Perceptions of teachers' in the use of first language (L1) while implementing EMI in the public schools' classroom

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Author's biography
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ABSTRACT:
This study examines government school teachers' perceptions of using the first language (L1) in classrooms where English is the Medium of Instruction (EMI). It explores how teachers incorporate L1, the situations in which it is used, and the challenges and opportunities in balancing L1 with EMI. Using a qualitative methodology and a phenomenological research design, data were gathered through interviews and focus group discussions with four purposively selected teachers from government-aided schools, with additional insights drawn from an analysis of relevant research articles. Thematic analysis of the data reveals that teachers view L1 as an essential tool to support student comprehension, especially when explaining complex concepts, offering emotional support, and ensuring clarity of instructions. Teachers also recognize that L1 can help bridge the gap between students' understanding and new English content, enhancing engagement and confidence in learning. However, teachers face the challenge of balancing L1 usage with the goal of improving students' English proficiency, as excessive use of L1 might limit exposure to English. Challenges include the pressure to follow curriculum demands, maintaining consistent EMI practices, and addressing varying English proficiency levels among students. Despite these hurdles, teachers emphasize the importance of using L1 strategically and purposefully to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. The study highlights teachers' dedication to meeting the diverse needs of students and balancing linguistic accessibility with the goal of improving English skills. It contributes to understanding how L1 can be effectively integrated within EMI classrooms to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

Key words: English Medium Instruction (EMI), First Language (L1), Teacher Perceptions, Public Schools, Student Engagement, Language Proficiency, Qualitative research, Phenomenological study.

INTRODUCTION:
English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) refers to the practice of teaching academic subjects (such as science, mathematics, history, etc.) in English in schools, colleges, or universities where English is not the native language of the students. EMI is becoming increasingly popular around the world, especially in non-English-speaking countries, as part of efforts to enhance students' English proficiency and prepare them for global opportunities. The use of the first language (L1) in EMI classrooms in public schools is a topic of considerable debate. Teachers often have mixed perceptions about when and how to use L1 while implementing EMI, especially in non-English speaking countries. These perceptions are shaped by various factors such as

pedagogical beliefs, language policies, and classroom realities. EMI has emerged as a key component of Nepali education, particularly in urban and community contexts. Many community schools in Nepal have adopted EMI across a range of topics as a result of the growing perception that English is essential to academic performance and future possibilities. However, there is a lot of disagreement over the first language's place in these courses. The linguistic variety and varying degrees of English fluency among students in community schools raise concerns about the efficacy of exclusive English teaching, even if EMI's main objective is to improve students' English competence. When and how to utilise L1 as a supporting tool in the classroom is a difficult decision that teachers in these institutions

frequently have to make while juggling actual teaching issues and educational policies. This study examines the opinions of educators in Nepali community schools about the use of L1 in EMI classes, illuminating the advantages, difficulties, and possible approaches to striking a balance between language instructions in a multilingual setting.

The implementation of EMI in public schools has become an increasingly prevalent educational approach, driven by the need to improve students' English language proficiency and better equip them for participation in a globalized economy and society. EMI involves teaching academic subjects, such as science, mathematics, and history, primarily through the medium of English, even in regions where English is not the students' native language. The rationale behind this approach is that immersion in English while learning complex subject matter will enhance students' ability to use English fluently and confidently in various contexts.

However, one of the key challenges in EMI is the role of the L1 in classrooms. L1, the native language of students, often plays an important role in facilitating learning, especially in environments where students have not yet attained sufficient proficiency in English. While EMI policies typically advocate for the exclusive use of English in instruction to maximize exposure, many teachers and educators find that incorporating L1 into the classroom can be a crucial tool for ensuring comprehension and effective learning. This is particularly true in contexts where students struggle with English, leading to cognitive overload when they are required to both learn a subject and develop their language skills simultaneously.

