Students' Perceptions of English Language Instruction (EMI) at a Private University in Bangladesh: A Survey

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Abstract

Private Universities of Bangladesh since its inception in 1992 have been claiming to be English medium universities as their academic system is based on English Medium Instruction (EMI). Students' textbooks are written in English and learning assessment is always carried out in English regardless of whatever major disciplines they belong to. However, to what extent EMI is maintained during the classroom teaching is a less explored area albeit it is generally expected that it is contributing to the development of academic performance immensely. On the other hand, as most of the students come from Bengali medium semi urban and rural schools, they might face a lot of problems and might be eventually excluded from gaining reasonable level of English proficiency. Southeast University (researcher's workplace) can be considered as a case of such place where many of those students study and it may be a matter of concern to investigate how this bunch of students are gradually getting out of success track or struggling to adjust with the new situation of EMI. This study, being basically a survey by nature will focus on the current state of EMI in the classroom teaching and also if there is any dilemma from students' side that is affecting students' overall performance in respect of English.

Keywords: English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), Globalization, CLIL

Introduction

It has been more than two decades that the dynamics of classroom learning in Bangladesh appeared to be changing. From the perspective of globalization, learning a foreign language tends to ensure a better career. The knowledge of English is one way of giving oneself a better chance in life and fair access to many avenues of economic activities. English, being so demanding language everywhere and is so widely spoken, it has often been referred to as a global language.

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As a developing country like Bangladesh, English, officially being a foreign language, is given high importance where a person is considered well educated if he/she can speak the language fluently. That individual can easily attract others' considerable attention and opportunities. One of the important opportunities is getting a good job in the corporate world.

It appears to be a general consensus that English has been a global language, a language that is widely used in higher education, business, technology, science, and the Internet (Crystal, 1997; Numan, 2003). In Bangladesh, EMI (English Medium Instruction) is relatively a new trend specifically in private universities. Use of English in teaching academic subjects such as geography, mathematics, medicine etc.(Dearden, 2014, p. 2) EMI is not a method it is actually a process through which students will learn not only English as a language but also, through English they will learn about the subject in which they are doing their major.

Bangladesh Context

In Bangladesh private universities which are run through EMI programs offer three fundamental English courses to the students of every discipline in the very first year of their university life. Here all textbooks, exam questions, answer scripts are written in English. Students hold both positive and negative attitude toward EMI. But teachers prefer EMI since English skill is valued. There are possibilities of EMI "EMI can improve English proficiency of students" (Ibrahim, 2001). "Learners who receive formal instructions in English may learn English more rapidly than those who do not" (Rod Ellis, 1984:16). EMI system promotes students' mastery of English. The students who are always getting English lectures and instructions in class are expected to be fluent in English.

However, there are tensions and issues concerning EMI**.** For instance students' perceptions of EMI, their attitude toward EMI, challenges they encounter with EMI, Students motivation to attend EMI classes, their level of proficiency to comprehend EMI classes, makes it difficult to understand the course content very often, Students cannot express or ask question smoothly in English in EMI classes, Interaction between teacher and students is less in EMI classes, Language proficiency of teacher and student might be an obstacle to EMI.

Literature Review

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Defining EMI

English Medium Instruction (EMI) refers to the use of English in teaching academic subjects such as geography, mathematics, medicine etc. (Dearden, 2014, p. 2). Kym and Kym (2014) hold that EMI is not a method; it is an education policy. In EMI, students are taught professional knowledge in English so that they can gain both subject-knowledge and English proficiency. While defining EMI, experts sometimes refer to CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) in which a language is taught thorough content/information of a particular subject. Vu and Burns (2014) point out that EMI emerged from CLIL, Content Based Teaching (CBT) and bilingual education in native English-speaking contexts. However, the major difference between CLIL and EMI is that CLIL is a teaching approach whereas EMI is a language education policy (Kym & Kym, 2004). Vu and Burns (2014, p. 3) note the complexity in the definition of EMI:

> Defining EMI from the language teaching literature is not a straightforward task. EMI is usually traced to the European Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) movement, Content-Based Teaching (CBT) and bilingual education in Native English-Speaking (NES) contexts. However, the concept extends beyond methodology into policy-making and language planning.

Issues Concerning EMI

Trends of research on EMI involves students' perceptions of EMI (Kym & Kym, 2014; Islam, 2013), students' attitude toward EMI (Wu, 2006), challenges encountered by EMI (Vu & Burns, 2014), and SWOT analysis of EMI (Ibrahim, 2001). Kym and Kym (2014) investigate perceptions of EMI among students in a Korean university. On the basis of a survey on 364 students, the researchers state that the motivation among students to attend EMI classes is considerably high. All the participants are satisfied with EMI; however, in the level of understanding or comprehending EMI classes students' level of proficiency is not equal. High proficiency students are more benefitted compared to low proficiency students. Kym and Kym (2014, p. 55) suggest: "In order for EMI programs to achieve the ultimate goal of acquiring the language and content subject, it should be a prerequisite that the participants, students and instructors, have obtained a certain level of English proficiency".

