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Challenges to Implement English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) at Primary Education

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Abstract

The implementation of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in primary education in Nepal is a growing phenomenon. Most schools in Nepal incorporate EMI in their education delivery process. In the process of adopting EMI, they have faced numerous challenges. This paper takes a qualitative design and narrative approach to explore the challenges faced by teachers in implementing EMI in primary education. Narrative inquiry was conducted with four head teachers of different schools, which were selected purposively. Findings and discussion indicated that lack of expert teachers, lack of appropriate teaching materials, learners' linguistic background, limited exposure to the English language, and contradiction between policy and practice are the major challenges to implementing EMI in primary education. Despite such challenges, teachers, students, institutions, stakeholders, and policymakers saw EMI as a worthwhile opportunity.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction, EMI, Challenges, and Primary Education

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Introduction

English as a medium of instruction in non-English-speaking countries gained significant traction in the education system. In the context of Nepal, most of the schools adopt English as a medium of Instruction (EMI) in their education delivery system with the hope of English proficiency and its support for economic well-being and social mobility. Implementing EMI in the education delivery system, especially at the primary level, presents numerous challenges for teachers who have low linguistic proficiency, pedagogical skills, and institutional support (Dearden, 2014). Such challenges impact on quality of instruction, academic outcomes of students, and institutional performance.

The teacher's role is pivotal for the successful implementation of EMI policies in practice; however, most of the teachers face difficulties in delivering content in English medium and fostering understanding in English. The EMI process becomes more complicated if there is a lack of adequate training, resources, and knowledge of cultural and contextual factors (Kirkpatrick, 2013). Proficiency in the English language is the primary challenge faced by most teachers. Presenting content with a lack of necessary skills in the English language may hinder their ability to teach effectively and diminish learners' comprehension (Thomas & Collier, 2020). Challenges in the successful implementation of EMI are compounded by inadequate opportunities for teacher professional development focusing on their English language ability (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

Teaching materials play a crucial role in effective classroom management and content delivery. Lack of adequate materials may also be another challenge for the implementation of EMI in primary education. Most teachers have to depend upon poorly translated textbooks, or they have to create materials themselves that are old-fashioned and time-consuming and cannot meet the educational standard (Hamid, Jahan, & Islam, 2013). Tollefson & Tsui (2004) mentioned that most of the primary schools of different regions have been facing the problem of scarcity of EMI-friendly materials like textbooks, learning materials, teaching aids, and experienced and qualified teachers, which hinders the proficiency of students.

Nepal is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country. The Census report (2078) shows that one hundred and twenty-four languages are used as native languages, and Nepali is recognized as the official language in Nepal. In Nepal, the English language is taken as a second or foreign language. The rise of English as a global language makes it the lingua franca all over the world, and it calls for the shift of the English language teaching (ELT) paradigm to meet the sociolinguistic landscape (Jenkins, 2009). In Nepal, the English language was used at the elementary to university level as a subject or medium of instruction. Khadka (2022) writes history of English language teaching in Nepal is elite to common people nowadays. English language teaching in Nepal is an integral part of the Nepalese education system. It was used as a subject or medium of instruction from the primary to the University level.

English as a medium of instruction is widely spread throughout the world, focusing on teaching English through English. Khadka (2022) claims that the popularity of EMI is increasing because it is believed that the English language can provide better opportunities for better careers. In the process of implementation of EMI in the Education system, non-native language teachers face more challenges in teaching the students. Bista (2011) mentioned that the English language is taught as a second or foreign language in Nepal.

In the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) (2016-23), it was mentioned that the medium of instruction may be English, Nepali, and students' mother tongue, and should be appropriately used in the classroom. SSDP provides flexibility in the medium of instruction, not only English; Nepali and students' mother tongue can be used as a medium of classroom instruction appropriately. Ibrahim, Anka, and Yabo (2017) discussed the challenges caused by the ineffective implementation of EMI in Nigerian primary schools, which may be divergent from the national education policy. Unplanned implementation of EMI may cause challenges for teachers in the education delivery system, which may create conflict with the national education policy.

Nepal is a multilingual country. According to a census report (2078), 124 languages are used as the mother tongue. In such a situation, implementing EMI seems against the rights provided by the Constitution of Nepal. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) states that

every Nepalese person has the right to get an education in their mother tongue. In such a situation, implementing EMI is challenging. The English language is used worldwide as a lingua franca, which is a widely spread phenomenon. EMI mainly focuses on teaching the English language through English. While implementing EMI, language teachers may face different challenges. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by teachers implementing English as a medium of instruction at the primary level.

