

Driving Forces Behind Adopting English Medium Instruction in Nepalese Community Schools



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Abstract

Community schools in Nepal seem to have shifted the existing medium of instruction (MOI) to English nowadays. In this context, the implementation of the English-as-a-medium-instruction (EMI) policy has become a contemporary issue for researchers to study. This paper explored the driving forces behind the enactment of the EMI policy at community school in Nepal. This study has used the blended qualitative approaches of ethnography and case study—mini-ethnographic case study (MECS). Selecting an EMI adopted community school as a case and EMI as a phenomenon, I interviewed and informally interacted with purposively selected participants—the head teacher, three teachers, a School Management Committee (SMC) representative, a Parent-Teacher Association representative, and three parents—to collect the qualitative information. I analyzed and interpreted the data categorizing them into themes using the ATLAS.ti software. They implemented the EMI policy thinking that it would facilitate them for ‘bikau’ of the students in the market (salability of production in the market), ‘tikau’ of the institution (maintainability of the school), and with the supposition that it would be a hallmark of social supremacy. The stakeholders seem to have been influenced by the neoliberal perspective while adopting and continuing the EMI policy in their school.

Keywords: English-as-a-medium-instruction policy, driving forces, salability of students, maintainability of the school, social supremacy

Introduction

The adoption of English as a medium-of-instruction (EMI) policies in community schools of Nepal has become a focal point of educational discourse, resonating a global trend where institutions are increasingly shifting their medium of instruction to English. EMI, as defined by Dearden (2014), involves using the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or regions where the majority's first language (L1) is not English. In the context of Nepal, a nation with a rich linguistic diversity, this shift raises questions about the motivations and driving forces behind such a policy change. The present study undertakes a mini-ethnographic case study (MECS) approach (Fusch et al., 2017) to delve into the nuanced dynamics surrounding the implementation of EMI in community schools, with a particular emphasis on understanding the underlying factors that contribute to this linguistic shift.

With English steadily rising in prominence as a global lingua franca, the trend of adopting EMI has made its mark on the educational landscape of Nepal. Despite being a non-native English-speaking context, community schools in Nepal are increasingly adopting EMI policies (Dearden, 2014; Hayes, 2016). This research aims to shed light on the multifaceted forces boosting this shift, exploring the intricate interplay of sociocultural, economic, and educational factors that influence the decision-making processes at both institutional and individual levels. The significance of understanding these driving forces lies in the potential implications for educational practices, language policies, and the overall quality of education in community schools.

While existing literature provides insights into the implementation of EMI policies, a notable research gap exists in comprehensively understanding the specific driving forces behind the adoption of EMI in the context of community schools in Nepal. Previous studies have touched upon the challenges and outcomes of EMI, but a nuanced exploration of the motivations and contextual factors shaping this policy shift in the Nepalese community school setting is lacking. This research seeks to bridge this gap by employing a MECS design, offering an in-depth exploration of the driving forces influencing the adoption of EMI policies in community schools, thereby contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on language policies and educational practices.

Review of Literature

In the realm of EMI classes, research consistently highlights a disconcerting trend characterized by low interaction between teachers and students. A study

conducted by Lo and Macaro (2012) in Hong Kong secondary schools compared classrooms utilizing Chinese as the medium of instruction (CMI) against those employing EMI. Their observations revealed a noticeable tendency for EMI classes to adopt a teacher-centered approach, resulting in restricted interactions between teachers and students. In contrast, CMI classes afforded numerous opportunities for meaningful interaction, emphasizing the pivotal role of a language familiar to students as the medium of instruction (MOI) in cultivating conducive learning environments.

Delving into the Nepalese educational landscape, Baral (2015) conducted a qualitative field research study spanning various cities, aiming to unravel the role of EMI in education and its impact on the quality of teaching and learning. Despite commendable academic achievements by students in EMI schools, he identified a dearth of creativity and diminished opportunities for student interactions within these classrooms. This recurrent theme, observed not only in Baral's study but also in the work of Lo and Macaro (2012) underscores the prevalence of teacher-centered methodologies and the limited occurrence of student-student and teacher-student interactions in EMI classrooms.

