# Application of English as a Medium of Instruction Policy in a Private
# School in Nepal: An Examination

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## Abstract

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has become an important academic issue for further discussion in the context of Nepalese education system. Many parents and community members believe it gives children a viable route toward Socio-economic mobility and global citizenship, although researchers have mixed opinions about its effectiveness. In south Asian countries such as Nepal, EMI has been adopted as a mandatory practice as early as possible, particularly in the private schools and also increasingly in government schools. Based on a small-scale action research on teachers and students of a private school situated in the Western Nepal, this article examines the conditions in which the school level decision-makers are forced to adopt EMI as a school's language-of-education policy. In this article, I analyze both students' and teachers' views and reflections on EMI to argue that it can be effective and relevant if conducted in a way that suits the local context and enables participants to recognize its value.

**Keywords:** *English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), International, English, learning, Local contexts*

## Context

The English language has been called as a preferred global communication tool, the primary means of communication and collaboration, and the medium of communication among the people of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For the people of Nepal, English is a foreign language. It is a compulsory subject taught in school. Phyak (2013) mentions that the mandatory use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and of exams in higher education has become an issue in many multilingual countries such as Nepal, attracting considerable attention from stakeholders and researchers. Currently, Nepal primarily uses Nepali in primary and secondary levels as the language-of-education, but higher education institutions and private schools have applied EMI in greater extent and have intentionally discouraged local language use in education. Many government schools have attempted to apply EMI switching from Nepali to English, while several others are in the process of applying EMI. Making policy on language planning and implementation it is not an easy task. Today, making a policy on EMI has become a controversial issue in teaching and learning activities in various countries where English is not spoken as a primary language. The rapid shift to EMI is attributed to the constantly increasing value of English. Knowing English, for example, is essential for success in many sectors, including tourism, education, and media. It has become the main way to have access to the world resources and gain globally relevant knowledge and skills. It brings the symbolic value of modernization and internationalization. Consequently, the application EMI from an early stage has increased several folds throughout the developing world including Nepal.

The recent surge in EMI policy application in Nepal seems to run counter to some reports which claim the ineffectiveness of EMI policy implementation (Sah & Karki, 2020). Such reports contend that there is a lack of adequate infrastructure and required resources. Most important of all, the teaching force is incapable in applying EMI effectively. On the other hand, other recent studies have showed that teachers in public schools generally had a positive view of implementing EMI in their daily pedagogical practices and activities (Khatri, 2019).

## The debate on adopting EMI

EMI has both good and bad aspects. On the positive side, EMI can open doors to new opportunities to interact in English and provide more exposure to help students to become globally competitive in English language skills. EMI, for example, can provide a lot of exposure to the contents, vocabulary and skills needed to cope with the increasing demand of learning from the world resources. In considering the suitability and/or feasibility of implementing EMI, the local condition is the most crucial factor to examine. There are several factors influencing the decision of applying or adopting EMI in a school. First, in some contexts, there is community and parental pressure to introduce EMI. In Nepal, for example, private EMI schools have attracted many students and families Similarly, Khati (2016) reveals that community schools adopting EMI have also been able to lure students. In addition to this, there is a public perception that EMI offers the opportunity to become a global citizen, opens up professional and academic opportunities nationally and internationally, and is viewed positively by various employers. In the two-tier education system of Nepal consisting of both government-led and institutional schools, the amount of English use varies across these two types of schools, but generally it is significantly greater in the private schools than in the government schools. Most parents who enroll children in private EMI schools trust their educational programs, and the students at these schools are viewed as talented and outstanding, contributing to the EMI's popularity. Seemingly, the only logic behind the current rapid shift to EMI is the urgent need to keep up with globalization and market forces. On the other hand, it can be argued that in the current global situation, if English is taken as a great means of communication and medium of instruction, then more English language use is better. In addition, some people contend that English is a way to improve students' ability in other subject areas. Consequently, increasing number of parents has started to move their children from public schools to private schools forcing many schools to close.

