Learning Competencies for English Medium Instruction and Student Learning at Primary Level

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Abstract

Using English as medium of instruction at the primary level is a rapidly growing global phenomenon in the countries where English is not the first language of the learners because of the onslaught of English as global lingua franca. Public opinion is divided and controversial but not against the introduction of EMI at primary level. The researches specifically focusing the impact of EMI on the learning of the speakers of other languages at primary level are rare and most of them are based on assumptions. The same is true for the studies related to mother tongue instruction. But no research is available about the competencies of the young learners for EMI at primary or pre-primary level. The present study focused on the instincts and capabilities of children of young learners which they bring to the classroom to be exploited for learning through EMI at the primary level. Using a qualitative research design for the present study the EMI teachers working in the DJ primary English medium schools of Giligit-Baltistan province were selected for data collection through the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected using purposive sampling technique. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. Major findings of this study highlighted a number of learning competencies children bring to an EMI classroom for effective learning at the primary level.

Keywords: AKESP (The Aga Khan Education Service Pakistan), LEAP Language Enhancement and Achievement Programme, DJ (Diamond Jubilee), PDCN (Professional Development Centre North)

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Introduction

What language should be used for imparting instruction in schools? What language of instruction leads to enhanced learning? What factors direct the policymakers in formulating language policies? All these questions are valid and need careful consideration for understanding the language of education issue. To begin with, the importance of the competence in the mother tongue for further learning and education has been repeatedly endorsed by the researchers and thinkers. It was on the basis of these assertions about the utility of mother tongue as medium of instruction that UNESCO adopted an emphatic stance on the provision of education for children in their mother tongues and recommended to extend the use of mother tongue as late as possible in education. Later on, this endorsement acquired the status of a "right" and it was incorporated into the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC). According to this convention it is the basic right of every child to receive education in mother tongue at least through the initial years of schooling (UNESCO, 2007).

In Pakistan, the education policies including the latest Education Policy (2009) are silent about the mother tongue as medium of instruction in education. It has been estimated that almost 95% of children in Pakistan do not have access to education in their mother tongue (OBE 2010).

The theory of mother tongue as medium of instruction is equally hypothetical as the theory of teaching in a foreign language because both of these theories lack the research evidence regarding their impact on students' learning. Most of the poor people in developing countries feel that mother tongue theory is being propagated to marginalise the already impoverished people from the mainstream schooling or as an apartheid system of producing two classes (Naik, 2011).

English is being taught in Pakistan since its inception in 1947. So there is a long history of its use in education in the country. Making English as a medium of instruction at primary level may not be that much challenging as assigning the same roles to the mother tongues. According to Naik (2011), it cannot become the norm for the medium of instruction at primary level even if we accept the validity of the term mother tongue. The medium of instruction is not the only factor responsible for the academic growth of the child. The competence of teachers, teaching methods and quality of textbooks are more important factors in students' learning. Irrespective of the differences of caste, language, religion or location English as a medium of instruction at primary level would be a boon for everyone. He warned the parents, education department and management not to fall prey to the pseudo intellectuals, educationists, politicians and the supporters of mother tongue because these people have double standards and are hypocrite (Naik, 2011).

Because of this gigantic march of English in all areas of human life its demand is increasing throughout the world to be used as a medium of instruction at primary level in the educational systems especially in the developing countries Graddol 2010).

A recent report (Dearden, 2014), published jointly by EMI Oxford and the British Council, identifies English-Medium Instruction (EMI) as a rapidly growing global phenomenon in all phases of education. For the purposes of the report, EMI is defined as "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" (ibid: p.4). This report states "there is a fast-moving worldwide shift from English being taught as a foreign language (EFL) to English being the medium of instruction (EMI) for academic subjects" (Dearden, 2014, p. 2).