Further insight into the challenges faced by educators in EMI settings emerges from the work of Werther et al. (2014), who explored the difficulties encountered by university lecturers with English as a second language in Denmark. The study unearthed the tension created by the EMI policy, particularly for lecturers lacking optimal English proficiency. Aligning with this perspective, Khati's (2016) investigation into community schools in Nepal revealed that stakeholders embraced EMI to enhance student enrollment and global job opportunities. However, teachers perceived this policy as a burden, adversely impacting student learning.

J. Karki's (2018) exploration of reasons for EMI adoption and challenges faced by teachers mirrors Khati's findings, highlighting the shared perception of EMI imposing a significant burden on educators. This viewpoint resonates with studies conducted by Ojha (2018), Sah and Li (2018) in diverse Nepalese regions, and Werther et al. (2014) in a foreign context. The collective narrative from these studies underscores the perceived challenges and burdensome nature of EMI policies on teachers, irrespective of geographical location.

In-depth investigations into student comprehension of content delivered in English in EMI classes further contribute to our understanding. Thapa's (2016) study in Nepal identified student disinterest and inattention stemming from discomfort with

EMI. The suggestion emerged that incorporating national or local languages alongside English could enhance engagement in teaching and learning activities. Similarly, Bishal Karki's (2018) study in an eastern Nepalese community school highlighted challenges faced by EMI students, including a lack of participation and interest due to difficulties understanding English content not used in their homes and communities.

Despite these well-documented challenges, community school stakeholders persist in expressing interest in implementing EMI policies, even at the early grades. The current study endeavors to address a crucial research gap by delving into the driving forces behind the implementation of EMI policies in Nepal's community schools, with a particular emphasis on basic-level education. Framed through the lens of neoliberal theory, the analysis aims to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the motivations and influences shaping the adoption of EMI in this specific educational context.

Theoretical Foundation of the Study: Neoliberalism

The theoretical framework underpinning the analysis of the study is rooted in neoliberal ideologies. Neoliberalism, as a manifold concept encompassing political, social, and economic dimensions, seeks to transfer control over economic factors from the public to the private sector. It advocates for free-market capitalism, promoting for a reduction in government intervention, regulation, and public ownership. The central principle of neoliberalism is that enhancing human well-being is most effectively achieved by unleashing individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within a robust institutional framework characterized by secure private property rights, open markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2005). This ideology extends beyond the economic sphere to influence various aspects of society, including the education sector.

In the context of education, neoliberal principles shape the perception of schools as institutions tasked with preparing students to boom in a competitive global labor market. This perspective emphasizes the role of schools in equipping individuals with the essential skills, knowledge, and values necessary for success in a dynamic and competitive market (Down, 2009). The neoliberal education policy agenda places a significant emphasis on the role of EMI. This emphasis is driven by the association of English with 'global economic capital,' 'international communication,' 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), and 'global academic excellence' (Bourdieu, 2010). Within the neoliberal framework, the adoption of EMI is seen as essential for

preparing students to participate in the global economy and contribute to the ongoing processes of globalization.

Language, with some specific conditions in the neoliberal market, plays a central role to create new opportunities for profit-making in the education sector (Shin & Park, 2016). This insight highlights how the implementation of EMI in Nepalese community schools is not solely driven by educational considerations but also by the desire to position students to grab emerging global opportunities. The study explores the connection between neoliberal ideologies and the adoption of EMI in Nepalese community schools. It explicates how the neoliberal education policy agenda shapes the perception of education as a vehicle for preparing individuals to succeed in the globalized economy, thereby influencing the language policies adopted at various education levels in Nepal.

