

Medium of Instruction: The Context of Primary, Secondary and Higher Secondary Level in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: MoI, EMI, BMI, ethnic minority students, social, cultural and economic effects

Medium of instruction (MoI) has turned into a matter of dispute in post-colonial societies for various conditions, such as favoring foreign languages over local or native tongues, enacting monolingual laws in multilingual communities, and creating inconsistencies between education policies and practices. This study aims to give a critical overview of MoI policies and practices from primary to higher secondary levels and their social, economic, and cultural effects in Bangladesh. The study employed a systematic literature review approach as part of secondary research. The study finds Bangla as a medium of instruction (BMI) by de jure and English as a medium of instruction (EMI) by de facto, which results in a remarkable inconsistency between MoI policies and its existing practices in the education sector. The further notable finding suggests that the mismatch between MoI policies and its practices leads to a disparate education structure and, eventually, a stratified society marked by inequalities, social hierarchies, marginalization, and so on. More importantly, the inequalities characterized by MoI practices are twofold: on the one hand, EMI is a source of division and inequalities for the Bangla-medium students, and on the other, BMI acts similarly when it comes to ethnic minority students. This research seeks to provide insights for policymakers to address the issues arising from the inconsistencies between MoI policies and practices.

Introduction

MoI refers to the language used in schools to implement the curriculum (Puteh, 2012). In other words, it encompasses the language of teaching and assessment. The political and historical narratives of a nation have had a significant impact on MoI policies throughout history. The colonial heritage of English and its status as "an unstoppable language juggernaut" had an effect on social, cultural, and political developments around the world. (Demont-Heinrich, 2005, p. 80, as cited in Sultana, 2014; Haidar and Fang, 2019). Therefore, English has emerged as a popular choice for the MoI in many educational institutions across the non-Inner Circle

(Brumfit, 2004). The existing literature of EMI found English not just a tool of employment opportunities and social prestige but also a way of liberation from poverty and social marginalization among the indigenous groups, as in the case of the English Goddess' movement among Dalits in India, who believe that the knowledge of English would give liberation (Rao, 2017). However, EMI proved to be an obstacle to high-quality education, which reproduces disparities for students from minority groups. This is supported by several reports from South Asian nations, including Bhattacharya (2013) and Erling et al. (2016) for India, Haidar and Fang (2019) and Rashid et al. (2016) for Pakistan, Karki (2018), Phyak (2013), and Sah and Li (2018) for Nepal (as cited in Sah & Karki, 2023). Alarming, EMI has become a source of social division and inequalities in many countries between the elite and the 'Englishless masses', namely in the Philippines, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, India, Hong Kong, and so on (Tollefson, 2000; Li, 2002; Bhatt et al., 2005; Kamwangmalo, 2007 as cited in Sultana, 2014). Given the situation, MoI policies can also be a way of emancipation in a country, as in New Zealand, where the introduction of inclusive MoI policies saved the Maori, the local language, from extinction. (May 2004, as cited in Sultana, 2014).

In Bangladesh, Bangla is the national language, and it is spoken by 98% of the population. In this context, MoI is selected on a national stance by Bangla being designated as 'the medium of instruction at all levels of education' (Ministry of Education, 1974, as cited in Hamid et al., 2013). Specifically, at the primary (grades 1- 5), secondary (grades 6-10), and higher secondary levels (grades 11-12) of schooling, the prime language of instruction is Bangla (Rahman et al., 2019). However, like other non-Inner Circle countries in South Asia, MoI is one of the most contested issues in Bangladesh, as the disparity between MoI policies and practices led by distinctive language ideologies creates a socio-economically and culturally divided society. There have been several studies on MoI policies as a source of socioeconomic division between private and public university students (e.g., Ramanathan, 2005; Sultana, 2014; Hamid & Jahan, 2015; Hamid and Baldauf, 2014; Rahman et al., 2019; Hamid and Erling, 2016). This situation raises the question of whether this kind of division marked by existing MoI practices is also notable in Bangladesh's primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels of education. Thus, this study aimed to explore MoI policies and practices in the context of primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels of schooling and how these policies and practices affect society, the economy, and culture in Bangladesh.

