EMI as a Form of Cultural Hegemony

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide critical analysis of the relevant literature, particularly focusing on how English as a Medium of Instruction has promoted cultural hegemony in the context of developing countries. The descriptive summary from the documentary analysis of recent literature helps to develop the argument on different themes. This paper reports that the current trend of adopting English as the medium of instruction is one of the forms of cultural hegemony as the government endorses EMI policy in the national curriculum focusing to develop English competence as the determiner of quality education, index of socioeconomic status and the foundation of students' career. Moreover, it indicates that EMI has served the elites to channelize their power and hegemony resulting the wider educational gaps, socio-economic inequality, marginalisation of the local languages, confusion in educational language policies, linguistic and cultural identity crisis and implementational challenges in theory and practice levels. It is significant to understand the practice and outcomes of EMI in the different educational settings in many multicultural countries including Nepal. The paper suggests developing critical discourses among the stakeholders, policymakers, educators and parents to create the appropriate model of multilingual pedagogy to prevent the English hegemony.

Keywords: English hegemony, cultural minority, Socio-economic ideology, linguistic marginalisation multilingualism

Introduction

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has constantly been an ongoing debate in academia since its increasing implementation as one of the teaching models or policies in many countries to develop English language proficiency and content knowledge of students by teaching

English and non-English subjects in English medium. EMI has been adopted from primary to tertiary levels in many developing countries where most of the students represent diverse linguistic backgrounds other than English as a native language.

It is widely assumed that EMI is necessary to increase the quality of education and employability in the competitive and globalized world; however, many researchers (Imam, 2005; Phyak, 2018; Rana, 2018; Sah, 2020a; Sah & Li, 2018) have questioned the practicality and output of EMI in diverse educational settings. There has been a long-standing interest of many educators, parents and teachers to adopt EMI in schools, colleges and universities despite the decades of research focus and conclusions with many limitations of EMI to multilingual developing countries. It is significant to understand the nature and practice of EMI, on which factor has to lead this transitional and transnational debate of educators dividing them into the two factions advocating that EMI as the required teaching model for quality education in the globalised world or EMI is a form of cultural and linguistic hegemony. Different countries that are adopting EMI with the government back up (Dearden, 2014), with unsystematic education language policy, need to be responsible to analyse the results of implementing EMI in the curriculum by developing explicit language policy to address all the challenges.

Some studies (Walkinshaw et al., 2017; Yeh, 2014) focused on the demand of EMI to develop the English proficiency of the students to get opportunities in the globalised world. English language as the medium of international communication in the late capitalist world Halliday (2019) maintains the transnational relationship in diverse fields such as education, business, science, technology, economics, travel and tourism (Rao, 2019). Similarly, Gundsambuu (2019) identifies that government initiates EMI courses to increase learners' employability and socio-economic status promoting the national and international profile of the universities. However, many other researchers pointed in the opposite direction that EMI has brought linguistic and cultural identity crisis (Sah & Li, 2018) as it is a form of cultural hegemony, where the country and ruling capitalists use different civil societies such as schools and universities to support their ideological beliefs for maintaining their power in capitalist societies (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). Similarly, Rana (2018) has identified that EMI has been implemented without systematic plans and inclusive language policies in a multilingual country like Nepal with the interest of educators, parents and teachers; which has promoted English language hegemony over Nepali and many local languages and endangered the socio-cultural and linguistic diversity of the country. Expansion of English hegemony through EMI is illustrated when Sah (2020a) argued that EMI appeared as an instrumental approach of self-colonizing to the minority people and indigenous languages that they prioritize English with more value of economic importance than their mother tongue.

Therefore, for understanding the nature and practice of EMI, this paper primarily aims to provide a critical analysis of the relevant literature, particularly focusing on how EMI has promoted cultural hegemony in the context of developing countries like Nepal. The related themes are presented in the following sections for critical analysis and explanation of how EMI replicates cultural hegemony.

