

## EMI Strategy: A Misconception in Early Grade

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### Abstract

*This article discusses on the debatable EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) issue as there is confusion either English must be taught right from the Nursery or at some later stage. Nepalese classrooms are the product of multilingual, multicultural and bilingual society. Without considering the fact of multilingual and multi-ethnic context, EMI (English as a medium of Instruction) is strictly adopted in schools in early grade. Our school system, including textbooks, instruction, curriculum, teaching practices, is influenced heavily by the dominant English hegemony in early grade. In this context, this paper aims to explore the difficulties and struggles of Nepali language speaking children's experiences as they find in between the Nepali-speaking home environment and English-speaking school environment at their early grades. To fulfill this objective, the researcher adopted narrative research design under qualitative method incorporating interpretative philosophical guideline. It is based on the unstructured interviews aimed at eliciting personal stories and experiences related to EMI in early grade. Discussing on a narrative analysis, this paper revealed that how the learners are discouraged to what Bourdieu's term symbolic violence with some examples of how such demotivation is seen in school's teaching-learning practices. The results further concluded that to address the problematic nature of schooling for such learners in most of the schools in Nepal, this paper highlights the need for socially responsive school policies and pedagogy understanding local context entertaining the linguistic and cultural diversity of students.*

**Key words:** *EMI, English hegemony, symbolic violence, socially responsive pedagogy, instruction*

## Introduction

In the context of Nepal, where English is not the mother tongue, there is a growing debate among parents about the medium of instruction in early education. Some parents believe that sending in EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) school can produce children having good learning outcome and some other believe in institutional schools. Parents think that English medium school can provide better English environment. Learning English has been a craze in these days. Many community schools have shifted to English medium from Nepali to attract a maximum number of students (Rana, 2018). In this context, can EMI schools only enhance learning achievement in early grade (nursery to Grade 5) where the learners have different mother-tongues than English? They think that 'English only' idea can improve the quality of school. If so, what is the ground reality? This study aims to examine the impact of mother-tongue based instruction on early learning outcomes and explore its implications for educational policy. Today, school, teachers, students, parents, policy-makers seem in confusion whether early education is in their mother-tongue or in an international dominant language English. In the context of Nepalese community, nearly half percentage (44.6 %) of the total population use Nepali language as their mother tongue. Similarly, Newari, Magar, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Hindi, Sherpa, Gurung, Tharu etc. languages are used as mother-tongue. There is very less population who speak English as their mother-tongue.

Nepalese classrooms are bilingual as well as multilingual. As Census report of 2011 reported that there are 125 ethnic groups and 123 languages are practiced as mother-tongue. Among 123 languages, Nepali language is spoken by 44.6 %, nearly half population of Nepal. Nepali language seems the most dominant mother-tongue in Nepalese communities. Some of the languages don't have their own written script as a result they are slowly disappearing. Phyak (2011) argues that many of the languages of Nepal lack their written script as a result it has been difficult to protect and insert them into education. What more we can say that particular local language teachers' unavailability and silence of local body can be the obstacle to implement every language as a medium of instruction in early grades. However, Nepalese classrooms are the product of multilingual communities and diverse socio-cultural practices. In this classroom context, mother tongue as a medium of instruction (MOI) plays crucial role to facilitate children's early learning. The language which is learned at their mother's lap seems to be effective medium of learning upto basic level. In this regard, Bender (2006) clearly states that mother tongue as a medium of instruction, regarding with the Mali bilingual education program where children were facilitated in their mother tongue in the early grades with slowly shifting to French, helped to promote learning achievement and decreases repetition and drop-out rates of the minority learner (Phyak, 2013). In a similar vein, on the basis of research made in other countries, Coleman (2011) highlights that launching English medium in early grades can create to poor learning achievement and applying English in a poorly resourced context may have negative learning results.