According to Meganathan in India there was an increased tendency of using English as medium of instruction at every level of education and the most rapid increase was observed at the primary level (Meganathan, 2009). The general perception and attitude in Pakistan is also clearly biased towards English as compared to Urdu or any other indigenous language including mother tongues. The three attitudinal surveys (Mansoor, 1993, 2005, Mahboob, 2003, and Jabeen, Mahmood & Rasheed, 2011) conducted in Pakistan reached similar findings. Interestingly the same tool was used for data collection in two of these studies but Mansoor's (1993) study was conducted in Lahore and Mahboob's in Karachi. In terms of comparison of data and trend studies these are significant researches. Mansoor (2005) concluded that an overwhelming majority of students, teachers and parents showed their preferences for using English as a medium of instruction at all levels of education (Mansoor, 2005). Mahboob also proposes that English be used for teaching subjects at all levels of education. (Mahboob, 2003).

EMI at primary level has been launched without much planning in Pakistan. Most of the teachers were ill prepared to take such a responsibility. Without any structural and infrastructural changes EMI only would not bear some tangible results. Almost all the teachers agreed that no provision of EMI is available in pre-service and in-service trainings. This deficiency is even present at the global level. Presently such professional development programmes appear to be ignoring the need for substantial EMI pedagogical components (Dearden, 2014).

Even though the researchers have discussed how to strengthen EMI by supporting the learning context, the providers of primary education still need guidance which addresses the specific factors relevant to EMI classes at primary level. The DJ (Diamond Jubilee) primary English medium schools run under The Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKESP) in Gilgit-Baltistan can be identified as the only schools where

EMI at primary level is successfully achieving the desired results in Pakistan. The total number of schools run under AKESP are 106 including primary, middle, high, and higher secondary schools. There are 47 DJ primary English medium schools functional in Gilgit, Gupis, Hunza, Punia/Ishkoman, and Yasin.

The present research conducted in the DJ primary English medium schools is an attempt to provide an evidence of identifying learning competencies of children for learning through EMI at primary level. EMI is successfully producing the desired outcomes for short and long term student learning in these schools. Every factor affecting EMI has been addressed and the learning context has been supported to strengthen EMI environment through rigorous teacher training, supporting through ECD (Early Childhood Development) programs, changes in the assessment procedures in accordance with objectives of EMI at primary level, learning material and curriculum development, and the use of ICTs. Gilgit-Baltistan is comprised of six districts named Gilgit, Ghizer, Astore, Diamer, Skardu and Ghanche. AKESP an agency of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), is amongst the largest private networks of educational institutions in Pakistan. Until the 1940s, the government was the sole provider of formal education in the Northern Areas. In 1946, the first 17 Diamond Jubilee Schools were established by the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), which can be cited as a first community intervention in the field of education in these areas.

As the impact of EMI on the learning of subject content remains elusive in the field of research equal amount of studies are available in favour or against EMI at primary level. But in all of these studies the arguments are not directed towards the impact of EMI on students learning. The majority of the people who opposed EMI at primary level have their own arguments against it. For example, one of the arguments of those who opposed EMI reiterated that it was a blow to the sanctity of the national language or mother tongue (Wee, 2010). Similarly, some studies (e.g. Benson, 2004) have shown that when the MOI is a language other than the child's mother tongue, it causes pedagogical and linguistic problems. Others (e.g. Salili and Tsui, 2005) indicate that it can be a motivational barrier for students. Kosonen (2005) has argued that a mother tongue-based education system will have higher enrolments and corresponding success rates. This may be because when children are encouraged to use their mother tongue in the education context, they have better thinking skills (Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000) and higher levels of understanding (King and Mackey, 2007).

Similarly, many of the researchers are critical of EMI policies. They are of the opinion that there is a lack of evidence to conclude that a statistical correlation can be drawn between educational achievements in subject areas and evidence of effective L2

learning and point out to ineffective delivery along with the lack of improvement of English in EMI (Cho, 2012; Manakul, 2007; Oh & Lee, 2010; Tsuneyoshi, 2005; Akar, 2010; Chang, 2010; Hou, 2011; Hou et al., 2013; Hu & Alsagoff, 2010; Kim, 2011; Manh, 2012; Tatzl, 2011).