EMI Policy and Linguistic Marginalization

Implementing EMI in schools and universities has a close connection to how cultural hegemony works in human society because EMI has been directed by the top-down language policy of the country and applied from primary to tertiary levels without analysing the long-term outcomes which results in English language hegemony and loss of many indigenous and local languages in the society with the socio-economic and cultural gaps. Supporting this claim Sah (2020b) emphasized that EMI was an instrument of linguistic marginalisation as elites deliberately imposed English as the language of literacy curricula to maintain their status quo which ideologically established English as a compulsory skill for socio-economic mobilities in the society; resulting minorities to accept the English as the powerful literacy skill ignoring their local language and cultures. Similarly, Khan (2013) reported that the socio-economic ideologies have guided EMI in the universities of Pakistan connecting teaching-learning English with socio-economic prosperity to establish a hegemonic nation through the assimilation of the cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups. Moreover, Rana (2018) contended that the lack of explicit language policy has resulted in an unsystematic implementation of English medium in many government schools of Nepal. However, some studies also have reported the positive impacts of EMI as Walkinshaw et al. (2017) stressed that EMI promoted internationalization, bilingualism and multilingualism with improved institutional profile and socio-economic mobility of graduates and university staff. Since English as a global language, people can argue in favor of teaching through the English medium. Nevertheless, Masri (2019) claimed that EMI policy had been accepted as a taken for-granted practice in the UAE as a result many indigenous languages lost their ethnic and cultural identity in the battle of English hegemony causing violation of linguistic rights and absent of Arabic language as the medium of instruction in higher education.

Although some studies reported advantages of EMI in different contexts, there is still considerable ambiguity concerning the public choices and perceptions of EMI as Dearden (2014) reported that about 51% of people in 55 countries perceived EMI as a controversial and socially divisive approach implemented as the top-down language policy by education managers rather than consulting with the key stakeholders; which could limit people from low socio-economic background causing linguistic and cultural identity crisis.

These findings demonstrate that the lack of systematic language policy of EMI has created a kind of socio-cultural gap in society by replacing many ethnic languages and their cultural identity.

The Reflection of Cultural Hegemony in EMI

Introducing EMI programs by the government in different educational contexts can be relatable to Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, emphasizing English as a key to unlock personal and socio-economic opportunities. As a result, many parents' interest is to enroll their children in EMI schools and universities because they perceive that their children will achieve personal and economic success. However, there are many doubts that EMI can address such

expectations in reality rather it serves only the dominant groups causing learners' socio-economic gaps, and linguistic marginalisation. Munslow (1988) stated that hegemony denoted the established relationship between the elites and dominant groups through socio-political and economic consciousness with the link of language. Similarly, Bates (1975) stated about Gramsci's theory of hegemony that people were not only ruled by force but also by ideas and civil society was supposed as the marketplace of ideas where intellectuals played the role of salesman spreading the ideas of rulers to the ruled and succeed to get the consent of common people as per the interest of political leadership. For example, the study of Sah and Karki (2020) concluded that EMI has been guided by the hegemonic and neoliberal ideology of elite groups which has convinced students and parents to provide quality education and socio-economic capital; however, epistemological inequalities and comprehension crisis in education and influence on local languages and culture for minority students has stood as the outputs of EMI.

Similarly, Eriksen (1992) stated that the hegemonic language was extensively used in the education system, mass media, political and official contexts that prevented minorities from attaining power and encouraging them to abandon their maternal languages. Furthermore, several researchers (Green, 1993; Lears, 1985; Rivkin & Ryan, 2017) stated that cultural hegemony uses capitalist ideology than violence and economic force to maintain the common-sense values of working-class people who depend on intellectuals to understand the social structure; how political power shapes the attitudes and boundaries of reality depends on the intellectuals who connect the capitalist ideas in the society. For example, the recent study of Song (2019) reported that the elites had associated education and internationalization by developing EMI courses which established neoliberal personhood as demanded by the knowledge economy in the world.

The above literature demonstrates that English as a medium of instruction represents elites' interests and advantages keeping the general public in social, cultural, educational and economic marginalisation in the national and international contexts.

Perspectives on EMI

The students' perceptions of EMI reflect that it has generated socio-economic, linguistic, cultural and educational conflicts and gaps in society based on various results of EMI at the practice levels. For example, Khan (2013) revealed that students representing rural Urdu backgrounds experienced learning difficulties such as limited vocabulary and comprehension in EMI courses of Pakistan universities; they perceived that English was not an essential pre-requisite for the socio-economic development of a country because many advanced countries used national language and mother tongue as the medium of teaching. Likewise, Ali (2013) emphasized that the EMI system was developed from the macro (national policy), meso (university documents) and micro levels (actual stakeholders) in the Malaysian university resulting lack of official coordination and an educational gap in the practice of EMI in the classroom.