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Vu and Burns's (2014) study supports the observation of Kym and Kym. In their study, Vu and Burns investigated the challenges of EMI at undergraduate level in Vietnam. The authors interviewed 16 EMI teachers who teach six different subjects: Biology, Business Administration, Physics, Computer Science, Environment Science, and Linguistics. Analysis of the interview revealed the following challenges of EMI: (a) English proficiency of lecturers, (b) student diversity (i.e. students' level of English proficiency), (c) pedagogy, and (d) availability of resources. The authors conclude that teachers should be given the opportunity to improve their English skill, pedagogic skills (i.e. methods and techniques of teaching). Besides, institutions should take initiatives to produce English materials and provide necessary technological support.

Wu (2006) investigated the attitudes of students toward EMI at Chung Hua University at Taiwan. The researchers interviewed 28 graduate students and found that students hold positive attitude toward EMI. In other words, majority of the students believe that EMI improves their English and it helps them understand text and reference books. On the other hand, a large number of students identified some disadvantages of EMI in the classroom. For instance, EMI makes it difficult to understand the course content and stops students from expressing themselves smoothly in the class. EMI also discourages the interaction and discussion between students and teachers. Pointing to this contradiction in students' favorable attitude toward EMI policy and problems in the classroom, the Wu (2006, p. 78) states:

> Whereas most participants admitted that their English proficiency was either fair or poor, all of them were in favor of EMI language policy and recommended that more EMI courses should be offered, which presumably indicated that they believed that EMI language policy could either help them improve their English competence or give them more opportunities to use English in a natural environment. However, the present study reflected the contradiction that most of them did not grab the chance to use written and oral English.

Ibrahim (2001) presents a SWOT analysis of EMI in Indonesia. The author points out that EMI can solve the language problems of the students. Teaching core subjects in English language will generate opportunities for 'comprehensible input' and 'comprehensible output'. However, Ibrahim (ibid)

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notes that EMI might not provide opportunities to improve four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking). In addition, language proficiency of teachers and students might be an obstacle to EMI. Therefore, the author maintains that there might be a partial EMI program at the initial stage before implementing a complete EMI.

EMI in Bangladesh

In a report of British Council, Dearden (2014) explores the existence of EMI in 55 countries including Bangladesh by interviewing British Council Staff in the respective countries. The author shows that EMI exists at private primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions in Bangladesh. However, the national attitude toward EMI is not favorable since people in Bangladesh believe that EMI might be a threat to national identity and it might inject western value system in Bangladeshi culture. However, EMI is popular in Bangladesh for pragmatic reasons. Dearden (2014, p. 17) writes:

> More and more people in Bangladesh seem to be interested in English medium education as good knowledge of English provides many opportunities. Students of English medium schools tend to learn western literature, geography, history and so on. Though these schools contribute towards the rise of English there is an impression that this education is gradually fostering western culture that undermines Bangladeshi culture and tradition.

Islam (2013) conducted a case study on EMI to explore different dimensions of EMI at a private university in Bangladesh. Interviewing 17 teachers and 37 undergraduate students, the author found that students hold both positive and negative attitude toward EMI whereas teachers are in favor of EMI. Some students opined that EMI is a good policy since it improves their English skills. Others reported that EMI is a problem for them since they do not understand course content in English; these students prefer Bangla as academic language. However, teachers prefer EMI since English skill is valued in the job market.

Methodology

Setting

Data have been collected from Southeast University, a private university located in Dhaka city.

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Sampling

62 students of Southeast University were randomly selected for the survey.

Instrumentation

A closed Likert-type questionnaire (see Appendix A) with 20 items was used to generate data. The questionnaire was designed to elicit responses regarding students' perceptions, attitude, and experience of EMI.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data have been analyzed using SPSS 16.0. Distribution of frequencies has been analyzed to describe students' perception, attitude, and experiences with regard to EMI.

Findings and Analysis

Analysis of data shows that almost all the respondents (98.4%) (See Table 1) come from Bangla medium background. Besides, 24.2% come from rural areas; 25.8% come from semi urban areas; and 50% come from urban areas.

Table 1: Background of the respondents

Background		Percentage
Medium	Bangla Medium	98.4
	English Medium	0
	Madrasa	1.6
Region	Rural	24.2
	Semi-Urban	25.8
	Urban	50

Analysis of the data shows that majority of the students hold positive attitude toward EMI. Students believe that EMI increases students' English skills (agree 71% and strongly agree 24.2%); EMI policy should be implemented in the classroom (agree 53.2% and strongly agree 33.9%; and EMI increases students' overall English proficiency (agree 30.6% and strongly agree 67.7%).

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A large number of students (50%) responded that their teachers do not use English in the whole class while conducting EMI classes. However, majority of the students (agree 29% and strongly agree 61.3%) reported that assessment, tests, and interviews are conducted in English.

Some items of the survey questionnaire identified students' experiences with EMI. For instance, majority of the students (agree 56.5% and strongly agree 6.5%) reported that EMI is difficult for them. However, a large number of students (agree 45.2% and strongly agree 51.6%) responded that if simple English is used in the classroom, they understand it easily.