In order to address the problem, many public schools have hastily adopted EMI without developing adequate infrastructure and preparation. Moreover, according to Khati (2016), all teachers in a school must be adequately trained in order to implement EMI systematically and to apply it consistently. As mentioned by Sah & Li (2018), studies show that teachers at the secondary level faced multiple challenges in adopting EMI; students' weak exposure to English, mother tongue interference, limited resources, and linguistic diversity in the class, Khati, 2016). They further mention that some researchers have criticized the EMI implementation in multilingual contexts. They have argued that EMI introduced without reasonable guidelines and policies, or with little or no preparation and planning produce disastrous consequences.

The EMI debate is an important part of academic and pedagogical practice in the Nepalese educational context. There is no denying that EMI has produced significant progress in education in many school settings. However, without adequate teacher preparation and infrastructural support, EMI can lead to negative outcomes. Furthermore, imposing EMI in multilingual classes could be less effective, and it may not work well for teaching and learning the contents of other subject areas. There is also a psychological aspect of resistance to EMI in that some people fear that their mother tongue will go out of existence.

**Action research: Implementing EMI policy in a private school**

In the early of 2019, I carried out an action research study examining the application or usage of EMI in a private school in the western Nepal where I am professionally affiliated. The motivation for this study was the pressure coming from parents, the community, and the administration of the private school to adopt EMI. The study was designed in a series of action research steps. First, I identified the problems faced by teachers using English, the most prominent of which was students' apathetic attitude towards learning. Then I planned and carried out the actions and interventions in the form of enhancing and supporting the implementation of EMI. Finally, teachers and students' views were collected to analyse and interpret the effectiveness of the intervention. The three steps may be represented diagrammatically as follows:
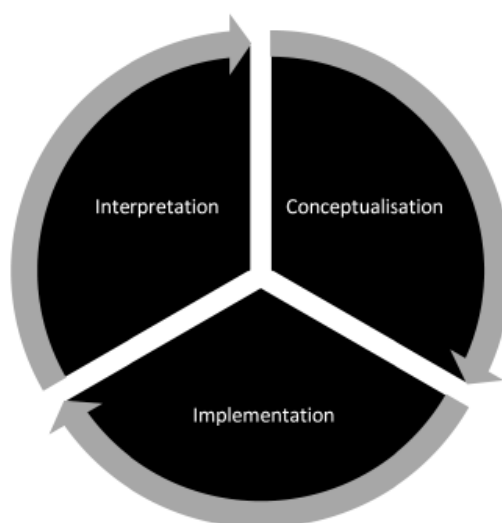


Figure 1: *The three components of EMI intervention*

As the figure above illustrates, three main steps were taken to examine the application of EMI were conceptualization, in which the intervention was conceived, implementation, in which EMI was implemented and then interpretation in which its effectiveness was examined based on the teachers' and students' views.

Students in grades 9 and 10 (45 students) were selected using purposive sampling, and asked to use only the English language in the classroom, which was designated an "English-Only Zone," and teachers were asked to present all course contents in the English language. Next, as a participant researcher (I was a teacher as well as a researcher), with the support from the institution, I organized various English enhancement activities to support the curriculum, including community service activities, computer-based activities, and language games. I also encouraged the students to take some units/courses related to science, mathematics and health in English via Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). This article reports teachers' views and reflections on the implementation of EMI as a school language-of-education policy in private school located in the western part of Nepal.

The following research questions were addressed:

1.  What are the stakeholders' (teachers and students) attitude to EMI?

2.  What are their perceived benefits of EMI?

3.  What challenges they point out for the effective implementation of EMI?

To collect data, I used open-ended questionnaires along with soliciting reflections and feedback from both the students and purposively selected six teachers. I also observed about three weeks and recorded the students' participation and teachers' interventions in the classroom. Finally, I collected the teachers' feedback and reflections on the implementation of EMI.

