English Medium Instruction in Nepalese Community Schools: Perceptions, Practices, and Pedagogical Challenges

Assistant Prof. Bishow Raj Joshi,

Tribhuvan University, Sanothimi Campus

Email: bishowjoshi5@gmail.com

Assistant Prof. Narendra Raj Paneru, Ph.D.

Tribhuvan University, Sanothimi Campus (corresponding author)

Email: nrajpaneru@gmail.com

Abstract

The adoption of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Nepalese community schools has played a significant role due to its implications for global competitiveness, socio-cultural calls, local cultural sharing, and promotion. This article essentially explores the perceptions, practices, and challenges associated with EMI in community schools in Nepal, focusing on its implementation in subjects such as science, mathematics, and computer science linked to school education and the global job market. Employing a phenomenological research design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews and field observations with students, teachers, School Management Committees (SMCs), parents, and local government representatives. The findings of this study reveal an urgent need for EMI in community schools due to pressure created by institutional schools and globalized socio-economic realities. It also discloses the bilingual approach to EMI due to limited English proficiency among teachers and students, and highlights the need for effective teacher training programmes to address pedagogical and linguistic challenges. Emphasizing a context-specific approach to EMI implementation in Nepal, the study concludes with recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to adopt informed and effective strategies for effective EMI implementation while balancing global aspirations with local realities.

Keywords: *English Medium Instruction, bilingual education, teacher development, linguistic challenges, cultural preservation*

Introduction

The global trend towards English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has been a subject of extensive research and debate for a long time at home and abroad. Though its adoption has frequently been portrayed as a pathway to the global competitive market and economic opportunities, it raises major concerns about linguistic and cultural sharing and promotion in non-native English-speaking countries like Nepal. The implementation of EMI in Nepal—a country with a rich tapestry of languages and cultures—adds further complexity to this debate since it has been practising two types of education systems—English medium and Nepali medium—for a long time. English as a medium of instruction (EMI), basically adopted by the institutional schools in Nepal, brands as the better education for better careers and opportunities in and abroad, whereas Nepali as a medium of instruction (NMI), usually practised in the community schools, have been considered "inferior and poorer" in their quality and

performance. Furthermore, the slogan raised by the activists for mother tongue education has also been loudly heard in the mass media but sadly accepted in the realities. The battle between EMI, NMI, and mother tongue education has given priority to EMI for the global market, education, communication, and migration. With over 124 languages spoken across Nepal (CBS, 2021), the introduction of EMI in community schools is expected to impact educational equity, linguistic diversity, and cultural heritage.

The adoption of EMI has been widely studied across different regions—Nepal or abroad —revealing its multifaceted implications. Chan et al. (1997) analyzed EMI policy implementation in Hong Kong schools and observed a decline in academic performance due to inadequate teacher preparedness and a lack of curriculum adaptation. Similarly, Tsui (2004) highlighted challenges such as limited teacher proficiency in English and insufficient support for professional development in Hong Kong, emphasizing the necessity of targeted interventions to ensure successful implementation. In South Asia, Meganathan (2016) examined the dual role of English in Indian education as both a "library language" for academic enrichment and a "language of empowerment" for upward mobility. Even in Nepal, English has been gradually shifting from a subject of an academic course to day-to-day communication. These studies and experiences in and abroad collectively emphasize the importance of EMI in modernizing the educational plans and practices as well as empowering the pupils and workforce.

In Nepal, research on EMI still is emerging focusing on the complexities involved in integrating EMI into a linguistically diverse education system. Furthermore, the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI), the NMI (Nepali as a medium of instruction) and the mother tongue as a medium of instruction (MOI) have been combatting for a long time. However, the global demand and need to insist on EMI as a compelling agenda of this time. Bhattarai and Gautam (2005) explored the challenges faced by English language teachers, who often solve tensions between meeting global demands and addressing local realities. Bista (2011) provided a historical overview of English language teaching in Nepal, noting its growing prominence in policy discourse. More recently, Ojha (2018) focused on the increasing adoption of EMI in community schools, identifying teacher preparedness, resource constraints, and sociolinguistic barriers as significant hurdles. These studies reveal that though EMI is gaining momentum, its implementation is fraught with challenges that require systematic investigation.

Effective teacher training and professional development are critical to the successful implementation of EMI. Teachers play an significant role in translating EMI policies into classroom practices, yet many lack the necessary skills to teach effectively in English. Brown (2018) and the British Council (2014, 2018) highlighted the urgent need for tailored professional development programs in Nepal, emphasizing capacity building in English language teaching (ELT) methods and classroom management in EMI contexts. Without adequate training, teachers may struggle to deliver content effectively as a result it leads them to suboptimal learning outcomes and widened educational inequities. Furthermore, Bhattarai and Gautam (2005) stressed the importance of continuous support mechanisms, such as mentorship and access to teaching resources, to enhance teachers' confidence and effectiveness in EMI settings.