Teachers have different opinions on the usage of first language in EMI classrooms; some regard it as a crucial step towards understanding, while others feel under pressure to follow the rules precisely (Phyak, 2015; Gim, 2020; Kharel, 2022). This article explores these viewpoints to address the linguistic demands of their pupils while navigating the challenges of teaching in English. It explores how teachers must find a balance between upholding EMI policies—which frequently forbid the use of first language—and making sure students are understanding and participating. The analysis provided by this article reveals the dynamic function of first language in EMI classrooms and provides insights into how teachers can effectively and creatively modify their instruction to fit the different requirements of their students while still working to achieve EMI's goals.

Literature review:

The use of the first language in English as Medium Instruction (EMI) classrooms has been a topic of interest in the field of language education for several decades.

This section reviews key studies and perspectives that provide insight into the role of L1 in EMI classrooms, particularly in the context of community schools in Nepal.

The value of L1 as a scaffolding tool for second language learning is well-established, especially in situations where English is not the primary language. L1 usage in an EMI classroom, according to Swain & Lapkin (2000), can improve understanding, lessen cognitive overload, and assist students in connecting new material to what they already know. L1 is especially valued for its ability to communicate complicated ideas, which is important in topics like science, math, and social studies. According to Acharya (2015), L1 acts as a bridge that facilitates learning for Nepali kids, who are frequently exposed to English later in their primary schooling. Although L1 can help with comprehension, the literature generally agrees that L1 shouldn't take precedence over English language instruction in EMI classrooms. Code-switching—alternating between L1 and L2—can be a useful teaching technique in multilingual classrooms, according to Canagarajah (2011). With this method, teachers may continue to emphasise English while using L1 as needed to make sure students comprehend. The technique of code-switching or selective L1 usage can help children from a variety of linguistic backgrounds study in Nepalese community schools without hindering their ability to acquire English.

The usage of L1 in EMI classrooms is also influenced by Nepal's cultural background. With many pupils speaking Nepali or regional languages as their first language, teachers in community schools frequently struggle to meet the needs of children from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Employing L1 in these classrooms enables educators to establish a rapport with learners, creating a more welcoming and encouraging learning atmosphere. In rural or underdeveloped locations, where students might not have enough opportunities to interact with English outside of the classroom, this is especially crucial. More student participation and engagement can result from the usage of L1 to improve cultural relevance in the classroom. The overall educational policies in Nepal frequently place an emphasis on complete English immersion, notwithstanding the pedagogical advantages of L1 use. Teachers may be deterred from utilising L1 in the classroom by pressure on Nepal's community schools to conform to government policies that support English-medium education (Khadka, 2024). Teachers may experience conflict when trying to strike a balance between their students' needs and the requirements of the policy. Shrestha (2024) points out that some teachers claim they are forced to use only English, even when doing so could help them understand important ideas. In

diverse, multilingual classrooms, the effectiveness of EMI may be constrained by this conflict between policy expectations and classroom realities.

The study carried out by Shrestha (2022) reveals that although teachers generally have positive attitudes toward EMI, they often use a translanguaging approach in classrooms due to students' limited English proficiency and the lack of adequate resources. Classroom observations also revealed that EMI was more effective when teachers employed student-centered teaching strategies, incorporated audio-visual tools, utilized ICT, and made use of locally available materials to teach the content in English. Similarly, according to Panthee (2020) the use of EMI in community schools has proven to be advantageous. Teachers in these schools have expressed a positive attitude towards implementing EMI in their day-to-day teaching and learning activities. However, they still face certain challenges, such as language barriers, insufficient language proficiency among teachers, cultural diversity, ineffective teaching methods, and limited resources.

