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Indonesian EMI Teachers' Challenges: Voices from Primary Education Teachers

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Abstract: English Medium Instruction (EMI) is widely implemented in Indonesian primary schools, especially in international schools, to improve students' international competitiveness. But the rapid growth of EMI is not necessarily supported by teacher and school readiness, particularly at the primary level, where students are still mastering language skills. The study explores the issues teachers encounter in implementing EMI in Indonesian primary schools. This study used a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology, interviewing three teachers from an international primary school in Indonesia. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data. Five key challenges were identified: language proficiency, professional development, classroom dynamics, institutional and cultural challenges, and affective challenges. These challenges are inter-related and impact the teaching and learning process. The study revealed that support is needed in terms of teacher training, school policy, and practices that are sensitive to the contextual factors. This research adds to the scant research on EMI in primary education in Indonesia and has implications for teacher preparation and school policies.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction (EMI), Primary School Teachers, Teaching Challenges, Teacher Training and Support, Indonesia Education Context

INTRODUCTION

English is a major language used for communication worldwide, and it is important in education in a globalising world. Macaro et al. (2020) as cited in Gu et al. (2024) define English Medium Instruction (EMI) as teaching academic subjects through English in a non-English native speaker environment. EMI policies have been introduced in education systems as a consequence of political, social, educational, and economic factors (Anaam & Kerouad, 2024). The growing use of English as an international language in different disciplines, such as science and technology, further supports the use of EMI within the world's educational landscape (Macaro et al., 2020). Thus, EMI is not only considered a teaching and learning approach but also a part of educational innovation.

English-medium instruction (EMI) has been introduced across different education systems, including primary and tertiary, to help students learn English by developing discipline-specific vocabulary. However, implementing EMI presents challenges, particularly for teachers. One of the challenges is the support for EMI teachers. Previous studies have indicated a need for more teacher training and certification for EMI (Macaro et al., 2020; Alhassan, 2021). There are a number of challenges for teachers (especially at primary level) to teach subject content in English (language and pedagogical) (Hu, 2023; Macaro et al., 2020; Alhassan, 2021). For instance, Hammou and Kesbi (2023) found that Moroccan secondary science teachers feel linguistically and pedagogically unprepared to teach in EMI, despite wanting to, mainly because they are not sufficiently trained, and policies are imposed without consultation. This underlines that EMI teachers in developing countries are struggling with language, institutional and teacher readiness issues.

The concept of EMI has evolved over the years from language as medium of instruction to language and content learning. The focus has shifted to an integrated approach to language and content learning, with equal emphasis on both. Hu (2023) introduced the notion of CLIL-based EMI, which integrates Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) with EMI. This blended model seeks to accommodate different learners' language proficiency levels by encouraging integrated learning of content and language. These innovations are part of the global trends in education, especially in a multilingual environment, where learning is a cognitive-linguistic process.

At the macro level, EMI in education is interconnected with global English language needs as the lingua franca in science, technology and global communication (Macaro et al., 2020). EMI is increasingly used in non-English-speaking countries at the primary and higher education levels (Gu et al., 2024). Although EMI has potential advantages, including enhancing students' academic and professional opportunities and enabling international mobility, it also poses challenges for teachers and students alike. Teachers need to juggle the delivery of course content and the teaching of language, and depending on the teacher's level of training, and students' level of English proficiency, this can create challenges (Macaro et al., 2020). Research from various contexts also underscores these issues. For instance, Alqarni et al. (2024) reported that although EMI is supported by the institution in Saudi Arabia, teachers still experience language challenges, lack of training and appropriate teaching resources, while students feel excitement and nervousness. Similarly, Sangkawong and Bucol (2025) found that teachers in Southeast Asia face both challenges and strategies here, with teachers struggling with limited English language proficiency, lack of teaching materials, and translation, while implementing innovative strategies such as code-switching, peer collaboration and visual aids to facilitate student learning.

