

Language Identity Crisis in English Medium Instruction: Challenges in Bengali Language Learning Among EMI Students in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This qualitative research paper explores the difficulties that students in English Medium Instruction (EMI) of the Bangladesh educational system incur in learning Bengali, as a subject content, especially the problem of effective communication in Bengali as a subject in the classroom. This study discusses the case of student difficulties with mother tongue acquisition as teachers use Bengali to teach EMI classes in a particular society, with semi-structured interviews in five Bengali teachers in three geographical locations (Chittagong, Dhaka, and Sylhet). Five Bengali language teachers from three different regions of Bangladesh took part in this research where English medium schools are prominent: Chittagong, Dhaka, and Sylhet. The research is based on the Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky, the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), and the Language Maintenance Theory which help grasp the complexity of linguistic and identity challenges that students might have to encounter. Key findings reveal large differences in teacher views of issues pertaining to students with four out of five teachers indicating issues concerning vocabulary selection and general challenges in the Bengali subject among the EMI students. Another noteworthy area of concern was communication confidence, where students were found to be adamant to communicate in Bengali owing to the lack of exposure to the academic discourse of the Bengali language. The paper extends to the insight into the delicate linguistic dynamics in the multilingual educational environments and can inform the creation of a more accommodating language policy that should equip children with English proficiency and the need to retain the language of their mothers in the changing environment within Bangladeshi education.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction, Bengali language learning, mother tongue maintenance, Communication Accommodation Theory, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Introduction

The accelerated growth of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Bangladesh is an important change in the educational context of the country, which, in the wake of the current trends of globalization and the use of English as an international language, is associated with internationalization of higher education and professional life (Akter & Mitul, 2020). The English medium schools in Bangladesh are around 500 and focus more on teaching English as the main language of study whilst receiving either a British or international curriculum (Chowdhury, 2021). Nonetheless, this educational system poses exclusive difficulties to those students whose first language is Bengali language especially when they expose to Bengali language teaching in such majorly English-speaking educational settings.

A common phenomenon of EMI in non-English speaking countries has created some interest among academics, as scholars point to the opportunities and challenges related to this form of education (Clegg & Simpson, 2016). At the Bangladesh level, EMI schools have a rather complicated linguistic demand that compels students to function between their native language (Bengali) and the academic language (English) that is predominant, hence developing what researchers refer to as a linguistic identity crisis (Shaila & Fan, 2024). This poses a greater challenge especially when attending Bengali language classes because teachers carry out their communications and convey their instructional contents in Bengali hence leading to communication accommodation gap between the teachers and the students who are more comfortable with English.

In earlier studies, several problematic questions on the issue of introducing EMI in Bangladesh have been indicated as a problem of expressing the idea in English by students, challenges with delivery of the content by teachers, and the macro implications on the academic performance (Rahman et al., 2019). There is scanty literature, however, that focuses on the reverse effect, that is how EMI students fare with learning their own language. This absence in the literature is especially prominent due to cultural and linguistic significance of the Bengali language in Bangladesh and the possible long-term consequences regarding the maintenance of the language and the preservation of identity (Milošević, 2019).

The multidimensional nature of language learning and use is a salient feature that should be invoked, in as far as the theoretical conceptualization of these challenges is concerned. The Sociocultural Theory that was developed

by Vygotsky offers a basis of acknowledging how a language is influenced by the social interactions and cultures in which people live in (Newman, 2018). On the same note, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) provides information on how people adapt themselves to the way they communicate depending on social contexts and intergroup relationships (Giles & Gasiorek, 2015). The Language Maintenance Theory also sheds more light on linguistic communities that either maintain or lose their native languages in multilingual schools (Tawalbeh, 2019).

This study addresses three primary research questions: (1) What specific challenges do EMI students face when learning Bengali as a subject in their schools? (2) How do teachers perceive and accommodate these challenges during Bengali language instruction? (3) What are the implications of these challenges for language maintenance and cultural identity among EMI students in Bangladesh?

Literature Review

English Medium Instruction in Global and Local Contexts

English Medium Instruction has become an international trend with many universities and schools all over the world having adopted English and use it as a primary language of instructions in order to increase internationalization strategies and train individuals to work in the global market (McKinley et al., 2023). According to research, the application of EMI varies widely in various contexts and various ways in different countries have their own peculiar problems which pertain to language backgrounds and education policy, as well as culture.

