



Towards a Multilingual Approach: Exploring English Language as Medium of Instruction in Teaching and Learning of Nonlanguage Disciplines at Bangladeshi Tertiary Level Education

Dipty Rahman

Lecturer

Department of English,

American International University Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract : Although English Medium Instruction (EMI) has incurred global debate for the last half a century, it has been implemented worldwide, especially in higher education institutes. The scenario is quite similar for Bangladesh as well. This paper investigated the perceptions of nonlanguage teachers and students surrounding the use of EMI across Bangladeshi public and private universities and how EMI is being implemented in teaching and learning of nonlanguage subjects. A qualitative approach was followed for data collection. Five nonlanguage teachers of different disciplines from both private and public universities in Bangladesh were selected for in-depth interviews; three FGDs with 20 students from business, law and science disciplines were conducted to get a clear picture regarding their perceptions preferences and beliefs and its impact on both teaching and learning. 10 classes of private and public universities were observed to understand the pedagogical impact of EMI. For data analysis, Silverman's (2006) qualitative content analysis was used. From the data analysis, it was found that, although English is used as MOI officially, Bangla (mother tongue of the respondents) was widely used alongside English to aid the learners, who mostly came from Bangla medium background prior to entering the universities. Both the teacher and student respondents felt use of occasional Bangla in knowledge transfer leveraged the learning process. Based on findings the researcher suggests considering a multilingual/bilingual mode of teaching and use of Bangla sporadically for making the learning journey more effective for the learners.

IndexTerms - Medium of instruction, English medium instruction, tertiary education

I. INTRODUCTION

Since very beginning of Bangladesh, English became an inseparable part of its education system. Though the journey of English began merely as a subject in Bangladesh, it has gradually become an important part of the socio-cultural system of the country. Increased use of English has caused its intermixture with Bangla, resulting in frequent code-mixing and code-switching. In a country known to be predominantly monolingual for Bangla speaking people, and born from the movement of Bengali nationalism, the emotional factor has always played an important political reason for side-lining other languages in the language and education policies.

Although Bangla successfully became the medium of instruction for imparting education in the primary and secondary level due to these policies in favour of 'Bangla Everywhere', it failed to become the sole MOI at the tertiary level. Over the recent years, in response to growing demand of English in the global job market, an overwhelming emphasis has been put on English education in Bangladesh. For example, at public universities, a growing tendency to recommend and follow textbooks written in English can be observed. In addition, the private university act of 1992 and the revised private university act of 2010 have encouraged the blooming of English medium higher education institutes, reinforcing a similar situation in terms of use of English as MOI. At the same time, subject teachers, in the act of teaching, require adapting to the diverse needs of the students in terms of their abilities, and linguistic competence. The current study focuses on the tertiary education in Bangladesh, as it is evident that more and more universities are shifting towards English as MOI. There is a dearth of study in nonlanguage teachers' and learners' perception regarding EMI and use of EMI in actual classroom scenario. Hence, this paper intends to explore the perceptions of subject teachers and students of different disciplines such as Engineering, Law, Science and Business Administration of selected public and private universities in Bangladesh and the pedagogic application of EMI.

Given this scenario, the paper explores the following questions: (1) What are the perception of the teachers about EMI? (2) What are the nonlanguage students' preferences and perception regarding EMI? (3) How EMI is being implemented in the teaching and learning of Nonlanguage subjects?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: ENGLISH AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

Hillman et al. (2023) opines “EMI involves more than just language and pedagogy, as it is a complex sociohistorical, political, economic, and ideological phenomenon that is closely intertwined with broader power structures. (p.1)” According to Wright and Bolitho (1998), Non-Native Speakers of English (NNS) teachers have to perform three interconnected roles: the role of language user, language analyst, and language teacher. These interconnected roles are also applicable in the case of the subject teachers as they also have to perform these roles while teaching content in the classroom. However, in the case of non-language teachers, their focus is mainly on teaching knowledge using language. The view has generated the concept of ‘multi-competence’ which Cook defines as, ‘the compound state of mind with two grammars’ (Cook, 1992). The difference between ‘mono-competence’ and ‘multi-competence’ is not only one of *degree*, he argues, but also one of *kind*, as *multicompetent* speakers have a different knowledge of their languages than monolinguals do. Gorter and Jasone (2017) also proposed that the bilingual is an integrated whole which cannot easily be decomposed into two separate parts. The co-existence and constant interaction of the two languages in the bilingual has produced a different but complete language system. In this regard, Cook (2013, p. 447) defines multi-competence as ‘the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or the same community.’ That is one reason why Li Wei and Wu (2009) consider ‘code-switching’ as the most distinctive behaviour of the bilingual speaker. In Bangladesh, the students also encounter a bilingual or multi-lingual setting, even when they operate in classrooms. As both mother tongue (MT) and English are integral parts of the teachers’ and the students’ verbal repertoire, even while using English as MOI in the classroom, translanguaging becomes essential for teaching language or non-language subjects.