The introduction of EMI in the education system of Nepal cannot be examined in isolation from the country's linguistic and cultural landscape. Nepal is home to multiple indigenous languages, many of which are already endangered due to the dominance of Nepali as the national language (Eagle, 1999; Rai et al., 2011). The shift to EMI in community schools risks worsening this trend, potentially marginalizing local languages and cultures further. Wood (1965) argued that educational policies in Nepal must consider its unique linguistic diversity to ensure inclusivity and equity. Similarly, scholars like Giri (2010) have emphasized the importance of adopting a bilingual or multilingual approach to education, integrating English while maintaining a strong foundation in local languages. These perspectives emphasize the need for EMI policy that prioritizes both global competitiveness and cultural preservation.

Stakeholder perceptions are central to understanding the practical realities of EMI implementation. Students, teachers, and administrators bring diverse perspectives shaped by their experiences, aspirations, and challenges. For instance, while students often view English proficiency as a gateway to better opportunities, they may face difficulties in comprehending and engaging with EMI lessons due to limited language skills (Ojha, 2018). Teachers, on the other hand, may feel underprepared or unsupported in transitioning to EMI, particularly in rural areas with limited access to training resources (Bista, 2011). Administrators play a crucial role in policy enforcement but often lack the strategic guidance needed to implement EMI effectively. Understanding these varied perceptions is essential for designing contextually appropriate interventions that address stakeholder needs.

Implementing EMI in Nepalese community schools presents several challenges. It ranges from structural barriers to sociolinguistic complexities. Resource limitations, including inadequate teaching materials and poorly equipped classrooms, hinder the effective delivery of EMI (British Council, 2018). Linguistic challenges, such as students' and teachers' varying levels of English proficiency, further complicate the teaching-learning process. Moreover, sociocultural factors, such as parental expectations and community attitudes toward English, influence the success of EMI initiatives. For instance, while many parents support EMI as a means of securing better futures for their children, they may inadvertently contribute to the erosion of local linguistic identities (Eagle, 1999; Ojha, 2018).

To address these challenges, it requires a multi-faceted approach that combines policy reform, capacity building, and community engagement. First, policymakers should adopt a phased implementation strategy, starting with bilingual or multilingual education models that ease the transition to EMI (Giri, 2010; Tsui, 2004). Second, teacher training programs must be expanded to include both pre-service and in-service modules focused on EMI pedagogy, classroom strategies, and language development (Brown, 2018). Third, resource allocation should prioritize equipping schools with teaching aids, technology, and infrastructure to support EMI delivery. Finally, community awareness campaigns should be conducted to foster a balanced understanding of EMI's benefits and limitations, encouraging active participation from parents and local stakeholders.

This study is expected to be significant for several reasons. First, it may contribute to the limited body of research on EMI in Nepal by addressing a critical gap in the literature.

Second, it can provide evidence-based insights to inform policy decisions, teacher training programs, and curriculum development efforts. Finally, it shall offer a detailed understanding of the complexities involved in balancing global demands for English proficiency with the need to preserve the linguistic and cultural heritage of Nepal. Future research should expand the scope of inquiry by incorporating longitudinal studies that track the long-term impacts of EMI on students' academic performance and socio-cultural integration.

In this sense, the global trend toward EMI reflects the growing importance of English in a globalized world, yet its implementation in linguistically diverse contexts like Nepal presents unique challenges and opportunities. This study attempts to explore the perceptions, challenges, and solutions associated with EMI in Nepalese community schools, contributing to a broader understanding of its implications. By addressing these issues, the research seeks to inform policies and practices that promote equitable and effective EMI implementation while safeguarding Nepal's linguistic and cultural diversity. Through a balanced approach that integrates local and global perspectives, Nepal can chart a path toward a more inclusive and sustainable education system.

Review of the Related Literature

The global adoption of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is a multidimensional phenomenon. Conceptually, EMI refers to the use of English to teach academic subjects in non-native English-speaking settings, aiming to enhance global competitiveness and proficiency in English among students (Dearden, 2014). However, its implementation often intersects with broader socio-linguistic and cultural dynamics, posing challenges to linguistic equity and inclusivity (Eagle, 1999). In Nepal, the shift towards EMI in community schools is driven by aspirations to align with global trends while addressing local educational demands (Ojha, 2018). The debate surrounding EMI in Nepal pivots on the tension between the perceived benefits of English proficiency for global integration and the need to preserve Nepal's multilingual heritage (Giri, 2010).