In Bangladesh the concept of EMI has become dominant, especially at the level of private institutions or in private-educational institutions specifically, where EMI is seen as a road towards better job opportunities and competitiveness in the international market (Bandara, 2024). Nevertheless, the literature has repeatedly reported the difficulty of students transferring to the EMI educational setting, with particular concern raised about their problems with understanding the content, academic achievements, and linguistic identity formation (Hossain, 2020).

EMI in Bangladesh has also shown the existence of intricate relations between language policy and practice where bilingual patterns of language use

in practice can be observed in institutions even with English-only language policies. The pragmatism involved with respect to strictive adhering to monolingual instruction in multilingual settings is cleaved in this linguistic versatility, as the different linguistic backgrounds of students imply the demand of an accommodative approach to teaching (Rahnuma, 2021).

Theoretical Frameworks

a. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory:

The Sociocultural Theory by Vygotsky signifies the fact that social interaction and culture are the two most paramount aspects of cognitive and linguistic development (Vygotsky, 1978). Based on this model, acquisition of knowledge takes place during meaningful exchanges with those more knowledgeable, who act as culturally mediated in activities. Such major ideas as Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding presented by the theory offer a great understanding of how language learners can obtain proficiency with the help of participation in the context provided (Newman, 2018).

Trying to apply the theory of Vygotsky in the environment of EMI education, it can be said that the development of the language of students is influenced by their social life in educational institutions where the language spoken is mostly English (Vygotsky, 1986). The theory implies that those who do not receive a sufficient amount of exposure to Bengali-medium instructions would be negatively affected in developing age-appropriate proficiency in a mother tongue because their ZPD of the Bengali language proficiency would be underdeveloped, lacking the social experience of speaking (Vygotsky, 2016).

b. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT):

One example is the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), the theory introduced by Howard Giles, which deliberates individuals changing their styles of communication, to either come closer to their interaction partners or avoid them (Giles & Gasiorek, 2015). The theory says that there are three major accommodation styles which include convergence (changing communication to suit people), divergence (showing differences) and overaccommodation (over-adjusting communication to the point of being patronized).

CAT gives insights into the EMI situations in which teachers in Bengali language experience communication difficulties when they work with students who feel more comfortable working in English (Zhang & Giles, 2018). According to the theory, effective accommodating actions by teachers and students are the key to successful communication, and the incompatibility with each other can result in the failure to communicate and low learning efficiency (Hoffman & Zhang, 2022).

c. Language Maintenance Theory:

Language Maintenance Theory studies the reasons behind the predilection or abandonment of native languages by linguistic groups regarding an environment with several languages (Tawalbeh, 2019). The theory points out some important determinants on language maintenance such as demographic determinants, institutional backing, economic and social perception towards the language.

The study of languages in schools underlined the importance of schooling as a factor that contributes or impedes the development of the native language (Ahmad & Rahman, 2019). Research shows that learning systems which fail to target mother tongue development can lead to language shift especially among younger generations whereby they have fewer formal studies of their native language (Ozfidan, 2017).

Mother Tongue Challenges in EMI Contexts

Past studies have reported different problems that are related to the maintenance of mother tongue in cases of EMI. According to studies, EMI school pupils tend to be weak in terms of their native languages because of the lack of scholarly exposure and academic teaching (Milošević, 2019). All these difficulties might take different forms such as problems with academic vocabulary, declining writing and reading skills, and lack of confidence when it comes to the formal communication.

Mother tongue interference in the second language still remains a researched phenomenon, whereas little consideration has been given to the opposite case, namely, how a strong second language use can inhibit first language skills (Irene et al., 2023.). Studies state that learners who have been mostly taught English could face the problem of having difficulties when they are asked to immerse themselves in academic material in their native language, and some researchers call this process subtractive bilingualism (García & Li, 2014).

Methodology

Research Design

The qualitative research design included a phenomenological approach implemented in providing perceptions of teachers and their experiences along with Bengali language challenges among EMI students (Levitt et al., 2017). Phenomenological approach was selected in order that the experiences and perceptions of the particular authority who have lived experiences and observations of students who learn the Bengali language in direct context with the EMI students could be captured.

