
English as a Medium of Instruction in Public Schools: Dreams and Realities

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ABSTRACT

This research articles aims to explore the factors which attracted public schools based in rural setting adopting English as a medium of instruction and to reveal the difficulties in practicing EMI in classroom. This qualitative research design has employed narrative inquiry as a method of study. The researcher selected the participants purposively. They were stakeholders from school administration, management committee, parents, teachers, and students. The narratives and experiences of the participants were collected through semi-structured interviews, using a questionnaire, informal conversation, taking notes and online communication. The responses were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. The data analysis showed that the adoption of EMI was the result of parents' pressure, dreams to bring quality in education, to retain students in public school. However, it was not easy to practice EMI in the classroom effectively. The teachers lack pedagogical skills and proficiency, the school environment is not EMI friendly, and students come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it takes time to convert dreams of EMI into reality in public schools.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction, public school, teachers, students, dreams, and challenges.

Introduction

English in Nepal has been a gold coin since the beginning of formal education with the establishment of Durbar High School in 1854 by Jung Bahadur Rana. It is interesting to note that the first school of Nepal was an English Medium School. Establishment of Tri-Chandra College in 1918 by Chandra Shamsher further expanded and promoted English Education in Nepal. However, the modernization of education through systematic policy began only after the fall of Rana Regime in 1950/1951 (Poudel, 2019). The Multiparty Democratic System continued English Education in School along with monolingual ideology in Education. The establishment of Tribhuvan University in 1959 opened the door for general people in higher education. The university started promoting English as a foreign language at the same time. However, English was formally recognized as a foreign language only in 1971 (NNEP, 1971).

The autocratic Panchayat system tried to slow and silence the spread of English education adopting one language policy i.e., Nepali. But the Restoration of Multiparty Democracy in 1990 paved the way of pluralistic language policy and privatization of education. The private schools attracted students with the promise of quality education through English as a medium of instruction in 1990s. The parents' attractions and the flow of students were attracted by the private schools in the urban areas at first and in the villages later. Realizing the Value of English as a global language, the Federal Republic Nepal (2007) allowed the public schools to use English as a medium of instruction along with mother tongues and Nepali language. National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2007) states "the medium of school level education can be in Nepali or English or both of them" (p.34). It was the result of pressure from the parents, students, and the stakeholders to convert the community schools into "English Medium School" and changing medium instruction from NMI (Nepali as a medium of instruction) to EMI (English as a medium of instruction). Since then, the government funded public schools have become free to adopt mediums of instruction as per the desire of local community, teachers, students and school management Committee (SMC). As a result, a large number of public schools have adopted English as a medium of instruction since 2010 in Nepal (Shah & Li, 2018).

The choice of public schools, shifting from Nepali to English medium instruction (EMI) has, in fact,

neglected the reality of Nepali contexts, where children from multi-lingual backgrounds have their own mother tongues as well as national language Nepali. Further, EMI has posed the threat of destroying native identities such as Social, cultural and linguistic diversities. Further, lack of trained teacher with English proficiency, low resource materials, difficult learning environment in schools are factors to consider while practicing EMI in Multilingual Nepali communities. The question of whether the medium of instruction should be entirely in English, mainly in English or a blend of first and second languages needed to be answered considering the above-mentioned factors. Thus, this research study aims to explore the promises and perceptions of the stakeholders through EMI in public schools. It also aims to reveal existing pedagogical challenges in of EMI in classroom context.