Methods of the Study

In this study, I employed blended qualitative approaches of the ethnography and case study, technically called, the “mini-ethnographic case study (MECS)” (Fusch et al., 2017). A mini-ethnography, also called a “focused ethnography,” is used when the “domain under investigation focuses on a specific or a narrow area of inquiry” (White, 2009, p. 46) and it generally “focuses on a specific area of study to understand the cultural norms, values, and roles as recalled by the participants” (Aclan et al., 2021, p. 1496). Similarly, a case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2018, p. 15). Employing the MECS design in this study, I explored the driving forces in regard to the particular phenomenon—the adoption of the EMI policy in their school—within the limited time, and resources.

Selecting an EMI adopted community school located in Lalitpur district as a case purposively, I employed in-depth interviews for the principal stakeholders (i.e., head teacher and teachers) and informal interactions for other stakeholders (i.e., parents, School Management Committee [SMC], and Parent-Teacher Association [PTA] representatives) as methods for data collection. Using interview guidelines, I interviewed the head teacher, and three teachers who were teaching Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science at the basic level especially, in grades four and five of the selected school. Similarly, I informally interacted with a participant from SMC and a participant from the PTA representatives, and three parents by selecting purposively (see Table 1 for details). Taking informed consent from and maintaining the confidentiality of the participants, I collected the data from them.

Table 1. *Details of the Participants Selected for Data Collection*

Participants	Gender	Professions	Qualifications	Data elicitation methods
Balchandra	Male	Teaching (T)	MPA, BEd	Interviews
Drabya	Male	Social service (P)	IA	Informal interaction
Jina	Female	Teaching (T)	MSc	Interviews
Kabir	Male	Teaching (P)	MA, BEd	Informal interaction
Lalita	Female	Teaching (T)	MEd	Interviews
Mahendra	Male	Teaching (HT)	MA, MEd	Interviews
Pawan	Male	Farming (PTA M)	SLC	Informal interaction
Subana	Female	Civil servant (P)	BA	Informal interaction
Tilisa	Female	Farming (SMC M)	SLC	Informal interaction

- Note:** 1. (T) = Teacher, (P) = Parent, (HT) = Head Teacher, (PTA M) = Parent-Teacher Association Member, (SMC M) = School Management Committee Member
2. The participants' names mentioned in the first column of Table 1 are pseudonyms

After collecting the data, I interpreted them using ATLAS.ti 9—a qualitative data analysis software. For this, first, I transcribed the collected data and translated them. Then, I added the text documents (translated data) to the ATLAS.ti project and interpreted the information using the concept from various scholars (such as Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Stake, 2006) for qualitative data analysis procedure in general. Similarly, to interpret the qualitative data with ATLAS.ti, I utilized the notions of several scholars (e.g., Friese, 2021; Soratto et al., 2020) specially to add the documents and group them (Figure 1), code the information, categorize the codes (Figure 2), and create various themes (i.e., basic, organizing, and global). The data analysis in my study proceeded in three phases based on Soratto et al. (2020) viz. pre-analysis, material exploration, and interpretation.