Participants

The study involved five Bengali language teachers from three different regions of Bangladesh where English medium schools are prominent: Chittagong, Dhaka, and Sylhet. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience teaching Bengali as a subject in English medium schools. The demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1.

Teacher	School Type	Location	Experience (Years)	Region
Teacher 1	English Medium School	Chittagong	4	Chittagong
Teacher 2	English Medium School	Chittagong	10	Chittagong
Teacher 3	English Medium School	Dhaka	9	Dhaka
Teacher 4	English Medium School	Dhaka	1	Dhaka
Teacher 5	English Medium School	Sylhet	4	Sylhet

Data Collection

Each of the participants was interviewed with the use of semi-structured interviews where data were collected. The interview guide was based on probing the feeling of the teacher about the weaknesses of the students in the learning of the Bengali language, such as word choice, sentence structure, understanding, participation, spelling, and speech. The interviews were carried out in Bengali as it helps the participants to discuss the views freely and exhaustively.

The interview questions focused on seven key areas:

1. Students' ability to select appropriate Bengali words
2. Sentence construction skills in Bengali

3. Comprehension of ordinary and complex Bengali vocabulary
4. Student engagement during Bengali lectures
5. Spelling accuracy in Bengali
6. Willingness to communicate in Bengali
7. Overall challenges with Bengali as a subject

Data Analysis

Theme analysis allowed investigating the data collected in the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The analysis involved: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report.

The theoretical premises of Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky, Communication Accommodation Theory and Language Maintenance Theory were applied in the form of analytic tools to interpret the findings and to be able to see more clearly on the pertinent mechanisms that fuel the problems that were observed.

Findings

The interview study-based assessment demonstrated the notable trends in the perceptions concerning the issues with Bengali language acquisition among EMI students. The seven main themes that have been identified because of the analysis represent several crucial themes around which the data are organized concerning the levels of Bengali proficiency and engagement.

Vocabulary Selection Challenges

Majority (four out of five) of the teachers (Teachers 1, 2, 3 and 5) concurred and strongly agreed that there are challenges involved on the part of students when picking the right Bengali words in the course of communication. Teacher 1 noted that students often experience problems in choosing the proper Bengali words in situations of communication, which indicates the basic problem of lexical access and retrieval in the language being native. This evidence corresponds to the theory of Vygotsky about the importance of social interaction in vocabulary acquisition since EMI students do not actively study formal Bengali terms during classrooms and learn through minimal exposure to it in terms of classroom discourse (Newman, 2018).

However, Teacher 4 remained neutral as to vocabulary selection issues, which may belong perhaps to the differences in the student population or in the methods of teaching in various institutions. The described difference in teacher perception might suggest that the problem of vocabulary is not universal in all EMI settings and it could be determined by the background and policies of the institutions, teaching strategies (Watson & Garcia, 2021).

Sentence Construction Difficulties

Teachers showed divergent attitudes to the sentence building skills of students in Bengali. The weaknesses mentioned by the teachers were that the students found it difficult to frame complete sentences and Teacher 5 mentioned this too. Teacher 3 was neutral, and Teacher 4 did not agree that there was something wrong with sentence construction.

This difference indicates that difficulties in the construction of sentences can be situation-specific and depend on such factors as the level of support of the Bengali language at home, prior educational situations, and personal linguistic backgrounds (Cummins, 2017). According to the Communication Accommodation Theory approach, such challenges might be an indication of students acclimatizing to English-speaking mainstream communication practices, exhibiting challenges meeting the accommodation of Bengali syntactical formulations in instructions (Zhang & Giles, 2018).

Vocabulary Comprehension Patterns

There was quite a trend noted as far as vocabulary comprehension is concerned, and not all teachers agreed. The teachers in the leadership roles 1 and 2 concurred that the students have anxiety in comprehension of both ordinary and more elaborate vocabulary Bengali words, whereas the Teacher 3 did not agree with this criterion. Teachers 4 and 5 as well rated that among their pupils, comprehension was not a significant topic.

Such a difference in perception can also be conditioned by regional variations, or institutional differences, or variations between student populations (Forbes, 2022). The fact that no similarities were realized in Chittagong (Teachers 1 and 2), where the understanding problem was repeatedly mentioned by the educators, but in Dhaka and Sylhet teachers encountered different experiences could indicate the regional influences on language maintenance and development.