Concurring in this regard, Shohamy (2011) advocates multilingual tasks in language assessment so that learners’ use of their multilingual resources is accepted, whereby ‘mixing languages’ gains legitimacy, paving the way for expression and communication of ideas effectively, without fear of incurring penalties. While teaching non-language subjects, similar linguistic flexibility might be useful to express the students’ knowledge of subject without impediments. Altinkamis and Simon’s (2020) assertion that considering children’s language performances should not only be evaluated in light of their family characteristics and daily language experiences including the amount of exposure, but also the linguistic characteristics of the languages they are exposed to and the way in which these may differ from the registers required in language tests.

However, students of a non-language subject where English is used as MOI, have to perform all the activities for assessment in English: writing in examination scripts/taking quizzes, presentation and Q&A sessions.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned, the researcher claims that the perceptions of teacher and students surrounding EMI relates not only to personal attitudes and representations, knowledge and cognitive abilities to interact in a specific multilingual setting, it transcends personal dimensions.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section, the researcher elaborates the adopted methodology for collecting and analysing the data for addressing the formulated research questions. For conducting this research, a qualitative method was applied and the main instruments for collecting data were semi-structured interviews of the teachers, Focus Group Discussions with students, and Classroom Observation.

To capture nonlanguage teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about English as medium of instruction at tertiary level, semi-structured interviews were used. The duration of the semi-structured interviews with individual subject teachers were 45 minutes to 1 hour. In total 5 subject teachers from the disciplines of Law, Business and Engineering from both public and private universities in Bangladesh were interviewed. Ten Classes of the disciplines of law, business and science were observed and recorded using an observation check-list to capture the use of MOI in practice. Three focus group discussions consisting of 6 to 8 students from the faculties of Law, Business and Engineering from both private and public universities were held online platform Google Meet and Zoom to understand the student’s attitude, motivation and opinion about use of English/Bangla or both as medium of instruction for teaching non-language subjects. During FGDs, students’ day-to-day exposure to English was explored through domain analysis of the use of languages. The FGDs also helped to identify the students’ attitude towards use of English/Bangla or both in their day-to-day lives and their opinion about the use of English/Bangla or both as MOI in their respective disciplines.

After transcribing and translating the semi-structured interviews and FGDs, qualitative content analysis (Silverman, 2006) was used to analyse the data. At the first stage of data analysis broad categories were identified from the sections of the interview schedule. It was followed by identification of different thematic patterns across the set of data. Emergent themes from the transcribed data were then used to finetune the themes of the interview schedule and the transcripts were manually coded accordingly.

Participants

In total, 25 respondents participated in this research. Among them 5 were non-language teachers belonging from the disciplines of law, business and science from public and private universities of Bangladesh with varied range of teaching experiences, from a minimum of 1 year to up to 19 years. 20 students from public and private universities of Bangladesh participated in three focus group discussions. Table 1 below provides relevant information of teacher participants in the interviews. For maintaining confidentiality, the respondents’ names have been changed.

Table 1: Profile of Teacher Participants

Name (pseudonyms)	Gender	Department	Teaching Experience
Sabiha	Female	Engineering (public)	18 years
Hannan	Male	Law (public)	4 years
Munim	Male	Business Administration (public)	19 years
Latifa	Female	Law (private)	11 years
Polash	Male	Engineering (private)	1.5 years

- Public University (public): government sponsored universities
- Private University (private): privately owned universities

Three FGDs were conducted across public and private universities to understand the students' points of view regarding English as MOI, their regular English uses in different domains, their perceptions regarding language needs for career, for communication, and content consumption via different platforms. The FGDs also focused on the student's language needs and struggles and adjustment to the pedagogic practices in the classroom. Participants of the FGDs were selected from science, law and business disciplines from both public and private universities in Bangladesh. All the participants were from the undergraduate level, and except one participant, all of their medium of instruction in primary, secondary and higher secondary level was Bangla. The subjects they are studying now are officially being delivered to them using English as medium of instruction in class. Student Profile (Subject and year of study) of private universities who participated in the FGDs is mentioned in the table 2.