The qualitative data collected through questionnaire, observation and teachers' written reflections were analysed applying the thematic data analysis approach. In thematic analysis, I followed the following process:
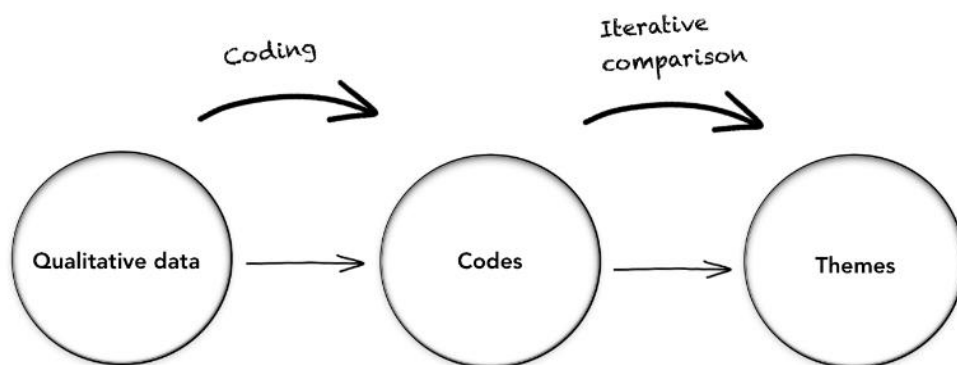
Figure 2: *The process of qualitative data analysis (source – nn/g.com)*

As it can be seen in the figure above, the qualitative data are first reviewed to familiarise oneself, then based on the research questions, codes produced. These codes then are generated into themes and then these themes are followed through the data.

## Findings

To address the mentioned above research questions, the findings are presented under the following three broad themes:

### *Teachers' and students' attitude*

I observed and recorded the students' and teachers' activities both in and outside the classroom. I also discussed their feelings towards EMI during semi-structured interview. I found that they had a very positive attitude towards EMI. Teachers experienced positive results as teachers started to use English as a Medium of Instruction. The teachers' and students' positive attitude towards the English language played

a very significant role in the adoption of EMI in school. A student, Hari said:

> *I also like to use more English language while seeing spoken by the teachers. I become so encouraged thinking and talking in English. I would like to be better than teacher in speaking English language (S1).*

This statement shows that the students like to get more ideas and to elevate the level of English-speaking skill. Students also get opportunity to practise English language. The students can learn new skills and ideas.

Although initially, I, as a teacher, felt pressured by parents and administrators, the collaboration among the parents, administrators, all the staff and students made the use of EMI successful and effective. The school's reputation also improved once we adopted EMI. So, with regard to the debate over whether to go with EMI, I argue that the decision should be made after careful considerations of the local factors on the basis of the local context and stakeholder opinions. In order to implement EMI, the school will need well-equipped learning labs with computers and internet access, audio and visual aids, and other resources. Most importantly, the teachers need to be prepared. Such supports enable teachers to adopt EMI very effectively and achieve good student participation. A student shared her opinion in the following terms:

> *We would like to explore using Google in different subjects. If we have a good internet accessed library, we can learn more and get more exposure in different subjects. We can share and teach new ideas to the junior brothers and sisters (S2).*

Similarly, teachers want to apply different materials which support the EMI at school. A teacher, Paras (pseudonym) said:

> *I want to bring the students in the computer lab and let them present the ideas in groups. I want them to explore idea of my subjects by using different technology tools (T1).*

In brief, both teachers and students were excited to adopt EMI in the classroom because they were getting opportunity to explore using different links and resources. For instance, teachers were using different sources for developing vocabulary like dictionary, mobile apps and different links related to their own subjects. They were presenting the ideas in different subjects using English as a medium of instructions respectively. The students had strong desire to interact with the teachers as teachers were using the English instructions in the classrooms. The teacher as well as the students reported positive feedback and reflections on applying EMI. Likewise, the stakeholders such as school administration and parents also gave a positive feedback for adopting EMI. A great motivation from the stakeholders to the teachers and students really made the school environment lively and effective. The concerned teachers also reported during their interviews that the unit tests and terminal tests results taken by the students went up after applying the EMI.