Previous research, such as the study conducted by Heugh, Benson, Gebre, and Bogale (2012), has demonstrated the advantages of mother tongue-based instruction in improving learning outcomes. These studies find children more enjoying in classroom at their mother tongue. Learning depends much on socio-cultural context. Social context, family language and cultural celebrations matter a lot in learners' learning. In this context, presenting the example of Ethiopian learners who were taught in their mother tongue for early grades, Heugh, Benson, Gebre, and Bogale (2012) find that these learners obtained better mean achievement scores in Maths, biology, chemistry, and physics on the 2004 national assessment than the learners who were practiced in English-medium instruction (Phyak, 2013). This study also strongly supports that mother tongue as a medium of instruction can increase the learners' learning achievements and improve the access and equity in Nepalese multilingual- context classrooms in early grades. Drawing from my own experience, I benefitted from mother tongue-based education in my early years, which facilitated my later proficiency in English. I was taught in mother tongue -based environment. I didn't remember facing much problem while learning content. My home language and social context used to be in Nepali, the same I found in my classroom and learning became easier for me in early grade. I learnt English when I was in Grade 4. Medium of instruction used to be in Nepali and English was taught as a subject from Grade 4 onwards. After passing SLC, I completed PCL, B.A, M.A and M.Ed. majoring English. Now I am secondary level English teacher in an institutional school. From my 17 years of long teaching experience, what I can draw that mother tongue as a medium of instruction can bring positive impact on subject-matter learning and second or foreign language development in the multilingual or bilingual context of Nepal.

Similarly, most of our teachers have shared with us that they had started learning English from Grade 4 in bilingual context. Our English teachers conduct classes confidently and smoothly using English despite learning English from Grade 4 in their time. I am enjoying a lot their classes. This particular evidence is enough to say that EMI may not be the building block to enhance the quality of learners in early grades in the bilingual or multilingual context of Nepal. In Nepal, most of the English school teachers and University lecturers and professors seem to have come from mother tongue as a medium of instruction schooling. They are performing better in their job.

In this paper, I discuss that the context specific situation like understanding of socio-political, and economic dynamics of a particular context, culture, way of society-specific celebrations can play major role in determining language policy and desire of teachers, parents and local representatives regarding with English or mother tongue as a medium of instruction in early education, where English is not spoken as their mother-tongue. This paper aims to critically analyze the implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) policy in the Nepalese context, considering the role of mother tongue based education and local perspectives. I am attempting to bring ground-reality in course of implementing EMI policy, argue medium of instruction as a context-specific, non-generalizable field (Canagarajah, 2005; Phyak, 2013); not

the impositional and put forward the role of local bodies to bring the medium of instruction policy into practice. I will also try to interpret constitutional provision regarding with mother-tongue based basic education. In the following sections, this study will delve into the misconceptions surrounding EMI policy and its implications, providing insights for educators, schools and policymakers.

## **Methods**

This study is based on a qualitative research adopting narrative research design (Clandinin & Connely, 2004; Cresswell, 2012), focusing on the meaning the participants' make through their individual experiences. Data was collected through the unstructured interviews aimed at eliciting personal stories and experiences related to EMI in early grade (Cresswell, 2012, p. 502). In this way, I drew the meaning of these experiences related with EMI in early grade. I purposefully selected Naresh (his true name has been replaced to protect his anonymity) due to his unique experience transitioning from a Nepali-speaking environment to an English medium school. He was studying in Grade 4 in one institutional school in Tansen Municipality of Palpa district that runs classes from nursery to Grade 10. Naresh was grown and brought up in rural setting with complete Nepali speaking environment. Naresh was brought Tansen from village to enroll in English medium school. Due to his parents' pressure, Naresh was admitted in Grade one in English medium school. I was given responsibility to guide his study by his parents.

Being school teacher, neighbour as well as uncle, I used to make informal talks with Naresh about teaching techniques, the problems created by English language during class hours. What knocked me about this study is when Naresh who is studying in Grade 4 in institutional school, where English is strictly used, came from school with his anxiety to understand the instructions and suggestions for students given in assembly by Principal. To my surprise, he shared how he was compelled to speak English inside school premises and pay fine in every Nepali language utterance. He was not so good at handling English. I could easily understand his "English fear" and uneasy feelings created by EMI policy in his facial expression. As a school teacher, I could do nothing, who would listen to us and we couldn't make any difference in decision making. I knew that judicial use of mother tongue is better where the bilingual/multilingual classroom context exists, while doing M.Ed. Then I started convincing him that gradually we learn the language. I became more eager to learn his language learning struggle and learning environment. He shared that his friends in the classroom were struggling on the same issues. I also realized the fact that they never talked using English at home. Our all feasts, festivals, celebrations and visits were mediated in Nepali language only; it means he didn't get any English exposure except in school. Before this event, I was not so serious about his concerns and I used to say "learn English at any cost" but his disappointed expression due to medium of language led me to go further.