Key conceptual considerations include linguistic capital, linguistic inequality, and pedagogical dynamics. Linguistic capital refers to English as a gateway to economic and social mobility (Meganathan, 2016). Similarly, linguistic inequality denotes the dominance of English that may marginalize indigenous languages (Wood, 1965). Pedagogical dynamics describes the effectiveness of EMI which depends on teacher training, curriculum adaptation, and availability of resources (Brown, 2018; British Council, 2014).

Theoretically, EMI can be observed in multilingual societies through various lenses such as Bourdieu's theory of cultural and linguistic capital, sociolinguistic ecology, critical pedagogy and language policy, second language acquisition and so on. In this regard, Bourdieu (1991) posits that languages function as symbolic capital, granting individuals access to power and resources. In Nepal, English represents high linguistic capital, yet its imposition through EMI risks undermining local languages and identities (Eagle, 1999). However, Haugen's (1972) framework emphasizes the interdependence of languages within an ecosystem. It highlights the need to balance English with local languages in education to sustain Nepal's linguistic diversity. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) challenges power imbalances in educational systems, advocating for inclusive policies that respect linguistic and cultural

diversity. EMI policies in Nepal should align with these principles to avoid perpetuating inequalities (Giri, 2010). Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis underscores the importance of comprehensible input for effective language learning. EMI in Nepalese schools must ensure that instruction is accessible to students with varying levels of English proficiency (Tsui, 2004).

The reviewed literature has emphasized policy design, teacher training, resource allocation, and community engagement for EMI implementation in Nepalese community schools. For instance, policies must balance global aspirations for English proficiency with the preservation of Nepal's linguistic heritage (Giri, 2010; Eagle, 1999). Similarly, comprehensive training programs are essential to equip teachers with the skills needed for effective EMI delivery (British Council, 2014, 2018). Furthermore, schools must be adequately resourced with teaching aids, technology, and infrastructure to support EMI (Brown, 2018). Awareness campaigns should involve parents and communities to build consensus on the benefits and limitations of EMI (Ojha, 2018).

Despite the growing body of literature on EMI, there remain several gaps. They include limited empirical studies on the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators regarding EMI in Nepalese community schools; insufficient research on the socio-cultural and linguistic impacts of EMI, particularly in rural and multilingual settings; and lack of comprehensive frameworks addressing the challenges of EMI implementation in resource-constrained environments.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study examines the complex dynamics of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Nepalese community schools by connecting global competitiveness, pedagogical challenges, and sociocultural factors. At the core, the framework recognizes the global push for English proficiency as a driver for EMI adoption, which is tempered by the pedagogical and linguistic challenges arising from limited teacher preparedness and language barriers. The framework also underscores the importance of balancing EMI with the preservation of Nepal's rich linguistic and cultural heritage, through bilingual or multilingual education strategies. Stakeholder perspectives, particularly from students, teachers, and communities, are crucial in shaping EMI implementation policies that are contextually relevant. Teacher training and curriculum adaptation are central to the successful integration of EMI, requiring both structural reforms and community engagement to ensure that local cultural identities are maintained while enhancing students' global opportunities.

Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework*
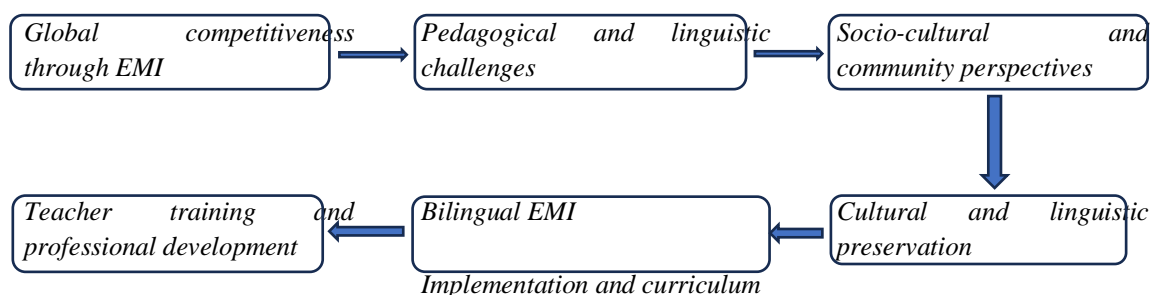
Methodology

