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**English as a Medium of Instruction:
Challenges for Teachers in Unaided Schools**

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ABSTRACT

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has gained wide popularity over the last decade in India. The number of children studying in English-medium schools has increased by 274% between 2003 and 2011 to more than 20 million students (National University of Education, Planning and Administration, 2012). With the increase in demand for English-medium education, there has been a surge in low-cost private English medium schools across India including Bihar. However, there is a noticeable paucity of research investigating the micro-level aspect of using EMI in such schools in Bihar. This is a micro-level study focusing on the challenges faced by the teachers in the implementation of EMI in actual classroom situations. It aims to give voice to their concerns and requirements. The study covers three low-cost private English medium schools in Patna, Bihar. The data was collected using semi-structured interview. Findings reveal that teachers are challenged by students' language limitations, their own limited language abilities and lack of awareness of teaching methods, pedagogical issues, and lack of professional development for in-service teachers. Based on these findings, practical and contextually relevant suggestions are made to ameliorate the situation for both the teachers and the students.

Key Words: Challenges of using EMI, English as a medium of instruction, in-service professional development, low-cost private schools, teacher development.

1. Introduction

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is a rapidly growing global phenomenon. EMI has overwhelming public support in India as proficiency in English is seen as a key factor for ensuring upward social mobility, enhancing job opportunity, and development of the society in general. It is being used in universities, secondary schools and now even in primary schools. Though some concerns are voiced and opposition is raised against the use of EMI by policy makers, especially at elementary school level, the public sentiment is in favour of it. Indian parents believe it to be a sign of quality education and better learning outcomes (Dearden, 2014). According to National University of Education, Planning and Administration (NUEPA) the number of children studying in English-medium schools has increased by 274% between 2003 and 2011, to more than 20 million students (as cited by Mukherji, 2012). It is expected that the number of such schools will continue to increase in the coming years.

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Closely related to the expansion of EMI is the phenomenon of establishment of low-cost English-medium private schools. The proliferation of such schools in urban India has increased over the past two decades and the state of Bihar is no exception. According to a recent survey there are at least 1,224 private unaided schools in urban Patna alone which equals to 78% of the total number of schools in urban Patna and out of these 69.1% are said to be low-cost (Rangaraju, Tooley, & Dixon, 2012). Based on interactions with teachers, school administration, and parents in this context, the author found that children from socially and economically marginalized social groups form a considerable percentage of the students going to low-cost private schools. These students could not secure admission in elite English medium schools as the school fees are too high for those with limited financial means. They do not want to attend government schools which are deemed to be lacking in many educational aspects such as teaching standards and unequipped classrooms. The desire to seek good quality English medium education within their limited financial means leads these students to low-cost private schools.

There is a paucity of research investigating the actual learning scenarios in such schools in Bihar and the real and immediate challenges of teaching in these contexts. This micro-level study attempts to investigate the challenges faced by teachers of low-cost private schools in using English as a medium of instruction (EMI). It aims to give voice to the concerns and opinions of teachers who play the key role at real classroom level. For the purpose of this study, the definition of EMI is as follows:

“The use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English.” (Dearden, 2014, p. 4)

The concept of low-cost private schools, also known as low-fee or budget schools, is not clearly defined (Nambissan, 2013). Broadly, they can be defined as unregulated, unaided schools that play key role in providing education to students from low-income or middle income families. Yet, for the purpose of this study, certain specific criteria were used to narrow down the choice of schools. The selected schools were of the category \uparrow TP \uparrow EE; where teachers have limited English language proficiency, students have very limited or no background in English and parents aspire to upward social mobility through English (Amritavalli, Kumar, Kurrien, & et al., 2006). These schools are funded by private educational trusts, schools fees, or private endowments and are unaided by the government. The classrooms are technologically underequipped and somewhat over-crowded.

The study maps the challenges faced by teachers who teach using EMI in low-cost private schools of urban Patna, the capital city of the state of Bihar in India. These teachers are non-native speakers of English. Their first language is Hindi or Urdu. Three private English medium schools were selected for this micro-level study using convenience sampling. These schools follow Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum¹. In these schools, textbooks of subjects such as Science, Social Science, and Mathematics are in English from elementary grades till high school. The students are selected for admission through a simple test to ensure that they fulfill the minimal criteria for a certain grade. The teachers and students share their first language.

The themes for investigation in this study emerged from related literature review (Dearden, 2014; Vu & Burns, 2014), personal observations, and previous discussions with the teachers who work in similar contexts. The overarching themes relate to the teachers' own linguistic proficiency and ability,

students' English language proficiency, pedagogical concerns (including lack of resource materials) and in-service professional development opportunities.