In this way, I attempted to carry out this research consulting my nephew who had three years of EMI experiences as an early grade learner. So, I chose to listen to him about three years of EMI practices as an early grade learner in his own words. I started listening his each and

every concern related with the English language. He was average student studying in Grade 4 in our hometown school in Palpa district. He usually used to come to my home to learn and ask. I chose to listen to my nephew's experiences of English as a medium of instruction schooling in his own words. I listened to his concerns and helped him in sorting out their problems and gradually I talked to him, individually, about his learning experiences. I mostly talked to my nephew right after arriving from the school in a family-friendly environment.

During my interview with my nephew, I tried my best to create natural setting, so I did not use any recording device and I did not take field note. I diligently documented a detailed account of Naresh's experiences within 24 hours of our interview, including direct quotes and relevant anecdotes. In writing those accounts, I was aware of the possibility of understating or overstating his voice, so I attempted to "bracket" my own perception and understanding about EMI. The descriptive notes were coded using an inductive coding method (Thomas, 2006). Using an inductive coding method, I identified key themes in Naresh's narratives and created a small number of summary categories. I maintained ethical integrity revealing that the fact that his story would be the part of my research. To maintain ethical integrity, I obtained informed consent from Naresh and assured him of confidentiality regarding his participation in the research. This approach allowed me to gather rich narrative data, providing insights into the challenges faced by bilingual and multilingual learners in English medium schools. More broadly, this methodology enabled me to explore the issues arising from 'English language hegemony' in alignment with the works of scholars like Alexander (2009), Phillipson (1996) and (Shannon, 1995) with the existing centrally-controlled, nationalized school program and 'English -medium -as- quality- education' assumption among parents.

## **Results and Discussion**

The findings corroborate Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, as they reveal the problems and struggles of Nepali-speaking students' in the face of taken-for granted- English -medium ideology – on the grounds of a desire to be abreast of development and get access to global job opportunity. Such hegemony is indirectly and slowly implemented through the process of schooling like teaching materials, textbooks, socialization and teaching. It is reproduced and reflected in the form of language, culture and pedagogy. Our school system is heavily influenced by dominant English language through legitimate process of schooling. It is found that private schools and English as a medium of instruction are the two main symbols that help the dominancy of English hegemony. This study further showed that top-down policy making process and prescriptive approaches of schooling may not be relevant and productive as our local context might be different; it can be implemented in terms of local setting, context-specific needs (Canagarajah, 2005) looking how the culture, resources and practices have bearing on. The following sections briefly describe how symbolic violence in the form of English hegemony is slowly imposed upon the Nepalese identity and culture in the school context of Nepal.

## **Symbolic Violence through Language**

Nepali and other local languages are highly subordinated by the dominant status of English language. Lane (2017 May 10. ) states that widespread of the English hegemony is not affecting only local languages in many countries but also showing the danger of only English culture although we want differences and varieties and our civilization is a rich garden of different flowers. Similarly, the findings of Mustapha (2014) in Nigeria suggest that the rapid growth, acceptance and use of English is not only threatening the local languages but also shifting them from the communities which may lead to a loss. In this regard, Rana (2018) expresses his concern that making English as a medium of instruction in Nepali schools without considering the social, cultural and linguistic diversity in Nepal might be great threat to Nepalese identity and it might be the hidden interest of imposing the English in Nepal's education.

Due to the mandatory provision of dominant English language, students get less opportunity to be exposed in their local languages as their textbooks, teaching pedagogy, interaction belong to dominant English language. In English medium schools, speaking Nepali language is strictly prohibited. As reported in the narrative interview, he always speaks only Nepali at home with his parents and finds everyone speaking in Nepali in neighboring houses and relatives' houses. He functions each and every activity using Nepali language. We provided no time for his new language learning thinking that unnecessary pressure may hamper on his autonomous learning and thinking that he would learn English on his own. He could not communicate fairly in English. He speaks 'Nepanglish' with a completely Nepali accent being less confident, which sounds a bit odd to those who speak English near to English native speaker. He grew up in Nepali speaking community. He is quite confident in communicating in Nepali but feels hesitation speaking in English. After joining in English medium school, he became a 'language sufferer' in two ways: first he had problem in getting the concept over discussed content because of his teachers' continuous English expression and second, he had been insulted for his 'poor English' pronunciation in a stammering way. All the teachers except Nepali teacher at the school speak English only which was demotivating for him as he had very less learned English. Most of the words, phrases, and conversations in the classroom were quite unfamiliar to him. Being completely sad, he shared that he was fined many times in his Nepali utterances. He shared the linguistic problem that he faced at school due to fewer competencies in English:

