Secondary Level Students' Experiences in English as a Medium of Instruction: A Nepalese Context

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Abstract

This study explores the secondary-level students' experiences in English as a medium of instruction in education. It aimed at identifying the challenges in English as a medium of instruction for the students in the Nepalese educational settings. It used narrative inquiry as a research method in order to explore the living experiences of the students regarding the practice of using the English language as a language of classroom instruction in the context where English is used as a non-native language. Semi-structured interview has been used as a research process for data collection and the interview guidelines have been used as research tools while collecting data from purposely selected seven student participants studying in the secondary level. This study has revealed that the students experience English as a medium of instruction as a practice to boost up their confidence personally as well as academically despite their EMI hardships in and outside their educational settings.

1. INTRODUCTION

A good understanding of instructional language determines the successful dissemination of education that secures its intended outcomes. In the worldwide academic spectrum today, the dominant English language has been reigning as a medium of instruction resulting in globalized education (Tsou & Kao, 2017). Generally, the use of the English language in the classroom as a means of pedagogical instruction is called English as a medium of instruction (EMI). Dearden (2014) has defined EMI precisely as the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in those countries where English is not spoken as the first language. Hence, it is an instructional practice of using English language to teach non-academic subjects; finance, medicine, engineering, and science, etc. (Zhao & Dixon, 2017). So, basically, EMI is considered the practice of teaching classroom content through the English language in such a context where English is not used as the first or official language.

Contemporarily, English has been regarded as the powerful language as it has the dominance in all sectors; business, arts, education and culture along with obligatory telecommunication opportunities for modern professionals in each field or discipline (Tamtam et al., 2012). Specifically, in education, the worldwide EMI trend has been taken as the students' need for developing their English competence along with updating them with the emerging knowledge that enable them to compete in the global market (Tran & Nguyen, 2018).

Recently, Bolton et al. (2024) have claimed that EMI has appeared as a distinct sub-field of applied linguistics with seventy five percent books on this topic published only in the past five years despite its passive practice from the earlier years. Moreover, in the context of Asian countries, the fastest growth of this trend is being celebrated with the mushrooming establishments of international schools (Ascher & Pichery, 2024). Regarding the EMI popularity, Kym and Kym (2014) have stated that, along with other diverse educational policies, EMI has also been adopted in many countries where English is used as an unofficial language. So, EMI practice has been considered supportive to the students for acquiring higher English proficiency so that they are prepared for better future settlement.

Though EMI has been regarded as a helpful practice for students' academic and personal excellence globally, they struggle with their linguistic barriers resulting to EMI adversities depending upon the contextual status of English use. To support this claim, I would remember my EMI experiences in my schooling that trigger my sense of believing that there are many EMI challenges and problems in a multilingual context. I have collected many experiences of facing EMI comfortability during my school life. Specifically, I remember a particular incidence of going through a hard feeling regarding EMI; it was my experience when I was in the eighth grade. It was Friday; I was harvesting millet around the middle of the day alone. Meanwhile, I recalled a regularly used English expression in school; 'May I come in?' I also often tried remembering another basic expression; 'May I go out?' However, I failed because I could not organize the words in a sentence despite my understanding the meanings of those expressions. Overall, I used to feel bored during the English period as I used to go blank with the English language in classroom instruction. Consequently, I never secured good marks in English subject. Thus, such experiences make me think that instructional language plays a vital role in establishing students' academic as well as personal excellence. Therefore, I have a concern about the contextual sensitivity in EMI practice.

The unstoppable and unavoidable trend of EMI practice has been highly demanding for many years for various reasons including internationalizing the education of a particular country (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020). Since it is the result of globalization in education, EMI is becoming a fast-growing trend worldwide generating huge research interest and debates among educators and policymakers (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Dearden, 2015; Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2014 as cited in Tsou & Kao, 2017). While EMI has been recognized as a buzzing phenomena in recent times, scholars are coming up with various concepts and practices related to it, such as the coloniality of English proficiency (Ndlangamandala, 2024), Epistemic (in) justice in EMI (Zheng & Qiu, 2024), trans-languaging pedagogy in English language education (Yidie & Fan, 2024), multilingual instruction (Singh et al., 2024), and so forth that show its pervasiveness across the worldwide academic or educational settings.

