

Perceived Challenges and Implementation of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in the Classroom

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chapainkrishnaprasad81@gmail.com**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceived problems and classroom practice of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in public secondary schools of Nepal. Community schools have become more and more interested in implementing EMI in response to the increasing interest and demand in the community and shifting policies to Englishized education to boost the quality of education and enrollment. However, there is a big gap between the policy goals and the practice in the classrooms. This study uses qualitative narrative inquiry and is based on Vygotsky's Social Constructivism and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) theory to examine the lived experience of four teachers from two public schools in the municipality of Gurbhakot, Surkhet district. The data were gathered with semi-structured in-depth interviews, and analyzed using narrative and thematic analysis. The findings suggest that EMI has potential for improving students' communication skills in the right contexts of readiness, but it is highly limited in practice due to students' lack of English proficiency, language anxiety, teachers' overload, reliance on textbooks being translated into English, and systemic inequalities. In response, teachers use pragmatic strategies such as: using trans languaging, simplifying classroom language, and pre-teaching vocabulary. The study finds that classroom inequities can be exacerbated and weaker students may be alienated from the successful implementation of unreflective top-down EMI, if they are not prepared with the necessary scaffolding and structural support. It highlights the necessity of context-sensitive language policy, thorough professional development, as well as assessment realignment in Nepalese public schools.

Key words: English Medium Instruction (EMI), Classroom Implementation, Pedagogical Challenges, Narrative Inquiry, Translanguaging, Public Schools, Nepal.

Introduction

In the last 20 years, English Medium Instruction (EMI) has become a global phenomenon of policy making in the public and private educational systems of the Global South (Coleman, 2011; Sah & Li, 2020). The planning of language in education has undergone a significant transformation in South Asia, especially Nepal. The educational approach of EMI has been embraced by public (community) schools with a sense of urgency, as a response to the socio-economic aspirations, market pressures, and community demands for global mobility, which are perceived to be leading to a perceived lack of student enrollments and a quality gap between public and private institutional schools (Bista, 2011; Giri, 2014; Phyak, 2015).

But the learning of language is not just a pedagogical process, it is also influenced by sociopolitical processes, historical power relations, identity and global processes (Wei & Chao, 2025). The implementation of top-down EMI can sometimes run counter to the intricate realities of daily classroom practice (Choi & Poudel, 2024; Sah, 2022) in Nepal's multilingual public school context.

Policy constructs EMI as a driver of educational modernization and communicative competence, but in reality, there are often significant disconnects between policy aims and learning achievement in classrooms. In community schools, the teachers are expected to provide comprehensive material in English to students in general with very little foundation of English language (Khatri, 2016; Phyak, 2025). This has created tremendous pedagogical challenges for teachers such as lack of understanding of students, language anxiety, less quality of teaching materials, and lack of specialized training (Dhakal, 2016; Joshi & Paneru, 2025). EMI use in the majority of the public schools is an adaptation to a pedagogical necessity rather than a planned pedagogical process (Khatri, 2016).

The qualitative study is based on four teachers of two schools in Gurbhakot Municipality, Surkhet district who shared their experience on challenges and classroom implementation of EMI. This research explores three fundamental questions about their instructional methods, classroom dynamics, and systemic issues what are the challenges teachers in public schools encounter in implementing EMI in their classrooms, what are the impacts of learner characteristics, interaction patterns and institutional structure on the realization of the goals of the EMI policy in public secondary school.

Literature Review

As EMI has grown in its non-Anglophone contexts, many questions have been raised on its effectiveness, equity, and feasibility in the classroom. The gap between the intentions of macro level policies and micro-level classroom realities is a key topic in the global ELT and EMI literature (Coleman, 2011; Sah & Li, 2020). Sah (2022) points out that in a lot of developing countries, the introduction of the EMI policy takes place without any structural preparation, sufficient teaching-learning materials, and teacher upskilling. Therefore, it can also be seen as an "illusory promise" that educational disparities may be widened by unintended consequences of EMI (Sah & Li, 2020). Public community schools are facing extremely limited resources and linguistic diversity in Nepal (Choi & Poudel, 2024; Giri, 2014). The importance of the need for public school learners to have access to English language instruction prior to the implementation of EMI is discussed by Khatri (2016) as the majority of learners in public schools in his study come from non-English speaking families with little to no exposure to English prior to the implementation of EMI. The students often find difficulty in acquiring basic knowledge of English language (literacy, pronunciation and content) when English is the only medium of instruction (Ghimire, 2024). This language barrier hampers the deep integration of content learning in the classroom, and forces teachers to integrate the basic language teaching with content learning in the classroom, thereby adding the cognitive and pedagogical burden of teachers (Joshi & Paneru, 2025; Pun et al., 2024).

