



Potentialities and Challenges of Adopting English as a Medium Instruction at the Basic Level in Nepal

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Abstract

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Nepal is a multilingual, multicultural, multireligious, and multi-diverse country which has 124 national languages and 142 ethnic groups. English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been implemented in community schools since 2006 to catch up with the EMI policy of every country in the world. This study attempted to explore the potentialities and challenges of adopting EMI at school level and find out the reason behind adopting EMI in Nepal. The phenomenological research design has been adopted to address the research questions of this study. The sample of study was 8 teachers who were selected from four schools, at least 2 teachers from each school as respondents through purposive non-random sampling procedure. The findings of this study show the use of translanguaging in the EMI classroom, excessive motivation of parents and learners towards EMI, lack of teacher preparation, EMI with integration of digital pedagogy, and EMI as the main causes of the loss of mother tongues in community schools. It is concluded that EMI is essential for the bright career of learners in the non-English speaking country like Nepal because of the excessive dominance of the English in every domain of human life. The English language has become the lingua franca and global language to open a gateway in business, trade, education, science and technology, information communication and technology, politics, media, and diplomacy.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction, translanguaging, digital pedagogy, lingua franca

Introduction

Socially, Nepal is inhabited by people of diverse social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. There are 142 officially recognized castes and ethnic groups with practicing of ten different faith systems, viz. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Kirat, Christianity, Prakriti, Bon, Jainism, Bahai, and Sikhism (NPHC, 2021) in Nepal. There are 123 languages which are spoken in its various climatic and ecological zones (Yadava, 2013, 2014); however the national languages have been increased as 124 languages (NHPC, 2021) which have been recognized as national languages in the Constitution of Nepal (2015). Nevertheless, Yonjan-Tamang (2006) claims that there are still 143 living languages which are on the verge of disappearance in Nepal. Nepal has 15.6 million (59%) monolinguals, and 11 million (41%) speak at least two languages. Nepali is spoken as a second language by the 8.7 million (32.77%) in Nepal (CBS, 2011, 2012, 2014).

The geographical landscape of Nepal comprises four distinct zones, viz. the Himalayas, the Mahabharata range the Siwalik, Hills and Valleys and the Terai. Nepal has been divided into 7 provinces and 77 districts on 3rd April, 2018. More importantly, there are 753 local units (6 metropolises, 11 sub-metropolises, 276 municipal councils, and 460 village councils) for official works in Nepal (Bajracharya et al., 2020). The Constitution of Nepal (2015) has granted 22 absolute powers to the local governments, while they share 15 more powers with the central and provincial governments. All of the authorities for school education have been given to the local governments in the Constitution of 2015. Nepal has already initiated the campaign on "Education for All". Moreover, the Constitution of Nepal (2015) has enshrined children's right to education through mother tongues in Nepal whereas the Nepali language is the dominant and official language in the country. Nepali has been the medium of instruction (NMI) in community schools for a long time; however, the English language has been implemented as the medium of instruction (EMI) in institutional schools since the successful first

people's movement in 1990. Moreover, there is a paradigm shift of the medium of instruction from NMI into (EMI) even in the community schools since 2006.

The Rana rulers adopted the assimilationist language ideology for 104 years from 1846 to 1950 to make Nepali language more powerful and dominance. Likewise, during the Panchayat regime from 1960 to 1990, the same assimilationist language ideology was strictly followed and implemented for 30 years. Assimilationists support the dominant language policies in order to gain uniformity in language and culture in Nepal. Literacy is one of the important indicators of human civilization in the world. The literacy rate of Nepal is 63%; however, 37% of the total population cannot read and write (CBS, 2012). Seventeen percent of the children do not attend the school and 12% drops out in mid of basic level of their education (Bandhu, 2020). One of the main causes of dropout is the medium of instruction. Most of the dropped-out children are from non-Nepali language community and minority communities whose mother tongues are non-Nepali.