The advantageous EMI practice has been a celebrated educational demand across global educational institutions. However, being immensely welcomed, it is lagging behind in terms of effective implementation or practice in schools. In this regard, Miya (2023) has claimed that the inability of the epistemic institutions to provide the professional training for the teachers and sufficient teaching materials for better EMI practice in pedagogical activities are majorly affecting its effective EMI implementation. Despite such fluctuations, Manh (2012) has found many countries adopting this practice to attract the foreign students prepare students for better careers and settle the excellent students' productivity within a country. Eventually, EMI is

viewed as a practice of fostering the worldwide transmission of academic knowledge (Li & Wu, 2018). In the context of Nepal, aligning with the discussed views, the schools are implementing EMI increasingly though it has nothing to do with ensuring quality education (Ojha, 2018). Interestingly, the higher-level students despite their EMI adversities (Rai, 2023) have praised EMI to be a supportive policy. In the views of educators, EMI is a practice to causes an uncomfortable feeling while carrying out their pedagogical activities (Tiwari, 2023). While EMI is thriving in Nepalese education, it is supposed to be explored extensively from each respect. However, the area of EMI has been explored with several studies, but has not been found any research conducted on secondary-level students' EMI issues. Keeping the students at the centre of epistemic programs and practices, this study explores the Nepalese secondary-level students' lived EMI experiences.

1.1. Purpose of the study

2. To explore the experiences of secondary-level students in English as a medium of instruction
3. To identify the challenges of secondary-level students while getting instructed on the contents through the English as a medium of instruction

1.2. Research Questions

2. How do the secondary-level students experience English as a medium of instruction?
3. What are the secondary-level students' challenges in English as a medium of instruction?

2. Literature Review

In order to conduct this research efficiently and make a distinct comparison to others, the relevant literature has been reviewed in this study.

2.1. EMI in Nepalese Educational Context

The Nepalese education system has come a long way through several formations and reformations regarding language in education policies and practice. Nepal has a several-decades-long history regarding English language teaching (ELT); almost about a half of a century (Bista, 2011). The history of ELT goes back to the Britain visit of then Prime Minister, Junga Bahadur Rana in 1850. After four years of his visit, he started providing English education to Rana family (Royals) in the palace (Aryal, 2016) with the establishment of Darbar High School. Then, Tri-Chandra College, established in 1918, introduced the direct influence of the British-Indian system in the Nepali education system (Pandey, 2020) by imparting education in the English language.

Regarding further flourishment of ELT in Nepal, the first university of Nepal, Tribhuvan University (TU), was established in 1959, and prioritized English highly in its curriculum (Bista, 2011). Moreover, another landmark in Nepalese educational policy; Nepal Education System Plan (NESP) in 1971 provisioned the use of English as a compulsory medium of instruction in higher education (Pandey, 2020). Now, for more than forty years, ELT has been in practice in Nepalese education. Though English is not the second or official language in Nepal, it is largely in use in different sectors. Furthermore, it was used as a medium of instruction in a number of private schools, colleges and universities in Nepal (Bista, 2011) motivating its subsequent increasing implementation in community schools today. Therefore, the emergence of the concept of EMI in Nepalese education seemed to be sprouted with the ELT practice. Hence, it seems that the ELT practice has worked out to set the foundation for EMI practice in Nepalese education.