2. Research Methodology

These broad themes were used to develop questions for the semi-structured interviews. These questions aimed to explore what challenges the teachers face while using EMI and how their needs are met. The pilot draft of the interview schedule was checked for its content validity, appropriateness, and relevance. The reason behind using semi-structured interview was to increase the authentic response rate and to minimize the influence of external factors, such as a colleague's opinion, on respondent. This method also proved useful in clarification of doubts of respondents as they were able to interact with the author in person. Additionally, open-ended questions allowed the respondents to share their perspective and opinions without any restriction. The paper will also look at the findings related to the challenges derived from the teachers' interviews.

2.1. Research Questions

The following research questions were focused upon during the interview:

1. What do teachers perceive to be the English learning needs of their students?
2. What challenges do teachers face in teaching through EMI?
3. Whether there is a school guideline or policy for teachers for balancing the use of English and L1 in class?
4. Do teachers need in-service professional development support and in what form would they prefer it?

2.2. The Participants

There were 9 participants, all of whom were from Bihar. They have been teaching in the same context for at least five years. All of them were non-native speakers of English who are supposed to use English for instruction in their classrooms on a regular basis. Two of them taught high school students (grade 9-10), four of them taught middle grades (grade 6-8) and three teachers taught elementary grades (grade 3-5). Specifically, three teachers taught Science and English to students from grade 3-5. Four teachers taught Science or Social Studies to students from grade 6-8, and two teachers taught English and Social Studies to students from grade 8-10. Five of the teachers were post-graduates from local universities and four of them were graduates. Three of them were associated with administration of their respective schools which means that they were aware of the schools' strategy for hiring new teachers. Of the nine teachers, only one had received formal teacher training. None of them were trained in using EMI nor had they attended any courses in English-speaking countries.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the author. The interview schedule was developed carefully, from which three major themes can be identified: teachers' own linguistic proficiency and ability, students' English language proficiency, and pedagogical concerns in using EMI (See Appendix A). The questions were translated into Urdu (L1 of respondents and the author) in order to give the participants choice of language. All except one participant chose to respond in both Urdu and English.

There was only one participant who chose to respond only in English. A voice-recording device was used to record the interview with the permission of the participants.

2.4. Method

Permissions were sought and duly granted by the administration of all the three schools to conduct interviews with the teachers. The author approached the participants personally to explain the purpose of the interview. A meeting time and place were set up as per the convenience of the participants. The participants were free to change the time and venue of meeting though none of them chose to do so. The interviews took place in the respective school's rooms which offered privacy and a quiet atmosphere. Each semi-structured interview took about 25-35 minutes depending on the interviewees' desire to speak and the related questions. With permission, all interviews were recorded and later transcribed for coding. The interview manuscripts were then carefully translated by the author into English so as to be made accessible to a wider readership². To avoid personal bias, the interview transcripts were made anonymous. The key themes were identified using a constant comparative analysis method and each theme was traced through the data to derive the conclusions.

3. Findings

The findings from this study reveal that the teachers are challenged by their own limited language proficiency and lack of awareness of teaching methods, students' language limitations, pedagogical issues, and lack of professional development for in-service teachers.

3.1. Teachers' English Language Proficiency

In unaided or low-cost private schools, teachers are hired on the basis of written test and personal interview but there is no rigorous test of English proficiency. The only criterion is the ability to use English for simple classroom instructions. Often it is assumed that if someone can speak basic English, they can also employ EMI. However, teaching through English is not simply a matter of delivering monologues in English. If the teaching-learning process has to be interactive then teaching through EMI would require good competence in communicating through English. Though the teachers did not always refer to their own experience, all of them mentioned that the teacher's limited English language skills pose a challenge.

"My English was not very good from the beginning. So I don't feel very easy using it. Sometimes I face difficulty in explaining things and I wish my English language skill would be better." (T2)

"If you are teaching any subject like Science, it is fine that you may know your subject very well. But when you are teaching it in English, there is more responsibility. This is more challenging. One has to come prepared for that." (T9)

"They (teachers) want to and like to do so (use EMI). But they lack that ability and are not able to use English properly." (T3)

While they were more confident about their writing skills, some teachers mentioned that speaking in English was more challenging for them. As one teacher puts it,

"I think we teachers should improve our English because there are times when we also hesitate in speaking in English. There are times when we have to talk to a senior or to a person who is speaking better English than us, and we just lose our confidence and hesitate to speak." (T4)

Some teachers also expressed concern about their linguistic ability affecting the students' English negatively and how it may affect their image as a teacher:

"First of all I've to be sure I never speak anything wrong because then my Students will learn it from me and they'll say that even the teacher can't get it right". (T8)

3.2. Lack of Awareness of Teaching Approaches

There was a noticeable lack of awareness among teachers about different teaching approaches that can be used when teaching using EMI. With the exception of a couple of teachers, majority of them said that their teaching approach hardly changes while using EMI.