Figure 1. Adding the Documents and Grouping Them With ATLAS.ti

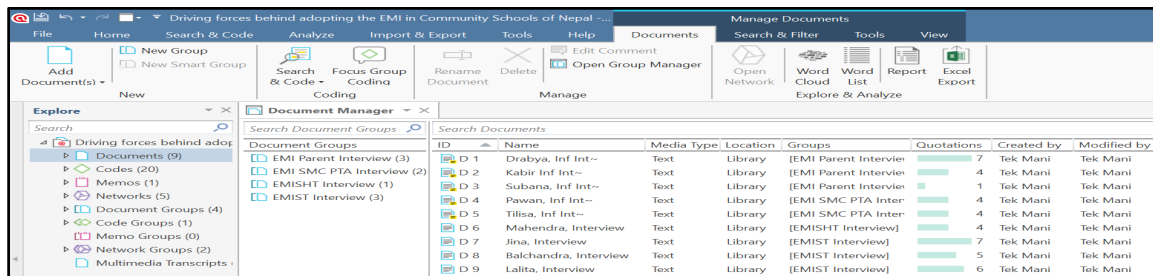
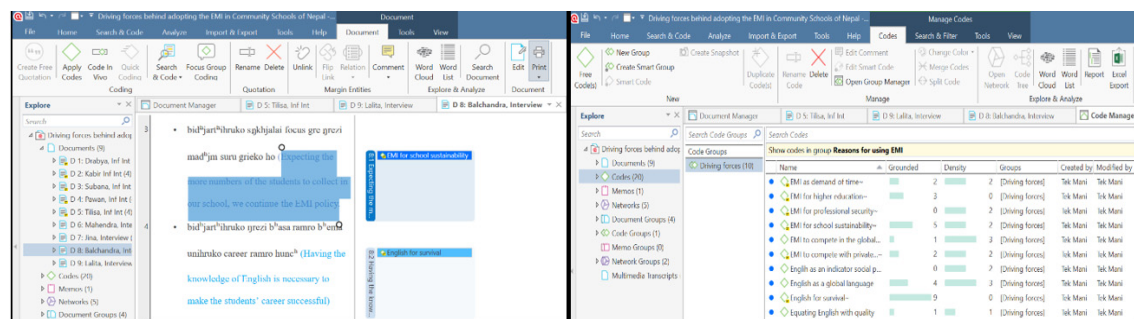


Figure 2. Coding and Categorizing the Data With ATLAS.ti



Results and Discussion

Major driving forces to implement the EMI policy in the community school encompass *bikau* (salability of production in the market), *tikau* (maintainability of the school), and a hallmark of social supremacy. These themes are explained below.

Salability of Production in the Market

The adoption of the EMI policy in the community school is driven by a concerted effort to cultivate a globally competitive human resource in the twenty-first century. Stakeholders perceive English as not only a global language but also an imperative response to the demands of the contemporary era. They firmly believe that proficiency in the English language is a prerequisite for students to stay relevant and competitive in the global job market.

The discourse within the community emphasizes the conviction that individuals with a strong command of English have enhanced opportunities in the market. Balchandra, a Mathematics teacher, highlights this perspective, stating, “Students who know the English language well are salable in the market and they get more opportunities than others who have problems in using English.” Lalita, a Social Studies teacher in the EMI policy-adopted community school, aligns with this viewpoint,

emphasizing that English is a “requirement of the present time” and that students, by studying with EMI, can effectively meet the market’s demands. Both participants stress the importance of English proficiency as a contemporary necessity, achievable through the adoption of the EMI policy in schools.

Pawan, a member of the PTA, echoes similar sentiments, asserting that students “should be fit for the international market, and this can only be possible if we use EMI in our school.” He elucidates the difficulty of survival without English knowledge in the age of globalization, emphasizing its necessity not only on the international stage but also in the national market. This perspective strengthens the idea that proficiency in English is indispensable for navigating the complexities of a globalized world and competing effectively in various markets.

An illuminating narrative from a parent participant, Subana, highlights the consequences of lacking English proficiency. Subana, who studied in Nepali medium schools, recounts her professional challenges, stating, “I am not good at English, and because of which I could not continue my job in an NGO though I was employed there for five years.” She further recounts her inability to compete in a Police Inspector examination due to insufficient knowledge of English, illustrating the real-world impact of language proficiency on career prospects. Subana’s determination to provide her daughter with English medium education underlines the recognition that English proficiency is now essential not only for international examinations but also for various competitions within the country.

The underlying motivations of the community school stakeholders align with the principles of neoliberalism, as articulated by Harvey (2005). Neoliberalism advocates for advancing human well-being through the liberation of individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills, particularly in the context of global free markets. The implementation of the EMI policy reflects a resonance with Barnawi’s (2018) assertion that societal aspects, including education, are shaped by considerations of the free market, offering individuals diverse job opportunities.