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the MoI policies from primary to higher secondary levels in Bangladesh?
2. Are the MoI policies and practices consistent from primary to higher secondary levels?
3. How do MoI policies and practices at primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels impact society, the economy, and culture in Bangladesh?

Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology to synthesize existing research on the topic of MoI. The researcher conducted a comprehensive search of academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, using relevant keywords such as MoI in South Asian Nations, MoI in higher education and primary and secondary levels, EMI, language-in-education policy, and minority languages. Additionally, the researcher manually searched the reference lists of key articles to identify additional relevant sources. The

inclusion criteria for articles consisted of qualitative or mixed-methods articles conducted between 2003 and 2024. Thematic analysis was used to synthesize findings across the existing studies through an iterative coding and categorization process, guided by the research objectives. The literature's patterns, trends, and contradictions are examined to develop a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Historical Overview of MoI in Bangladesh

MoI policies cannot be decontextualized from their socio-political history, as MoI policies are always influenced by the changing dynamics of a polity's social and political settings (Hamid et al., 2016). To begin with, during the colonial period of the Indian subcontinent, English-medium education was introduced for the privileged natives to facilitate and lengthen colonial rule. (Hamid, 2009, as cited in Hamid et al., 2013). After partition, English remained the language of international communication in multilingual India and Pakistan (Imam, 2005). After the long nine-month war, East Pakistan gained independence in 1971, and Bangla was recognized as the national language in newly-formed Bangladesh (Banu & Sussex, 2001, as cited in Hamid & Erling, 2016), replacing the use of English as the official language. Rahman (1991, p. 47, cited in Hamid et al., 2013) noted, "English, hitherto dominating the educated, commercial, and social scene, was relegated, due to a shift in emphasis and national outlook, to a secondary position." According to the 1974 Commission, Bangla is to be "the official language of communication as well as the medium of instruction in all state academic institutions" (Mohsin, 2003, p. 98). Later, "education commissions issued in 1987, 1997, and 2000 reiterated the 1974 Reports emphasis on Bangla and recommended that Bangla be the 'sole' medium of instruction" (Hossain, 2007, p. 250, as cited in Rahman, 2010). Here, the MoI is chosen based on the national sentiments of Banglees, which have a direct connection with the Bangla language. Article 9 of the Constitution defines 'Bengali nationalism' as 'the unity and solidarity of the Bengali nation, which, deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bengali nationalism' (Government of Bangladesh, 1972, p. 5, as cited in Rahman, 2010). Unlike other education policies, the recent National Education Policy (NEP) of 2010 prioritized ethnic minority languages pledging instruction in the mother tongues of indigenous peoples and small ethnic groups at the primary level of education since it aims for equitable access to primary education "irrespective of ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions, physical or mental challenges, and geographical differences" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 5). Measures such as the recruitment of teachers from ethnic groups and preparing texts in indigenous languages are recommended to be adopted to ensure a non-discriminating education system and to facilitate learning. Notably, first language-based instruction is only enacted for the early years of education, i.e., the primary level, whereas Bangla remains the sole MoI for the secondary and higher secondary levels of education in Bangladesh.

The Role of English in Post-Independent Bangladesh

Though the role of English was relegated by Bangla being 'designated as the official, representative language of the nation' and 'mandated' for use within formal domains' in a newly independent nation, the use of English reappeared for several reasons soon after (Thompson, 2007, p. 6). First, as a language of prestige and advancement, English drew the attention of affluent people who could not get over the colonial mentality. Imam (2005) noted, "The national elites continue to invest privately, as they always have, in the English language and culture." Since then, the number of English-medium schools has been increasing. Furthermore, with the globalization of English, the government of Bangladesh took some operative initiatives to

promote the English language, such as introducing English as a compulsory subject in the 1–12 national curriculum, introducing the English version following the curriculum of primary and secondary education boards, and improving English teaching and learning through donor-funded language projects. More importantly, the language ideologies of Bangladesh shifted from nationalistic fervor to global utility since the president of Bangladesh stated, ‘To promote employment abroad and encourage the transfer of technology, emphasis will be laid on teaching the English language along with the mother tongue’ (The Daily Observer, 2002, as cited in Imam, 2005). Finally, the use of English became widespread due to implicit MoI policies in Bangladesh. No explicit policy regarding the status of English is formed at the macro level. Consequently, the micro-context actors are implementing MoI policies that align with their advantages. Fang (2018) and Hu (2019) noted that the unplanned implementation of the MoI policy has negative effects on the educational outcomes of learners in non-native English contexts.