Dearden (2014) has claimed that EMI, being a growing global phenomenon, has been practised more in private education than in public education in all stages; primary, secondary and tertiary in many countries including Nepal. Recently, several government schools and community schools in Nepal have shifted their medium of instruction from Nepali to English (Republica, 2016 as cited in Ojha, 2018). In addition, Sah (2022) has stated that various types of schools such as elite private schools and low-fee private schools are established in the country to fulfill the increasing demand for EMI in education. Regarding the peaking value of the English language in Nepalese education, Phyak and Sharma (2020) have also reported that the national curriculum gives more focus on the importance of ELT from the first Grade in order to support learners to become proficient in English for enabling them to compete with international students in future. In this way, EMI seemed to be given a high priority in Nepalese school education.

2.2. Students' EMI Experiences and Challenges

When the students are instructed in a language, which is not their mother tongue, they are likely to collect vivid and unusual linguistic experiences. Regarding EMI practice, a numbers of research studies have been carried out differing from context to context. Kym and Kym (2014) researched in Korea with 364 students and found them having considerably high motivation and satisfaction in EMI despite their inadequate English proficiency. Similarly, another study by Phuong and Nguyen (2019) found that 136 Vietnamese undergraduate students had a positive attitude toward EMI. In their study, the students realized the advantages of EMI lessons to access ample resources, enhance English competency, job opportunities in the future, etc. though they experienced linguistic challenges, such as low English proficiency and insufficient knowledge of English vocabulary. Furthermore, Kuteeva (2020) explored that the EMI practice was complicated for the students as it troubled them with the conceptualization of English culture. Along with that, the students were critical of their positionality in the issues related to power relations, group dynamics, social integration and learning, etc.

The EMI experiences of the students from different contexts have shown that the students proudly stood for the EMI practice regardless of their linguistic capability. In this regard, Murtaza (2016) also made a similar observation in her study as she found that students favouring EMI implementation in Bangladeshi education since they realized that it is helpful for them to overcome their fear of English. Moreover, Macaro and Akincioglu (2018) conducted a study in the Turkish context and found the students strongly motivated to study through EMI as they counted the abroad studying and working as the principal drivers for the EMI environment. In the same way, Tylor et al. (2022) have found that Thai students perceive EMI as a tool to keep up with prestige in society and study abroad. Furthermore, Tajik et al. (2021) found that Kazakhstani students have positive views regarding EMI implementation in education since it helped them to secure a better future career. In addition, Lueg and Lueg (2015) have found the students likely to be detrimental if the EMI practice is abandoned in Danish education as they considered that EMI is for personal enrichment and a boon for their advanced future career. So, the studies showed that EMI has been taken as a tool for international education and enhancing the financial independence of the students.

The reviewed literatures indicated the unavoidability of global demand of EMI in education. The secnarios in studies projected the students' different perceptions regarding EMI practice from context to context. However, the reasons for EMI implementation are similar to

the students from different countries; to be prepared for global workforce. Mostly, the literatures appeared to be exploring on EMI in higher education. While reviewing the literature, I did not find any research that has been carried out to explore the experiences of secondary-level students in EMI in education even outside Nepal.

2.3. English Language and Sociocultural Theory

Humans are capable of possessing more than one language. So, the concepts of bilingualism, trilingualism, multilingualism, etc. have been introduced in the field of language learning. In today's globalizing world, people are learning additional languages being motivated intrinsically and extrinsically (Noels, et al., 2000). These days, people are learning additional languages being self-motivated or obliged due to globalization. In other words, the world contains multilingual people more than monolinguals today. At this present time, being a globally dominant language, English has been the foremost medium of international communication (Prodromou, 1992). Thus, such importance of the English language has been admitted in education. Consequently, the English language has been used in instructional practices in epistemic settings across the globe.