The study employed a phenomenological design to explore the complexities of implementing English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Nepalese community schools, focusing on the lived experiences of stakeholders. This qualitative approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, practices, and challenges associated with EMI within linguistically and culturally diverse context of Nepal. Purposive sampling was used to select participants deeply involved in the educational process, including students, teachers, School Management Committee (SMC) representatives, and local government officials. Data collection methods included Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students to capture their perceptions, in-depth interviews with teachers and administrators to understand pedagogical and administrative dimensions, and the researcher's field notes to document observational insights. This methodological triangulation ensured a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of EMI practices and challenges (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, identifying four major themes aligned with the study's objectives and theoretical framework. Data was systematically coded and categorized under these themes to interpret the findings effectively. Ethical guidelines were rigorously followed, with informed consent obtained from all participants and measures implemented to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. The study adhered to institutional review board protocols, ensuring the credibility and integrity of the research process. This methodological rigor contributes to the reliability of the findings, offering valuable insights into EMI implementation in Nepalese community schools and addressing gaps in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2015).

Results and Discussions

The study revealed a multifaceted landscape surrounding the implementation of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Nepalese community schools. Findings indicate a perceived necessity for EMI in subjects linked to higher education and global competitiveness, such as Science, Mathematics, and Computer Science. English proficiency in these subjects is seen as essential for preparing students to excel in higher studies and the international job market. However, for culturally rich subjects like Social Studies, instruction in the Nepali language was perceived as more effective. These subjects, rooted in local norms, culture, and values, benefit from a medium of instruction that fosters deeper understanding, creativity, and critical thinking. The preference for Nepali in such contexts reflects the tension between global aspirations and cultural preservation (Bhattarai & Gautam, 2005; Eagle, 1999).

The majority of the teachers in the study perceive English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) as a potential gateway to global opportunities for students but are grappling with significant challenges in implementation. A recurring concern among teachers is their lack of proficiency and insufficient training. Many feel inadequately prepared to conduct lessons in English, leading to frustration and reduced confidence. One of the teachers shared, "*We are expected to teach in English without proper training….In fact, I learned English as a subject, not as a medium of communication to teach my subject in English….It feels like we are thrown into the deep end.* His expression stresses the systemic gaps in EMI preparation.

Furthermore, teachers emphasized that their limited command of English affects both their teaching effectiveness and their ability to manage classroom interactions. This challenge becomes more acute in technical subjects, as another teacher explained, "*Students struggle to understand the lessons when taught in English and often remain silent, … and it's hard to tell whether they are following or not.* This observation aligns with Hamid et al. (2019), who argue that EMI can stifle learning in multilingual classrooms, particularly when both teachers and students lack fluency in English. Such disconnect between teacher competencies and EMI expectations highlights the urgent need for robust training programs tailored to diverse classroom contexts.

Similarly, students' perceptions of EMI reveal a dual narrative of optimism and alienation. On one hand, students recognize the advantages of mastering English for academic and professional success. On the other, they feel overwhelmed by the language barrier and its impact on their comprehension and confidence. A Grade 10 student admitted, "*I know English is important for my future, but it's hard to understand the lessons…. Sometimes, I feel like giving up because I can't keep up.*" Her sentiment resonates with García and Wei (2014), who emphasize the cognitive and emotional toll of monolingual EMI policies in multilingual contexts. Students also reported feeling socially constrained by the institutional pressure to use English, even during informal interactions. As one student felt "*pressured to use English even during breaks*" though he wants to speak in Nepali but is compelled to speak in English. It seems unnatural. His experiences highlight the tension between students' aspirations for English proficiency and the realities of linguistic readiness.

In the same line, administrators, while recognizing the societal demand for EMI, expressed concerns about its feasibility and effectiveness. They acknowledged that the push for EMI is largely driven by parental aspirations rather than pedagogical preparedness. One administrator explained that parents believe that EMI will secure a better future for their children, but they do not see the struggles that the school faces in implementing it. She further complained that they do not have "*the trained teachers, resources, or infrastructure*" to practise EMI effectively.

This aligns with Giri (2010), who critiques the adoption of EMI as more of a marketing strategy than an educational reform. Administrators also highlighted the pressure to maintain student enrollments, noting that schools adopting EMI often gain a competitive advantage in attracting students, despite the lack of necessary resources or expertise. This commodification of EMI highlights its potential as a transformative educational strategy.

Furthermore, the implementation of EMI in Nepalese schools has profound socio-cultural and linguistic implications, particularly in its marginalization of local languages. Teachers observed a gradual erosion of students' linguistic and cultural ties to their mother tongues. As one teacher noted that students are "*gradually losing touch*" with their mother tongues i.e. "*forgetting their roots*" at the cost of "*being modern and updated*". They think speaking English makes them modern, but they are forgetting their roots.