Review of Literature

English as a medium of instruction refers to the use of English language to teach English and non-English subjects in the outer and expanding circle countries where the first language of the majority of the children is not English (Macaro et al., 2018). Particularly, EMI is regarded as the practice of teaching the content of the course in English to non-English subjects in countries where English is not used as an official language. Especially, in the field of education of global, EMI trends are recognized as the needs of learners for improving the competence of language skills and aspects to compete in the global market (Tran & Nguyen, 2018). EMI has been emerged as a distinct subfield of applied linguistics in this new era. EMI has emerged as a buzzing phenomenon in the field of pedagogy in outer and expanding circle countries. English has been labelled as a medium of instruction in those countries where the first language of a large population of people is not English.

The main reason behind the use of English as a medium of instruction for non-English subjects in school education is that English has become the global language and global lingua franca in the world in the 21st century. For decades, English has become the global lingua franca in the world as an inexorable language in every country. In this post-modern age, the global academic spectrum has been dominated by English as a medium of instruction (Tsou & Kao, 2017). It is a language of science and technology, information communication and technology (ICT), tourism, media, diplomacy, and mediums of instruction. EMI is an educational practice in which non-English subjects such as finance, medicine, engineering and science are taught through English (Zhao & Dixon, 2017). Despite the fact that English is not the second and official language of Nepal, there is excessive use of English in most of the offices of the Government of Nepal, such as universities, customs offices, offices of foreign affairs, chambers of commerce, hospitals, banks, offices of tourism, etc. The status of English in Nepal does not seem less than the position of second language like in India despite the fact that English is recognized as a foreign language officially in the Constitution of Nepal, 2015.

Considering the current degree of globalisation and the dominance of English in every sphere of life, it is ubiquitous for the sharing and construction of knowledge in various fields, such as diplomacy, business, and education. The EMI policy is pervasive in various walks of life in Nepal. Being English as a global lingua franca creates pressure on non-native learners to get opportunities to be successful in the fields of business, education, employment, diplomacy, and ICT (Sah, 2015). Being English as a language of hope and an indicator of progress and knowledge, it cannot be overlooked. The English language facilitates the people of outer and expanding circle countries to foster trade and commerce, education, science and technology, and ICT across the world. More importantly, the use of English is related to economic development so there is demand for English in global communication (Phillipson, 2017; Sah & Li, 2018). There are increasing trends in adopting EMI policies among non-native countries (Sah & Li, 2018). EMI has been rapidly adopted at the basic, secondary, and university levels in Nepal. This trend has a very significant impact on the education of young people. However, a few empirical researches have been carried out on the issues of why, when and how EMI was employed (Dearden, 2014) in the world.

Government of Nepal implemented liberal policies that allowed the opening of institutional schools after the successful establishment of democracy in 1990. The institutional schools were opened in every regional capital and every district capital of Nepal. The EMI policy was adopted by the newly established institutional schools, in which the children of elites could only afford to pay the tuition fee (Ojha, 2018). The use of English

as EMI was adopted to teach English as well as non-English subjects in the institutional schools since 1990. The use of English in the classroom by students as a medium of pedagogy plays a vital role in improving the competency of students in English. There was a drastic increase in the flow of students in institutional schools owing to the scope of English at home and abroad in every sphere of life. There was no concrete EMI policy till 2018 in ministry of education, science and technology of Government of Nepal. There are many changes in classroom management, the English language teaching and learning environment, accessibility of teaching and learning materials, language pedagogy, and the identity of teachers and students in the community and institutional schools where EMI has been implemented effectively (Ghimire, 2019). Due to the lack of teachers of science, mathematics, and social studies with good proficiency in English, the EMI policy in community schools cannot be very effective and productive, particularly in rural and remote districts of Nepal.

