carry out every academic stuffs easily" (P1). Since English has been spoken by high-class people (P1), and in office work or documents contain English even in the government offices nowadays (P1), the students need to be instructed through EMI. Moreover, the informants said that the use of the English language with family members can help them be more efficient in English in their education.

Since English has been regarded as a common language (S2) all around the world, EMI has to be implemented in education undoubtedly. As the data showed, it offers benefits for job seeking, studying, leveling up, traveling abroad, and working abroad easily (S2). The main reason for implementing EMI in education is that it helps a person with international communication (S2). The practice of EMI in education can support students with various purposes in their lives such as being financially independent, exploring internationally, developing personalities, etc. As Fenton-Smith et al. (2017) have identified EMI as a geopolitical, economic, and ideological phenomenon impacting educational ecosystems, this study has found that students have similar ideologies regarding EMI.

While analysing attitudes of the participants in the study, the students were found to be supportive and positive towards EMI implementation in education. As Sah and Li (2018) have examined the significant adoption of EMI policy in education, this study has found a strong demand for EMI implementation in education among students.

Conclusion

The study has explored the experiences of the students with EMI and their anxieties regarding EMI practice in education. This narrative inquiry used semi-structured interview as a research process and interview guidelines, including open-ended questions as research tools. The voluntary participants discursively expressed their views on the phenomena undertaker in this study. The discussion of this study cannot be generalized since it represents the personal perspectives of the participants.

In this study, low English proficiency has been found to be a major challenge for the students in EMI education. Despite the challenges they face, students significantly prefer EMI practice in education. Thus, the students perceive EMI as an unstoppable practice in today's education. However, the students have anxieties about EMI practice in the classroom. In most cases, the instant regret and feeling of guilt for their mistakes while speaking and not understanding the content properly lead them to face EMI anxieties. Furthermore, the students were found to favor EMI implementation for learning the English language over learning contents through the English language.

Finally, on the basis of the data analysis, it has been explored that, despite the anxieties, the students in higher education strongly prefer EMI in today's education as they aspire for global employment which they consider to be achieved through English excellence.

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