"No, it does not... I don't think it does... except one has to take care of a few points. Take for example Urdu or Hindi – one does not need to explain every word because students understand them easily. But when the lesson is in English, one has to make sure that students understand every word." (T5)

"I've not noticed any changes in my teaching style. I'm quite okay with teaching in either English or Hindi. Similar problems are there. Method does not change, only language changes." (T9)

Only one teacher said that the teaching method changes but it was referred to in terms of the extra time it takes.

"Using EMI does change our teaching method. It takes almost double time than teaching a lesson in L1." (T6)

None of the teachers mentioned being trained to teach using EMI or to use CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). On being asked whether they feel a need for specific training, seven of the nine teachers replied in affirmative. They also explained why such professional training courses are not always within their reach.

"Teachers realize that they are not trained. Some are still studying in University or have completed their studies recently. There are only a few government teachers' training colleges here and if one wants to do this course privately, it is very costly. So teachers are affected by this." (T3)

3.3. Students' Limited English Language Proficiency

All the nine teachers who were interviewed strongly believe that limited proficiency of students causes hindrance in using only English as a medium of instruction in class. However, the reason they cited for this varied. All of them mentioned that their classes had students of mixed abilities and they have to use L1 to explain concepts to make sure that all students understand them well.

“The biggest challenge is that you are trying to explain to students in a language which is not their own. Some students can understand English, but those who can’t face a lot of problem. In that situation, we can’t explain concepts in English even if we want to. We have to use L1.” (T9)

“Even if the teacher can speak English fluently and use it exclusively in class, the students won’t get it at all. It will have to be explained in their first language. So we have to resort to using first language if we want students to understand concepts.” (T5)

As expected, some of the teachers mentioned that the problem of not understanding English is more pronounced in elementary grades.

“When I try to speak English in elementary grades I observe that students just stare as mute spectators. They don’t understand what I’m saying. So I’ve to resort to the use of L1 to help them understand.” (T8)

“Because in senior classes we may interact in English but in junior classes the vocabulary level is limited. So they mix both languages – Urdu and English.” (T1)

It is important to note that about thirty to forty percent of students in these low-cost private schools come from economically marginalized sections of society. Some of these students are the first generation of their family to attend formal schools. Their parents are either uneducated or have not studied beyond primary schools. There are others whose parents are educated in their mother tongue but speak very little English. Such students pose a great challenge in classes where English is used for instruction. As one teacher explains,

“They face language problem all the time. If I give them notes on black-board, then they copy it. But if I try to change it a little... say there is the definition of a term given in the textbook, and I tell them that this is the answer for your question, I even tell them page number, and paragraph or line number but they create chaos in the class.” (T6)

Naturally, the teachers believe that these students cannot be left out.

“We have to take care of them. We have to take them along with others. But due to them other students have to suffer. Some students may follow what teacher is saying in English but since these students are not following we have to resort to using the first language.” (T8)

On a related note, all teachers emphasized that the social background might be a major cause of students’ limited language abilities.

“Students come from a background where they are not familiar with English. The prescribed textbooks are in English but we have to explain it in our first language. Students don’t come across English at home... nobody uses it at their home and they come across it for the first time in the form of school textbooks.” (T5)

“I have observed that many guardians don’t know English and can’t help students in their homework. So it becomes a problem for us.” (T2)

This is certainly a social factor beyond the confines of classroom and yet it clearly affects the way instruction takes place in class. Using English as a medium of instruction does not involve only teachers using English; students should also use it extensively in class. All the teachers mentioned students' lack of awareness, excessive shyness, and hesitation as the cause of their inability to use English effectively, especially for oral communication.

"The biggest problem which I've noticed is that students hesitate a lot. They know the words but hesitate to use them. They feel ashamed if someone laughs. This also creates fear." (T4)

Out of nine, three teachers emphasized that students have to be more responsible for learning and using English language.

"At some point students have to take control, take it in their own hands." (T1)

"... and of course there should be some internal responsibility of students also." (T9)

On being asked how can the students write exams in English when they have difficulty in understanding English in class, all the teachers admitted that the students rote-learn the notes before the exams. One teacher shared candidly,

"I think that's totally cramming. They rote-learn the notes and write the exact same words in exam. They can't express it in their own words." (T4)

3.4. Pedagogical Concerns: Classroom Time Management

As the schools covered in this study are curriculum-driven, the teachers have to make sure that they cover the syllabus every month. When asked if they face any problems in time management, four teachers said that it is a matter of concern for them.