The Disparate Education Structure

The colonial history, privatization of education, shifted language ideologies, and inconsistent MoI policies made mainstream education in Bangladesh complex, dissecting it into three different sectors: Bangla-medium, English-version, English-medium, and Madrasah, or religious instruction for Muslims (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007, p. 251). Firstly, the Bengali medium follows the national education curriculum, which caters to above 80% of the school-age population, and Bangla is the MoI at the primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels of schooling. In this stream, all the subjects are taught in Bangla except English. The tuition fees are lower in the Bangla-medium stream (Sultana, 2014). There is another stream within the Bangla-medium education system called the English version. The curriculum followed in English-version schools is generally aligned with the national curriculum of Bangladesh but with the language of instruction in English. The tuition fees in this stream are slightly higher than in Bangla-medium. English-version schools are recognized by the Ministry of Education of Bangladesh and are seen as a pathway for students who prefer English as the medium of instruction over Bengali (Bangla). Thirdly, the English-medium schools follow the Cambridge International Examination Board conducted by the British Council in Dhaka. The whole teaching and learning process is conducted in English in this stream. It caters to 10% of the population. The system is “totally different and isolated from the nationally accepted curriculum” (Chakrabarti, 2002, as cited in Hamid & Jahan, 2015). The teaching and learning environment is resourceful with qualified teachers, as this stream charges very high tuition fees. Finally, the religious education sector is regulated by the state-recognized Madrasa Education Board, where general education is provided alongside Islamic education using both Bangla and Arabic as MoI. Though the curriculum of the religious stream is unified with general education, the quality of teaching and learning in the madrasa education is not as good as in general education. Asadullah et al. (2007) found that religious school students have lower competency in mathematics and English than secular students. In a nutshell, the gaps marked by disparate MoI policies among the different streams of education are creating a socio-economically and culturally stratified society.

EMI and its Consequences

Social Consequences

Over the last two decades, EMI has drawn the attention of researchers in making an impact on the individual, societal identities, and social division (e.g., Annamalai, 2004; Tsui, 2004; Ramanathan, 2005; Sadhu, 2010; as cited in Hamid et al., 2013).

Language and Identity

Language is coupled with identity as people express themselves through language (Montero, 2007; Hall et al., 2008, as cited in Sultana, 2014). Historically, English has been linked to a prestigious identity as a language of the ruling class, and comparatively, Bangla and indigenous languages are associated with lower status in our society. Eventually, disparate MoI practices in our education system result in dual social identities where English-medium students belong to the 'us (self) and Bangla-medium students to 'them' (other) (Hamid et al., 2013). The condition is worse when language-based social identity determines access to social benefits.

Linguistic Capital

Linguistic capital refers to the values and advantages associated with language proficiency, specifically proficiency in the prestigious language. Even individuals' competence in and access to a prestigious language can impact their social status. As Bourdieu (1991) remarks, linguistic capital plays a fundamental role in positioning people in different social hierarchies.

In the Bangladeshi context, English, as a prestigious variety, acts as a linguistic capital that reproduces social stratification. To illustrate, when English-medium students engage in conversation, it represents their higher social status. Their spontaneous English communication shows their competence (Sultana, 2014). Bangla-medium students belong to the middle class as they are less fluent in the linguistic capital. Based on this stratification, students' knowledge and life experiences are neglected, which leads to lower self-esteem. Tsui (1996) found that many students associate English with failure, frustration, and low self-esteem. This linguistic capital is intangible yet powerful, as it defines people's social position.