Specifically, there are significant challenges for teachers implementing EMI. These include language proficiency, where teachers struggle with academic English; professional development, where many teachers are not well-trained and develop their own strategies (Alhassan, 2021); classroom environment, where teaching diverse student proficiency levels is necessary (Macaro et al., 2020); and institutional and cultural issues, in which limited resources and cultural expectations impact the teaching process. These issues reflect the multifaceted nature of EMI in multilingual and developing countries. Yet, while there has been a growing interest in the implementation of EMI in Indonesia, few studies have focused on EMI in primary education, especially from teachers' perspectives (e.g., Macaro et al., 2020; Alqarani, 2024). Hence, this research seeks to identify the challenges facing teachers in implementing EMI in primary education and to offer insight on how these challenges reflect the wider educational practices and institutional factors.

METHOD

Research Design

In this educational research, a qualitative research design was adopted to investigate phenomena in their natural settings. Qualitative research involves the study of things in their natural environment, and aims to collect detailed information on participants' experiences (Creswell, 2018). In this study, narrative inquiry was used, as it's a common approach in education to explain and understand human experiences and meaning-making (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry is concerned with the study of people's experiences in order to create knowledge and understandings (Clandinin, 2016). Experience is understood as multidimensional and involving personal, social, institutional, cultural and historical factors (Dayal et al., 2021). This enabled the researcher to gain insights into the teachers' experiences with English Medium Instruction (EMI).

Participants

This study was conducted in one international elementary school in East Java, Indonesia, which uses EMI as one of its languages of instruction. This setting was chosen for its relevance to EMI in elementary schooling in a multicultural setting, where students have diverse language backgrounds. This study involved three teachers who were purposively selected. The teachers were selected based on being experienced in EMI and having at least a year of teaching experience. This was to ensure that they would provide valuable information on the challenges of the implementation of EMI.

Data Collection

The data in this study were collected in interviews, which can be defined as the exchange of information between two or more people about a particular issue (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). Interviews are also a method of data collection that involves a question-and-answer session to collect information (Prastya & Ashadi, 2020). This study was based on interviews conducted by the researchers with the participants and those interviews were then transcribed as part of the narrative data (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this study, personal narratives were used to conduct narrative interviews, as the researchers sought to understand participants' experiences without intervention. The interviews were based on a certain theme - the challenges teachers encounter in implementing EMI.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted of the data, which is a method whereby patterns (themes) are identified, analysed and reported in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was selected for the flexibility it offers and to allow a detailed description of the participants' experiences. The process of analysis can be broken down into steps such as becoming familiar with the data: reading and re-reading the interview data to familiarise yourself with the content. Next, an initial set of codes was generated by dividing relevant areas related to teachers' experiences of teaching EMI. These were then grouped into themes based on aggregating similar patterns and ideas. Then, these were refined and reviewed for coherence and representation of data. Finally, we defined and refined the themes to present the findings of the study. The researcher constantly compared data between participants to establish how they were similar and different and to ensure that the themes were formed and presented in a clear manner.

Ethical Considerations

Research ethics were maintained to ensure quality of the research and to protect participants' rights. Information on the study, its aims and processes, voluntary participation

and the right to withdraw was provided before data collection. And data anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through data anonymisation and secure storage. The interview room was a safe and comforting environment to minimise anxiety. We also considered cultural aspects in the research site, which was multicultural. This study was approved by the ethics committee of the Language and Arts Education Department, at the University of Jember, and adhered to research guidelines.

Findings

This section reports the results of the thematic analysis of the interviews with three primary school teachers who implemented English Medium Instruction (EMI). Five related themes emerge from the analysis: (1) language proficiency, (2) professional development, (3) classroom dynamics, (4) institutional and cultural challenges, and (5) affective challenges. These themes are explored in light of the literature to better understand the EMI practices in Indonesian primary education.

Language Proficiency

Language proficiency was the main focus among all participants. Students lamented about their English level, particularly in teaching content-based concepts (e.g. Science and Mathematics). Mr. Edo stated:

“Many of the terms were unfamiliar because my education was in Indonesian. It was difficult to teach scientific concepts in English.”

This aligns with other research that underscores the importance of academic language in EMI classrooms (Sameephet et al., 2025). This affects not just teacher confidence but also their teaching clarity, and student learning. What this study found, unlike others in higher education, is that the problems are greater at the primary level and students need more support and explanation.

Professional Development

Another issue that was identified was lack of EMI training. All teachers identified that they were not well-trained in EMI. Mr. Vendo noted:

“I was assigned to teach EMI classes, but no proper training was provided.”