Literature Review

English as a medium of instruction is an instructional model of teaching non- English academic subjects through the medium of English in educational settings where English is not the mother tongue of most students, which aim to facilitate the learning of content knowledge as well as English skills (Shah, 2022). EMI has become not only the talk of the town but also dreams of rural and remote villages of Nepal. The so-called “English Medium School” phenomenon has caught everyone including the school management committee, school administration, teachers, parents and the students. All the stakeholders are lured by the economic globalization, and EMI is being developed / practiced, ignoring the local realities (Shah, 2022). Shah (2022) further argues that EMI within the framework of MTB-MLE in South Asian countries is creating the discourse of inequality and injustice for different social groups. For Shah, such neoliberal policies (EMI/MOI) do not only undermine the local (e.g., language, culture, and knowledge) but they also create an unequal space of learning. Therefore, he does not advocate the adaptation of EMI blindly but aware us about the demand for English language for various purposes. In some extent, the public schools have adopted the EMI only to retain their students. They have felt pressure from the nearby private schools which are able to attract students by selling their “English” package. Phyak (2011) states that many governments schools are gradually shifting from, Nepali to English medium to attract a maximum number of students. Rana (2018) shows his concern that the English language interest of schools, parents and educators in Nepal is likely to promote English language hegemony over several local languages including Nepali. His studies further states that EMI & Policy of public schools endangers social, cultural and particularly linguistic diversity in Nepal. He even warns that the imposition of English as an instructional language on children will betray students from learning and gradually make education worse.

On the other hand, EMI in public school has also exposed the challenges of teachers, who not only have to teach in English but also to integrate content. Shah (2022) indicates a critical need for designing teacher education programs and training accordingly, at both central and local levels, if the adaptation of EMI is continued and desirable. Ojha’s (2018) study pointed out that EMI has been adopted in public schools in Nepal without careful planning and the necessary preparation to make it a success. He states that schools are shifting to EMI mostly because of demand and pressure from parents. Saud (2020) in his study about EMI in public draws a different conclusion” English medium education has become a new linguistic market in public school education in Nepal”.

These studies generally focus on the assumptions, teachers’ identity, ideology, agencies, opportunities challenges, possibilities, policies and practices of EMI. However, previous studies and research paid truly little attention to how the different stakeholders from rural and remote public schools were attracted by the Policy of EMI and what sorts of academic issues are there in EMI classrooms. So, this research will try to answer the following research questions in particular:

- a) What perceptions and perspectives attracted the stakeholders to use English as a medium of instructions in rural public schools in Nepal?
- b) What pedagogical challenges and issues are posed by EMI in the classroom contexts?

Research Methodology

For this study, I have employed a qualitative research methodology adopting a narrative inquiry design to explore the perceptions and experience of the participants. This qualitative research approach included the population from a public school located at hilly remote areas of Rapti Municipality, Chitwan. I have selected a former headteacher, present headteacher, Chairperson of the school management Committee, a representative from Parents Teacher Association, two non-English language teachers and four students. The students belonged to Class nine and ten and two from each class. My study followed the use of purposive sampling which is also known as subjective sampling in order to get responses to major research questions. I selected the participants and research site purposively. Among the participants the former head teacher and the Chairperson of SMC were directly involved while making the decision to adopt EMI in the school. Whereas, the present, head teacher, the subject teachers and the students are struggling to turn the dreams into reality through EMI. I interviewed the participants using a questionnaire and recorded their answers. Besides that, I visited the school, observed the class

and took notes. I also had informal conversations with the stakeholders outside the school and the classrooms. Later, I transcribed the recorded narratives and analyzed them using a thematic approach. I went through the transcriptions thoroughly and developed common codes. Then, I divided them into certain categories under the topic attractions for EMI and struggles of EMI. To protect the privacy and secrecy of the research participants and research site, pseudonyms were used.

Results and Discussions

The results of the study are presented in two major themes:

- a) Attractions for EMI in the public school.
- b) Obstacles of EMI in classroom practices

Attractions for EMI:

Though EMI has not been imposed compulsorily in the public schools of Nepal, the public schools are slowly and gradually adopting it. It is not only the schools of urban area but also the schools of rural area as well, are converting them into the “English Medium Schools” adopting EMI Policy. The following are some causes reflected by the participants, which attracted them to adopt EMI in their school.

Parents need, demand and pressure:

The most striking factor for adopting EMI in public school is parents’ constant pressure on school administration. The participants of this study revealed that the changing mentality of parents forced the school management committee and school administration to make the decision. The narratives of the parents as presented by the PTA representative reflects their dreams:

“EMI brings quality in Education.”