I find my all the classes except Nepali subject were difficult as I got less concept on what teacher elaborated. Teachers' instructions were lengthy and unusual English expressions which I could not understand. Assembly instructions and notices with strange words and phrases in English were really tough to understand. Teachers spoke continuously using long sentences even without pause. I was not much encouraged in the classroom activities. Class-monitor used to fine me in at my every Nepali speaking.

English is taken to be the language of power, high status, key to abroad study and the matter of prestige in the society. For those who send their children in English medium school, it is regarded as an asset. They become satisfied labeling themselves as upper class as they have sent their children in English medium school. In this regard, Phyak (2013) clearly says that English medium schools and English as a Medium of Instruction are the two major symbols that help the dominant groups to keep their ideological supremacy over the minority groups intact. Consequently, demotivated students cannot raise their own voice to go against the imposition of dominant language, which is unquestionably accepted because, as Gellner (1997) asserts, 'local languages and traditions have no practical values, and are, they often feel, a disadvantage in the highly competitive scramble for employment and survival' (p. 20 as cited in Phyak, 2013). Phyak (2013) further states that 'English language stand as symbolic capital and a key aspect of elitism, ...communities do not resist the language policy that is imposed- explicitly and implicitly- over them and their children (p. 10).

My nephew got less support from teachers and fellow-friends at school because of his less confidence in English and from parents at home because of our less supportive nature. He had expected to get sufficient explanations on the difficult areas in Nepali language, there was no such support either from teachers or from parents. The school teachers and I had never realized his problems. He further shared, "My books are very big and written in English, which I find irritating". Teaching and explaining in English created a lot of problems to understand the concept of taught lessons. He further explained that he could not do better in the exam because of English medium question paper. He pointed out:

There was none at the school and home to explain the difficult lessons in my language, I find you busy every time in doing your own business. Mother was busy in household works. My teacher did not give individual attention for me. I used to feel hesitation to ask questions as I had been laughed at my 'Nepanglish' (half English half Nepali) way of speaking. I was always hopeless in the school.

The above remarks depict that if schools cannot provide individual support to overcome their problems, they think that schools are unfriendly, discouraging and hostile. Teachers can encourage all children addressing their individual problems and transmit certain values to students. Teachers' positive attitude on judicious use of mother tongue can minimize the adverse effect of English hegemony. Curricular and extracurricular activities, context-specific teaching pedagogy and materials, need-based explanation might be the solutions to reduce linguistics-violence and psychological harassment in the school. In policy level, different stakeholders related to school system in Nepal have to formulate the clear policy to address and preserve the issue of cultural and linguistic diversity within school policies and programs.

### **Socially Unresponsive Pedagogy**

Having explored the challenges of language dominance, we now turn to the issue of pedagogical unresponsiveness. Pedagogical unresponsiveness to the particular needs of student

is another main theme which explores a part of my nephew's learning struggle at the school. As mentioned in our conversation, he could not score nice grade, but scored A Grade in Nepali subject, in first term and second term examination in Grade 4 that made him upset in such schooling. He was mostly troubled with the instruction-related obstacles that stopped his autonomous progress in learning the lessons. Mainly, the tools of instrument such as English medium text-books, teaching in English and other activities were unfamiliar with his cultural experiences. In his early grades, he did not have sufficient exposures in English, neither at home nor in his neighboring houses, so he could not cope up with English mediated setting. Social and family interaction in completely Nepali sets but learning in English mediated setting might be the barrier his smooth learning. He said, 'My books are very big and written in English which I find irritating.' His difficulty in understanding the curricular contents was due to English medium. In this regard, Rana (2018) rightly said that 'there is no empirical evidence found to support that the EMI assures the improvement of the quality of education' (p. 46). Similarly, Simpson (2017) mentions in executive summary that early introduction to EMI is ...viewed as impairing learning in the formative years and limiting educational attainments. Mother tongue-based education model seems practical and effective in early grade. Culturally responsive techniques can insist on the local context combining socio-cultural and institutional characteristics of the setting in which they occur. Such strategies can help the learners like my nephew get confidence in their formal schooling. To address this gap, producing appropriate resource materials considering local-context and the students' need as well as implementing socially responsive teaching mechanisms, could be beneficial.