Similarly, Sah (2017) found that both teachers and students expressed a positive attitude towards the use of L1 in the classroom. However, they shared the belief that excessive reliance on L1 could hinder language acquisition. While teachers generally discouraged the use of Nepali (L1) in lessons focused on enhancing learners' communicative skills, they did use it to assist students in understanding difficult grammatical concepts and vocabulary. The overuse of Nepali was often linked to teachers' limited communicative abilities and lack of creativity in delivering EFL lessons, though students showed a preference for the inclusion of L1 in instruction. In a similar vein, Margić, and Vodopija-Krstanović (2024) reveal that the main distinctions between teaching in the first language (L1) and EMI are highlighted by teachers, with EMI requiring more time, effort, and preparation. EMI makes students pay closer attention and might make teachers feel uneasy (Poudel, 2021). Teacher tactics include key point concentration, visual aids, translanguaging, and comprehension checks to enhance learning. In order to accommodate multinational students and curriculum, they also modify their teaching methods (Dahal, 2023; Neupane, 2023). Regarding student contact and participation in EMI as opposed to L1MI, opinions differ. The authors contend that EMI calls for the integration of language, pedagogy, and intercultural communication into the classroom and goes beyond a simple linguistic shift.

These studies emphasise the importance of striking a balance between L1 and EMI, although it's still unclear how L1 usage would affect students' overall English language skills over time. Future studies might look at the effects of extended L1 assistance on students' long-term progress towards English fluency. There is an ignorance gap about how diverse school environments (private schools, rural vs. urban settings, etc.) or regional language rules affect teachers' use of L1 in EMI contexts because the current study is restricted to government-aided schools. A complex picture of the benefits and difficulties of incorporating L1 into language instruction is painted by the literature on L1 use in EMI classrooms. The usage of L1 in Nepali community schools can improve student understanding, promote cultural relevance, and strengthen the bond between teachers and students. To guarantee that pupils keep improving their English language proficiency, it also necessitates cautious balancing. Optimising the use of L1 in EMI classrooms and fostering students' overall success in multilingual learning environments seem to depend on a flexible, context-sensitive strategy that is backed by institutional policy and teacher training.

METHODOLOGY:

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological research design to explore the perceptions and experiences of teachers regarding the use of first language in EMI classrooms. The primary data collection tool was interviews, allowing for in-depth insights into teachers' lived experiences. The sample consisted of four teachers from government-aided schools, who were purposively selected based on their experience with EMI and their willingness to participate in the study. This approach aimed to uncover the essence of teachers' views and practices regarding the integration of first language in EMI classes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

To convey the core of the participants' shared lived experiences, the study's results and discussion are arranged thematically in this section. A central emphasis area that was revealed by the interview data is represented by each topic. Thematic presentations facilitate a comprehensive and lucid comprehension of the main challenges faced by teachers in government-aided schools, as well as how they function in their workplace. To provide insightful interpretations in the context of current literature and educational philosophy, the discussion is entwined with the findings.

Attitudes towards the use of L1:

The data obtained through the interview with all the four participants revealed that the teachers generally perceive the use of the first language in EMI classrooms positively which is in alignment with the study of Sah (2017). They felt that L1 served as a valuable aid in enhancing understanding, particularly when explaining complex ideas or vocabulary that students might find difficult to grasp solely in English. Macaro,Tian, and

Chu (2020) also found out that teachers have positive attitudes towards the use of L1 in the EMI classrooms.

Challenges of using Excessive L1:
The results showed that, although teachers acknowledged the advantages of using L1, they were concerned that overdependence on it could impede students' English learning which is similar to the study of Al Balushi (2020). They pointed out that frequent use of L1 might limit students' chances to practice and fully immerse them in the English language.

Balancing Act:
It was discovered during the focus group discussion (FGD) that teachers were trying to find a balance between using first language and English. They mostly taught the lessons in English, although they occasionally used first language to clarify difficult ideas, provide explanations, and make sure the pupils understood. Tan (2017) also opines teachers perceive the use of L1 in the classroom as a potentially useful language learning tool, particularly at lower levels, even in the face of an English-only policy. On the other hand, because their pupils were learning in a New Zealand university setting, the professors also thought that English ought to be the language of choice for interaction. A perceived over-reliance on students using L1 in the classroom caused tensions among the teachers (Kharel, 2022). A set of suggestions for changing the monolingualism of English classrooms to accommodate multilingual classrooms are provided in the article's conclusion.