“We want to see our children speaking English as boarding schools’ students.”

“Our children can wear tie, belt, and shoes.”

“Our children can get jobs easily when they know English.”

“Our children can go to Australia and other countries.”

EMI: tools for maintaining students’ number

As the number of private schools increased even in rural and remote parts of the country, the students’ public schools. As a result, public schools got a constant threat from the private school to maintain and retain their number of students. So, the school administration and School Management Committee along with Parents Teacher Association (PTA) had to make decision to adopt EMI as a tool to retain their students. The following remarks of the participants reflected the ethos:

P1 stated:

“We had to accept EMI as our students we were attracted by the private schools through their English medium classes. EMI has been useful to stop the students flow to private schools as we have started classes in EMI.”

P2 explained:

“Students and parents are happy after the introduction of EMI as parents didn’t have to pay much fee and students started using English to some extent.”

To upgrade school as per time

Public Schools in Nepal have been going through process of transformation after people movement of 2006. There has been investment in infrastructure to build new school buildings, libraries, ICT labs as well as laboratories. The newly formed school management committee has geared up the activities to meet the expectations of parents and the community as the SMCs were led by educated young leaders who have new vision and commitment.

They wanted to do something new in the community and they adopted EMI as a tool to improve quality of education in public school. The young school chairperson (P4) argued that he is weak in English because there were no English medium public schools then. He further said that EMI would bring quality in education and students would develop their English proficiency. He hoped that EMI would help the students to go to the job market and pursue their higher studies in foreign countries.

Arrival of new teachers through Teachers Service Commission (TSC)

The formation of the Teachers Service Commission gave new dimension in public schools’ education recently. TSC has started recruitment of teachers on a regular basis. As a result, university graduates have become teachers in public schools. They are highly qualified, trained and determined to impart education with new visions and mission. The study found that the SMC and the school administration have capitalized these teachers’ competency in adopting EMI in public schools. One of the participants (P5) enthusiastically expressed, “I have

taught in private school for five years before I was appointed by TSC. So, I knew how to teach in English medium classes, and I can use English as a medium of instructions.”

Formation and Election of Local bodies

The constitution of Nepal (2015) formed new local bodies as per the principles of federalism. These local bodies got people's representative after the election, and they exercised the rights given to them by the new constitution. The rights of school education came under local bodies and the local government inspired the public schools to adopt EMI. The former and the present headteacher (P1 and P2) explained that they were assured by the local government to provide necessary assistance when they approached the local government. They said, “Local government and province government have helped us in infrastructure development, ICT, and teachers' salary as well as educational materials. It encouraged us in our dream of English medium school.”

Challenges of EMI in classrooms practices

As Phyak (2017) states, “Public schools are adopting the EMI policy to help students develop their English language proficiency” (P.8), the question whether EMI really improves English language learning is still there. Similarly, the stakeholders are still in confusion regarding efficacy of adopting English as a medium of instruction or teaching English as an additional language. This study extensively researched the difficulties of implementing EMI in Classrooms where the students base rural and remote setting. The major themes emerged after the analysis of narratives of the participants are coded in the following topics:

Lack of teachers' proficiency:

Since there has been a growing trend of using EMI in public schools in Nepal, learners' content learning is endangered (Sand, 2022). Most teachers teaching in public schools have studied English only as a compulsory subject in their school and university classes. They basically lack pedagogic skills in teaching English medium classes. They may be content experts but are unable to present the course content through EMI. So, most of the teachers are found struggling in EMI Classrooms while teaching the subjects other than English. These teachers are not trained enough to cope with the problems which arise in EMI Classrooms. Because of their insufficient proficiency, they cannot address content completely in English. Saud's (2022) study exposed that “EMI in education is destroying the knowledge of education in the learners since they do not get clear-cut concept of the subject matter in English”. He further stated that “EMI is destroying the learners content learning.” In this regard, P5 expressed his views as “It is exceedingly difficult to teach subjects like Economics entirely in English. I always felt difficulties in giving examples and make the concept clear. So, I times and again use Nepali to tell the major points.” Similarly, the participant teacher P6 mentioned, “For me EMI has become student controlling tool, whenever they talk in Classroom or make noise, I ask them to talk in English and they stop talking. I am not sure whether they understand my teaching or not.”