Student Engagement Variability

Variations were also quite high as regards to teacher perceptions on how their students have been engaged in Bengali lectures. Teacher 1 agreed that students seem to be disengaged whenever there are lectures in Bengali, but Teacher 3 disagreed with the same. Teacher 2 and 4 did not agree to disengagement being an issue and Teacher 5 assumed a lesser pronounced stance.

This difference in perceptions of engagement can be indicative of varying pedagogical strategies, classroom experiences or school cultures (Dayal & Sharma, 2022). On the sociocultural level, student engagement is highly tied to how they view the social relevance of the learning activity, as well as its social worth. Students having a lower engagement level will regard Bengali as more irrelevant to their learning and professional success (Zhou & Rose, 2022).

Spelling and Writing Challenges

There was divided concurrence among teachers on spelling problems. Teacher 1 strongly responded that the learners have serious spelling errors, Teacher 2 responded that there are serious spelling errors, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5 did not concur with the view that spelling is always an issue. Such a difference can possibly occur due to emphasis on writing instruction as well as assessment procedures and level of student preparation in different institutions.

Further problems with orthographic knowledge and formal writing skills in Bengali and inability to spell correctly may be traced behind the spelling errors mentioned by some of the teachers and must be taught and practiced systematically (Moncada-Comas, 2022). Students in the EMI classrooms that have little formal training in writing in the Bengali language are likely to place problems with the normal spelling rules and norms in academic writing.

Communication Confidence Issues

Majority of teachers affirmed that the pupils show incertitude or reluctance to talk in Bengali. The highlighted challenge was observed by Teachers 1 and 2 and 5 and was rejected by Teachers 3 and 4. This trend indicates that lack of confidence in communication might be one of the major

factors affecting most EMI situations, which might be an indication of the lessened familiarity with more formal patterns of Bengali discourse.

Students might avoid communicating in Bengali because they are afraid of making mistakes, they do not have many options in vocabulary or are unaware of the rules of communicating in a formal register. Such a finding allows joining the discussion that the transition toward a world language is associated with a considerable maintenance deficit until a critical stage of active linguistic usage is reached (Ahmad & Rahman, 2019).

Overall Subject Challenges

Though some parts saw a difference, four out of five teachers (Teachers 1, 2, 3, and 5) replied that the students have a lot of issues with Bengali as a subject in general. The only teacher, who did not agree with this general evaluation, is Teacher 4. This agreement implies that although issues may be different in various contexts, an overall phenomenon of EMI students having difficulties with learning the Bengali language is well-known to educators.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

The results of this research are important considering the three philosophical frameworks utilized in it. In the Vygotsky Sociocultural Theory sense, these struggles of EMI learners are dependent on the decreased chances of effective and meaningful social connections in Bengali within the academic settings (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of Zone of Proximal Development implies that students need proper scaffolding and guided involvement to acquire the skills of Bengali language that cannot be provided in EMI settings because the classroom communication is organized mainly in English (Newman, 2018).

It is possible to state that Communication Accommodation Theory could assist in describing communication breakdowns that can be observed between Bengali instructors and EMI learners (Giles & Gasiorek, 2015). In the case where the teachers instruct in Bengali language when the students are more comfortable in English, they must both join in accommodation strategies to enhance the communication process. The identified challenges in this study mean that the adopted accommodation privileges might not be sufficient and

can cause students to learn less effectively and to become less engaged (Hoffman & Zhang, 2022).

With the help of the Language Maintenance Theory, these issues create a picture of the greater concerns they may have on the preservation of the Bengali language in Bangladesh (Tawalbeh, 2019). That which transpires amongst EMI students can lead to language shift patterns especially when these learners continue to be taught very little Bengali during their studies (Ozfidan, 2017).

