

## **Teachers' Opinions About the Use of English as a Medium of Instruction at the Higher Secondary Level in Tripura**

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### **Abstract**

In this qualitative study teachers share their opinions on using English medium schools (EMI) government school teachers, teaching English at the higher secondary level in Tripura, participated in the study. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews. Teachers' views elicited in Bengali were transcribed, translated and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show two broad themes, namely, reasons for being in favour of EMI and reasons for not favouring EMI. The findings indicate that teachers have a mixed opinion about EMI. The implications of the findings for teacher training are discussed.

**Keywords:** English language, multilingual, language proficiency, English medium instruction (EMI), teacher preparation

### **Introduction**

There is an increasing trend of converting Bengali medium schools into English medium or running a parallel English medium section in the same institution in government schools in Tripura. Since English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is being introduced on a large scale, it is necessary to understand teachers' feelings and experiences because they are responsible for transacting the curriculum. The study has been undertaken in response to this need. Its purpose is to understand teachers' opinions about EMI.

EMI can be understood as using English to teach and learn academic subjects. In EMI, outside English-speaking countries, teachers', and

students' first language is not English (Murata, 2019). The practice of EMI is on the rise around the world. Earls (2016) observes that EMI is complex and challenging, yet it is also full of opportunities and benefits of internationalization and globalization. Proficiency in English has become the deciding factor for employment, better livelihood, and access to various other resources. Paik (2008) states that the demand for learning the English language has been increasing since it is perceived as an indispensable tool for the global economy and identity. In a similar vein, Kirk-Patrick and Sussex (2012) note that English is a widespread global language and has become a common subject or a language of classroom instruction in schools and universities worldwide. It is observed that the English language has been regarded as the language of hope, opportunities, and progress in multilingual contexts.

### **Multilingual Education in India and the Three Language Formula (TLF)**

The National Curriculum Framework (2005), which lays down broad guidelines for teaching and learning, sums up the views of experts when it says, "A renewed effort should be made to implement the three-language formula, emphasizing recognition of children's (home languages or mother tongues) as the best medium of instruction" (p. 127). The framework recommends that English should find a place with other Indian languages. Ideally, schools should provide a space where children enjoy every right of learning, that is, 'right to learn in one's mother tongue', 'right to learn in one's habitat', 'right to learn in one's own culture', etc. However, it is observed that schools often become isolated spaces where there is a gap between what children do at home and school. One of the reasons for this gap is that schools fail to recognize the habitat and languages.

The three-language formula (cited in NCF, 2005) was recommended as a strategy for school education by the National Commission on Education (1964-66). It was incorporated into the National Education Policies of 1968 and 1986 (Meganathan, 2011). According to this formula, a student who has completed high school education must have command of two languages besides English. The Position Paper on Teaching of Indian Languages (NCERT, 2006b) states that TLF helps foster bilingualism and multilingualism, increase achievement, promote divergent thinking, and improve cognitive growth and social tolerance.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (2005) focuses on the fact that a student passing out of secondary school has adequate knowledge of three languages.

### **English Education in Tripura**

The school education system of Tripura is divided into four stages: the primary stage (Classes I-V), the middle stage (Classes VI-VIII), the secondary stage (Classes IX-X) and the higher secondary stage (Classes XI and XII). English and Bengali are the media of instruction. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Rajya Mission, Tripura, has taken the initiative named Project-14 programme and selected 14 Government English Medium Schools from all districts to improve the standard of English education in Tripura. Though some schools are labelled English medium, they practically use Bengali for teaching. Therefore, this programme aims to promote English as the medium of instruction in its true sense and spirit. The programme was launched in 2014 to enhance the knowledge of English and improve the quality of the academic performance of students.

### **Method and Analysis**

A small part of the data collected for my doctoral research is analysed in this article. The data were collected through a twenty-question one-on-one interview of teachers who taught English at higher secondary level schools affiliated with the *Tripura Board of Secondary Education* (TBSE). A total of twenty-five teachers (fifteen female and ten male teachers) participated in the study. Participants' response to the question on why teachers favour the use of EMI is analysed.