Choi and Poudel (2024) argue that EMI has been enacted in public school in Nepal within resources limitations so the output of implementing EMI in public school is not satisfactory and effective due to the lack of competent teachers in English language, poor internet access in school premises and poor infrastructure in the classroom without proper smartboards in each classroom. There has been dominance of only NMI and EMI without incorporating the local vernacular languages of learners as linguistic resources to promote EMI in public schools. In same vein, Sah (2024) conducted a study on teachers' beliefs and reproduction of language ideologies in English medium instruction in Nepal using narrative research design in which he found that English language has been given high priority for the learners by implementing EMI in community schools as well. However, Nepali language has been given less priority than English language due to being English as a lingua franca, and international language in every walk of life of the people in this world. In this study, local vernacular languages of learners are given less priority than English and Nepal languages so cognitive development of learners has not been adequately developed due to less use of learners' linguistic resources and their L1 repertoire in non-English subjects while using EMI. Ghimire (2024) conducted an empirical study on perceptions on English as a medium of instruction in community school in Nepal which he attempted to explore the perceptions of stakeholders on the use of English as a medium of instruction. The finding of this study revealed that EMI was implemented without any planning and analyzing the teachers' and students' readiness to adopt the EMI in teaching non-English subjects. As a result, the teachers and students have been facing a great challenge to implement EMI smoothly in community schools. There is no any research conducted on potentialities and challenges of adopting EMI in community schools in Kathmandu district particularly Kirtipur municipality so this study attempted to address the following research questions:

- What are the potentialities and challenges of adopting EMI at school level in Nepal?
- Why is EMI the best mode of instruction in the context of Nepal?

Methodology

A phenomenological research design has been adopted to carry out this study. This research design admits the researcher to delve subjective and multiple realities (Campbell, 2015). Phenomenological research design attempts to investigate the meaning and significance of a particular lived phenomenon (Diaz, 2015). I have adopted the qualitative phenomenological research design to address the research questions of this study. Phenomenology is conceived as the "social and cultural situatedness of actions and interactions, together with participants' interpretation of actions" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 21). According to Hatch (2002), hermeneutic phenomenology is a constructivist approach through which multiple, socially constructed realities exist. Phenomenological research design was followed to collect and interpret the data "aims at depicting a phenomenon as lived experienced by participants and as described by them" (Riazi, 2016a, p. 45).

I selected 8 teachers from four schools, particularly 2 teachers from each school through purposive non-random sampling procedure since it is based on phenomenological research design under qualitative research approach. The participants have been teaching science, mathematics, social studies, and English at basic level. The classroom observation of mathematics, science, social studies, and English was conducted using field notes. The in-depth interview and classroom observation were used as tools to elicit the required data to address the research questions of this study. In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, I have entitled the respondents T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, and T8 as pseudonyms in place of their real names.

Findings

Five global themes were developed out of several organised sub-themes in this study. The global themes are:

use of translanguaging in the EMI classroom, excessive motivation of parents and learners towards EMI, Lack of teachers' preparation to run EMI, EMI with an integrated digital pedagogy approach, and EMI as the cause of the loss of the mother tongues of learners.

Use of translanguaging in the EMI classroom

The students could not understand the text delivered in English in the classroom because they have a very limited vocabulary. In this regard, the teachers should translate content into the first language of the learners to make them comprehend the content knowledge while teaching science, mathematics, compulsory English and social studies. In this context, one of the respondents, T1, said that

most of the students could not understand the text taught in English due to their poor competency in English. The majority of students cannot communicate the content using appropriate vocabulary and standard English language due to their poor proficiency in English.

It can be inferred that the implementation of EMI causes burden and tension for both teachers and students. In a similar vein, T3 asserted that

the teachers of science, mathematics, and social studies used very poor English while teaching science and social studies, respectively. The students could not understand the actual meaning of the text due to the use of broken English used by even by teachers.

In fact, EMI creates a serious problem for both teachers and students in community schools. The teachers of non-English subjects have very poor command over grammar, vocabulary, language skills, and language functions. The implementation of EMI invites a serious problem owing to the poor competency in English of the teachers and students in school (Sah & Li, 2018). The learners cannot understand even the formative assessment assigned by the subject teachers. In this regard, the learners can hold interaction with their peers to sort out the problems in the formative assignment through translanguaging (Adhikari & Poudel, 2024). EMI promotes rote learning due to the limited comprehensive abilities and poor vocabulary of both learners and teachers. In the examination, the learners were compelled to memorise content due to their poor competency (Poudel, 2021).

Excessive motivation of parents and learners towards EMI

The English language has become the global lingua franca in every field of life. In this context, the respondent T5 asserted that

the parents are ready to spend a huge amount of money on the future careers of their children in the English medium of schools. Even in the rural areas of Nepal, there is a scarcity of students in NMI schools due to the demotivation of both parents and their children towards NMI schools.