Studies have shown that rigorous enforcement of EMI could have a negative impact on the interaction and cause serious language anxiety in the classroom. Hu and Duan (2019) note that frequent contact with English can contribute to the interactive competence building of proficient learners, but it often causes passive silence and passive disengagement among low-proficiency learners. At severe levels, implementation of EMI leads to higher dropouts and lower academic achievement than teaching in students' home languages (Bälter et al. 2024). To address these challenges, flexible multilingual practices, such as translanguaging, peer collaboration, and contextualizing teacher scaffolding (Choi & Poudel, 2024; Ghimire & Gurung, 2024; Pun et al., 2024) were deemed to be important practices.

The two theoretical frameworks for this study are Social Constructivist theory proposed by Vygotsky and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) theory proposed by Brown with additional Critical EMI Perspectives.

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is a social process, in which language, collaborative dialogue and interactive tools mediate the process in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Effective instruction demands proper scaffolding where the more knowledgeable peer/teacher helps the learner to make the leap from the level of ability to the level of potential. There is a scaffolding process in an EMI classroom, but if the medium of instruction is the difficult barrier, the process of scaffolding breaks down and meaningful co-construction of knowledge is not achieved.

The focus of Brown's (2007) CLT model is functional use of language, communicative competence, meaningful interaction and risk-taking in low anxiety environments. Under the optimal EMI conditions, the process of content delivery offers a natural context for acquiring natural language (Qasserras, 2023). However, when translation of texts becomes a burden, or when it causes language anxiety, the fundamental principles of CLT interactive negotiation of meaning, dynamic expression are compromised.

This study also takes into account the wider structural context through the critical perspectives on language policy (Phyak, 2015; Wei & Chao, 2025). Language policies are related to power dynamics, cultural identity and social stratification. A critical analysis of EMI brings up the issue of how privileged groups can be excluded from the teaching/learning process if language is not provided as a means of empowerment but rather a barrier. The macro-sociopolitical context and the situation of institutional capital differences affects the educational context, while the micro-pedagogical scaffolding through the mechanisms of ZPD and CLT in Vygotskian terms tries to operationalize meaningful interaction within the transformational EMI classroom.

Methodology

The qualitative narrative inquiry design (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was used in this study. Narrative inquiry fits well with examining educational policies and classroom practices since it focuses on lived, story-based practices of practitioners. The personal experiences of educators can be captured in their narratives and examined for how they are lived, adapted, and negotiated at the classroom level related to systemic policies.

This research was carried out in two public (community) secondary schools in Gurbhakot Municipality of Surkhet district in the Karnali Province in Nepal. The two schools both had recently implemented policies on EMI in secondary schools to gain a competitive edge over the other private schools in the area and to keep the enrolments in their schools. The number of four secondary school teachers were selected by purposive sampling technique. In order to have rich and reflective insights into the long-term challenges of EMI implementation, the inclusion criteria were that participants should have at least five years of active EMI teaching experience in public schools.

The number of participants included four experienced teachers working in public secondary schools in Gurbhakot Municipality. Kaji is a male teacher with 12 years of teaching experience, and has a master's degree in English. He teaches English and Social Studies. Bhim is a male teacher who has an experience of 9 years and M. Ed in English and Science and leads English and Science courses.

Anu, female with 7 years teaching experience and M.A in English is a teacher of English and Health Education. Saral is a male educator, with 8 years of experience and an M.Ed in English, who teaches English and Mathematics.

Multi-session, semi-structured in-depth narrative interviews were used to collect data. Two narrative interviews were conducted with each participant, for a total of 60-90 minutes. Interviews were held in a flexible manner with participants being allowed to be interviewed in both English and Nepali so that they could fully express their experiences. The guide for the interview focused on three main areas Initial emotions and first-hand experiences in introducing EMI in their schools. The pedagogical and linguistic problems that arise in everyday lessons, the interaction patterns of the learners and management of the classroom. Coping strategies, systemic policies and reflections on adaptive teaching strategies in relation to classroom realities.