Among numerous theories in the ELT field, sociocultural theory is one of the significant theories that assumes learning as an act of enculturation (Scott & Palincsar, 2013). Moreover, this theory believes that humans do not act directly in the physical world (Lantolf, 2000). Furthermore, it views that human social and mental activities are organized being encultured with culturally constructed artifacts. Specifically, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory believes that social interaction plays a significant role in a learner's language acquisition and internalization (Mahn, 1999; Hazhar et al., 2023). This theory deals with the importance of society for an individual's cognitive development. Furthermore, Lantolf et al. (2014) have also stated that human linguistic development happens through participation in cultural, linguistic and historically formed settings; family, peer interaction and instructional contexts. Thus, the core of this theory views that human consciousness is a process which evolves continuously (Vygotsky, 1978 as cited in Almazyed, 2021). Thus, social interaction is regarded as a significant factor in language acquisition and learning.

Regarding the implication of sociocultural theory, the proposed approaches like task-based learning and collaborative learning, etc. including the concepts of mediation activity, private speech, regulation and zone of proximal development (Nun, 2001 as cited in Gongyu et al., 2013) are supportive to language learning and acquisition. As this theory is about the development of human cognitive and higher mental functions through social interaction, it demands teaching through interaction (eg. Storytelling, Think-aloud, Language data, etc.), and dynamic assessment (Eg. Pretest-teach-posttest, Pretask-mediation- Post-task) (Aimin, 2013). So, it centres on interactional activities in teaching learning programs that assure the learner's active participation in learning the target language efficiently and productively.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research, narrative inquiry was used in order to explore the EMI experiences of secondary-level students and identify their EMI challenges. Narrative inquiry believes that humans are storytelling organisms who mean lived stories individually and socially (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). So, aligning with the beliefs of this research approach, the study was carried out based on the participants' narration of their lived experience of the phenomena.

In the study, seven students from different public schools in Kathmandu were purposively selected for data collection. They were the students studying in schools located in Kathmandu city originally belonging to different districts in eastern Nepal. Economically, they were from an improvised economic background where their parents were the daily-wage workers. Moreover, English teachers who had decades-long teaching experience had taught them. I used semi-structured interviews as a research process and interview guidelines as research tools in this study. This study followed the quality standards of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989 as cited in Al Riyami, 2015) by assuring the data stability, verifying data authentically, and using the appropriate methodology to maintain the trustworthiness of the study. Furthermore, this study has also ensured the basic ethical considerations (Creswell & Clark, 2017) by following the principles of confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation and informed consent. Moreover, the participants were given pseudonyms; Ambika, Nogen, Dinesh, Samik, Manju, Shristi, and Aarav.

The discursive questions prepared for the semi-structured interviews led the respondents to express their views or opinions freely. The questions set the respondents free to elaborate on their points at their own pace. The questions demanded experience and knowledge of the content but not one-word answers or responses. The following were the major questions that were asked to the participants along with other supportive questions.

The question like "How do you perceive EMI?" took the participants to opine their understanding of EMI. The participants had the liberty to put their thoughts on their understanding of the phenomena. Moreover, the question "How do you experience EMI in your education?" led them to explain their observation on EMI. This question explored their certain perceptions of EMI. Similarly, the question, "Why would you think EMI in education is a good or bad practice?" this question was responded to by the participants with their real journey with EMI. This question expected the respondents to identify their challenges regarding EMI in the classroom based on their experiences.

There were other related sub-questions, such as, "How would EMI be practising in your schools?", "How would you support/discourage EMI practice?", "Why do you think EMI is necessary or unnecessary to be implemented in your school?" were asked to the participants to elicit the data more enriching.

After the data collection, the responses to the questions were analyzed by organizing, coding, and thematizing.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

By analyzing the data from seven participants, their EMI experiences and challenges have been drawn in this section.

4.1. Students EMI Perceptions

Purposely, as this study aimed at exploring the secondary level students' perceptions of EMI in education, all i.e. seven participants were encouraged to narrate their EMI perceptions. As a result, all of them narrated their views sharing identical understandings regarding the phenomena. The participants (Nogen and Ambika) perceived that EMI *is all about using the English language in every school activity.* In the same way, other participants (Aarav and Shristi) understood *EMI as a practice of using the English language in teaching and learning activities in schools.* So, The *use of the English language except for other languages in academic activities in schools* is considered EMI (Samik, Manju and Ambika) in education.