Despite the growing body of research that has shown that children's first language (L1) is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout the early years and primary schooling (UNESCO, 2008), some studies (e.g. Turnbull, Hart and Lapkin, 2003) do point to the positive impact of foreign language immersion on not just the academic achievement of students but also their language development in both their L1 and other languages used in education. According to Seitzhanova, Plokhikh, Baiburiev & Tsaregorodtseva (2015) most of the students admitted that EMI improved their English language. (Seitzhanova, Plokhikh, Baiburiev & Tsaregorodtseva, 2015).

Seemingly most of the researchers are in favour of EMI because it provides an ample opportunities for using English along with learning academic subjects i.e. students not only acquire English language but learn the subjects also. EMI environment helps and motivates the students to acquire better English proficiency (Kim, 2002; Kirkgöz, 2005; Witty, 2008).

The researchers of L2 suggest that the speaking ability of the instructors, practicalities of the programs, linguistic and academic assistance for the students and systematic services for nonnative instructors are some of the preconditions for making the EMI policy successful for subject and language acquisition by the students (Cho, 2012; Kang & Park, 2005; Kim, 2002; Kong & Hoare, 2012; Witty, 2008; Im & Kim, 2015).

There is a connection between the second language acquisition and neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is the ability of the human brain to change according to the environment (Shaw & McEachern, 2012). Our minds can be rewired. It means our mind remains plastic beyond critical period of language acquisition and can remake itself throughout our lives. Schwartz and Begley (2002) call it complete remapping of this property. It shows that human mind neurologically acquires language through repetition, selective attention and focus. This knowledge is very beneficial for our classroom as EMI teachers. It means if we even ignore the age factor in foreign language learning the importance of intensive foreign language environment cannot be under emphasised as Doidge (2007) says, "If we stop exercising our mental skills, we do not just forget them; the brain map space for those skills is turned over to the skills we practice instead" (p. 59). As a result, the more brain map space allocated to L2 the more we practice and use L2 to learn it otherwise it would go to other activities that are practiced more (Maher, 2013).

The most recent research on use of a foreign language as medium of instruction reveals that instead of creating problems or imposing excessive demands on the minds and brains of young learners it can work in remarkable ways in changing the brain networks enabling it for skilled cognition, fluent language performance and facilitating new learning. These changes in the minds and brains of learners are not simple according to the new research. "In the past, bilinguals were looked down upon," said Judith F. Kroll, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Linguistics and Women's Studies. Kroll also says that not only is bilingualism not bad for you, it may be really good. When you're switching languages all the time it strengthens your mental muscle and your executive function becomes enhanced (Kroll, 2016).

On the basis of these researches in the field of EMI at primary level it may be safely surmised that this issue is controversial but nobody is against the introduction of EMI at primary level. Secondly, no research is available specifically focusing the impact of EMI on student learning. Most of the researches on EMI at primary level are based on assumptions and are focused on the problems of EMI other than learning. In many countries the educational infrastructure does not support quality EMI provision: there is a shortage of linguistically qualified teachers; there are no stated expectations of English language proficiency; there appear to be few organisational or pedagogical guidelines which might lead to effective EMI teaching and learning; there is little or no EMI content in initial teacher education (teacher preparation) programmes and continuing professional development (in-service) courses.

Method

The present study conducted at the Diamond Jubilee schools in Gilgit-Baltistan used a qualitative research design and focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews for data collection to answer the research questions. The selection of participants for the focus groups was done using convenience and purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Purposive sampling is subjective in nature and sample is selected based on the judgement of the researcher. It is a type of non-probability sampling technique. To gain the maximum perspectives on the topic under consideration a type of purposive sampling known as maximum variation sampling was used for looking at it from all angles. Morgan puts focus groups decisively in the group of qualitative research (Morgan, 1997). They are also known as group interviews. There are various advantages of using semi-structured interviews (Bryman 2008).

A total of four focus group discussions were conducted for the study at Danyor and Phundar. Involving 62 EMI teachers. The duration of all the focus group discussions varied but each of them lasted for more than 45 minutes. In addition to the main data collection through focus groups, the process was augmented by informal discussions/interviews with some of the head teachers and staff of AKESP and PDCN (Professional Development Centre North) for further clarification and elaboration of ideas coming out of the focus groups. This process was very helpful in the triangulation and strengthening of the data and its credibility.

