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Impact of English-Medium Instruction on Construction of Knowledge at Secondary School Level in Punjab

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Abstract

The present study has aimed at investigating the impact of implementation of English as medium of instruction on the process of knowledge construction in different types of schools of Punjab. Qualitative data has been gathered through interview method from these schools by interviewing 150 teachers of different subject areas teaching in English medium in government as well as private schools across Punjab. The teachers have reported both positive and negative implications of adopting English as medium of instruction. The positive implications mainly include better prospects for students in their future higher education and professional pursuits and enhancement of proficiency in the use of English. Whereas the negative implications include rote memorization of subject content, difficulty in assimilation of content, teacher resorting to use of mother tongue in order to explain the content taught in English etc. In this context, most of the teachers have been of the view that our classrooms should be multilingual spaces for ensuring an effective process of creation and transmission of knowledge.

Keywords: Medium of Instruction, Knowledge construction, Qualitative, Interview method.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge construction refers to a set of collaborative efforts aiming at generating new knowledge. The basic mission behind any education system generally is to carry out this process of knowledge construction for imparting requisite skills and values to the students. Whereas, on the one hand, an educative process is linked to the self-growth of learners, on the other hand, it has another important dimension of preparing the learners for the world of work. In classroom situations, through this process, students are made to critically think, raise questions and actively find answers rather than being only passive receptors. It is crucial that knowledge construction is based on exchange of ideas and thoughts between teachers and students.

Teaching of English language as a subject of study has been an acceptable part of education system in India. The three-language formula, adopted with a focus on the development of indigenous languages of the country, also made English an indispensable part of school education and higher education.

The advent of globalisation and resultant emergence of a global economy along with development of information technology have resulted in the proliferation of use of English language world over. In globalising India too, English language proficiency is now an essential component of one's cultural baggage, a resource that can eventually open doors into the world of professional employment in India and abroad. For the middle classes, English is a resource that must be defended and maintained at all costs (Scarse, 2002). In this regard, Rao (2006) in NCERT Position Paper on Teaching of English states: "English is in India today a symbol of people's aspiration for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life."

Further, parents and school administrators advocate eloquently English medium education in the current era of globalisation. Now-a day, English language is being perceived as economic capital capable of ensuring upward mobility of all sections of society including the underprivileged. English as a medium of instruction has become preferred choice due to a strong demand that exists outside the country. This has led to persistent need for implementation of English as medium of instruction from primary level.

This introduction of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has extracted enormous attention from academicians, policy makers and educationists. According to Dearden (2015), EMI is a phenomenon that is growing rapidly in schools in the era of globalization. She has defined EMI as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of most of the population is not English." EMI means English is the language of instruction of certain subjects in schools. This trend of EMI adoption is due to the perception that teaching core subjects through English will enhance learners' English proficiency and hence the chances for better socioeconomic mobility (Haidar, 2017). The primary goals of EMI in Asia are to improve English language proficiency, develop human resources as per the needs of global economy, enhance the quality of education, and internationalize trade and commerce as well as education (Mahboob, 2020).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Various researchers have analysed the implications of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) and how teachers in diverse parts of the world have carried out language and content instructions in their classrooms. Various researchers have supported the role of EMI in enhancing English language proficiency. Silvhiany (2021) has elucidated that the teachers perceive EMI as being instrumental in improving students' English proficiency resulting into building up confidence in spoken English. The students have also perceived it useful for them because it could improve their English language skills including vocabulary and ensure better prospects for higher studies. Hamid et al. (2013) have observed that there prevails a conviction that English language ability is effectively attained if English becomes medium of instruction of all academic subjects like science, maths, social studies etc. EMI education enhances students' exposure of English language if it is introduced as early as possible.

Besides, it has also been reported that English medium instruction involves many problems. Kyeyune (2003), in the context of Ugandan classrooms, has reported that use of English as a medium of instruction, sometimes, is obstructive instead of being contributive to the achievement of learning outcomes. Erling et al. (2016) have revealed that there is perception in Indian society that English medium education leads to upward socio-economic mobility of poor sections of society. It has resulted in mass level shift among students from local language medium schools to low fee private EMI schools. However, it is found that EMI in these schools hinder the process of education. In another study, Khatri (2019) has revealed that both teachers and students are having positive approach towards implementing EMI in classroom. However, the teachers have been facing different problems in EMI classroom like students' limited exposure to English, mother tongue interference, lack of resources in school and linguistic diversity among students. Cleghorn and Rollnick (2002) have noted a wash back effect of an examination-oriented education system on teachers' educational practices in African schools. Following foreign language as medium of instruction, teachers' role remains confined merely to examination preparation activities.