Scaffolding Strategies:
In English-medium settings, teachers employed a diverse range of scaffolding techniques to enhance students' learning experiences and bridge linguistic gaps. One commonly used approach was the deliberate emphasis on highlighting key concepts during lessons. This strategy allowed students to focus on critical information, making it easier for them to grasp the foundational ideas being taught. Teachers also utilized visual aids, such as charts, graphs, and pictures, to reinforce understanding. These tools served as non-verbal cues that complemented verbal explanations, making abstract or complex topics more accessible for learners.

Another notable scaffolding method was the integration of translanguaging, a dynamic practice where instructors seamlessly shifted between languages. By using students' first language (L1) alongside English, teachers were able to fill comprehension gaps effectively, ensuring that students could connect new knowledge to their existing linguistic framework. This approach not only enhanced understanding but also fostered inclusivity, as it acknowledged and valued the linguistic diversity of the classroom. Research by Gim (2020) and Kamrani, Tajeddin, and Alemi (2023) highlights the significance of these practices in creating equitable learning opportunities for multilingual learners.

Additionally, instructors recognized the importance of routinely assessing students' understanding to identify and address any language-related challenges promptly. By conducting frequent formative assessments, such as quizzes, discussions, or informal feedback sessions, teachers could monitor progress and provide targeted support where needed. This proactive approach minimized the risk of language barriers impeding learning and ensured that all students remained engaged and confident.

These scaffolding strategies collectively contributed to the development of a supportive and welcoming classroom environment. Teachers aimed to encourage active participation by addressing the diverse needs of their students, allowing them to interact with the curriculum more effectively. By implementing such thoughtful techniques, educators helped learners overcome linguistic challenges, empowering them to thrive academically and develop confidence in their English-medium education journey.

Increased Preparation and Effort:
Teachers reported that compared to teaching in their own language, teaching in an EMI environment required a great deal more planning and work (Dearden, 2018). This extra labour meant changing instructional materials and evaluation techniques to fit an English-medium setting, which frequently necessitated giving significant thought to the clarity and complexity of the language used. To guarantee that no student was left behind owing to a language barrier, teachers had to adapt their lesson plans so that the content was understandable to pupils with varying levels of English ability (Brown, 2018). They also had to plan assignments that matched language acquisition with topic matter education and account for any understanding challenges Margić, and Vodopija-Krstanović (2024). All things considered, EMI necessitated a more careful and deliberate approach to planning, requiring instructors to devote additional time and energy to fulfilling the varied language demands of their pupils.

Impact on Teacher Confidence:
When using EMI to teach, two teachers experienced increased stress and feelings of uncertainty which is also found out by Tsui (2023). They expressed worries about their capacity to convey difficult subject matter in English in an effective manner. There was more pressure to make sure that pupils grasped the topic completely since they felt less secure in their language skills (Li, Curdt-Christiansen & Zhu, 2024). This uncertainty

occasionally caused them to worry about whether they would be able to teach in English as thoroughly and clearly as they would in their home tongue, especially when dealing with difficult subjects or instantly answering queries from students.

Diverse viewpoints exist among teachers on the use of L1. While some educators think L1 should be reduced to promote higher English proficiency, others see it as a useful tool. According to research by Devkota (2023), teachers in Nepali community schools have a generally supportive attitude towards L1 use, particularly in early schooling when students' English proficiency is still growing. Instructors in these contexts contend that L1 reduces students' nervousness and increases their self-assurance when interacting with unfamiliar content. Over-reliance on L1, however, raises concerns because it may impede pupils' progress in learning English.

Student Preferences:

Insights gathered from teachers revealed that students expressed a clear preference for the occasional use of their first language (L1) in the classroom. They indicated that incorporating L1 not only improved their understanding of the subject matter but also motivated them to participate more actively in class. The use of L1 provided students with a linguistic bridge, allowing them to better grasp challenging concepts and contribute meaningfully to classroom activities.