"Yes, we have to explain in two languages and it takes more time. First I've to explain in English and then in the first language. There are some students who are very good in studies; they can follow very easily on their own. Then there are those who listen and follow classroom instructions. But the third category is of those students who can't follow our directions at all. We have to monitor them constantly. They cannot even understand what topic is on what page. So it takes a lot of time." (T6)

"Yes, we run short of time too. Explaining in two languages takes more time. If I explain something in English and notice that there is little response, then I have to explain again in Urdu." (T4)

On the contrary, the other five teachers did not notice any problem regarding time management.

3.5. Pedagogical Concerns: Use of English and L1 in Classroom

All of the teachers repeatedly stated that they have to use both English and their first language in order to explain concepts in class. When asked if their school had a policy or written guideline about how to do it, all of the teachers replied in negative. On being further probed, all the teachers said that they prefer to use English for simple classroom instructions such as 'Why were you absent yesterday?', 'You have not done your homework.', 'Open your books' but they discuss individual problems of students in their first language. None of the teachers had a specific personal plan to

balance the use of L1 and English in class. Some teachers said that they have never thought about developing such a plan.

3.6. In-Service Professional Development

All teachers except two were initially hesitant to speak about the facility of in-service professional development provided by their schools. But gradually they warmed up to share their needs and concerns. It was clear that they want much more than an occasional workshop scheduled at the beginning of each academic year,

“We are talking about language here and you can’t just learn it in a very short duration. I think we need longer courses. I think even two-three days are short. The duration of each class should be short... it should not run too long. But the whole programme or course should run for a long period.” (T3)

Some of the teachers stated that they would prefer to be trained in speaking skills,

“We should have spoken English class not just for students but also for teachers. I think there should be a class of English once a week. Different teachers should get different time slots. So that everyone may get the opportunity for learning.” (T4)

However, not all were of this opinion. One of the teachers said,

“I think that in our school teachers will benefit more from written materials rather than from workshops.” (T6)

Teachers were also keenly aware of the problem of financial constraints. One of the teachers, who also works as a vice-principal, shared,

“Our resources are very limited. So we are not able to organize the kind of professional development programmes that we’d like to conduct.” (T3)

4. Discussion

The popularity of EMI is likely to increase in India in the next few years. However, its effective implementation is challenging in actual teaching contexts. The first major challenge is teachers’ own limited English proficiency. Professionally well-trained teachers, capable of teaching through EMI, are not easily available in India in general and more so in Bihar. In this study, the teachers who were familiar with the hiring process of teachers admitted that it is very difficult to find such teachers. Also low-cost private schools pay salaries which are considered inadequate by teachers. The teachers with good English proficiency look for better opportunities. Therefore, it would be more effective to focus on improving existing teachers’ English language proficiency in such contexts.

All the teachers who participated in this study were unaware of any specific teaching method which could help them to use EMI more effectively. Some confirmed that they teach using traditional methods which means that the students take notes and then memorize them to write in exams. Teachers’ lack of awareness of appropriate EMI pedagogy definitely makes their jobs difficult and boring. Teachers were also unaware that principled code-switching could be beneficial in the context where teacher and students share the same first language (Cook 2010; Dearden 2014). Hence it is evident that in-service professional development should be provided to the teachers through a regular and systematic plan suitable for their own teaching context.

Students' limited English proficiency and social background also emerged as potential challenges for teachers. The teachers participating in this study believed that it was very difficult to improve students' language skills if they come from a family where no one speaks English. Suggestions by teachers to improve students' language skills included vocabulary building, raising awareness of learners' responsibility and developing proper learning environment. Only one teacher said that she focused on developing speaking skills. None of them mentioned CLIL, extensive reading, project-based learning or task-based learning. They were unaware of the concept of scaffolding. This may be due to their lack of pedagogical training. Also the fact that they are required to 'cover' the syllabus leaves them little time to adapt, modify or develop their own lessons. For using EMI successfully, the teachers should be trained to use English as a communicative language. It should not be reduced to learning random vocabulary sets or memorizing complex grammatical rules.

Finally, limited learning materials and resources clearly affect the successful implementation of EMI (Kaplan, Baldauf Jr, & Kamwangamalu 2011; Manh 2012; Hamid, Nguyen, & Baldauf Jr, 2013). In the schools covered in this study the inadequacies appeared to have adverse effect on both teachers and students. This study also indicated the need for digital awareness, better classroom conditions, and adequate human resources.