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Further, another matter of concern is respective roles of teacher and learner in knowledge construction in an EMI classroom. The researchers have raised the issue of teacher's dominance in classroom interaction in low-fee private English medium schools. The majority of times, in such schools, teachers employ translation method due to teachers' inadequate proficiency in English language. This overdependence on translation makes the entire process teacher-centred and as a result limits the chances of learners' participation. Also, while translating or paraphrasing texts, many sentences and words of English text are not accurately perceived by teachers. It affects students' level of comprehension (Sah, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2013).

Another important aspect of EMI classroom is role of first language in classroom interactions. Regarding use of first language in EMI classroom, Karakas (2016) has reported that it enables teachers to overcome language barrier occurring in the way of understanding by switching to first language. It can be used for summarising the course content to explain the difficult concepts, discuss complex processes or to facilitate interaction with students whenever needed so as to facilitate learning and to enhance student participation in class activities.

Islam et al. (2015), in their study, have shown that adopting English medium at primary level can bring positive results, if it is introduced in a phased manner and also incorporated in teacher's training. Besides, this change has been welcomed by all stakeholders namely parents, teachers and students. As the research findings have highlighted varied types of positive and negative implications of using English as a medium of instruction, hence, there is a need to explore it further.

Rationale of the Study

In the state of Punjab, there has been an unprecedented growth of English medium private schools in recent years to cater to the demand of English medium education. The Government of Punjab, in the recent past, has introduced English as a subject from class I in the government schools. Besides, it has been offered as optional medium of instruction in IX and X grades from the session 2018-19 in its schools. In the light of this scenario, the present study has been conducted in both government and private schools of Punjab with the following objective:

1. To study the implications of English as medium of instruction for carrying out of process of knowledge construction in the schools of Punjab

METHODOLOGY

In the present study, 150 teachers, of different subject areas, teaching in English medium in government as well as private schools across Punjab have been interviewed. For this purpose, an interview schedule has been prepared by the investigator. The qualitative data gathered from these teachers has been tabulated and content analysed to get varied perspectives with regard to the impact of English as a medium of instruction on the process of knowledge construction across the curriculum.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative data gathered from interviewing teachers teaching different subjects in English medium in government as well as private schools has been analysed by employing the techniques of percentage analysis and content analysis in the following manner and the results have been reported:

Students' Ability to Comprehend, Analyse and Interpret the subject content when presented in English medium

While interviewing teachers, they were asked for their opinion about students' ability to analyse and interpret the subject content when presented before them in English as a medium of instructions and also about possible reasons responsible for the same. A large proportion of the teachers (55.5%) responded affirmatively to this question and articulated varied reasons to substantiate their responses. These teachers have been of the view that the students easily comprehend the content and are able to analyse and interpret it because 'learning content is presented in simple language to enhance the ability of the students to comprehend the text'; 'new vocabulary is introduced

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before teaching a topic'; 'use of reference material by students'; 'slow to moderate pace teaching that facilitates students in grasping and analysing content in English language' etc. Besides, some teachers have reported that the proficiency of their students in English language enables them in comprehending the text.

Table 1: Students' Ability to Comprehend, Analyse and Interpret the subject content when presented in English medium

Number of Respondents	Students have the ability	Students do not have the ability
150	83 (55.5%)	67 (44.5%)

On the other hand, a considerable proportion of responding teachers (44.5%) have replied in negative to the question pertaining to students' ability to comprehend, analyse and interpret the subject content when presented before them in English. These respondents have been of the view that 'as English is not the language of their students' day to day communication', hence they find it difficult to understand learning content when presented in English'. Besides, 'inadequate level of vocabulary of English', 'poor oral command over English language' and 'students' perception of English as a foreign language' also adversely affect their understanding and prove detrimental to their ability to analyse and interpret course content presented in English language.

Simultaneous use of English and Vernacular in the classroom

The respondents were asked about the extent to which they make simultaneous use of English and vernacular in their classroom. While responding to this question only 17% of the responding teachers have been of the view that they use only English while teaching their subject and have also emphasized that that is the only way through which students can develop command over English language. In the opinion of these respondents 'the simultaneous use of English and vernacular leads to acquiring habits of using mix language by students and as a result they do not develop command over the use of English language'. Besides, 'the intermittent use of the mother tongue in the teaching-learning process would not allow students to think and express creatively in English language'.