Supporting this perspective, McMillan and Turnbull (2009) observed that teachers who strategically used L1 as a supplementary tool reported positive outcomes in their students' learning experiences. When L1 was employed to clarify difficult content or address language barriers, students appeared more relaxed and confident. This increased self-assurance translated into higher levels of engagement, as students felt more comfortable asking questions, articulating their thoughts, and interacting with peers and instructors.

By enabling learners to express complex ideas in their native language and then gradually transitioning to the target language, L1 use served as a catalyst for deeper comprehension and more robust participation. This practice not only facilitated smoother communication but also fostered an inclusive and supportive learning environment where students could thrive academically. Teachers recognized that this balanced approach—leveraging L1 alongside the target language—enhanced the overall quality of learning, empowering students to bridge gaps in their understanding while building their proficiency in English.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity:

Teachers discovered that variety in language and culture had a significant impact on how they approached EMI. They implemented practices that were both linguistically and culturally friendly, adapting their teaching approaches to fit the diverse requirements of their pupils (Rose, 2021; Lu, 2022). Through recognising and addressing the many backgrounds of their pupils, educators sought to establish an inclusive classroom that honoured various cultural viewpoints and offered individualised language assistance. The use of L1 in EMI classrooms is complicated by Nepal's linguistic variety. In addition to Nepali, pupils in many community schools speak a variety of other languages, including Maithili, Bhojpuri, Doteli and Newari. Teachers find it challenging to choose a single language to serve as a common linguistic bridge due to the diversity of pupils' first languages. In order to ensure that students from diverse language backgrounds can comprehend the material, this circumstance calls for a more flexible approach to L1 use, where teachers utilise a variety of linguistic resources. Teacher preparation is crucial for equipping teachers to function well in these multilingual settings.

Mixed Views on Engagement:

Regarding the difference between teaching in the first language and EMI, teachers' opinions on the level of student participation and classroom interaction were divided. Two of the participants agreed that EMI enhanced student involvement by providing them with the language proficiency required for worldwide prospects, resulting in a more globally applicable educational environment (Lasagabaster, 2022). However according to two other participants, first language instruction improved engagement and participation since students felt more at ease expressing themselves and actively participating in class discussions in their mother tongue. This gap brought attention to the need to strike a balance between fostering English language skills and upholding productive educational environments.

Overall, the results show that although teachers appreciate the value of supporting students in EMI classrooms by using the first language, they also recognise that L1 usage and EMI promotion must coexist in harmony. Teachers have difficulties in maintaining this balance while trying to improve student engagement and learning. Their actions demonstrate a dedication to offering efficient education that satisfies the various requirements of their pupils while promoting English proficiency.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the findings highlight the delicate balance teachers aim to achieve between first language (L1) use and English Medium Instruction (EMI) in the classroom. Teachers widely acknowledge the significant role that L1 plays in fostering student engagement, comprehension, and confidence, particularly in contexts

where English proficiency is still developing. By strategically incorporating L1 as a supportive tool, educators can bridge linguistic gaps, reduce student anxiety, and create an inclusive environment that promotes active participation.

At the same time, teachers understand the importance of prioritizing the development of English language skills, recognizing that mastery of the target language is essential for academic success and broader opportunities. The challenge lies in harmonizing these dual objectives—leveraging L1 to support immediate learning needs while encouraging students to gradually transition towards greater fluency in English. This balancing act reflects teachers' commitment to providing a well-rounded educational experience that caters to the diverse needs of their students. By thoughtfully integrating L1 and EMI, educators strive to empower learners not only to excel academically but also to build the confidence and skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly globalized world. Ultimately, this approach underscores the value of flexibility and inclusivity in language education, ensuring that students are equipped with the tools they need to succeed both inside and outside the classroom

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