

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI): A pivotal approach to enhance english language proficiency in the Philippines

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Abstract

English as the medium of instruction (EMI) refers to the use of English language to teach academic subjects in countries where the first language of the majority in terms of population is not English (Dearden, 2014)). When EMI is implemented in the educational system, an English teaching policy is strictly required. Educators should use English in class discussions and students should practice its usage and relevance. In the Philippine context, EMI is still a suggestion. During the State of the Nation Address (SONA) of President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., he suggested the Department of Education to bring back the use of English as medium of instruction even in teaching Filipino subjects. Looking back to the successive years of Philippine English Proficiency (before 2016), the competence of Filipinos in using English was higher than today. In fact, our country is ranked as the third highest English proficiency Index before. Thus, the purpose of this literature review is to mirror the proficiency that once lost through giving emphasis to previous studies that are significant to English language teaching in order to achieve the claim that EMI is a pivotal approach to ease English language teaching. This is to encourage students to not be afraid in grammars but to embrace it.

Keywords: Approach; EMI; Language Teaching; Policy and Proficiency

1. Introduction

English proficiency has become a global priority, functioning as a lingua franca across industries, education, and international relations. More than 1.5 billion people speak English globally, with over 600 million using it as a second language (Hidayat, 2024). English is increasingly linked to employability, adaptability, and cross-cultural communication (Rionaldi & Saputra, 2023; Hidayat, 2024). Consequently, educational systems that incorporate English instruction contribute significantly to equipping students with competencies required for global competitiveness (Haryadi & Aminuddin, 2023). Mastery of English not only enhances professional growth but also strengthens cultural and intellectual engagement in an interconnected world (Santos et al., 2024; Tiwari, 2023).

In earlier years, the Philippines ranked third globally in the English Proficiency Index. However, from 2016 to 2019, it dropped to 20th, and more recently to 27th out of 100 countries (Icamen, 2020). Despite still being recognized as the second-largest English-speaking country in Asia, this decline signals the need for intervention in the educational system. In response, President Marcos Jr. emphasized the return to EMI in his inaugural SONA, advocating for a rethinking of curricula and materials to strengthen scientific, theoretical, and vocational competencies, delivered in English.

2. The Case for EMI in the Philippines

EMI refers to teaching academic subjects in English in regions where English is not the primary language (Rifiyanti & Dewi, 2023; Ojha, 2022). Research suggests that consistent exposure to English through subject instruction leads to

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improved fluency and comprehension. Elbashir (2024) found that students required to use English regularly performed better in language proficiency than those permitted to use their native languages. Pérez (2023) further demonstrated that combining EMI with focused language instruction enhances academic performance and vocabulary acquisition.

Despite this, EMI in the Philippines remains largely conceptual. One major barrier is students' fear of using English due to potential judgment or ridicule, which leads to reluctance and reduced participation. This cultural dynamic may contribute to the country's declining English proficiency rankings. To overcome this, a shift in mindset and classroom culture is necessary, promoting an environment where learning from mistakes is normalized.

3. Challenges and Misconceptions in Implementing EMI

Although EMI has shown strong global potential, its application in the Philippines presents several challenges. Radhikarki (2021) identifies three major obstacles: lack of teacher proficiency, limited teaching materials, and inadequate student background in English. While valid in some contexts, these challenges must be critically examined.

For instance, the assertion of teacher deficiency may not hold, given that English is a core subject in teacher education programs in the Philippines. Similarly, the issue of limited materials can be addressed through access to digital resources and open educational platforms. As such, these barriers often stem more from institutional inertia or lack of initiative than from actual scarcity.

Regarding students' background in English, it is true that learners in remote areas may have limited exposure. However, English is introduced in primary education nationwide, making the language familiar to most students. More targeted research is needed to explore these regional disparities.

4. Global insights supporting emi

EMI is increasingly being adopted in non-English-speaking countries due to its dual benefits for language and academic development (Xu & Xiao, 2023). Dearden (2014, 2015) describes EMI as a pedagogical approach that integrates English into subject matter instruction. Vu and Burns (2014) argue that EMI enhances English learning when directly tied to content.

Muttaqin et al. (2022) and Penthisarn & Phusawisot (2021) found that EMI contributes to increased student engagement and academic success, provided that learners and instructors possess adequate English proficiency. Wei (2023) emphasized that teacher readiness plays a critical role in EMI effectiveness.

According to behaviorist theory, language learning is reinforced through repetition and imitation. When students receive content through English, even in non-language subjects, they absorb and replicate structures, gradually improving their linguistic competence.

4.1. Case Study: EMI in Practice

Wong (2010) conducted a longitudinal study in Hong Kong, comparing two non-native English-speaking classes. One group followed a strict English-only policy, while the other was permitted to use their first language, Cantonese. The English-only group not only demonstrated higher proficiency but also showed a greater preference for English instruction.

However, the study lacks detailed explanation of its sampling method, raising concerns about potential bias. For example, if the English-only group consisted of higher-performing students, the results might be skewed. Nevertheless, the study provides empirical support for the benefits of EMI in language acquisition.

5. Conclusion

English as a Medium of Instruction has faced both support and skepticism. Critics argue that EMI alienates students with weak English skills and favors those from more privileged linguistic backgrounds. However, research increasingly shows that EMI fosters language proficiency, academic success, and global readiness.

While it may not solve all gaps in English education, EMI represents a strategic approach to improving language outcomes. Challenges—such as teacher preparation, instructional resources, and learner anxiety—can be addressed through government support, teacher training, and inclusive policies.

As Barnard and McLellan (2013) suggest, successful EMI implementation requires sustained efforts, including language-awareness training for teachers and careful attention to learner needs. By investing in EMI, the Philippines can restore its standing in global English proficiency and empower its learners for international engagement.

Promoting EMI does not mean undermining the native language; rather, it adds a mechanism for national development. In a globalized world, the mastery of English is no longer optional—it is essential.

Compliance with ethical standards

Author's note

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