Table 2: Profile of Student Participants (Private)

Name (pseudonyms)	Department	Year of study
Urmy	Law	2 nd
Hasaan	Law	2 nd
Papiya	Engineering	3 rd
Jaber	Engineering	1 st
Jamal	Engineering	1 st
Swami	Engineering	2 nd
Kannya	Business Administration	2 nd
Lafifa	Engineering	1 st
Sajed	Engineering	1 st

Student Profile (Subject and year of study) of public universities who participated in the FGDs is mentioned in the table 3.

Table 3: Profile of Student Participants (Public)

Name (pseudonyms)	Department	Year of study
Farzana	Law	4 th
Sajal	Law	4 th
Saima	Engineering	3 rd
Luma	Business Administration	3 rd
Zayal	Business Administration	2 nd
Safikur	Engineering	4 th
Aanita Dey	Science	2 nd
Nasim	Science	2 nd
Sumon	Engineering	4 th
Aaslam	Engineering	3 rd
Nazmul	Engineering	3 rd

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The interviews were primarily coded using deductive coding; subsequently, through interaction with the collected data, emergent themes in all the categories were inductively coded and thematic descriptors were defined.

Findings from Teachers' Interviews

Teacher's Perceptions of EMI:

For me language is a systematic means of communication. Apart from communication, language also shapes our knowledge. If a teacher fails to communicate the contents of a subject clearly to students, then his attempt to transfer the subject knowledge would be ineffective. So, I firmly believe that a teacher must be a competent user of the language he uses in teaching.

-Polash (Business Administration)

Crucial insights were gathered from the reflections of teacher respondents on the role of language competence while teaching nonlanguage subjects. Sabiha (Engineering) identifies the mastery of language as one of the key elements of successful teaching:

The success of teaching profession depends on mastery of languages to deliver lecture. So, if a teacher is not competent in using language, then how can he or she explain the subject effectively?

All of the respondents share the view that linguistic knowledge and skills are essential in teaching their respective subjects. Teachers' perspective regarding the importance of language (especially the medium of instruction) in the pedagogic practice is illustrated from their responses to the interview questions.

The respondents also feel that the students' linguistic competence is of equal importance for understanding subject knowledge. Munim (Business Administration) believes that students without sound proficiency in English 'will eventually suffer' in a class setting that relies on English as MOI. Thus, linguistic skills are essential in terms of students' competency in grasping the subject knowledge.

Role of teacher's bi/multilingual competence in pedagogic practice:

In some cases, I prefer to use Bangla in class as it is easier to explain complex concepts in mother tongue.

-Munim (Business Administration)

As Bangla is the mother tongue for most Bangladeshis, it is inevitably used in all the sociocultural domains by both students and teachers. Apart from Bangla, English is taught as a subject from grade 1. Both Bangla and English along with regional dialects become integral parts of the verbal repertoire of all Bangladeshis in their daily lives. This gives sufficient background to understand that teachers as well as students are likely to bring multilingual knowledge into the classrooms.

Though English is officially accepted as MOI at tertiary level nonlanguage classrooms, the multilingual knowledge of the teachers along with multilingual background of the students automatically generate the need to use more than one language for conveying subject knowledge successfully to the students. The respondents believe that using Bangla reduces the 'gap' in understanding core concepts of a nonlanguage subject and helps students to connect with it. Polash (Engineering) deliberated that although he preferred to present the topics in English in front of the students, 'the occasional shifts to Bangla' for "further clarification" in class has proved to be very effective for the learning of the students.

From the reflections of the respondents, it became visible that in one way or other teachers are negotiating the use of Bangla and English in the classroom for leveraging their teaching practices.

Shifts in Attitude towards English as MOI with Career Progression:

In the beginning of my career, I delivered my lectures completely in English and I also encouraged my students to reply in English. After teaching for so many years, I understand the need to use more Bangla than English to facilitate the learning of the students.

-Latifa (Law)

During the interviews, the teacher respondents were asked whether they observed any changes in the use of English in classroom as they progressed in their teaching careers. All of the participants have reported observing similar changes in the way they use English language in the classroom for instruction over the course of their teaching career. At the beginning of their career, participants claimed to deliver the lectures completely or mostly in English (as required to prove that they were competent in English). However, the more they progressed with their teaching career, they started to introduce mother tongue (in this case Bangla) in the classroom. The teachers grew more sensitive to the linguistic competence and linguistic needs of the students, and this became a key factor for the adjustment and readjustment of the teachers' language in the act of teaching.