However, some studies have presented students' positive perspectives of studying in English medium institutions when Rahmadani (2016) reported that about 50% of students agreed

and about 34% strongly agreed that EMI had increased academic success and students' motivation towards improving communication and comprehension understanding the international culture. Although some improvements in English language skills through EMI have been reported from the EMI classes, the recent study of Zumor and Qasem (2019) revealed that EMI triggered anxiety, frustration, embarrassment and poor educational outcomes that about 70% of students surveyed the English language medium of testing caused their academic failure in the exam and about 87% reported that EMI deprived their basic rights of using Arabi language for effective communication, discussion and understanding the subject matters and better performance in the test. These findings represent that EMI has created learning gaps in different educational contexts with the loss of socio-cultural and linguistic recognition of native languages.

Issues and Challenges of EMI

A growing body of literature has demonstrated that EMI strategies have several issues and challenges in the second language teaching pedagogy in different contexts due to the gap in the EMI planning and implementation. For example, Poon (2013) identified that the dominance of the English language through EMI raised various educational issues in Hong Kong such as rote learning and lack of motivation in students; linguistic issues such as decreasing language standards and the socioeconomic issue of social mobility. Likewise, Lee and Curry (2018) pointed out the various challenges in EMI classes such as lack of English proficiency, less time for planning classes, problems in correcting mistakes and examining learners' English proficiency on the part of teachers and less class enrollment, lack of interaction, and preference of native language on the part of students. Moreover, the recent study of Toh (2020) identified that the EMI was more guided by bureaucratic rather than academic purposes as a result, numerous challenges such as learners' mother tongue interference, diverse learning backgrounds, lack of teachers' ability to deal with the second or foreign language issues in EMI classes.

However, some researchers argue that the challenges of the EMI approach can be minimised by developing systematic guidelines for that teachers' agency significantly helps in implementing EMI policies. For example, Dang and Vu (2020) concluded that a modified EMI competence framework supported to overcome the initial challenges in teaching EMI contexts to non-English background teachers in Australia because more than 85% of academics adopted various learner-centered strategies based on that framework to develop their linguistic, communicative and pedagogical competence.

However, several researchers have found issues in the EMI strategy foundation and implementation. The recent work by Phyak and Sharma (2020) has exhibited that EMI policy is largely influenced by neoliberal ideologies as a result it has replicated English language hegemony to reproduce socio-cultural inequalities between English and local languages and constructed language hierarchy in terms of material values. Therefore, these issues and challenges associated with the EMI have raised the question regarding the effective implementation and its outputs.

Conclusion

This paper argues that English as the medium of instruction has been growing as a cultural practice based on the power, ideology and dominant language policy in many countries which have created several challenges in theories and practices such as wider academic achievement gap, socio-economic inequality and linguistic marginalisation. From the content analysis based on the different themes of relevant literature, this paper illustrates that worldwide acceptance of English as the dominant language has influenced the instructional language policies in many multilingual contexts based on the popular agenda of English competencies such as the prestige, socio-economic position and transnational mobility for tempting global citizens.

Most importantly, EMI as a form of cultural hegemony leads people to abandon their mother tongues prioritising English as only the effective language to learn; as a result, many indigenous languages and cultures which are developed over hundreds of years collapse gradually from human history. Moreover, EMI policy has ruled over the indigenous languages emphasizing English as a tool to serve the elite interests therefore, EMI is inadequate to address the expectation of minority people in the reality. Regarding the perception of EMI practitioners, EMI has created academic confusion about which language should be used as the primary medium of instruction as there are different language policies at lower and higher levels.

It is important to analyse the limitations of EMI that, the trend of a hegemonic shift in English as the medium of instruction (Phyak & Sharma, 2020; Rana, 2018; Sah & Karki, 2020) without an explicit language policy neither develops English proficiency nor empowers the local and indigenous knowledge. Finally, based on the literature, the effective way forward is to develop critical discourses among the policymakers, educators, administration and parents to develop the appropriate model of multilingual pedagogy to prevent the English hegemony. For addressing many issues, gaps and the ongoing debate on EMI, the stakeholders need to be responsible for developing an explicit instructional language policy that prioritises other native languages and mother tongues as the mediums of instruction rather than focusing only on English-medium education. Similarly, further research and exploration can help find possible solutions to this critical situation for EMI

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