These narratives indicated the existence of clarity in students' understanding of EMI practice in education.

The exploratory question; why do they think EMI is necessary or unnecessary to be implemented in their school along with other sub-questions, enrichingly elicited their perceptions towards EMI implementation in education. Those questions were expected to discover clarity on either their alignment or opposition regarding EMI practice in the educational spectrum for highlighting their attitude. In this case, the participant, Samik volunteered the practice as she found it *supportive to the students in many terms, such as; dealing with the questions formed in the English language* since the exam questions tend to be asked in English and Nepali language. Moreover, she indicated the students' comfortability with questions asked in the English language rather than Nepali. Furthermore, Dinesh found that EMI is useful for conversing *with people across the world.* He added that it is a common trend these days that people travel across the globe where English would be the only language to get mediated through. The data showed that the students have experienced the English Language as a part of people's life where they considered EMI to boost English as a language for their survival. Furthermore, Manju asserted that *EMI practice has benefited her with technological skills.* She further claimed that *this practice aligns with today's techno-world which we need to get along as if we are optionless*. Thus, the students experienced EMI as a pivotal practice for their personal and academic growth.

Additionally, English has helped *a lot* (Dinesh) for the secondary level students. They encountered *more prestige due to people's competence in the English language in society* (Nogen) than in other languages. Aarav considered that EMI crucially supports the students in *study abroad* as he had *many older youngsters pursuing academic degrees overseas* who went EMI implemented schools before. Moreover, it helped them to *showcase their confidence locally or internationally* (Samik). In the same way, EMI has also been supportive to enable secondary level students *to watch English movies and use mobile phones* (Shristi). So, the data indicated that the secondary level students have positively perceived the significance of EMI practice in education along with assessing it in relation to globalization.

The data has shown that secondary-level students have perceived EMI as a tool for excelling in better future careers (Tajik et al., 2021). The students considered that EMI education crucially leads them to live a life not being restricted only to their home country. They also experienced personal enrichment (Lueg & Lueg, 2015) through EMI in education. As the English language has its impact on every aspect of life, the students have been found to be noticing its effect on people's social lives and have constructed their positive perceptions towards EMI in education. Moreover, they have been found to be exploring the position of the English language in relation to the buzzing discourses of globalization and technology.

4.2. Students' EMI Experiences

The study aimed further at identifying the students' EMI experiences in education. So, all the participants i. e. seven narrated variegated experiences in EMI practice in their educational journey. The data has shown that the students have been acquainted with vivid feelings regarding it. Evidently, they have been confronting varied hardships in EMI practice despite their positive perceptions.

Specifically, they *barely understood the language used by the teachers in classes* (Aarav). So, they *hardly succeeded in comprehending the content taught through the English*

language (Ambika). Precisely, as they *were just in the process of learning English, it was often challenging to understand the people's English talks who were better than them* (Shristi and Ambika). Thus, their limited English resources led them to go through troublesome EMI experiences. Furthermore, the students *could not resist their finite English vocabulary while speaking due to the lack of practice* (Nogen). However the students felt more comfortable speaking English alone than with people around. *The vocabularies abruptly vanished from their mind while speaking in the English language* (Samik and Dinesh). So, they have experienced more difficulties in speaking the English language in their educational settings.

While exploring on more EMI challenges, Manju unfolded her *bad feelings while being unable to comprehend the speaker's English talk since her mind did not process to catch the words right away.* The students' EMI difficulties differed from one to another. EMI was problematic in terms of *grammatical fluctuations in speaking and writing* with Ambika. The problem in *pronunciation* (Aarav) was another major EMI adversity for the students along with the challenge in *appropriate vocabulary selection while speaking English around* (Manju and Samik). Though the students did not feel any serious challenges regarding reading, they felt EMI more challenging in terms of speaking, listening and writing.