English is the language of trade, commerce, business, and the medium of instruction in schools, colleges, and diplomatic affairs. The esteemed universities in Europe, Australia, and America grant scholarships to those students who have achieved outstanding scores in IELTS, TOEFL, and SAT. English is the gateway to be success in every field of life, so almost all parents are motivated to enrol their children to study in EMI-implemented schools to develop the competency of their children's English. Even young adult students are well-motivated to study in English-medium schools for their bright careers.

In fact, English really becomes the key to opening up the opportunities of every walk of life in the inner, outer and expanding circle countries in the world. In this regard, Khatri (2016) argues that EMI is a gateway to joining the global economic, academic, and diplomatic community due to English being an international language and a global lingua franca. The respondents (T4) said that "*the local government decided to implement EMI in the community schools, particularly from the pre-primary level, due to excessive pressure from the parents.*" According to the Constitution of 2015, school-level education has been handed over to the authorities of local governments. The local government started to implement the EMI policy in most of the community schools across the country.

Lack of teachers' preparation to run EMI

Most of the universities have been running teacher development program from bachelor to research levels to

prepare competent, skillful and academic human resources. In this regard, one of the respondents, T7, asserted that

there are even seven universities, including the largest and oldest Tribhuvan universities, which have been running academic teacher development programmes from bachelor to PhD levels. However, there is a lack of coordination and cooperation among universities and the ministry of education, science, and technology regarding the implementation of EMI even at the graduate and post-graduate levels in Nepal.

There should be symbiotic relationships between the federal government and provincial universities regarding the teacher professional development issues. Seventeen universities have already been established in Nepal. There is no policy of implementing EMI even at the graduate and post-graduate levels at the universities in Nepal. In this regard, T3 stated that *“the passouts in non-English subjects do not have good command over the English language to teach in the EMI school.”*

The novice teachers who have been qualified from the teacher commission service of Government of Nepal have to be provided with at least six months of English language proficiency induction training during their probationary period in order to develop the English proficiency. As a result, the newly appointed teachers can have exposure of English language proficiency to be ready to teach even non-English subjects at school. In this context, it can be inferred that there should be one paper as an English language proficiency test for compulsory subjects for non-English subject teachers in the teacher commission service in order to improve EMI at the school level in Nepal.

EMI with an integrated digital pedagogy approach

The students are not motivated to use mobile and other electronic equipments in a productive and fruitful way at school and home. On this point, T8 stated that *“parents frequently complain that their children are mobile addicts, so the teacher should control their children not to use mobile phones and electronic devices which is inadequate in the 21st century.”* Online and blended learning can offer flexibility, accessibility, and individualization for learners, as well as innovation and efficiency for teachers. However, online and blended learning also pose challenges, such as technical issues, digital devices, pedagogical adaptation, and assessment validity (Shrestha & Thapa, 2021; Poudel et al., 2021). The underage learners are to be offered a guidance and counselling course on the advantages of using mobile and laptops. If they use them properly with adequate guidance and counselling, digital devices can be a great blessing. In this regard, one of the respondents, T1, asserted that

This is the age of the 21st century, which has been dominated by information and communication technology and digital pedagogy in the field of education. In order to be friendly with the pace of the ICT era, we should integrate digital pedagogy with EMI in school education in Nepal.

This programme helps the students develop their listening skills and metacognitive strategies through digital literacy (Gilar Jatisunda, 2021). Podcast Addict offers a diverse, flexible, and learner-centred way of practicing listening skills through digital literacy (Kung, 2018). English with digital literacy can provide an effective and engaging way of enhancing listening skills and pronunciation (Liu & Chu, 2010). Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab supports and adapts students' learning of listening skills and strategies through digital literacy and Web-Enhanced Listening Activities, which motivate and collaborate on students' enhancement of listening skills and attitudes through digital literacy (Yeh & Wang, 2003).