A considerable proportion of teachers (27%) have reported that most of the time they prefer to teach in English and but use vernacular sometimes in order to transmit learning content with better clarity.

Table 2: Simultaneous use of English and Vernacular in the classroom

Number of Respondents	Everything is explained completely in English language	Everything is explained most of the time in English language however mother tongue/regional language is used less often to generate understanding on the part of the students	During the process of explanation, translation into vernacular is done quite often to enhance understanding.	Explanation in English as well as in mother tongue goes side by side
150	17 (11%)	41 (27%)	36 (24%)	56 (38%)

However, a considerable proportion of teachers (38%) have been of the view that during their teaching, explanation in English as well as in mother tongue goes side by side. Similarly, twenty-four per cent of the respondents have expressed the view that during the process of explanation, translation in vernacular is done quite often to enhance understanding of the subject matter. These respondents have been of the opinion that 'the simultaneous use of English and vernacular as it enables students to grasp conveniently and clearly'. It 'rules out the chance of not understanding/misunderstanding which might occur due to explanation of any unfamiliar word or expression in English itself'.

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Thus, in order to teach effectively to students who are studying in English medium, a significant number of teachers choose to use vernacular to improve the understanding of subject they are teaching. Besides, teachers who focus on improving the proficiency of their students in English language prefer to teach the whole content in English.

Problems students experience during teaching-learning process with English as the sole medium of instruction

While responding to the question regarding problems the students experience during teaching-learning process with English as the sole medium of instruction, 39 per cent of the responding teachers have reported that ‘predominantly lack of adequate command over English language leads to disinterest and inattentiveness on the part of the students. Similarly, 26 per cent of the respondents among teachers have been of the view that, not being proficient in English language, ‘students opt for rote learning rather than developing the conceptual understanding of the learning content’.

Table 3: Problems students experience during teaching-learning process with English as the sole medium of instruction

Number of Respondents	Students' Inadequate command over English leads to their disinterest and inattentiveness in class	The students facing problem with English prefer to memorize the content than to understand it.	Students face difficulty in assimilation of content	Difficulty in creating rapport with students and in creating real life linkages for generating understanding
150	58 (39%)	39 (26%)	29 (19%)	24 (16%)

Further, another problem reported by 19 per cent of the responding teachers has been that students face varied kind of difficulties in assimilating the text’ when they use English as the sole medium of instruction. Furthermore, sixteen per cent of the teachers have highlighted that the sole use of English in the classroom hinders the process of rapport building with the students and in creating real life linkages for generating understanding of the content.

Overall, the respondents have emphasized that adopting English as a sole medium instruction in the classroom poses various challenges. Lack of proficiency in English language and hence adoption of rote learning over conceptual understanding, difficulties in explaining through applications and examples from real life situations and building rapport are the various issues highlighted by these teachers.

Teachers’ views regarding whether English as a medium of instruction reduces learning process to mere rote memorization of subject content

According to a large number of the respondents (45%), when English is chosen, as a medium of instruction, it reduces learning process to mere rote memorization of subject content only to some extent. Similarly, 18 per cent teachers have viewed that English as a medium of instruction only ‘slightly’ reduces learning process to mere rote memorization.

Table 4: Teachers’ views regarding whether English as a medium of instruction reduces learning process to mere rote memorization of subject content

Number of Respondents	Completely	To large extent	To some extent	Slightly	Not at all
150	13 (9%)	14 (9.5%)	68 (45%)	27 (18%)	28 (18.5%)

However, 9 per cent and 9.5 per cent of the responding teachers have opined that that when any subject in taught in English medium, then students, rather than comprehending the content, choose to rote memorization either completely or a large extent respectively.

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On the other hand, 18.5 per cent of the respondents have stated that English as a medium of instruction ‘not at all’ reduces learning process to mere rote memorization.

Introduction of multilingualism in classroom for better comprehension of content by students

With regard to the question of introducing multilingualism in the classroom for the better comprehension of content by students, half of the teachers have responded in affirmatively. In their view ‘all students don't respond equally to the language but they are more inclined towards mother tongue for better learning and understanding’; ‘students have larger vocabulary in vernacular language, so this will make them understand the content better’; ‘the cognitive and practical benefits of knowing more than one language is scientifically proven and such knowledge is a tremendous resource for teaching and learning’. Therefore, these respondents have been of the view that ‘whatever their subject specialisation, teachers should seek out opportunities to celebrate, promote and exploit the linguistic knowledge and skills of all their students’.