Methodology

Methodology shows the research paper writing process, research method used, and the reason for selecting particular methods. The methodological procedures show a detailed and step-by-step description of the research progression. To confirm the logical finishing point of this study, I have utilized qualitative research paradigms, and the medium of instruction is its ontology, where empirical and field studies are methodological procedures.

Field study involves observation and interviews for data collection. It is the process of collecting real facts from the real world. I took semi-structured interviews following the interview guide with four head teachers from different schools. According to Adams (2015) semi-structured interview is conducted to extract the required information from the participants to obtain the objectives of the research work. It provides the investigator with greater elasticity, and the interviewee gets control to make judgments about the construct.

To conduct the interviews, I initially contacted the participants via phone to introduce myself and explain the purpose of my research. The participants were purposely chosen based on their professional experience, commitment to the teaching profession, tendencies toward using English as a medium of instruction, and their distinctive qualities. I carried out semi-structured interviews through phone conversations and face-to-face meetings, during which I recorded and took notes of their responses. After collecting the data, I transcribed the interviews and identified key themes following the principles of the thematic analysis approach, aligning them with the research objectives and interpreting the findings in an organized manner.

Findings and Discussions

In the research article, findings and discussions are considered as major parts; findings of the article are based on methodologies applied, and discussions are made based on the reviewed literature. Major findings and their discussions of this study are presented below:

Lack of Expert Teachers

In the interview with participant 'A', he said that

The majority of teachers who are teaching at the primary level were not well trained to use EMI in classes. The lack of skilled and trained teachers creates challenges in the implementation of EMI. Hardly, the teachers can speak English at a general level, but they are not well proficient in the latest techniques and strategies used in teaching.

Similarly, participant 'C' stated that,

Due to the lack of proficient teachers, we are facing difficulties in conveying the required quality education to the students. This problem is difficult to solve unless there is a system in place to provide training and access to resources for teachers to implement EMI.

Participant "B" stated that,

The lack of expert/trained teachers has affected the quality of learning for students. Untrained teachers cannot adjust the content to the level of students. In such a situation implementation of EMI becomes challenging.

Finally, participant 'D' said that,

The lack of sufficient language proficiency and training among teachers to teach English at the primary level has greatly affected the learning process. Untrained teachers have difficulty in planning lessons and meeting lesson objectives, which hinders students' academic progress.

All the participants have similar opinions regarding the skills and expertise of the teacher. Participant 'A' focused on the latest techniques and strategies used in teaching, which makes the classroom interactive. Participant 'C' is concerned with the quality of education provided by trained and untrained teachers. Finally, Participants 'B' and 'D' concentrated on the presentation of content in the classroom. They opined that trained teachers can present content effectively with a plan to achieve the objective. Dearden (2014), in his research article, says that implementing EMI is challenging for schools because not every school has linguistically proficient and well-trained teachers, especially for EMI implementation. Kirkpatrick (2013) stated that inadequate training and resources for cultural and contextual factors make the EMI implementation process challenging. Based on the opinion of the participants and previous literature lack of expert teachers is a challenge to implement EMI in primary education.

Lack of Appropriate Teaching Materials

When I interviewed participant 'A', he stated that,

Our school has a shortage of proper teaching materials to support the curriculum while teaching in the English medium. Although efforts are being made to produce materials at the local level, it is difficult to maintain the quality of materials and costly too.

Similarly, participant 'B' said that,

There is a lack of posters, videos, and exercise books needed for English medium teaching in our school. We have to buy materials available in the market, but they are not according to the standards and needs of our students, and are costly too.

Likewise, participant 'C' regarding teaching materials mentioned that,

There are only limited books in the library, and teachers do not have time to prepare creative materials. Students need multiple communication channels and audio-video materials to become proficient in the language, but there is a lack of such resources and materials.

Finally, participant 'D' said that,

In our school, access to digital content is also limited; therefore, modern teaching materials cannot be used in the classroom. Learners can learn effectively from digital materials like audio-video materials. English language teaching has not become effective due to the lack of appropriate educational materials.