This concern echoes Hornberger and Vaish (2009), who argue that EMI often displaces minority languages, leading to the erosion of cultural identities. The tension between modernity and cultural preservation is particularly pronounced in multilingual societies like Nepal, where

local languages hold significant cultural and social value. Students from non-English-speaking households also reported feeling excluded and devalued in EMI settings. A student complained that she usually speaks the "Kumal" language at home, speaks Nepali in her society, and has to speak in English in the class. She further states "*It's confusing and makes me feel like my home and social language are not good enough*". Shohamy (2006) critiques such language policies for creating socio-cultural dissonance and perpetuating linguistic hierarchies. The forced prioritization of English in schools not only alienates students but also undermines the linguistic diversity that is a cornerstone of Nepalese culture.

Participants identified multiple challenges in implementing EMI, particularly in rural and resource-constrained schools. Teachers frequently cited the lack of appropriate teaching materials and professional development opportunities as major obstacles. One teacher complained regarding the "*lack of an appropriate textbook*" in English that is suitable for his students' level. He further got irritated with the "short and theoretical training" on EMI. In this regard, Dearden (2014) highlights the importance of aligning resources and training with local needs to ensure effective EMI practices. Teachers often felt that existing training programs were insufficient and failed to address the practical realities of teaching in multilingual, under-resourced classrooms. Another significant challenge was the inability of parents to support their children's learning due to their own lack of English proficiency. An administrator explained that most of the parents cannot help their children with homework because they do not understand English themselves. This creates "a gap" between school and home and exacerbates inequities in educational outcomes, particularly for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The long-term impacts of EMI on students' academic trajectories and social outcomes remain uncertain, with participants expressing concerns about potential negative consequences. Teachers worried that EMI could lead to higher dropout rates among students struggling to cope with the language demands. One teacher observed that many students lose interest in studies because they cannot understand the lessons. In this context, he fears that it would lead to more drop outs in the long run.

Students also voiced apprehensions about their future prospects regarding the importance of the English language. A Grade 10 student felt stressed that she could not get "better job" or do "better in her further study" until she improved her English. Such concerns highlight the psychological and emotional toll of EMI on students, particularly those from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Shohamy (2006) advocates for longitudinal studies to evaluate the academic and social impacts of EMI, emphasizing the need for evidence-based policies that prioritize equitable and sustainable outcomes.

In this sense, the implementation of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Nepalese community schools reflects a complex interplay of global aspirations, local realities, and socio-cultural dynamics. While EMI is seen as a pathway to global competitiveness, particularly in technical subjects, its effectiveness is hindered by systemic challenges such as inadequate teacher training, resource constraints, and linguistic barriers. The findings underscore the critical need for context-sensitive approaches to EMI that balance the benefits of English proficiency with the preservation of local languages and cultures. A more sustainable and

inclusive EMI framework requires robust teacher training programs, curriculum adjustments, and parental engagement tailored to diverse socio-economic contexts. Additionally, the emotional and cognitive challenges faced by students highlight the importance of supportive learning environments that accommodate their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Moving forward, a multilingual educational strategy that integrates EMI with local languages may offer a more equitable and effective model, fostering both global opportunities and cultural preservation in Nepalese education.

Conclusion

The study highlights the complex interplay between global aspirations and local realities in the implementation of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Nepalese community schools. While EMI is viewed as essential for subjects tied to global competitiveness, such as Science and Mathematics, its adoption faces challenges, including inadequate teacher proficiency, lack of resources, and insufficient training. Students experience a dual narrative of optimism and alienation, struggling with comprehension and confidence while recognizing the importance of English for future success. Administrators, driven by societal demands, highlight systemic gaps and the pressure to adopt EMI despite limited preparedness. Additionally, the study reveals significant socio-cultural implications, including the marginalization of local languages and the erosion of cultural identities, particularly in multilingual classrooms.

These findings call for policies that integrate local languages alongside English, ensuring equitable and context-sensitive EMI practices. Comprehensive teacher training, resource allocation, and parental engagement are critical for addressing systemic challenges. At the practice level, bilingual approaches, remedial support for students, and the celebration of linguistic diversity can mitigate the negative impacts of EMI. Future research should focus on the long-term socio-academic impacts of EMI and explore innovative solutions, such as technology integration, to support multilingual education. By aligning EMI implementation with local needs, stakeholders can promote both global competencies and cultural preservation.

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