### **EMI As a Constitutionally Deviated Practice**

Having discussed the challenges of language dominance and socially unresponsive pedagogy, we now turn to the issue of 'EMI as constitutionally deviated practice'. Regarding mother-tongue based education, constitution of Nepal-2072 clearly mentions under part 3 (31.5): "Every Nepali community living in Nepal shall have the right to acquire education in its mother tongue upto basic level." The 2072 constitution mandates that all children have the right to receive basic education in their mother tongue but excessive craze of our educational stakeholder (students, teachers, school administration, policy makers, parents) on English as a medium of instruction has violated the constitutional right pushing them outside the school as they find strange language 'English' quite different than the language they speak at home and society. To address this issue, mother tongue-based education can be adopted in early grade to enhance learners' learning and to respect the constitutional provision regarding mother tongue-based education.

### **Conclusion**

This research has explored that EMI can be practiced considering the local specific-context, their need, human resources and socio-cultural practices but imposition of EMI can be the barrier for smooth learning. Considering the point that every student is unique, with their unique social dimensions and learning capacity; schools and teachers have to employ context-



specific pedagogical interventions on their need. Employing the same pedagogical techniques for all students regardless of their different social dimensions and learning style, teaching-learning seems unproductive. In my nephew's case, the school system not only prioritized, but also legitimized, symbolic violence against him employing mandatory English and monetary charge in Nepali speaking. My nephew was completely hopeless due to English phobia as he was not facilitated with judicial use of mother tongue. My nephew showed his reluctance to attend EMI school and wanted to go back to his village school. My nephew didn't find any materials representing his socio-cultural context. Being fully grown-up in Nepali speaking socio-cultural context, he wanted home language and fine free learning environment. One-size-fits-all approach seemed counterproductive in my nephew's case. Naresh's experience of schooling supports the views explored in the Bourdieu's theory.

And important points to be noted that the decision that many schools have made to shift from Nepali to English medium and the use of unfamiliar language that discouraged in their learning are against the right to education in mother tongue upto basic level in schools as written in Nepal's Constitution. However, due to diverse range of caste, ethnic and language groups in Nepal and unavailability of their (some languages) written script, it seems difficult to implement the constitutional commitment of mother tongue. We need to begin from a concrete understanding of local attitudes, practices, resources, capacities and will power of local bodies.

Different researches (Cook, 2001; Cummins, 2001; Hovens, 2002; Ndamba, 2008), show that learning occurs best in the language a child speaks most. But our practices seem quite opposite. In recent years, most of the community schools of Nepal are using English language as a medium of learning in early education. Some of the local governments have made compulsion to use English as a medium of instruction and learning. Community schools' decision to shift from Nepali to English seems absurd and against the right to education in mother tongue in school as mentioned in Nepal's constitution 2015. This type of shift has made the slogan of inclusiveness and equity too is question-marked. Nepal National Framework- the foundational document to meet the goal - 'Inclusive and equitable quality education for life-long learning opportunities for all' (MOE, 2017) doesn't seem to be implemented if students can't enjoy in their classrooms due to unfamiliar English language. EMI may pose a barrier to inclusive and equitable quality education. Learners learn one language from home and celebrate festivals as well as culture in the same language but when they find strange language in the classroom; they don't find themselves in learning zone. They stop going school. Learners who are in their early education should feel happy with the language which is used to facilitate their learning otherwise they find demotivating classrooms. My nephew didn't like to go EMI school due to unfamiliar language and the bias treatment in the classroom due to village Nepali accent. Instructions delivered in the classroom must enhance mutual respect among the students.

EMI practice has made the learners confused; neither have they learned better mother-tongue nor better target language. In our basic level, all human resources don't seem confident enough to handle all subjects in English language. Such practice seems, on the one hand, against the constitutional commitment and on the other hand, barrier in their autonomous learning. Keeping this fact in mind; policymakers, educators and stakeholders have to reconsider the EMI approach in linguistically diverse classroom in early education. They have to prioritize such language policies that align with the needs and rights of students to maximize their learning utilizing their language and culture. Further studies can be carried to see the context-specific problems related to EMI issues in more depth and examine the effectiveness of different language policies in promoting inclusive and equitable quality education.

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