Assumption Nexus

Bangladeshi people hold very positive attitudes towards fluent English speakers. English-educated Bangladeshi speakers prefer to showcase their English language skills, as English holds the values of status, culture, education, and intelligence (Rahman, 2005). Majidi (2013, as cited in Khanh, 2022), stated that people around the world prefer to use English in a global context due to its sociocultural supremacy. These beliefs and practices are called the assumption nexus. In other words, 'assumption nexus' refers to "a complete set of beliefs and practices that make people believe in the superiority of a specific language-speaking population" (Ramanathan, 2005). These beliefs and practices lead to relegating people to disadvantaged positions. For instance, English-medium students tend to display their lack of proficiency in Bangla as a matter of pride (Sultana, 2014), and Imam (2005) noted that English-medium pupils ridicule Bangla-medium students for their poor English skills.

Community of Practice

Community of Practice (COP) encompasses "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor." (Eckert et al., 1992, p. 464). Wenger (1998) stated that their participation influences individual learning in the Community of Practice (COP). According to the COP framework, the more one is involved in the social practices of COP, the more he or she has the opportunity to learn. However, in our society, competency in English determines individuals' access to COP. Sultana (2017, as cited in Sultana, 2014) found that students from English-medium backgrounds have greater access to class discussions than those from Bangla. Notably, the majority of students with a Bangla-medium background opined that they go unnoticed by the teacher due to their lack of English competency.

Economic Consequences

With the growing demand for English, it is regarded as a tool for economic advantage in present-day Bangladesh. Particularly, stakeholders in non-English-speaking countries such as China (Botha, 2015; Hu & Lei, 2014; Zhang, 2018), South Korea (Evans, 2017), and Malaysia (Ali & Hamid, 2018) believe English will bring several benefits locally and will offer global opportunities (cited in Rahman et al., 2019). Khanh (2022) found that Vietnamese university students are highly motivated to learn English due to its better job opportunities, and English can help them gain a great advantage over the competition in different aspects of life, including study, work, and promotion. However, a specific language with instrumental values can create an economically stratified society if it is not accessible to all the members of the society. In our society, English-medium education is expensive and only accessible to the affluent. Though English is also taught to students in Bangla as a required subject, the quality of English teaching is so below standard that students pursuing a Master's degree in Bangla are unable to speak decent English (Hamid and Jahan, 2015). The primary education system is mainly criticized for students' poor English skills.

Even though the situation is worse in rural Bangladesh (Hamid, 2009, as cited in Hamid et al., 2013). Weak infrastructure, a lack of teaching and learning resources, and unqualified English teachers are the causes of poor learning outcomes in rural areas. The overall quality of teaching and learning in schools has already been pointed out as poor (Ali & Walker, 2014; Rahman et al., 2018), where English-medium students still need to improve Bangla, and Bangla-medium students need more English skills. Eventually, a job seeker from a Bangla-medium background lags in the competitive job market where English is required as a 'must' to get hired (Afrin, 2020).

Cultural Consequences

The disparate MoI practices in our education system promote only the respective culture, resulting in a cultural knowledge gap among students of different streams. Imam (2005) remarked that English-medium students are good at Roman, Greek, or Chinese history but are barely familiar with their national history. Similarly, Haque (2009) noted that English-medium education does not promote Bangladeshi culture; even teachers do not bother to relate foreign texts to it as it would cost their time and go against their curriculum; these practices engender cultural imperialism. According to Phillipson (1992), promoting British trade books is the best mode of cultural imperialism (as cited in Haque, 2009). Cultural imperialism can also terminate in cultural recolonization. As Imam (2005) noted, English-medium students read foreign writers' books that exhibit ideas, values, and attitudes ingrained in western culture, and therefore, they acquire English as a set of values, which is a sort of cultural recolonization.