Research Objectives

This study aimed to:

1. Investigate the competencies children need to learn through English Medium Instruction (EMI) at the primary level.
2. Explore the prospects and impact of English as medium of instruction on students' learning.

Research Questions

Question 1

What competencies do the primary school children have to learn through EMI?

Question 2

What is the impact of EMI on student learning at primary school level?

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used for the analysis of the data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method for "…identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.82). Braun and Clarke's 'guide' to the 6 phases of conducting thematic analysis was followed for detailed analysis of the data generated through focus groups.

Focus group discussions were recorded so as to preserve the richness of information provided by the participants. For the analysis of data, these recordings were played several times. It was not possible to produce a full transcript because of time limitations. Even otherwise a 100% complete transcription is not suitable because the facial expressions and tone of the voice along with body language and looks of the participants cannot be transcribed. Therefore to identify the creation of categories the audio tapes were played again and again. This resulted in the creation of leading themes. It was more economical for the researcher to listen to the spoken words from the recordings. It was much easier to discern the shades of meaning of the spoken words through the intonation patterns of the participants. All the discussion was compared with the written interviews taken from the people mentioned in the sample of the study.

Findings

The leading themes which emerged as a result of the data analysis are as follows. The participants' quotations have been intermingled into the discussion so that an outlet to their voices can be provided.

Theme 1. Similarity

Young children are assumed to be more similar to one another than adolescents and adults. They are expected to succeed without difficulty and fewer individual differences are expected among them. Usually there is no question of intrinsic or instrumental motivation. No resistance can be expected from the students in the way learning. The students are malleable stuff to be moulded in the desired way. The role teacher becomes significant in providing the kind of environment where students can easily learn through EMI. One of the participants said, "Students at primary level are usually without any sense of personal identities and there are no questions of egos, biases, aversion, resistance and xenophobia. The likes and dislikes are not usually deep-rooted. It is very easy for teachers to ignite new interests and motivations among children". Another participant said, "Pre-primary and primary level is the best stage for introducing EMI because in the absence of significant individual differences all the students are expected to learn uniformly". This kind of similarity among the children can be taped for learning a foreign language before they start strongly identifying themselves with their own language and culture which becomes a psychological barrier in the way learning the foreign language.

Theme 2. Resourcefulness and Potential

Almost all the teachers agreed that children are very resourceful and have great potential that can be exploited in many ways. The young children do not come to school empty-handed. The children bring with them well established set of instincts, skills and habits to learn another language. Teachers need to identify them and make the most of these skills and instincts. The potential and resourcefulness of the children are in a formative phase and keep on developing if provided a conducive environment for learning through the medium of English. One of the focus group participants explained, "I find my young learners full of capabilities and talents required for learning anything through any language. I sometimes find myself ill-equipped to make them learn the desired stuff and unlearn the undesired because their potential works in a multidimensional way". This over learning is just because of the resourcefulness of the students at primary level. This potential knows no bounds and cannot be restricted by the English medium instruction. One of the teachers said, "I personally feel that this potential of the young learners must be exploited with the introduction of English as medium of instruction at the primary level because it will not only provide a challenging environment for young minds to deal with but will also become a source of learning to learn to cope with these challenges". A sound foundation at an earlier age is expected to enhance the resourcefulness of the young minds potentially.