The data showed that the students have faced challenges in understanding the contents being imparted in the classrooms through the English language. They have often felt EMI problematic because of their inability to understand the information provided by people more proficient than them (Kym & Kym, 2014). They had identified their incompetence in the pronunciation of English words as one of the major difficulties in EMI education. Though the students positively perceived EMI (Phuong & Nguyen, 2019), they specifically found themselves incompetent in grammar while speaking and writing. However, they still were willing to carry on with EMI practice (Murtaza, 2016) in education as they regarded it as a helpful way for successful international communication (Prodromou, 1992). Moreover, as Lantolf et al., (2014) have stated human linguistic development happens through participation in cultural, linguistic and historically formed settings, secondary students seem to be in a need for the interactional classroom and school activities to boost their English proficiency.

4.3. Students' EMI Proposition

The interviews enlivened the essence of eliciting participant's EMI recommendations. The data revealed that the students excitingly admired the continuation of EMI implementation in education despite their EMI hardships. They favoured EMI practice rather than their mother tongue as an instructional language in their education for diverse reasons. In this case, Ambika asserted that the English language *has been a tool to sustain in today's time.* The secondary level students have acknowledged the era of globalization and technology and the demand for the English language for timely survival. They have recognized the English language as a common language among people from every corner of the world. Shristi proudly stated that the English *language has been regarded as a tool to measure the degree of people's affluence and intellectuality.* Similarly, Dinesh claimed that the English language *protects people from being recognized as dumb and unsmart* (Dinesh). As per the responses of the participants, the people who are good at English are regarded as more intellectual and civilized than the others who are not proficient in English.

Moreover, Manju found *EMI as an unavoidable practice since it is productively trendy.* It *boosts the communicative confidence of individuals that helps them for their carefree global reach* (Nogen). Hence, the *EMI arms the students to adjust confidently in any situation*

regardless of any skills that they hold (Aarav). Furthermore, they find it helpful for them in their *self-study with countless learning materials produced and available in the English language rather than Nepali language, so EMI is today's need* (Samik). Such narrations showed that they are encouraged to believe in living their lives easily and comfortably which could be ensued by EMI in education. So, the data indicated that the students considered EMI as an inseparable practice from education in the context of Nepal.

As EMI has been implemented in education increasingly (Bista, 2011), secondary-level students have been found to remarkably favour EMI in Nepalese education. The data, furthermore, indicated that the major reasons for EMI implementation in education are the current demand for English in every sector and building self-confidence in the students through English proficiency. As Dearden (2014) has called it a growing global phenomenon and Sah (2022) referred to it as an increasingly demanded phenomenon, students, nowadays, largely support EMI in order to sustain in the generation of technology and globalization. The high importance of ELT in Nepalese education (Phyak & Sharma, 2020) has been recognized by the secondary-level students in this study as well.

5. CONCLUSION

This research has explored the secondary-level students' experiences in English as a medium of instruction in education. The study was also focused on the challenges they faced while getting instructed through the English language in the classroom. The narrative inquiry was conducted with purposively selected seven secondary-level students using semi-structured interviews as a research process and interview guidelines as research tools. This study has found that secondary level students have perceived EMI as a source of their confidence to showcase their educational and personal excellence. Moreover, they have been found confronting EMI challenges due to their low English proficiency, especially in speaking, listening and writing. Concerning their EMI adversities, they have been found to identify a lack of practice as a major reason to hold them back in their English proficiency.

Furthermore, the students were found to be considering the English language as a tool to sustain their lives today and believing that EMI is a bridge to connect them with their better academic and personal propositions. Thus, despite their EMI struggle, they aspire for EMI implementation in schools considering its unavoidable need in such a context of ongoing globalization and technological advancement.

Finally, the findings drawn from the data analysis cannot be generalized as they represent the participants' personal perspectives on the phenomena. Moreover, the discussion of the study has not been influenced by the researcher.

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