Lack of learning environment in school:

During my visit to public schools, I have never found English learning environment. Neither the teachers nor the students were found speaking English inside and outside the classrooms in their conversations. The school board is filled with notices written in Nepali. There was no facilities of English newspapers, journals or ELT related materials. The students were not given instructions in English whenever they were taking part in extra-curricular activities. The narratives of the participant Student (P8) stated “Our school hardly organizes the programs like spelling contest, speech, dictation and debate competition in English. The teachers only ask us to draft essay in English. Teachers are not found caring and counseling students.”

Lack of learning environment at home:

Most of the students enrolled in the English medium school classrooms belong to the underprivileged, poor, backward, socially and culturally marginalized family or Community. The parents are either illiterate or unaware of their parenting responsibilities. What they think is that sending their children to school is their responsibility. They expect that the school does or has to do everything. They even can't facilitate their children's assignments in contrast to the parents of private schools.

As result, the students suffer in EMI classes. English is neither practiced at home nor in classroom in the conversation, which make them less confident and concerned to their English medium schooling. The parent participant (P4) reported one of the guardian's remarks as, “Our children ask us to assist in their homework, but we can't. When our children ask for additional materials, we did not have money.”

Linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms

Shifting from NMI into EMI seems to be dreams as well as compulsion in Nepalese contexts. The public schools had to make decision even though they knew the fact Nepal is a multilingual, multicultural and multira-

cial country with 131 indigenous languages spoken by 125 ethnic groups (Language Commission, 2020). Saud (2022) expressed that “English in education is the language of destruction rather instruction.” The public-school classrooms are filled up with students from various cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds. So, linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms are features of the classroom and it is difficult for the teachers as well as the students to conduct teaching- learning activity entirely in English. EMI students are disadvantaged because of the language barrier. The participants of this study agreed that it is very tough to deal with the students who belong to various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Participant 5, in this regard said:

“I have to translate language as well as code switching during the time of teaching as the students come from diverse culture and linguistic backgrounds. It is always difficult to get the student responses in EMI.”

Conclusion

This Study has extensively explored the dreams of the stakeholders through EMI and the painstaking jobs to turn the dreams into reality. The research study revealed the factors which compelled the stakeholders to adopt English as a medium of instructions in public schools. Further, the study unpacked the difficulties posed by EMI classrooms. The parents have expressed their ardent desire to provide English medium education to their children at low cost or no cost at all in public schools. The parents have connected their choice of EMI with job opportunities, social value, foreign employment, as well as further education in foreign countries, especially Australia. On the other hand, the school management committee, teachers, and head teacher have found EMI as a tool to bring quality in education, retain and maintain students’ number. They adopted EMI in order to bring self-esteem in students, confidence in teachers and dignity among the stakeholders. EMI has become an integrated part of school education and the most sought phenomenon in transformation of public schools. The new local bodies have found an area to invest in education through EMI.

Therefore, many public schools are now adopting EMI, claiming that it is the demand and need of the community (Saud, 2020). But EMI in rural and remote public schools is in a sorry state. The teachers other than English language, are struggling to present content in the classroom. They are unable to impart in-depth knowledge in lack of pedagogical skills and proficiency in English language. OJha’s (2018) study pointed out that “EMI has been adopted without careful planning and necessary preparation to make it success.”

Though EMI has brought significant changes and success in public schools located in urban areas, there is a remarkable gap between the spirit of adopting EMI and actual classroom practices in rural areas. How EMI can be effectively adopted in the rural and remote classroom context invites further research.

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