Theme 3. Interpret Meanings

Children have natural ability to grasp meaning without understanding the individual words. Most of the teachers agreed that their personal experience with the young learners was the same. The young children are usually able to understand before they understand the individual words. When English is used as a medium of instruction at primary level the meanings of unknown words and phrases can be told with the help of gestures, postures, intonation, facial expressions and actions. They start to understand the language by understanding the message through this way. One of the teachers said, "In the later years of our life we all maintain this first source of understanding alongside our knowledge of the language itself and it remains an inseparable part of human life". When children come to school their ability to interpret meaning is already highly developed and they continue to use it in their learning. One of the participants said, "It is very difficult for children to understand purely verbal communication and instructions even in their mother tongues also. If it happens or sometimes out of laziness or inattention children use their ability to 'read' the general message". In English medium class, the children use the same skills to help them interpret new sounds, new words and new structures. The teachers should develop and support this skill. They should make use of facial expressions, gestures, actions and body language to convey message parallel to what is

being said. One of the research participants also agreed, "Alongside the ability to perceive meanings the children also have great skills in the production of meaningful language from limited resources". It is the duty of EMI teachers to build on these skills.

It is true that subject learning is problematic through the medium of a foreign language. But as Gerber et al. (2005) says that students have difficulty in understanding abstract concepts and ideas in subjects even when they are taught in their mother tongue. Airey (2009) is also of the same opinion that in disciplinary learning language related problems also appear when medium of instruction is the mother tongue of the students.

One of the female teachers said, "EMI itself does not make the concepts easier to understand for the students. It is the responsibility of the teachers. For me it is very easy. It is easier to lift the students from sensual to conceptual learning through a foreign language like English. In this type of learning students start making the concepts about the things. i.e. one thing can have many names".

Theme 4. Creativity

All the participants agreed that children also have the ability to use limited language creatively. They are not only creative with the grammatical forms but also with the concepts. The EMI teachers should be careful in the identification of such instances of creativity because this phenomenon is very helpful in language development. Children also create new words for analogy or invent completely new words. Children make use of this ability while acquiring their mother tongues and adults in their foreign language learning. Unable to find a suitable grammatical structure we find other ways of expressing the same idea. Most of the teachers narrated several anecdotes of children showing how children use of language creatively in the classrooms. for instance one of the teachers said, "foreign language becomes a plaything for children and they create related ideas to link those ideas to the local culture".

Theme 5. Indirect Learning

Most of the time children do not learn directly but indirectly. Children's capacity for indirect learning is of great help for acquiring subject content and underlying language structures behind any activity. All the participants admitted that students at primary level avoid direct learning or a lecture full of information. That is why activity based learning is more beneficial at primary level. While giving an example one of the teachers said," By the time students finish guessing game they already acquire words, structures and phrases firmly into their minds". This indirect learning is usually helpful in the acquisition and internalising the grammatical structures, phrases and vocabulary.

Theme 6. Child's Imagination

All the participants also agreed that children always have a ready imagination. They take great delight in imaginations and fantasy. Children at primary level remain busy in making the sense of the world around them. Their own version of the world may be different and keep on testing and comparing their own version with the real world. They identify patterns and make concepts. This capacity plays a constructive part in EMI classroom. EMI may be concerned about teaching real life and promote reality in the classroom but it would be pity to ignore that reality for children includes fantasy and imagination also. Almost all the participants admitted that stories of monsters, genies and fairies are famous among all the children just because of the use of imagination and fantasy. One of the teachers said, "This is a very powerful stimulus for teaching real language and subject content through EMI". Children take great delight in sharing and telling their friends about the supernatural things very interestingly adding some of their own accounts making them more strange and dangerous. Another teacher shared, "I draw a monster on the writing board and tell the children a story for teaching parts of the body". Role of imagination is also important for thinking in the English language. Once the students start thinking in English their communicative competence gets activated and students start speaking fluently without much thinking. All the imaginative literature can be exploited for language teaching. Everyone agreed to the importance of stories in the classroom for teaching English as well as teaching the content subject through stories.

Theme 7. Fun loving

Everyone agreed that children love fun in whatever they do. They have a great capacity for finding and creating fun sometimes at the most inconvenient moments. For every activity they create their own version of it sometimes better than teacher's own original idea. One of the teachers said, "Through their ability for fun and play they live the language for real. That is why I always use games and active learning techniques for teaching". Most of the teachers accepted that teachers should exploit this natural instinct of the children for teaching subject content through EMI.