EMI as the cause of the loss of mother tongues among learners

There has been growing awareness among minority and marginalised people regarding the needs to preserve and promote their L1 and guarantee the rights to receive primary education in one's L1 up to grade 3. However, due to the terrific dominance of the English language globally and nationally, the issue of mother tongue-based multilingual education has been overshadowed by EMI in Nepal. On this point, T5 stated that *“oral traditions such as folk stories, fairy tales, and folk songs are disappearing owing to EMI in Nepal.”* There are 142 ethnic group communities in Nepal; however, the young generation does not have any motivation to acquire their mother tongues due to the overlapping and dominance of English in every domain of life since their childhood at home and school.

EMI from grade one in community schools and institutionalised schools have weakened the implementation of MT-MLE in Nepal. The policy of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology of the Government of Nepal in transferring the management of public schools to local communities promulgated in the 7th Amendment of the Education Act (2001) helps the local bodies be autonomous and independent regarding the choice of language and type of education in their localities. In this regard, T7 argued that school management committees are granted the responsibilities and authority for deciding on the medium of instruction in school. School management committees are gradually shifting from medium of instruction from Nepali to English from the early grades to attract students in community schools. In the similar vein, one of the respondents, T4, asserted that *“language, culture, and indigenous knowledge are inexorably intertwined, so if the language is dead, the knowledge of life’s running forces will also be lost.”* From this response, it can be inferred that loss of language affects the attitudes and critical and creative thinking skills of learners.

The disappearance of a language of one community or ethnic group will have an adverse effect on every aspect of life. In fact, the languages of ethnic groups are the main sources of knowledge and ideas. If the languages of ethnic groups are not made the medium of instruction for their learners, they can be disappeared and be genocided by English. Languages, cultures, and knowledge are inseparable. If the language is endangered, the culture and indigenous knowledge of indigenous people will also be lost. There is an interrelation and interrelationship between language and identity in the society. People easily guess that Nepali speakers must be Nepali nationals. Having implemented EMI in the institutional and community schools effectively, there is a dearth of mother tongue-based multilingual education in Nepal. When people lose their language, they automatically lose their culture and identity, since language and culture are inseparable.

Discussion

One of the findings of this study is use of translanguaging as a strategy in EMI classes of English and non-English subjects. The linguistic repertoire of the learners’ L1 plays a pivotal role to comprehend the content knowledge of science, mathematics and social subjects in EMI classes. Adhikari and Poudel (2024) argue that learners with non-Nepali language in EMI classes can use their L1 resources to solve the issues while carrying out the formative assessment. Translanguaging as a strategy in EMI class can be very useful when learners are poor in communicative competence in English. English and Nepali languages have been used in EMI classes as a translanguaging technique; however, learners’ L1 resources were excluded to use for the interaction in the EMI classes due to being their non-Nepali L1 (Sah & Li, 2022). In the community schools, the parents are very concerned to enroll their children in the EMI running school for the bright career of their children which is very embarrassing. First, there should be guidance and counselling programs in the community schools to persuade the parents, teachers and learners for the importance of providing mother tongue based multilingual education (MTMLE) from pre-school to grade 3. After acquiring L1 properly, children can acquire L2 and L3 easily (Cummins, 2000). EMI policy can be successful and effective through the help of digital pedagogy. Learners can develop the vocabulary, language skills and knowledge of language functions through digital devices with ICT (Yeh & Wang, 2003). EMI policy has been endangering the local vernacular languages in the society. The parents do not want to provide primary education to their children through MT-MLE instead they prefer to enroll their children in sophisticated EMI schools since English language becomes the global and international language and means of winning their fortune in any country in the world. EMI policy in community schools creates both potentialities and challenges for the stakeholders.

Conclusions

Implementation of English as a medium of instruction is inevitable to catch up with the pace of using English as an international language in every walk of life in the world. Moreover, English has been emerging as a lingua franca globally. There are more potentialities of introducing EMI at the school level in Nepal due to the emerging trends of the global village in the 21st century. There should be provision of English proficiency course as induction to newly appointed novice teachers during the probationary period. The policy of EMI causes the loss of the first language of most of the learners due to the excessive use of English at home and school. English has become a genocide of the L1 of the learners in the name of EMI and globalization of English language. In the policy of EMI, it is one of the examples of linguistic neo-imperialism in the world.

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