Table 5: Views of Teachers regarding the Introduction of Multilingualism in classroom for better comprehension of content by students

Number of Respondents	Multilingualism should be there in classroom	Multilingualism should be there in classroom only to some extent	Multilingualism should not be there in classroom
150	77 (51%)	27 (18%)	46 (31%)

Further, eighteen per cent of the responding teachers have only partially agreed to the opinion that multilingualism should be introduced in classroom for better comprehension of content by students. In the view of these respondents that ‘students only sometimes need an explanation of a particular content in their mother tongue’, otherwise most of the times they grasp the content in English language’.

On the other hand, 31 per cent of the responding teachers have viewed that ‘if we use multiple languages to learn a concept, it will affect students’ ability to focus on a particular language and concept and will make them inept in learning the concept’. Moreover, the ‘introduction of multilingualism in classrooms will enable students to have a choice of using the vernacular of their comfort and choice and they will not put the required effort in learning English, which they would do otherwise’.

English as the sole medium of teaching and conversation in the classroom develops ability among students to effectively use English for creative self-expression

Majority of the respondents among teachers (51%) have been of the view that English as the sole medium of teaching and conversation in the classroom will improve creative expression in English. In the opinion of these respondents ‘one has to think in a language to be creative, to have creative ideas, to assimilate and actually manifest those ideas. If we do not use English but any vernacular, the students would think in vernacular and then try to translate and this will make them lose any creative expression’. Therefore ‘to have good and genuine creative thoughts, one needs to think in the language, speak the language, listen to the language, in other words, imbibe the language, absorb it to assimilate it better’. Similarly, ‘use of English in the classroom will build students’ vocabulary which will lead to their more understanding of the language and hence they will become more expressive’.

Table 6: English as the sole medium of teaching and conversation in the classroom develops ability among students to effectively use English for creative self-expression

Number of Respondents	Yes	Not Necessarily	No
150	77 (51%)	27 (18%)	46(31%)

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However, eighteen per cent of the responding teachers have contended that English medium of instruction may be helpful in learning English language but it will not necessarily contribute in developing creative self-expression. Moreover, English as medium of instruction ‘may help students to develop command over language and enable them to communicate effectively, but it may or may not enable them for creative self-expression’.

On the other hand, thirty-one per cent of the respondents among teachers have opined that English as the sole medium of teaching and conversation in the classroom does not develop ability among students to effectively use English for creative self-expression. In their view, ‘just speaking in English with students makes them lose interest in the subject. Neither they understand the concepts right nor are they able to master the language’. Besides, ‘some concepts are understood better if explained in vernacular language along with English’, as ‘students find it difficult to understand completely in English language which leads to boredom and tiredness’.

CONCLUSIONS

In the present era of knowledge economy, English language has gained significance in the educational systems world over and India is not an exception. The introduction of English as a compulsory subject at primary level and as a medium of instruction both at school and higher education levels in most of the Indian states have been the reflections of the emerging significance of this language. The present study conducted in the Indian state of Punjab highlights the implications of adopting English as a medium of instruction on the process of knowledge creation. The varied responses from teachers teaching different subjects in English language have highlighted both positive and negative implications of English medium education vis-à-vis the process of knowledge creation. The positive implications include better prospects for students in their future higher education and professional pursuits, proficiency in the use of English enables students to comprehend, analyse and interpret the subject content and develop creative self-expression etc. The negative implications include students' inadequate command over English, rote memorization of subject content without understanding, difficulty in assimilation of content, teacher resorting to use of mother tongue in order to explain the content taught in English etc. In this context, most of the teachers have been of the view that our classrooms should be multilingual spaces for ensuring an effective process of creation and transmission of knowledge.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

English has been emerging as almost a default medium of instruction at school level. Being a foreign medium, it may interfere in the attainment of learning goals of various subjects. Teachers must have clarity of objectives of introducing English medium instruction to make suitable pedagogical choices. The focus on dual goals of attainment of language competence as well as subject comprehension need to be balanced out. It is also essential to determine the role of first language of students in an EMI classroom to ensure optimum achievement of learning objectives. Overall, certainty has to be maintained that the process of knowledge construction may not reduce to mere rote memorisation.

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