## Perceived benefits of EMI

### *International Dimension in Learning*

Applying EMI has provided a new lens in teaching which has received important feedback and appreciation from the concerned students and teachers who participated actively in the action research. The participants pointed out a number of benefits in adopting EMI. Their comments revealed that they

were impressed by the merit of EMI. For example, a student expressed his opinion by saying that:

> We can learn different skills and bring international dimension in our learning which may not be found in our Nepali context. We have eagerness to speak more and learn more. (S3)

In this study, the students and teachers preferred using English so that they can get more exposure on international terms and cultures. The study shows that a person who knows good English and who has strong command of other subjects as well can gain great international exposure and opportunities. Citizenship skills are among the 21st-century skills that are most important in making students globally competitive. To develop the needed international dimension, students need a solid knowledge base across various subjects. Considering the questions of what will the world be like in 2050? What attributes and skills will be required? And how EMI can support for this? The teachers interviewed suggested three main answers: 1. networking 2. citizenship skills 3. exchange program experience. For example, a teacher mentioned:

> This is the age of science and technology. Today we are connected with many educators nationally and internationally. We have learnt to network openly with others as a global citizen. We have been sharing and exchanging the ideas and resources each other. To keep on winning in the field of teaching and to make the better future, we need network, global citizenship skill and exchange program among the educators (T2).

To enhance the international dimension of education and make more opportunities available, EMI could be very helpful in terms of networking and exchanging the resources. EMI could encourage the teachers and learners for collaboration and communication skills with other local, national and international level partners.

## EMI as an effective form of ELT practice

EMI can be described as one form of English Language Teaching (ELT). If an ELT teacher likes to add a flavor in his or her teaching dinner, the salt is EMI. A good English teacher wants his or her learners to speak, listen, and think in the English language. Therefore, EMI is an ideal tool for teachers and students who are passionate about learning English. Today's parents demand EMI because they want their children to become strong both in English and in other subjects so that they can compete globally. It is a major advancement beyond ELT. An English teacher said:

> English language teaching has become very effective after applying EMI in our school. The apathetic attitude of the students has been reduced. They want to know different vocabulary items related to other subjects too. They have been taking part actively in the pair and group works and enhancement activities after adopting EMI at school (T3).

The statement showed that EMI has become an effective form of ELT. Likewise, English teachers were pleased to see good classroom management with English environment. The students also started to make a good English environment in the classroom. While observing the classes, it seemed very pleasant in the way that they spoke about what they require. Unnecessary talks stopped after applying the English environment and English as a medium of instruction in the classroom. Teachers and students' reflection showed that the classroom management took place well with the support of other teachers' instruction and English language exposure.

## *Challenges of adopting EMI*

Despite the benefits discussed above, the implementation of EMI faces a number of challenges. The following section discusses some important and notable challenges occurred among the school teachers and students.

## *Limited Exposure*

Some of the students faced challenges to understanding the English explanation while adopting EMI. The students pointed out that they wanted to translate some jargons while explaining the topics. They wanted to use the mix (English and Nepali) language usage while explaining in unfamiliar topics. Sometimes the courses were run without any understanding because of less exposure of English language. A student, Ram said:

> *I do not understand some topics but courses are completed. Most of the explanations are shared in English which I feel difficulty to understand and catch. I want teachers use both English and Nepali language in such cases. I also do not understand meaning of some words (S4).*

This above-mentioned statement indicates that the students were learning without understanding the unfamiliar topics. Similarly, they also wanted the teachers to explain in the mother tongue when they experienced difficulties. They wanted to use the Nepali language when they faced difficulty in understanding English words. A science teacher mentioned:

> *I can use English as a Medium of Instruction in the early classes but I feel tired after some hours of teaching. I want to use my mother tongue (Nepali language) when I feel tired (T4).*

This statement reports that teachers also need more exposure in the English language so that they feel easier to talk in English even though they are tired.