From the opinion of the participants, it was clear that teaching materials play a crucial role in English language teaching and learning, especially where EMI is implemented. All the participants have similar voices regarding the unavailability of appropriate teaching materials in their school that are suitable for English medium classrooms. Participants 'A' and 'B' opined that self-made materials and materials available in the market are costly and cannot maintain the standard of the learners. Another participant, 'C' and 'D', focused on digital materials. They stated that students can learn easily and effectively through digital teaching materials such as audio-visual videos based on their age and interests. There is a shortage of such materials, and teachers do not have time to create. Hamid, Jahan, & Islam (2013) said that inappropriate and inadequate teaching materials cannot meet the standard of education. Bizimana and Orodho (2014), insufficient levels of teaching and learning materials compromise effective classroom management and content delivery. Teaching materials, classroom management, and learning achievement are interrelated with each other. For effective classroom management and learning achievement, attractive and appropriate teaching materials play an important role. The lack of appropriate teaching materials is a challenge to implementing EMI in primary education.

Learners Linguistic Background

When I interviewed regarding the learner's linguistic background, participant 'A' said,

Most of the students in our school come from rural areas, where they use their mother tongue in day-to-day communication. Implementing English as the medium of instruction in the classroom makes it difficult for them to understand even the basic vocabulary and structure. This condition slows down their learning process

In the same way, participant 'B' stated that,

The linguistic background of the learners in this school is diverse, so that in the same class there are students who speak different mother tongues. Teachers cannot address each student's linguistic background when teaching English, where English is the medium of instruction. This has a direct impact on learning.

Similarly, participant 'C' said,

As the Constitution of Nepal suggests, every citizen has the right to get an education in their mother tongue. In our school, most of the students' primary classes are taught in their mother tongue. After the primary level, they start studying English medium at the secondary level, and because of the language shift, they lose confidence. This problem negatively affects their academic achievement.

Finally, participant 'D' said that,

After implementing English as the medium of instruction, communication between teachers and students is weak. Students feel uncomfortable expressing their questions or ideas because their linguistic background does not allow them to speak fluently in English. A linguistic support program seems necessary to solve this problem.

In every school, learners are from different linguistic backgrounds. From the above opinion of the participant, it seems that learners' linguistic background is another challenge to implementing English as a medium of instruction. All the participants agreed that learners use their mother tongue in their daily lives and find it difficult to use the English language in the classroom, which is why they cannot communicate with teachers, which slows down their learning process. In the interview, participant 'B' mentioned that learners are from diverse linguistic backgrounds and teachers cannot determine which impact on learning. Participant 'B' focused on the shift of language from mother tongue to English medium instruction has a negative effect on academic achievement. Finally, participant 'D' stated that due to the learner's linguistic background, they cannot actively take part in communication in the classroom. In SSDP (2016-23), it was mentioned that the medium of instruction may be English or Nepali, the learner's mother tongue, and should be used appropriately in the classroom, which is why implementing EMI is challenging. According

to the Constitution of Nepal (2015), every citizen has the right to get an education in their mother tongue. In such a situation, implementing EMI is a great challenge to schools. Walkinshaw, Fenton & Humphreys (2017) in their research mentioned that multiple language use among learners is a challenge for the successful implementation of EMI. Based on the opinions of participants and reviewed literature, learners' linguistic background is a challenge for the successful implementation of EMI.

Limited Exposure to the English Language

In the interview with participant 'A' regarding English language exposure, he stated that,

In our school, students find it difficult to understand and speak English in the classroom because the English language is less used in their families and as well as society. Lack of adequate practice in daily life created a challenge to improve their linguistic ability.

Similarly, participant 'B' said that,

Due to the lack of direct contact with the English language outside the classroom, students cannot absorb the course materials very well. Teachers have to put in extra effort, but sometimes that is not enough.

Likewise, participant 'C' said that,

Most of the students' social and family environments do not promote the English language, which is why students are not able to develop pronunciation and good writing skills. There is also a lack of effective communication between teachers and students, which creates problems in the learning process.

Finally, participant 'D' stated that,

Most of the students in our school are from rural areas. They have no opportunity to speak or understand the English language at home. They use their mother tongue, or Nepali language, in their daily life. So they have to face many challenges when

English is the medium of instruction, and teachers also face challenges in teaching them.

The English language is taught as a second or foreign language in Nepal. Most of the learners are from non-English speaking communities. They use their mother tongue or the Nepali language for communication in their daily life, which is why they do not get English exposure. All the participants have similar views regarding the English language exposure that the learners are getting. Based on participant 'A' said the English language is rarely used in families and society, and it poses challenges in the linguistic ability of learners. Similarly, participant 'B' mentioned that because of the lack of English language exposure, learners cannot absorb content, and teachers have to put in extra effort, which is challenging. Likewise, participant 'D' focused on effective communication between teacher and student, but because of limited exposure, English language learners do not want to participate in communication. Based on Participant 'D's voice, learners are from rural areas and do not get opportunities to speak and listen English language, which creates challenges to implement EMI in primary education. In Nepal, the English language is taught as a second or foreign language (Bista, 2011). Generally, in the English as a foreign language context in Nepal, there is little exposure for learners because they use their mother tongue or the Nepali language for day-to-day communication. Limited English exposure to learners is a great barrier to language acquisition in rural areas where resources and opportunities are limited (Samosir, 2022). Based on participants' opinions and previous studies, limited exposure to the English language is a challenge for the implementation of EMI in primary education.