Use of English as MOI:

As a student, I faced difficulties in comprehending the topic taught in class when teachers used English as the sole medium of instruction

-Hannan (Law)

Students' attitude towards English as MOI is an important consideration for teachers. When the respondents deliberated on this topic, they revisited their own experiences as undergraduate students and shared their difficulties when teachers used English as the sole MOI. Most of the university students in Bangladesh are compelled to experience a sudden shift in the medium of

instruction at the tertiary level. The students mostly come from Bangla medium background. However, English is the official MOI for learning non-language disciplines like Law, Business, Science, Engineering, etc. at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. When the teacher participants were asked if their students felt any kind of difficulty or low motivation due to this sudden switch in MOI, most of the participants mentioned that students struggle in understanding subjects matters and suffer from low motivation and anxiety in class if English is solely used as MOI. Interestingly, most of them confessed to experiencing similar challenges when they once were university students.

However, the teachers from the business discipline provided a different perspective and claimed that very few of their students felt demotivated while using English as MOI. Due to the nature of the discipline the students are required to be comparatively proficient in English as MOI.

Even with some deviation, most of the teachers believed that most students struggle with English as MOI in the classroom from the beginning of their university studies.

Adapting to Students' Level of Cognition and Language Competence:

A teacher is not an actor on the stage who delivers memorized lines. A teacher has to constantly analyse the linguistic and cognitive abilities of the students and adjust his lectures accordingly to achieve the best learning outcome from his class.

- Hannan (Law)

At the university level in Bangladesh, students usually come from diverse socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Likewise, there are students with different linguistic abilities and verbal repertoires in the same class. So, it becomes vital for the nonlanguage teachers to foster a considerate attitude towards students' linguistic competence for facilitating a good teaching-learning environment in class. From the interviews of the teachers it was evident that they are quite considerate about the students' level of proficiency in English.

Latif (Law) shared that he always tried to encourage the students to be 'communicative' in class. Even if the students made few grammatical errors he would 'correct them cordially.' Polash (Engineering) held the opinion that 'making mistakes' and 'learning from them' is part of 'systematic improvement' for every student. He also felt that it is quite natural for students to make mistake especially in pronunciation of English. He believed that the teacher should take the time to help them overcome this deficiency. Sabiha (Engineering), ignored few grammatical errors in both speaking and writing to help the students to build up their confidence. Munim (Business Administration) admitted to adjusting to the proficiency level of the students in class to provide meaningful input to his students.

Findings from Students' FGDs

From the three FGDs with the students the researchers, tried identifying the extent of their daily exposure to language(s), their attitude towards English as MOI, and their preferred language for examination. An attempt was made to get a holistic picture of the pedagogic practices and triangulate the findings from the semi-structured interviews of the teachers. Due to constraint set by the purpose, only the most relevant emergent themes are described.

The lecture plans are set up in English, but the most pervasively used language is Bangla. The use of Bangla makes me feel more comfortable as I can easily grasp the topics.

-Sumon (Engineering)

All the student participants across public and private universities agreed that the medium of instruction in the classrooms is mixed and this provides an advantage for the students to while understanding complex topics. Though all of the lecture plans and textbooks are in English, teachers frequently use both Bangla and English to transfer the subject knowledge to make their lessons comprehensible to the students. Majority of the respondents also admitted to feeling afraid and demotivated if the classes are conducted entirely in English, as they feel, EMI becomes a barrier in the learning process.

Jaber (Engineering) revealed that Bangla is often used alongside English in the classroom for instructional purposes in class. Nasim (Science) admitted that although the provided lecture materials are in English, the teachers often have to explain these 'English materials' in Bangla for the 'convenience of the students.' Jayal (Business Administration) on the other hand, spoke of how 'Bangla is rarely used' in the classroom. Kannya (Business Administration) agreed with Jayal in this respect while Farzana (Law) stated that the choice of language varied from teacher to teacher. Some teachers use Bangla in class whereas others use English. All of the participants agreed that the teachers usually switch to Bangla when complex terminologies and theories need to be explained to the students. The teachers also used translanguaging if the students demanded further explanation.

Findings from Classroom Observation

10 classes from the disciplines of Business, Law and Engineering were observed to understand the real classroom practices in regards to language use. The classroom observations reaffirm the teacher respondents' earlier revelations regarding use of MT along with English in classroom. In almost all of the observed classes the teacher used translanguaging/code switching specially while teaching complex concepts. In one of the observed classes of Engineering discipline the teacher explained the concept of "design thinking" in English and some of the students, requested clarification in Bangla. The teacher complied whereupon the students appeared to become more animated.