### *Barrier to Effective Communication and Collaboration skills among the teachers and students*

Most of the participating students replied that they hesitated to ask questions while they did not understand. Teachers expected students to use English in EMI classrooms but students felt shy. Some of the jargons were not be understandable but the students felt hesitation asking questions in English language. One student said:

> *While teachers are teaching in English, I feel hesitation asking questions and adding some ideas and points in my mother tongue (Nepali language). Likewise, I cannot communicate in English with the teachers even though I understand and comprehend the topic in English (S5).*

This statement suggests that the students did not become friendly enough during EMI. They felt shy to collaborate and communicate with the teachers. The students felt difficulty to communicate with the teachers even though they know the topics well. They could not respond and collaborate with the teachers as like they could do with the teachers in their mother tongue (Nepali language). Moreover, a teacher said:

*Classes seem collaborative and communicative when EMI is not adopted. The students become silence while applying EMI (T5).*

The statement indicates that students do not collaborate well while applying EMI. They follow and listen to the teachers passively in the classroom.

### Bottom-up EMI policy

No policy can be perfect. But the implementation of any innovative education policy should start at the bottom level, in particular the school level. EMI should thus be introduced as a bottom-to-top policy. Students in urban areas might adopt EMI more easily than schools in remote areas where schools may experience difficulties in following the mother tongue because of the lack of resources or a less supportive environment. According to Sah & Li, (2020) , some people believe that translanguaging can be taken one of the best strategies to avod the  the language hegemony of English over other local languages, but this is a challenging approach since teachers must be trained to function in multiple languages. Translanguaging creates a dynamic and flexible space of language use and is widely considered a transformative pedagogic approach to teaching. On the other hand, it is also questioned the notion that languages should not be treated as a separate translanguaging pedagogy. Dearden (2014) says that there is an urgent need for the research on the effectiveness of EMI in teaching and learning process. Likewise. Tsou & Kao (2017) recommend that to apply EMI among the educators, adequate training at all levels is needed. According to Coleman (2006), the main outcomes of EMI are internationalization, opportunities of employment, exchanges of the students program and research materials for integrating both content and language learning. Selvi (2014) indicates that the widespread use of English is a reality in this globalised world, but still there are some challenges such as lack of the qualified and resourceful trained educators as well as the maximum usage of mother tongue by the students.

Phyak (2013) discussed a long top-down monolingual and implicit language policy which promotes English language usage and teaching from the early ages or grades that is the one of the main forces affecting the use of local languages in Nepalese schools. He further suggested to observe and understand the local perspectives to find out the gaps and challenges between practice and policy. Similarly, implementing EMI policy remains complex (Phyak & Sharma, 2020).  One other concern about EMI is that a heavy emphasis on English in education may diminish social, cultural, and national identities. Rana (2018) boldly recommends that English teachers in Nepalese mulitilingual contexts, should apply the community and national based responsibilities. However, the study here finds out for overcoming such situations, a bottom-up policy and strategy should be implemented so that EMI can be made relevant in the particular contexts.

## Conclusion

In response to the global education market demand, the scope of EMI is expected to continue growing in the upcoming years. Although EMI's effectiveness remains a matter of debate, there is a growing trend in Asia, and particularly in Nepal, to introduce content instruction in English at different levels. This trend suggests that the ability to speak and teach in English will become widely required among subject teachers. Moreover, EMI in Nepal has been encouraged and promoted with great effort, both where its implementation is realistically achievable and even where it is less so. This is because EMI has become a key selling point in demonstrating the capacity to deliver quality education. As this paper has argued, however, EMI must be conducted with sensitivity to local contexts and the participating institutions must

integrate essential supportive resources to make EMI successful. Moreover, the majority of students and teachers reported that English as a Medium of Instruction can be applied with the preparation and further explained that EMI is a great key to academic success. The analysis of wide range of information explored through observation and reflection has informed that EMI can be applied to bring international dimension and to elevate the level of English playing the role of an associative idea for English language teaching. Therefore, this study suggests that EMI has become a great means for bringing international dimension, an effective form of English language teaching if applied bottom to top strategy.

## The Author

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