Contradiction Between Policy and Practice

In the interview with participant 'A', based on EMI policy and practice, he stated that,

Although government policy encourages English medium instruction, most of the teachers feel difficulties in using English effectively in the classroom. The use of learners' first language in the classroom facilitates learning, but English medium instruction policies pose challenges.

In the same way, participant 'B' said that,

In the schools of rural areas, teaching and learning have not been effective due to the weakness of teachers and students in the English language. The policy has given priority to English medium instruction, but there is a situation where the mother tongue has to be resorted to in the actual classroom environment.

Similarly, participant 'C' said that,

We apply English as a medium of instruction, but some parents worry that their children will forget their mother tongue. The government encourages to use English language, but guidance for preserving cultural and linguistic identity is not clear.

Finally, participant 'D' said that,

The linguistic differences between students and teachers have created problems in learning. School policy makes English medium mandatory, but practically, we have to follow the multilingual policy. Students do not understand the meaning of the text when they are taught only in English. There is a need to bring necessary programs to use the English medium, respecting the local language.

In the constitution of Nepal (2015) regarding the medium of instruction, it was mentioned that Nepali or English, or both languages can be used in classroom instruction. Most of the schools adopt the English language as a medium of instruction because of its growing popularity. Different policies are prepared by the government and practiced based on EMI. Regarding policy and practices, participant 'A' said the policy encourages to use of EMI, but teachers find it difficult, and the learner's first language facilitates learning. Similarly, participant 'B' stated that teachers and learners are weak in the English language and hesitate to use it, but policy priorities EMI. Likewise, participant 'C' mentioned parents are worried about their mother tongue if we apply EMI because there is a chance of linguistic identity loss. Finally, participant 'D' said we have an English medium policy, but we have to follow a multilingual policy to teach effectively. In SSDP (2016-23), regarding the medium of instruction, English, Nepali, and mother tongue can be used appropriately in the classroom, but the practices focused on English medium instruction

only, which creates challenges. According to Ibrahim, Anka, and Yabo (2017), the ineffective implementation of EMI may be divergent from the national education policy. Based on the participants' opinions, and reviewed literature contradiction between EMI policy and its practices created challenges for the successful implementation of EMI.

Conclusion

In the education system of Nepal, most of the schools adopt EMI and face different challenges. Nepal is a non-English speaking country, most of the people use the Nepali language and their mother tongue in their day-to-day communication. Growing popularity of the English language, it was compelled to adopt the EMI policy in school education in Nepal. While adopting the EMI policy, different teachers faced challenges in its implementation. Content knowledge, English language skills, and adjustment to foreign languages are the major challenges in EMI implementation (Goodman, 2014). In non-English speaking situations, implementing EMI is a thought-provoking task for policymakers, stakeholders, and institutions. In the context of Nepal, national policies like SSDP (2016-23) and the Constitution of Nepal (2015) have similar provisions regarding the medium of instruction: it was mentioned that the medium of instruction should be Nepali or English, or the student's mother tongue, and used appropriately in the classroom.

EMI in Nepal's primary education system faced different challenges, as emphasized by previously reviewed literature and responses from participants. In Nepal, EMI has been practiced by various schools. In the article, the researcher finds some striking challenges that are faced by teachers while implementing EMI in primary education. The major challenges found by the researcher in the article are: lack of expert teachers, lack of appropriate teaching materials, learners' linguistic background, limited exposure to the English language, and contradiction between policy and practice.

The successful implementation of EMI in primary education in Nepal required addressing the challenges by providing necessary training to develop expert teachers, developing materials, respecting the linguistic background of learners, creating English speaking environment, and aligning policy and its practices in real classrooms. In the classroom, teaching and learning use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction

promotes meaningful learning (Rai,2018). In primary school education medium of instruction should be appropriately used, as in the policy, it will be either English, Nepali, or the learner's mother tongue.

This study will be helpful for those primary schools that are implementing EMI. It will be useful for EMI policymakers, EMI implementing institutions, and future researchers. It also provides fundamental insights for curriculum developers, policymakers, and material designers involved in English Medium Instruction (EMI).

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