BMI and its Consequences

The National Education Commission reports issued before 2010 were solely based on the 98% of people in Bangladesh who speak Bangla, leaving out 2% of the population, equal to two million people who speak different languages other than Bangla. MoI policies recognize only the Bangla language, ignoring the fact that Bangladesh is a multilingual country. The ethnic groups and the indigenous languages got no recognition, even though the Constitution prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, and place of birth under Article 28 (Rahman, 2010, p. 346). Habermas (1987, as cited in Hamid et al., 2013) defined language policies as "suppression of generalizable interests" as they marginalize the values and ideologies of subordinate groups. Until now, the National Education Policy (NEP) was issued in light of a multilingual perspective in 2010 and pledges to provide mother-tongue instruction for

indigenous minorities (Ministry of Education, 2010). For the first time in the history of the nation, Bangladesh is recognized as a multilingual country with 45 ethnic minority groups that speak nearly 30 indigenous languages (Afrin, 2020). However, there is no reality of effective implementation of multilingual language-in-education policy due to many challenges such as standardization and selection of minority languages, centralized structure of education, poverty, natural disasters, and so on (Rahman, 2010).

Mokibelo (2016, cited in Sibomana, 2020) discovered that students experience anxiety, shock, fear, confusion, and a lack of self-confidence if they are instructed in unfamiliar foreign languages. Currently, Bangla being used as the only MoI in general education results in marginalizing ethnic minority students whose native tongue is not Bangla in many aspects. In many social contexts, ethnic minority students are disregarded due to their incompetence in linguistic capital, i.e., English. Afrin (2020) noted that they seem to be isolated from common gatherings as most of them face difficulties in interacting in Bangla, let alone English (Afrin, 2020). Consequently, they do not have access to a community of practice (COP) and are being deprived of learning. Thus, it can be said that unintelligence, demotivation, and insincerity are not always the reasons for failures in learning. Weaknesses in linguistic capital may cause students to be excluded from the community of practice (COP) and hamper their learning (Sultana, 2014). Secondly, minority students' financial conditions are not likely to improve as they face double challenges in job sectors. (Afrin, 2020). They are expected to be proficient in their second and third languages, i.e., Bangla and English, to get a good job. Rahman (2010) noted, "The people who use dialects while speaking consciously or unconsciously are deprived of getting good jobs." Therefore, the lack of bilingual proficiency limits the job opportunities for ethnic minority students. This language-based economic structure puts minority students at a disadvantage.

More importantly, BMI serves as a way of demeaning the historic ethnic culture as it imposes the national culture, i.e., the Bengali culture, upon the non-Bengali population. The national textbooks only glorify Bengali history and culture and discard the histories and cultures of ethnic minorities. Even the contribution of hill people in the liberation war is not acknowledged in the national textbooks. This inequity keeps ethnic students at the bottom of the educational mainstream, preventing them from achieving academic success, growing economically, and preserving their culture.

Results

The Evolution of MoI Policy: From Colonial Legacy to National Identity

According to the first research question, MoI policy has evolved significantly over time from primary to higher secondary levels in Bangladesh. Initially influenced by colonial rule, English served as the official language in administration, law, and education. At that time, English-medium education was also introduced to the privileged natives. However, after independence in 1971, Bangla became the national language, replacing the use of English in all formal domains, particularly in education. Significantly, education commissions in 1987, 1997, and 2000 reiterated the emphasis on Bangla as the sole MoI at the primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels of schooling. This shift was driven by national sentiment and the recognition of Bengali nationalism, as outlined in the constitution. The ideology of MoI policy in Bangladesh gradually evolved from a colonial legacy to a national identity.

The Dichotomy of MoI Policy: Complex Realities in Bangladeshi Education

In the inquiry on the consistency of MoI policies and practices, research question 2 indicated

that MoI policies and practices in Bangladesh from primary to higher secondary levels are inconsistent and complex. Despite Bangla being designed as the MoI by the constitution from primary to higher secondary levels of schooling, the widespread use and acceptance of English is evident at all of these levels of education. This situation resulted from several factors, such as colonial mentality, investment in private education, a shift in language ideologies from nationalism to global utility, and government patronage. Implicit English policy is another major factor that is strengthening the inconsistency of MoI policies. Since no explicit macro-policy is formed in the constitution regarding the status of English, the stakeholders in the micro-context are implementing English policies to their advantage. Consequently, all of these factors dissected the present education structure into Bangla-medium, English-version, English-medium, and madrasah education at the primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels. In these different streams, different MoIs are being followed; to illustrate, English is the MoI in English-medium and English-version schools, whereas Bangla is the MoI in Bangla medium schools, and finally, both Arabic and Bangla are followed as the MoIs in Madrasa education. This complex situation leads to a discrepancy between MoI policies and practices in the Bangladeshi education system, in which Bangla serves as a de jure language while English is a de facto language.