Theme 8. Talkativeness

Participants admitted that children are very fond of talking by nature. They have an instinct for interaction and speech. This attribute is very important of all the instincts the children bring into the language classroom. It is a most important motivator for language learning. EMI teachers can benefit from this natural propensity of the children. One of the teachers said, "Being teachers it is our job to make sure that this desire to talk is working for learning, not against learning. Through talking they learn to use the language instead

of learning about the language. Without talking they cannot learn anything. A silent class means no learning." It is the job of EMI teachers to manage the classroom keeping in view this instinct for talking of the young learners.

Theme 9. New strategies

Most of the teachers observed their students under EMI environment and reported some coping strategies they develop to learn through a new medium of instruction. These strategies help them in the completion of their learning tasks. These strategies include memorisation, peer support system, peer mentoring, copying, mimicking, role playing, using different languages to negotiate meaning and construct knowledge, and repetition. Most of the teachers accepted that it depends upon the teaching methods used by the teachers to make the students understand the lessons through the medium of English. One of the teachers said, "Children learn through playing and doing things in a less threatening social environment. I use different techniques like art and craft, drama and role play, Stories and jokes, Poems and songs in teaching".

Theme 10. Attitudes and Motivation

For the research participants, one of the arguments for an early EMI program was to develop children's positive attitudes. Most of the researchers also agreed that EMI at primary level helps in the development of positive attitude towards the English culture and language amongst the students. It is widely assumed that early foreign language instruction will, as a rule, contribute to children's favourable attitudes. The results of a longitudinal Croatian study (Mihaljević Djigunović, 1993; 1995) showed that young learners' initial motivation was closely dependent on their attachment to the teacher, while as they progressed in the FL both instrumental motives and liking the FL as such became important. This and another longitudinal study that extended over 18 years exploring the development of Hungarian students' attitudes and motivation (Nikolov, 1999) have shown that the most crucial motivational factors function on the classroom level: the teacher's role is extremely important, together with intrinsically motivating and cognitively challenging tasks tuned to learners' age and level. The main finding, however, is that FL learning motivation was maintained and often enhanced. That is why the learning of a second or foreign language in the later years of students' lives remains unsuccessful just because of the students' negative attitudes towards the target language (Tanoli, 2016). All the participants agreed that a negative attitude towards English is one of the biggest hurdle in the way of learning English.

Theme 11. Length of Exposure

In a country like Pakistan where most of the population lives in rural areas, it is very beneficial for the students to make foreign language accessible to them through school education. Most of the teachers believed that young children are good at picking up the language and if they are surrounded by a foreign language for a long time they learn it very easily. One of the teachers said, "It seems logical to fill the school environment with the language that children need to learn from as early an age as possible particularly when the school is the only place where they will have access to that language". EMI introduced at primary level provides the students enough time to remain in contact with the English language for a long time. Although the intensity of exposure is enough to guarantee for the successful acquisition of a foreign language but most of the teachers and parents agree that earlier start gives a child phonemic awareness, conceptual clarity, improves listening comprehension and other nuances of the language. One of the teachers said, "Students must be put in an EMI environment in Pakistan as early as possible because the later years of their student lives are saved from the hard struggle in learning the language itself". "Primary level in Pakistan is the non-competitive and developmental stage of student life and is the right time for learning English," said a parent.

Conclusion

It is concluded and recommended that there is an urgent need for a research-driven approach which consults key stake-holders at a national and international level and which measures the complex processes involved in EMI and the effects of EMI both on the learning of academic subjects and on the acquisition of English proficiency. There is a general trend towards a rapid expansion of EMI provision and official governmental backing for EMI is also available. Moreover, public opinion in support of EMI and the attitudes can be described as 'equivocal' or 'controversial' rather than being 'against' its introduction and/or continued use at primary level. The present study indicates that EMI program at primary level can achieve its desired goals if implemented in a planned and systematic way as in the DJ primary English medium schools by addressing all the issues and problems in the way of EMI. Secondly, the instincts and abilities which children bring to the EMI classroom can be exploited to make it more learner centred. Thirdly, the EMI teachers can also adapt their teaching style keeping in view these natural instincts of the young learners.

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