Interview sessions were professionally audio-taped with written informed consent, and then verbatim-transcribed and translated into English for analysis while preserving the narrative fidelity. Narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) and the thematic framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) were used to analyze the data. Coding of transcripts was iterative to highlight some of the main elements of the narrative, shared experiences and contrasting points of view. The themes that emerged were synthesized and triangulated with the theory of Social Constructivism, CLT, and critical EMI literature.

Ethical approval was obtained before conducting fieldwork. The identity of the participants was kept anonymous by using pseudonyms (Kaji, Bhim, Anu, and Saral) and omitting of certain institutional identifiers. To ensure that the participants would quote exactly what they had heard the narrative summaries were performed by member checking.

Discussion and Result

The stories of Kaji, Bhim, Anu and Saral provide evidence that the process of implementing English Medium Instruction in public secondary schools is a multi-faceted process. The results fall into five core themes: Initial expectations and practical language barriers; Conditional success: Interaction and language readiness; Systemic failures and resource shortages; Student disengagement, language anxiety and section transfers; and Synthesis: Pragmatic coping strategies vs. policy realities.

Initial Expectation and Practical language Barriers

The story of Mr. Kaji illustrates a typical path of implementing public school EMI: excitement, but concern about students' lack of language preparation. As Kaji reflected:

"At first, I was delighted. But after some time, I was worried about my students' weak English background. I tried to clarify but the students couldn't understand my instructions and the concepts. Students couldn't read the text with correct pronunciation. To overcome these challenges, I started vocabulary teaching and pronunciation before teaching the lessons. I used simple classroom language so that students could understand my instructions. It was like both content and language teaching."

The students' lack of linguistic readiness (Ghimire, 2024; Khati, 2016) is a fundamental challenge in the public school setting in EMI. However, when students fail to have functional English skills upon entering EMI classrooms, teachers will not be able to concentrate on the main content of the

subject. Rather, they have to teach explicit language while also teaching the curriculum topics, which adds to their cognitive and pedagogical load (Joshi & Paneru, 2025).

In order to fill this gap, Kaji used pragmatic scaffolding techniques, including providing vocabulary support, modelling pronunciation and restricting language used in the classroom. The adaptations are related to CLT principles, which emphasize meaningful communication with structured comprehension aids (Qasserras, 2023). In the same way, Pun et al (2024) highlight the issue of language barriers in EMI science and content classrooms that often necessitates teachers to incorporate scaffolding and translanguaging for basic concept understanding. The case of Kaji shows how teachers create micro-pedagogical solutions to cover gaps in macro-pedagogical policy (Choi & Poudel, 2024).

Conditional Success: Interaction and Language Readiness

However, Mr. Bhim had a different outlook on EMI implementation as compared to Kaji's early days:

"According to my personal experience, I follow it easily with the students who have been accustomed with this medium, they can understand the English language easily, it helps the communicative skill in English as well."

Bhim's story shows that EMI can be effective if students have developed a certain level of English prior to the course and are provided with an interactive English language environment. Hu and Duan (2019) discover that the communicative competence of students is promoted by the regular use of English medium instruction, which, however, requires students to have basic English language competence. The CLT's view of Bhim's classroom is that it provides a good space for practicing functional language (Qasserras, 2023). The use of English as the medium of instruction helps reinforce authentic interaction, help to build confidence, and help develop spontaneous language use, when learners understand the instructional input (Brown, 2007).

The story of Bhim, however, is a conditional story and might not be the norm in resource-poor public schools. A high diversity of English language proficiency within a classroom can make it difficult to detect differences in English learning between less and more proficient students if we assume everyone is ready to learn.

Systemic Failures and Resource Shortages

Mrs. Anu's story moved from classroom strategies to systemic and institutional problems and described the implementation of the EMI in the adjacent district of Kalikot which failed.

"Once a school in Kalikot decided to adopt EMI from primary level. They bought the book translated into English. The teachers couldn't handle it for different reasons. They returned the book and brought Nepali medium books."