Inconsistent MoI Policy and Socially, Economically, and Culturally Divided Society

As revealed by research question 3, inconsistent MoI policies and practices from primary to higher secondary levels have wide-ranging impacts on social, economic, and cultural conditions, reinforcing divisions and inequalities.

First of all, EMI is found to generate social barriers between Bangla and English-medium students due to several societal conditions. To begin with, EMI produces a dual social identity where English-medium students are perceived as belonging to a higher social status compared to Bangla-medium students, leading to social stratification. In addition, English is regarded as a linguistic capital in current society, as English competency is associated with social prestige and better opportunities. Besides, people suffer from the assumption nexus nowadays, in which people regulate their behavior in the belief of the superiority of the English-speaking population. Even English proficiency is now being used as the gateway to accessing the learning community, or community of practice (COP). All of these factors result in language-based social divisions and put Bangla-medium students in a disadvantaged position, affecting their access to social benefits and perpetuating feelings of inferiority. Secondly, EMI is found to be responsible for economic divisions as well. For economic advancements, English proficiency is increasingly considered essential, leading to a stratified job market where English-medium students get a significant advantage. However, the high cost of English-medium education limits access to this advantage for the economically disadvantaged. Additionally, the poor quality of English teaching in Bangla-medium schools further increases this divide, hindering opportunities for Bangla-medium students in the English-oriented job market. Finally, inconsistent MoI practices promote cultural imperialism, as English-medium education prioritizes foreign cultures over indigenous ones. This results in a cultural knowledge gap among students, with English-medium students being more familiar with foreign cultures than their own.

When society is already divided by the implicit practices of EMI, BMI further strengthens the divisions and inequalities in social, economic, and cultural contexts, holding the dominant position over minority languages. The pre-2010 educational reports in Bangladesh predominantly focused on the Bangla-speaking majority, neglecting the ethnic minority of the 2% population speaking other languages, despite constitutional provisions against

discrimination. However, the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2010 recognized the linguistic diversity of Bangladesh, emphasizing first language-based instruction, particularly in the early years of education, but faced implementation challenges. Consequently, Bangla remains the primary MoI, disadvantaging indigenous students who struggle with both Bangla and English proficiency. This linguistic barrier affects their access to social benefits and job opportunities. Moreover, the emphasis on Bengali culture in education sidelines the history and culture of ethnic minorities, generating inequality in education and hindering cultural preservation.

Discussion

The study aims to investigate the consistency between MoI policy and practices from primary to higher secondary levels in education and their social, economic, and cultural impacts. According to the first research question, Bangla is found to be the *de jure* national language and the sole MoI from primary to higher secondary levels of schooling. Following the independence of Bangladesh, Bangla replaced the use of English, the previous official language, and was given utmost priority in all formal domains, particularly education. This particular finding indicates that the nationalistic fervor followed by the liberation war of 1971 led the stakeholders to choose Bangla as the MoI from the foundational to the higher stages of education. Similarly, the government of Malaysia has outlined a Malay MOI in its macro policy document (Miligan, 2020). Liaqat et al. (2019) noted that some other South Asian countries selected their MOI based on nationalism, such as India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Based on the second research question, MoI policy and practices are inconsistent from primary to higher secondary levels, with Bangla serving as a *de jure* and English as a *de facto* MoI. Likewise, almost all private universities in Malaysia (as well as some public universities) have an implicitly dominant presence of English as the MoI. (Miligan, 2020) Similarly, in private schools in Thailand, English has become the *de facto* language, and there has been a noticeable recent trend toward EMI adoption in public schools (Tang 2020). Sah & Li (2018) discovered that EMI is widely and uncritically adopted throughout the global south, mostly at the elementary and secondary levels (as cited in Milligan 2020).