This alignment with neoliberal perspectives is also consistent with Gargesh’s (2006) assertion that proficiency in English is a prerequisite for pursuing diverse professional paths. The stakeholders, by framing their ideologies within neoliberal frameworks, strategically introduce the EMI policy to equip students with the linguistic skills necessary for global market competitiveness. This decision aligns with broader discussions in scholarly literature, emphasizing the fundamental role of English

proficiency in shaping individuals' success in the globalized world (Jayathilake et al., 2021; Piller & Cho, 2015). Nevertheless, it appears that the stakeholders at the EMI school may not be adequately taking into account the potential differences in student motivation when it comes to teaching with EMI, especially considering diverse cultural backgrounds (D. Rai et al., 2023; K. R. Rai et al., 2022).

In a nutshell, the adoption of the EMI policy in the community school is intricately linked to the stakeholders' recognition of the imperative for English proficiency in the contemporary global landscape. The narrative interlaced by the participants highlights not only the perceived advantages of English language skills in the market but also the tangible consequences of lacking such proficiency. This strategic move aligns with neoliberal ideologies, emphasizing individual freedoms and skills within the context of global markets, and reflects a conscientious effort to prepare students for diverse job opportunities in the evolving socio-economic landscape.

Maintainability of the School

The initiation of the EMI policy by the stakeholders of the community school stems from a strategic objective: the sustenance of the school's current standing, particularly in terms of student enrollment. Recognizing the inherent value associated with a higher number of students, the stakeholders perceive this as a crucial factor contributing positively to the school's overall position.

According to Drabya, a parent participant, the contemporary landscape sees most guardians actively seeking schools that offer the opportunity for their children to study using EMI. In an informal conversation, Drabya emphasized the community's perception that EMI equates to quality education. Consequently, aligning with parents' inclination to admit their children to schools that have adopted the EMI policy, the stakeholders strategically introduced the policy to uphold the school's current enrollment status.

Drabya further articulates the multifaceted rationale behind adopting the EMI policy, stating, "EMI is especially for *tikau* [maintainability] of the school." EMI has transformed into a tool for attracting students, as Kabir, another parent participant from the EMI school, attests, "Most of the guardians admit their children after verifying whether or not the school has adopted the EMI policy." This emphasizes the instrumental role of EMI in sustaining and enhancing the appeal of the school.

The pressure exerted by the existing government policy, which mandates the merger of schools with insufficient student numbers, directly or indirectly compels stakeholders to embrace the EMI policy for sustainability. Drabya elaborates on the challenges faced by schools in his rural municipality due to insufficient student numbers, leading to the closure of some schools and others being in the process of termination. In response, he notes, “To prevent such a situation in our school and to maintain the current condition of the school, we have continued the EMI policy.” Drabya highlights the proactive stance taken by the community school to safeguard against potential mergers and to uphold its current status.

Post the introduction of the English medium, Drabya notes a significant influx of students into their school. He reveals, “15 – 20 students from various private schools in addition to the students from Nepali medium schools from several places enroll in our school every year.” This affirms the stakeholders’ shared perspective that the major impetus behind adopting the EMI policy is to attract students and sustain the school’s existing position.

The findings align with the assertions of various researchers such as Bhandari (2018), Bhatta (2020), Karki (2023), Khati (2016), Ojha (2018), and Ranabhat et al. (2018), who contend that Nepalese community schools implement the EMI policy as a strategy to attract students and maintain their current standing. Pokhrel’s (2018) study also resonates with these findings, showcasing how schools, facing the threat of merger due to low student numbers, experience revitalization after adopting the EMI policy, leading to an increase in student enrollment. Nevertheless, the stakeholders appear to overlook the significance of students’ first language as “cognitive” (Luitel et al., 2023), “affective” (Sharma, 2023), and “interactional” (Sharma, 2022) tools for comprehending the content delivered in the second/foreign language in EMI classrooms.