5. Suggestions

In the light of above findings and discussion, some concrete steps are suggested here which are low-cost, practically applicable, and would be effective in similar contexts. First, as low-cost private schools do not offer a lucrative salary, they mostly attract those who may not be proficient in English and have no professional teacher training. Hiring well-trained teachers with good proficiency in English is not always a possibility due to financial constraints. So, instead of being very selective, these schools should focus on in-service language proficiency support. Findings of this micro-level study suggests that about 90 percent of in-service teachers would like to be trained in using English as a medium of instruction even if they do not intend to work in the same school for a long time. The schools should leverage their motivation for the best of all concerned. The use of free web-resources and mobile apps should be encouraged for improving English proficiency.

The second suggestion is that teachers should be trained to use effective teaching techniques to encourage student participation and minimize teacher talk. There should be a gradual shift from teacher-centered classes to learner-centered ones. Students should not be made to rote-learn everything. Rather they should be encouraged and trained to become autonomous learners capable of using English for their further studies.

The third suggestion is that the teachers should form a peer-support group to share ideas and help each other. Low-cost private schools and their teachers are working on low-budget and some of the teachers work on two jobs. In such contexts finding time for personal learning becomes difficult. The school management could form a team of teachers who could help their colleagues in their professional development. Such a team could be given less hours to spend in classroom teaching. Instead, they could be asked to use their free time to design professional development plans and materials for their colleagues. Teachers may also form groups for action research. This would help them to understand the issues in their classrooms and find solutions for their contextual problems.

The final suggestion addresses the problem of 'covering' the syllabus. Instead of letting this concern outweigh 'real learning', innovative ways of connecting the syllabi of two different subjects should be adopted. This would work specially in those classes where the same teacher teaches multiple subjects. For example, if a teacher teaches both Science and English she could use the same textbook to teach about ecosystem and conditional sentences, instead of using two very different textbooks for each. Thus the issue of heavy load of syllabus could be addressed by adopting creative solutions and collaboration.

6. Conclusion

This micro-level study has its own limitations. It is based on the data gathered from a limited number of teachers working in low-cost private schools in a certain context. So it may not be used for generalization from other contexts. However, it might be useful for those working in similar contexts. Another limitation is that the study is based on what teachers chose to disclose, which may or may not reflect the entire reality. For example, the teachers avoided speaking about any issue which could have reflected badly upon the school administration. However, the aim of this micro-level study was to give voice to a certain cross-section of the teachers who are stakeholders in this matter and not to seek generalization. Though grounded in a local context in India, the findings of this study reveal that the challenges faced by teachers using EMI in low-cost private schools are similar to those faced by teachers in other developing countries such as Vietnam and Sri Lanka (cf. Dearden, 2014; Vu & Burns, 2014; Balakrishnar & Thanaraj, 2015). It is essential that researches on the use of EMI not only investigate macro issues of policy-making or collect data through global online surveys, but also map the challenges faced by teachers with the aim to find locally relevant and practical solutions. Building upon this, further research could be conducted on a wider scale not only to determine the challenges faced by teachers but also to develop effective and relevant professional development programmes for them.

Notes

1. Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is one of the major national education boards of India. It was established in 1962. It is an autonomous organization under the Union Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India.
2. All the teachers except one spoke in their L1 during the interview. The author has the same L1.

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for Teachers

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been associated with your current work place?
3. Which subjects do you teach?
4. Which classes do you teach?
5. Your school follows CBSE curriculum and English is the language of coursebooks for subjects such as Science and Social Sciences. What is the medium of instruction in your school – only English or both English and Urdu(L1)?
6. Are there any guidelines provided by your school about when to use English and when to use L1(Urdu)?
7. If yes, please explain more. / If no, how do you decide when to use which language?
8. What do you think are your students' English language needs?
9. How well do you think these needs are met?
10. For the purpose of exams, questions are set only in English and students are required to write only in English. How are they able to write answers in English when they are unable to use English in the classroom?
11. What are the challenges that you face while using English as a medium of instruction?
12. How do you ensure students' comprehension if you use only English as a medium of instruction? (if applicable)
13. Do you think that using EMI helps in improving students' English?
14. As a teacher of (subject name) do you think it is part of your job to help students improve their English?
15. Does using EMI also change your teaching method?
16. Do you think using EMI creates inequalities in terms of employment opportunity for teachers who are good at their subjects but not trained to teach using EMI?
17. Are there enough qualified teachers who are also good at using EMI?
18. Do you have a regular in-service professional development system for teachers? Would you like to conduct such programmes regularly?

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