The consent of teachers was obtained before conducting the study. The participants' answers to the above question in Bengali were transcribed, translated to English, and analysed to arrive at the codes, categories and themes. Kuckartz's (2014) "thematic qualitative text analysis" and the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87) (a) be familiar with the data (b) generate initial codes; (c) search for themes; (d) review themes; (e) define and name themes and (f) produce the report was followed.

### **Discussion**

Analysis of teachers' interview transcripts threw up two themes—Reasons for favouring EMI and not favouring EMI.

### **Theme 1**

#### *Reasons for Favouring EMI*

Two sub-themes for favouring EMI relate to academic growth and technology.

Teachers expressed the view that EMI facilitates the establishment of international academic networks/communities. Connecting to the academic community is crucial for academic growth. English is the gateway to fostering connections. Teacher number 10 said, *Students from very few states understand Bengali, and therefore, if the students are not comfortable and proficient in English they will end up with limited scope and opportunity in the future as compared to students who have strong competency in English...* Teacher 7 added, *learning English and adding the knowledge of the language to your skill set will open the door to the world of opportunities... and therefore as a teacher our responsibility is to guide and support students....*

Scientific papers, articles, and journals are in English. Therefore, students need to be proficient in English to access a wide range of up-to-date academic content and grow academically. This point is another reason for favouring EMI.

Accessing academic material requires adequate proficiency in English. EMI helps students to improve their proficiency and academic language skills. *If a student is proficient in English, then it is an added advantage. At higher secondary level students are at a stage where they need to decide which career path to pursue therefore, knowing English will help them in many aspects...* (Teacher 20)

#### *EMI and Access to Technology*

English is the internet language; therefore, EMI should be compulsory. Almost all the teachers felt and explicitly stated that EMI will help students access academic content from the internet and other sources. Especially during the pandemic, when online learning is prioritized, a student must be comfortable in accessing the content in English to keep up with the pace of online education. It facilitates access to the latest software and teaching materials available on the internet. Teacher 18 stated that *if students don't understand English well, then it will be difficult for them to use the internet for educational purposes.*

## **Theme 2**

### *Reasons for Not Favouring EMI*

The second theme was the reasons for teachers not favouring the use of EMI. The subthemes obtained were low proficiency in English, and lack of training or support for EMI teaching.

Teachers were concerned about students' low English language proficiency, leading to poor understanding of the content and demotivation. Previous studies have reported that proficiency plays a vital role in the efficiency of EMI courses because students with low English proficiency might experience serious comprehension problems (Joe & Lee, 2012; Räsänen, 2008; Vinke et al., 1998). Teachers believe L1 should be used when difficult concepts/content are taught. They felt that learners' understanding of a concept is better if taught through the bilingual teaching method. Hence EMI should not depend on using English only.

The classroom environment becomes dull because of low proficiency and a lack of student motivation. *When the class is conducted in EMI... I could find less participation of students which is because of their low proficiency level. Earlier I used to conduct classes using only EMI but now I put emphasis more on students' participation to conduct the classes... I try to bring out the solution from the students giving them inputs in L1 at times. I encourage my students to participate in this process spontaneously.* (Teacher 18).

Teachers did not favour EMI because they were concerned over the limited or lack of training or support for teaching through English. They also felt uncertain because of the lack of uniformity in teaching in EMI across the schools. *It is up to the teacher to use English only in EMI or use both the first language and English* (Teacher 13). This finding aligns with previous studies that report that systematic support for faculty and students in EMI has been scarce (Chun et al., 2017; Floris, 2014). Some possible solutions to enhancing English education in an EMI classroom may be to adopt new teaching methodologies and provide ample training for EMI-specific teachers (Kim & Kim, 2020). Policymakers and educators need to deliberate its introduction and assess its efficacy to mitigate the linguistic issues in a typical EMI setting.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this qualitative study show that teachers' opinions on using EMI is mixed with both positive and negative views. Since

teachers play a critical role in transacting the curriculum, the findings have implications for training teachers, providing support, and setting expectations on the methodologies to be used for teaching, which is not meant to be prescriptive. It also implies that teachers believe that, given the right environment, students can improve their proficiency in English in EMI schools.

The number of participants in this study is small. Further research must be undertaken with a larger sample size to investigate teachers' and students' perspectives on EMI. This study is limited to interviews. Classroom observations can also be used to get an in-depth understanding of teachers' opinions on using EMI.

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