Pedagogical Implications

The difference between the teacher perceptions indicates that more reliable and uniform ways of teaching Bengali the language in EMI is necessary. Based on the findings one can offer a number of considerations related to pedagogy:

- a. Scaffolding Strategies:** The teachers should be able to devise the proper scaffolding that would help them connect the mostly-English-speaking language history of students with the needs of learning Bengali language (Cummins, 2017). This can include the stepwise implementation of Bengali terms, extensive visual aids, and clear teaching of difference in register between spoken Bengali and formal Bengali.
- b. Coded Switching Treatments:** Strategic code-switching between Bengali and English can enable understanding as well as decreasing tension among students when using Bengali to learn the language (García & Li, 2014). Nevertheless, these methods demand planning, so that gradually the support in English is reduced as students become competent in Bengali (Dayal & Sharma, 2022).
- c. Engagement Enhancement:** The problem of student disengagement necessitates new pedagogical practices that can tie Bengali language learning to the student interests and plans (Forbes, 2022). This may entail integration of modern Bengali literature, multimedia materials and project-based learning tasks which will illustrate the essence of Bengali proficiency.

Policy Implications

The findings have significant implications for language education policy in Bangladesh. The challenges identified suggest a need for:

- a. **Reform of Curriculum:** EMI schools might have to intensify their Bengali language curricular depending on the situation so that there is sufficient strengthening of mother-tongue proficiency (Milošević, 2019). This may take the form of allocation of more class time, formulation of age relevant materials, and setting of clear standards of proficiency.
- b. **Teacher Training:** Bengali language teachers in the EMI environment need some form of special training to teach with limited contact of students in the area of academic Bengali. Professional development tools need to revolve around accommodation practices, scaffolding, bilingual pedagogical practice (Clegg & Simpson, 2016).
- c. **Assessment Practices:** EMI schools assessment practices that exist to assess the Bengali language learning are likely to face a revision as the assessment practice of these schools might consider the linguistic background and language difficulties of students. Alternative assessment techniques which acknowledge multilingual skills of students and facilitate the prospect of Bengali can be required (Shaila & Fan, 2024).

Cultural and Identity Considerations

The problems as found in this research pose critical concerns on cultural identity and language retention by EMI students in Bangladesh. These problems in Bengali language acquisition can be a part of losing links between Bengali literature, cultural knowledge, and markers of national identity that exist in the language (Ahmad & Rahman, 2019).

In terms of a multilingual identity, EMI students can become complicated with both English and Bengali languages, each of which plays a particular role in their lives (Zhou & Rose, 2022). Educational strategies to support positive multilingual identity development relate first to demonstrating the value given to two language use; and second, to assisting students to effectively make use of their multilingual repertoire.

Conclusion

The results of the present research indicate that the situation with learning Bengali language as EMI students in Bangladesh is challenging indeed, which answers the three research questions concerning the opinions of the teachers and their theoretical discussion. Concerning the unique problems

that EMI students face as they learn Bengali, the researcher indicates the problematic selection of vocabulary, issues on sentence construction, confusion in the understanding of complicated terms in Bengali, inaccurate spelling, and lack of confidence in communication as main hurdles. This arises due to their limited exposure to administratively institutional Bengali discourse in school set ups that mostly work on English and so the students fail to access and use their mother tongue skills efficiently in classroom situations. The theoretical frameworks used cast lights upon these challenges in many ways: The Sociocultural Theory proposed by Vygotsky depicts how the lack of meaningful social interactions between Bengali during instances of EMI restricts the Zone of Proximal Development towards the proficiency of their mother tongues by students, whereas the Communication Accommodation Theory shows the communication breakdowns that occur when the Bengali teachers try to reach their EMI students on the levels which are comfortable to the students using the English discourse patterns.

Regarding the interpretation of the teachers in adjusting them during the process of teaching the Bengali language, the study shows a wide disparity in the way the teachers understand and adjust these issues with a particular teacher finding it very difficult whereas the other meets few difficulties within her students. This variation implies variation in terms of institution, region, and pedagogy that can determine the performance of the students on one hand and the readiness of the teachers toward multilingual classrooms. It has a radical impact on language retention and cultural identity of EMI students as the issues revealed above jeopardize maintaining the linguistic competence and cultural ties within Bengali language. These results should make it clear that extensive changes are required in the sphere of education, and curriculum reconstruction is essential to establish sufficient cover of the Bengali language in addition to specific programs of teacher selection which will assume bilingual ideas of education and altered assessment patterns that consider multilingual proficiencies. The article highlights the necessity of reasonable education policies based on excellence in English and, at the same time, the preservation of the Bengali language and the maintenance of cultural identity to be able to achieve success not only in the global opportunities but also in the cultural heritage of the country.

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