In essence, the adoption of the EMI policy by the community school stakeholders is a strategic response to the dual objectives of attracting students and safeguarding the school’s sustainability in the face of government policies promoting school mergers. The multifaceted nature of this decision reflects a nuanced approach to addressing both the immediate needs of student enrollment and the long-term viability of the school within the evolving educational landscape.

Hallmark of Social Supremacy

In the community, individuals possessing proficiency in English are accorded respect, perceived as superior, and receive heightened attention. Their societal value surpasses that of those who lack English language skills. Jina, a teacher participant, unequivocally asserted the societal advantage of EMI over Nepali Medium Instruction. She articulated, “If one is not educated in English, others will despise them, but if one is educated in English, others will respect them in society.” This sentiment is echoed by Tilisa, a representative of the SMC, who emphasized that individuals studying through EMI acquire more value in present-day society.

Mahendra, the head teacher, concurred with these thoughts, stating, “The people with the knowledge and skill of English are considered superior and are highlighted in the society.” The pervasive theme across these participant perspectives accentuates the belief that individuals possessing English language proficiency are not only respected but are also regarded as superior, gaining prominence in the society. The positive expressions used by participants, such as ‘respect’, ‘superior’, ‘highlighted’, and ‘value’, distinctly indicate the elevated status attributed to those with English language proficiency within society. The use of such terms signifies a consensus among the participants regarding the perceived supremacy of individuals with English knowledge in the community.

This aligns with various scholarly studies, including Dearden (2014), Dearden and Macaro (2016), Gargesh (2006, 2020), Kamwangamalu (2006), Bobby Karki (2021), Rajagopalan (2006), and Schneider (2006). These studies consistently suggest a strong connection between English proficiency and prestige in various societal, institutional, or national contexts. Furthermore, the findings bring into line with the research by T. M. Karki (2019), which emphasizes that knowing English translates to possessing “social prestige,” a concept akin to Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of “social capital.” Together, these studies give emphasis to the pervasive belief that proficiency in English is synonymous with social supremacy within non-English speaking communities. Nevertheless, the study participants exhibited a lack of concern regarding the implementation of action research to address the learning challenges due to EMI prevalent in the classrooms (Puri & Karki, 2023).

To sum up, the prevailing attitudes in the community towards individuals with English proficiency underscore the social significance attributed to the language. English is not merely seen as a means of communication but as a marker of elevated

status, garnering respect, superiority, and attention. These entrenched beliefs illuminate the complex interplay between language, social capital, and societal perceptions, shaping the dynamics of prestige and recognition within the community and these beliefs help the stakeholders to adopt the EMI policy in their school.

Conclusions

Utilizing a blended research methodology involving the MECS for data collection and ATLAS.ti 9 for the analysis, this study deals with the compelling forces for the adoption of the EMI policy in Nepalese community schools. Through interviews and informal interactions with stakeholders, the study unravels the key motivators, identifying the salability of students in the market, the maintainability of the institution, and the establishment of social supremacy as significant driving forces behind the implementation of the EMI policy. These findings shed light on the multifaceted considerations influencing the educational landscape, acknowledging the essential roles of economic viability, institutional sustainability, and societal perceptions.

However, amid the recognition of these driving forces, a remaining question emerges concerning the appropriateness of the EMI policy within the local sociopolitical context. The study prompts a critical interrogation of whether the current implementation aligns seamlessly with the nuanced dynamics of the community. This raises a call to action for further research endeavors, specifically addressing the challenges and consequences associated with the adoption of the EMI policy in Nepalese community schools. The need for an in-depth exploration of the impacts and potential drawbacks of this policy becomes evident, ensuring that educational strategies align not only with global trends but also with the unique sociocultural structure of the local context. In essence, the conclusion calls attention to the imperative for ongoing research to inform and refine educational policies, promoting a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between global educational paradigms and localized sociopolitical dynamics.

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