Improper professional development resulted in the fact that the teachers honed their skills in practice. As told by Mr. Edo:

“The first and second years were very challenging. In the third year, classroom management became more emphasized.”

Teachers also reported difficulty in catering to the needs of highly gifted students, as seen in Mr. Edo:

“Because the students were smart, I had to prepare more advanced and varied materials.”

Teachers had to devise their own teaching strategies and "experiment". This is in line with Alhassan (2021), who argues that due to lack of professional development, teachers used trial-and-error based experimental teaching. Not having EMI training could affect teaching quality, particularly in the early stages of implementation. This points to a need for professional development that integrates language and teaching skills development.

Classroom Dynamics

The classroom environment was another issue, as students had different English levels and learning styles. Teachers felt frustrated meeting the needs of both the proficient and low-proficiency English learners. Mr. Vendo explained:

“We cannot focus on the middle. Some students need enrichment, while others need simpler materials.”

Ms. Diny went on that students' classroom behavior was highly disparate:

“Unless on the move, some students learn. Others are distractible and must be seated in front.”

This quote illustrates the dilemma of EMI classrooms where teachers not only need to enable language learning, but also learning of the subject matter. This study confirms the need for personalised learning in multilingual classrooms as identified by Macaro et al. (2020). However, using these strategies at primary levels may require more time, energy and skills which may not be fully supported.

Institutional and Cultural Challenges

Institutional and cultural issues were also revealed. Teachers felt there was no EMI policy, support or resources. Mr. Vendo stated:

“There is no official EMI policy in our school. Teachers adapt their methods individually.”

Inadequate resources were also mentioned, specifically regarding learners' challenges in accessing digital technology and learning materials:

“Other students have no gadgets at home, so their ability to catch up with the lesson is minimal.”

Furthermore, outside pressure, i.e., parents, added to the problem. Mr. Edo stated:

“Parents are very active and often complain if something is not clear.”

This institutional status quo can lead to uneven practices and workloads. Additionally, parents' and stakeholders' cultural factors exacerbate the situation, particularly when students struggle to understand English lessons. These findings resonate with Gu et al (2024) who highlight the need for institutional preparedness in EMI. Without such understanding, teachers are left to grapple with complexities of teaching.

Affective Challenges

Beyond the language and institutional issues, affective factors were significant. Teachers expressed fear, anxiety and exhaustion, particularly when teaching special needs students. Mr. Vendo described:

“There was a student with special needs. I had to find a way to explain things very clearly and keep the atmosphere positive. It was emotionally demanding.”

This story explains the two types of emotional work: the mental work to mediate on the contents in a second language and the emotional sensitivity to cater to frail learners. This affective load, in addition to a linguistic alienation environment that teachers are already in, may worsen the sense of inadequacy, stress and burnout.

In addition, educators complained about inconsistent motivation and interest levels among students in EMI classrooms, which in many cases depended on the different degrees of their language proficiency. As an example, when students cannot follow the teachings, it often results in loss of interest and disappointment, and this has an impact on the classroom setting and the morale of the teacher. Mr. Vendo observed:

“Some students enjoy learning in English, but others shut down when they don't understand. That affects the whole class energy.”

These may be amplified in EMI classrooms, where teachers have to concern themselves with language and content. These findings align with Dewaele and Dewaele (2023), who emphasize the role of emotions in language teaching and learning. The absence of emotional support (e.g. mentoring and reflection) leads to teacher burnout.

Interconnected Nature of Challenges

Importantly, the findings demonstrate these issues are not standalone. For instance, low language proficiency brings about low self-esteem, which affects classroom management and classroom participation. Insufficient institutional support also affects some of the teaching and emotional problems.

The latter suggests that EMI should be implemented holistically. Attempting to solve one problem in isolation is not likely to help. Instead, language, pedagogical, institutional and emotional support should be provided together to help primary education teachers to deliver EMI.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research examined the issues faced by primary teachers in implementing English Medium Instruction (EMI) in an International School in Indonesia. This study confirms and expands on previous research on EMI by revealing five interconnected dimensions of concern: language proficiency, professional development, classroom dynamics, institutional and cultural challenges, and affective challenges. These areas are interrelated and impact teachers' teaching and learning experiences.