In this case, the dangers of top-down EMI policies without teacher preparation, pedagogical planning and contextual planning are emphasized. Dhakal (2016) and Sah (2022) state that language change without teacher capacity and adequate language development is a huge hindrance to teaching. Anu's story is indicative of the fact that EMI can never be a mere administrative decision. When teachers are not confident in English and don't have a strong training as language teachers, textbook translation results in a decrease in instruction, which means schools need to go back to local language textbooks. It is indeed consistent with the claims of Wei and Chao (2025) that a language policy may

not work if macro-level policies do not take into account local socio-pedagogical realities. In contrast, the macro-level policy expectations are based on the assumption of universal adoption of English medium, educational modernization, a simple translation of textbooks and a seamless process of developing communicative competence. In reality, the problems faced in the classroom can be summarized into the following elements: English language readiness of students is found to be very different in the classroom, the workload of teachers is increased, teachers' specialized training is quite limited, and student silence is very common due to language anxiety.

Student Disengagement, Language anxiety, and Section Transfers

Mr. Saral's experience brings to light how the implementation of EMI can affect participation and classroom dynamics:

"The other students would not speak in classes and migrate to the Nepali medium areas. Some of the students remained silent throughout the class. They did not speak and respond to my questions. They may be because of the problem of language. A few of them shifted to Nepali medium sections afterwards."

The key disadvantage of the spontaneous EMI approach, as disclosed by Saral, is that students become disengaged and suffer from language anxiety. Many learners opt out of speaking a language when they are asked to do so in a language they are not proficient in (Ghimire, 2024; Hu & Duan, 2019). This result is consistent with Bälter et al. (2024) who demonstrate that, in forced EMI settings, students' performance can suffer, with lower levels of class engagement and increased incidence of course tracking and/or transfer. The Social Constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) has seen the complete silence as failure of classroom scaffolding. Peer collaboration, strategic translanguaging, and other aspects of interaction must be possible if the ZPD is to be reached. Due to the strict use of EMI, low-proficiency learners may feel excluded from these environments, thus exacerbating inequalities in the public school system in terms of academic achievement.

Synthesis: Pragmatic Coping Strategies vs. Policy Realities

The common experiences of Kaji, Bhim, Anu, and Saral illustrate the complexity and unevenness of the processes of implementing EMI in the Nepalese public schools. Establishing ambitious goals and expectations for the curriculum while working in a context where students may not be prepared to take on the more complex language demands is a task that is faced with frequency by teachers. If the top-down EMI approach is required in certain situations and the language barrier is present in the classroom, teachers must find ways to cope. These are improvisations that involve pre-teaching key vocabulary, creating more transparent classroom language, using strategic trans language, and arranging peer-to-peer interaction. Yet there are constraints at a system level that remain. Heavy workload, pressures from high stakes examinations and unassisted transfer of students back to Nepali medium tracks are still a challenge for teachers.

The adaptive strategies are consistent with a major tenet of the CLT, which is that they focus on functional meaning rather than formal perfection (Qasserras, 2023) but without systematic institutional support, they have short-term consequences only. The findings in the context of Khati (2016) and Joshi and Paneru (2025) suggest that EMI is not an integrated and well-resourced pedagogic language policy,

but is being implemented reactively as a result of market competition in many community schools in Nepal.

Conclusion

The result of this study shows the huge difference between the official policy expectations and classroom realities in the implementation of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in public schools of Gurbhakot Municipality in Nepal. Although EMI can be effective in improving the communicative competence of students, when the conditions of language readiness are optimal, difficulties in the practical implementation of EMI are brought about by low students' English proficiency, students' language anxiety, lack of teacher training, and structural deficits.

Pragmatic and improvised approaches such as pre-teaching words, simplifying classroom discourse, and implementing translanguaging are implemented in the classroom to overcome these barriers, allowing teachers to teach subject content while also supporting basic language learning. However, if top down EMI is not properly scaffolded, supported with context appropriate resources and teacher preparation, it can cause the isolation of lower proficiency learners, resulting in classrooms that go silent and children being moved to Nepali-medium classrooms. In conclusion, the successful teaching of a language goes beyond the mere translation of texts in the target language to continuous institutional backing, flexible multilingual usage and pedagogically appropriate approaches to the context.

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