In another class, the researchers observed of the law department, the teacher used Bangla for ice breaking and rapport building with the students. He commenced the class with greetings in Bangla. He switched effortlessly between Bangla and English to create an adequate and enjoyable teaching-learning environment for the students.

It was also found that in the classes with senior students belonging to 3rd or 4th year, the teacher uses more English than Bangla. In those classes the students also seemed accustomed to more use of English as MOI. For example, in a 3rd year class of Business

department of a public university the students appeared very comfortable with the use of English in class where very little use of MT was found.

From the observation of the classes, it became evident that Bangla and English are both being used in non-language classes for teaching subjects. Though officially the MOI is solely English in many disciplines, the practice differs within the classroom setting. The teachers are using Bangla for creating rapport, clarification of complex concepts and for taking students' feedback, and negotiating with the linguistic needs of the students for proper delivery of lessons to meet the lesson objectives. So, from the observations it was evident that bi/multilingual awareness is crucial for successful knowledge transfer.

V. DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the data collected via semi-structured interviews of teachers, FGDs with students and classroom observation, the researcher addresses the three research questions.

While addressing the 1st research question, from the study it became evident that for successful transfer of knowledge/content, the nonlanguage teachers prefers to use a mixture of Bangla and English. The nonlanguage teachers are flexibly adapting EMI to meet their specific pedagogic necessities, adjusting and readjusting to the shifting needs of the students. The teachers admitted to facing difficulty in the sole use of English as MOI in the class, while they were students. Until the students grow accustomed to English as MOI in their later years of graduation, a generous mix of MT and English is deemed to be helpful for teaching subjects especially at the 1st and 2nd year of their undergraduate study.

The second research question tried to comprehend the perceptions of the students about EMI and the findings mirrors the teachers' respondents' beliefs and attitudes. Most of the learners felt comfortable if Bangla was used alongside English to aid the learning process. They appreciated the teacher's willingness to adjust to the necessity of the student's linguistic needs.

The third research question addressed the actual implementation of EMI in class. The class observation revealed, despite being the official MOI, English language is often replaced with Bangla in case of explaining difficult topics, for being comprehensible to the students, to motivate 1st and second year students and to make them interested in the subject matter.

VI. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis EMI and its implementation encompasses more than the academic spheres of the teachers, learners and classroom. Hamid et al. (2013) claims that, English, a legacy of the colonial regime, in this era has been reintroduced as a global language rather than a colonial one. While deciding on a unified policy for MOI at the tertiary level in a country like Bangladesh where the language setting is predominantly multilingual, and most learners and teachers come from a Bangla medium background, it is essential to consider their preferences, perceptions and pedagogic necessities in terms of which languages to be used in the classroom for imparting knowledge of nonlanguage disciplines. The considerations may help to bridge the gap between the policy and actual practice of EMI in teaching and learning of nonlanguage subjects at the tertiary level Bangladeshi Academia.

REFERENCES

1. Altinkamis, F., & Simon, E. (2020). Language Abilities in Bilingual Children: The Effect of Family Background and Language Exposure on the Development of Turkish and Dutch. *International Journal of Bilingualism*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006920909889>
2. Cook, V. J. (1992). Evidence for Multicompetence. *Language learning*, 42(4), 557-591.
3. Gorter, D. & Jasone, C. (2017) Language Education Policy and Multilingual Assessment, *Language and Education*, 31:3, 231-248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2016.1261892>
4. Hamid, M. O., Jahan, I., & Islam, M. M. (2013). Medium of Instruction Policies and Language Practices, Ideologies and Institutional Divides: Voices of Teachers and Students in a Private University in Bangladesh. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 14(1), 144-163.
5. Hillman, S., Li, W., Green-Eneix, C., & De Costa, P. I. (2023). The Emotional Landscape of English Medium Instruction (EMI) In Higher Education. *Linguistics and Education*, 75, 1-6.
6. Shohamy, E. (2001). *The Power of Tests: A Critical Perspective on the Uses of Language Tests*. Harlow: Pearson Educational.
7. Shohamy, E. (2011). Assessing Multilingual Competencies: Adopting Construct Valid Assessment Policies. *The Modern Language Journal* 95 (3), 418-429. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01210.x>.
8. Shohamy, E. (2011). Assessing Multilingual Competencies: Adopting Construct Valid Assessment Policies. *The Modern Language Journal* 95(3), 418-429. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01210.x>.
9. Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction* (Third edition). London: Sage
10. Wright, T., & Bolitho, R. (1993). Language Awareness: a Missing Link in Language Teacher Education? *ELT journal*, 47(4), 292-304.