As indicated by the third research question, a substantial gap exists between MoI policy and practices, which has caused two layered social, economic, and cultural divisions. In the first layer, EMI eminently generates social divisions, as competency in English determines higher social status and access to learning communities, leading to lower self-esteem and unequal access to learning opportunities for Bangla-medium students. Economic stratification occurs as access to English-medium education is limited to the affluent, hindering job prospects for Bangla-medium students. Additionally, EMI promotes cultural imperialism, neglecting Bangladeshi culture and reinforcing Western values. A similar case is found in different schools in the Mt. Everest region and the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal by the Sah and Karkib (2023) study, where EMI is preferred so that students gain social and material (economic) capital. However, in this case, EMI limits the learning opportunities for minoritized students, creating a 'comprehension crisis' and 'epistemic inequalities'. The inequalities marked by EMI are also evident in other educational studies in Africa and China in which students perform poorly due to foreign language instructions (Mokibelo, 2016; Babaci-Wilhite, 2013; Williams, 2011; Ssentanda, 2014; Kirkgöz, 2014, cited in Sibomana, 2020; Lei & Hu, 2014).

In the second layer of division, this current study discovered that it is BMI that creates social, economic, and cultural barriers for ethnic students, being the sole MoI from primary to higher secondary levels of education. Although the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2010

recognized the linguistic and cultural diversity of the 2% population speaking other languages, pledging mother-tongue instruction in primary education, there is no effective progress at the implementation level. This oversight generates the marginalization of ethnic students in mainstream education, limiting their access to learning opportunities, economic advancement, and the preservation of their historic culture. This particular finding aligns with Chongbang's (2022) ethnographic study based on the Limbu community, a Nepal-based migrant. Data reveals that the cultural rituals of the Limbu community are degraded, and they cannot promote or protect their culture due to a lack of native-language-based policies. Another study by Civan and Coşkun (2016) reveals that a lack of non-native language-based policies negatively affects academic success, which is consistent with this study. Notably, several educational researchers identify that socioeconomic groups, rural, isolated locations, including individuals from non-dominant groups, and conflict-affected areas are negatively affected by EMI (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Rao, 2017; Yi & Adamson, 2019, cited in Milligan, 2020), and in a broader sense, instruction in any non-native language.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that Bangla serves as the MoI by de jure from primary to higher secondary levels; however, the use of English turned out to be the de facto language at these levels of education due to colonial history, shifted language ideologies, the privatization of education, and implicit English policies, which results in a disparate education structure, with different MOIs being followed by different streams of education. Consequently, the inconsistency between MoI policy and practices has been found to be a great source of social, economic, and cultural division in the Bangladeshi education system. On the one hand, EMI, as a prestigious variety, linguistic capital, and economic tool, disadvantages Bangla-medium students. On the other hand, BMI acts the same as EMI for ethnic minority students. Consequently, a divide-and-rule society is emerging, characterized by two-fold inequality and marginalization. This study contributed to filling the gap in the local research context, specifically by involving the primary to higher secondary level context. Most importantly, this study offers policymakers insights into the causes of the discrepancies between MoI policies and practices and their negative effects on society, the economy, and culture. Finally, this study lends support to sociolinguistics by taking into account the context of ethnic minority students and indigenous languages.

In line with the findings, the current study recommends some ways to address the issues of MoI in Bangladesh.

- It is high time policymakers reconsidered Bangladesh's MoI policies from primary to higher secondary levels. First of all, the National Education Policy (Final) 2010 needs to be implemented, where English is to be dispelled from the primary level of schooling and a compulsory subject from the secondary to higher secondary level. (Ministry of Education, 2010).
- At the same time, global competence in English is also inevitable. To this end, explicit policies regarding the status of the English language should be implemented to improve the quality of English teaching and diminish its divided usage in society.
- Finally, an inclusive and non-discrimination education system needs to be introduced where MoI is the first language to meet the needs of different language speakers. UNESCO (1953, p. 6, cited in Sibomana, 2020) stressed that 'the best medium for teaching is the mother tongue of the pupil'. Notably, many developed countries, namely

China, Japan, and Russia, have achieved high literacy in their mother tongues, at least at the primary level (Rahman et. al., 2019). Heugh (2000) argued that mother tongue education is more effective than bilingual or second language mediums of instruction (cited in Uys et al., 2007).

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