Our findings echo previous research on the implementation of EMI in multilingual settings. For example, Hosan et al. (2022) observed that non-native English language teachers face difficulties in juggling language and content delivery, especially in cognitively challenging subjects. Likewise, the current study demonstrates that inadequate language training and support for teachers can affect teaching and learning. This supports the view that EMI should not be understood as a linguistic transition, but rather a pedagogical shift that needs to be supported through a holistic approach, such as teacher preparation and curriculum development.

Language Proficiency

The most noticeable issue in this study is teachers' inadequate academic English proficiency. This finding corroborates the study by Sameephet et al. (2025), who reported teachers' struggles to use suitable academic language to explain their subject matter. Consequently, teachers in this study adopted compensatory measures like translating and simplifying the content. Although these strategies can be helpful in the short term, they do not address the underlying challenges of EMI, which demand academic language proficiency. Therefore, enhancing teachers' language skills should be an integral part of the EMI implementation, especially through language development programs.

Professional Development

The absence of professional development was also identified as a key problem. In line with Alhassan (2021), the teachers in this study reported they were expected to deliver EMI without proper training and had to experiment with their teaching practices. While they adapted to new teaching practices, the lack of structured EMI training may have had a negative impact on the quality of instruction, especially in the initial period. This suggests the need for EMI-specific pedagogy in pre-service and in-service teacher training programs, to ensure both language and pedagogical skills are developed.

Classroom Dynamics

There were also challenges in classroom dynamics, as a result of students' differing proficiency. The need to teach content and language simultaneously added cognitive and pedagogical complexity for teachers. This observation aligns with Macaro et al. (2020), who state that EMI classrooms can be complex, particularly when students are not proficient in English. The need for frequent teaching adjustments may result in lower teaching efficiency

and workload. Thus, personalized and scaffolded learning strategies are critical in EMI classrooms to cater to different student needs.

Institutional and Cultural Challenges

EMI is also hindered by institutional factors. Lack of policies for EMI, inadequate teaching materials, and lack of consistent support from administrators added to the challenges. This observation aligns with Gu et al. (2024) who highlight the importance of institutional support for EMI implementation. In addition, external factors, such as parents' expectations and students' language readiness, further complicated teaching and learning. These findings indicate that the implementation of EMI needs not only the readiness of the teachers, but also the readiness of the institutions and policies.

Affective Challenges

Finally, this research suggests the affective nature of EMI teaching. Teachers felt a lot of emotional pressure because of teaching in a second language, responding to institutional requirements and teaching students with different abilities. These emotional challenges are frequently ignored in EMI studies, but they are important factors in teacher motivation and achievement. To support teachers, it is not only important to provide professional training but also provide a school environment that recognises teachers' emotional needs.

CONCLUSION

This study extends the body of research on English Medium Instruction (EMI) by providing empirical insights from primary schools in Indonesia, a less-studied domain. This research confirms that EMI practice is not only about teaching through English medium, but also comprises complex interplays between pedagogy, institutional factors and emotions. The study revealed that the challenges are teacher language proficiency, teacher preparation, students' diversity, institutional factors and affective factors. This indicates that EMI practice at elementary levels is a complex and transformative process and requires a systemic approach.

The implications of this study are that there are areas for improvement. First, pre-service and in-service teacher education should aim to provide EMI-related training - a mix of academic English language skills and good practice in teaching bilingual (or in some cases the content language). Second, school policies and guidelines in EMI-sensitive environments should be developed. Third, teaching resources (particularly bilingual teaching resources) need to be made available and developed. Finally, teachers need personal and professional support (mentoring, reflection, collaboration) to ensure they are effective. Last, EMI should have flexible and inclusive teaching practices to cater to diverse student needs such as learning and language ability.

This study has some limitations. Data were collected from just three teachers from a single school, limiting their representativeness. This means that the observations should be interpreted with caution. There is a need for future research to involve more teachers across more schools, using mixed-methods, to better understand EMI practices. Longitudinal studies are also suggested to investigate long-term impacts of EMI. Finally, future studies may explore the effects of training teachers in EMI on teaching and learning. In summary, this research suggests that to implement EMI it is not just about the teacher, it is also about institutional support, policy and consideration of both pedagogic and emotional needs for teaching and learning.

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