A large number of students responded that teachers are not good at English communication (agree 37.1% and strongly agree 16.1%). In addition, teachers use Bangla in the classroom to cater to the demands of the students, (agree 33.9% and strongly agree 56.5%). Most of the students (agree 59.7% and strongly agree 40.3%) reported that teachers use both Bangla and English in the classroom.

Students' responses also reveal that they are comfortable with lectures in Bangla rather than English. For instance, majority (agree 32.3% and strongly agree 56.5%) of the students reported that they feel shy to ask questions in English; they do not feel shy while asking questions if the class is conducted in Bangla (agree 41.9% and strongly agree 58.1%).

In a nutshell, analysis reveals that students hold positive attitude toward EMI, that is, they believe that EMI can improve English proficiency. The survey data indicates that students are not comfortable with EMI. Besides, students' responses on the classroom experiences suggest that EMI is not properly implemented in the surveyed university as majority of the students reported that most of the teachers use both Bangla and English in the classroom.

Table 2: Students' responses regarding EMI

Item	Strongly Agree (Percentage)	Agree (Percentage)	Disagree (Percentage)	Strongly Disagree (Percentage)
1. EMI at the tertiary level	24.2	71.0	4.8	0

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increases student's English skills				
2. EMI is difficult for me to follow the class properly	6.5	56.5	33.9	3.2
3. While conducting the EMI classes my teachers use English in the whole class	1.6	46.8	50	1.6
4. My assessments/tests/interviews are carried out in English	61.3	29	6.5	3.2
5. Class lectures mixture of Bangla and English is helpful for developing understanding	67.7	30.6	0	1.6
6. I find no problem when my teacher explains everything in simple English	51.6	45.2	1.6	1.6
7. EMI can be maintained if students want their teachers to give lectures in English	32.3	61.3	6.5	0
8. EMI is not maintained because our teachers prefer using Bangla in the class	11.3	17.7	54.8	16.1
9. Most teachers use both Bangla and English while giving lectures	40.3	59.7	0	0
10. Because of students' demand teachers use Bangla in the class	56.5	33.9	8.1	1.6
11. Some teachers are not good at English communication	16.1	37.1	38.7	8.1
12. If lectures are given in Bangla there will not be any problem	41.9	35.5	19.4	3.2
13. Most students feel shy while	56.5	32.3	8.1	3.2

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asking questions in English			
14. Students can easily ask questions if the lectures are given in Bangla	58.1	41.9	0	0
15. Being lectures in Bangla or mixture of Bangla and English, it is rather difficult to follow textbook written in English	9.7	27.4	50.0	12.9
16. EMI should be properly maintained in our classroom teaching	33.9	53.2	11.3	1.6
17. Lectures often being in Bangla students tend to remain weak in English	41.9	45.2	9.7	3.2
18. EMI system promotes students' overall English proficiency	67.7	30.6	0	1.6

Policy Implication

Based on student's responses, some policy interventions may be implemented for the development of effective EMI programs. Firstly, EMI lecturers need to be trained for the improvement of student's language abilities, especially to improve their speaking skills and building confidence. However, the EMI based should be interactive in teaching so that students feel engaged in their classes. The EMI classes need to be learner-centered and activity based. Teachers need to be well prepared for running their interactive sessions. Secondly, new teachers should be well trained and properly oriented to conduct EMI classes. From students response it is clear that students face some problems to adjust in the new system of EMI. The major adjustment problems faced by the students are lack of pervious exposure, lack of appropriate vocabulary use, fail to understand the course content, fail to ask question in class, feeling of shyness are so prominent among the students in EMI classes. So before implementing EMI effectively, these issues must be taken into consideration. Thirdly, gradual increase of EMI needs to be ensured in all levels of classroom teaching and teacher needs to play the central role to carry it out.

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University may set a policy restricting its language preference with strong monitoring to follow up so that teachers feel professionally obligated to comply with that. Finally, use of L1 may be considered to be occasional support towards student understanding of the content as well as their improvement of English language skills.

Conclusion

As pointed out by Kachru, the cultural consequences of globalization have changed the global scene. English has not only become a global language, but also "a tool of power, domination and elitist identity and of communication across continents" (Kachru 4). It is employed as a tool of power to influence the mindset of people who use English as a second language. EMI programs improve student's English proficiency and gradually help them gain mastery of English and make them confident English speaker. Though EMI is claimed to be practiced everywhere in the surveyed university, the real scenario is different, it is not properly implemented. Teachers do not use English in the whole class rather the mixture of English and Bangla dominates. Although code switching in the classroom sometimes makes teaching and learning processes more effective, it should not be used frequently to get the full success of EMI programs. Students find it difficult to follow EMI classes, but their attitude is positive toward EMI and they want it to be implemented to overcome their fear of English. Throughout the survey findings, one point has appeared pretty clearly that student failure or less success in EMI does not lie in the lack of student willingness rather it is the lack or inefficiency of the teachers who the run the class with effective EMI. Therefore, more interventions related to EMI development need to be effectively taken by the institutions and more importantly strong monitoring system should follow it up. To sum it up, EMI should be integrated towards overall teacher development which strongly includes the central idea is that effective student learning largely hinges upon effective and efficient teaching.

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