

Mizo Medium in English Medium Schools of Mizoram

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Abstract

An English medium education system is one that uses English as the primary medium of instruction - particularly where English is not the mother tongue of the students especially in the British ex-colonial countries of the world. Even in India, a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life is their knowledge of English. In order to respond to people's aspirations and to check the gradual decline in the students enrolment in Government vernacular schools, and in the hope to improve the quality of education in the state, the Government of Mizoram started converting government run vernacular schools into English medium schools. However, the instruction in the Government English Medium schools in Mizoram is still in Mizo. This paper attempts to explore the problems of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in government English medium schools and the impact of EMI on the school education in Mizoram. The study found lack of English language proficiency of the teachers was the biggest problem. Increase in number of students enrolled in government schools after the introduction of EMI was the most visible impact of EMI on school education in the state.

Keywords: *English as a Second Language (ESL), Medium of Instruction, English Language, First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), Third Language (L3).*

Introduction

An English medium education system is one that uses English as the primary medium of instruction - particularly where English is not the mother tongue of the students. There is an expeditious worldwide shift towards using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) for academic subjects such as mathematics, science, architecture, medicine and geography etc. EMI is increasingly being used in universities, secondary schools and even in primary schools (Dearden, 2014) in many countries especially in the British ex-colonial countries of the world.

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English in India is a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life. The visible indicator of this presence of English is that today its teaching is being demanded by many to be taught at the very initial stage of schooling. Moreover, it can be observed in mushrooming private English medium schools and the early introduction of English in State schools (Dutta, 2012). It is a matter of common observation that students' learning is greatly facilitated if the students and their teachers have enough mastery over the language being used as the medium of instruction in the school (ERCM 2009-2010 p.81). Therefore, English as a second language (ESL) has also become the preferred medium of instruction in Mizoram. As such private English Medium Schools have been flourishing in the state for the last 15-20 years while there is a gradual decline in the enrollment of students in the Government Mizo medium schools in Mizoram. In fact, it is the pull of English medium which attracts students towards private English medium fee-charging schools. Evidently, the increasing popularity of the private schools is due to the use of English medium which is perceived to be the means of social and economic empowerment and upward mobility.

Therefore, in order to respond to people's aspirations and to check the gradual decline in the enrolment in government Mizo medium schools and to motivate parents to choose to send their children to government run schools; the Government of Mizoram started giving permission to government Mizo medium schools for shifting the medium of instruction to English. During 2002 – 2017, a total of 144 Government Mizo medium schools (87 primary schools and 57 upper primary (middle) schools) had been converted into English medium schools adding the total number of English medium schools to 1373 which contributed about 58.4% from the total number of elementary schools in Mizoram.

Moreover, the Government of Mizoram had issued a Notification (*Vide No.B.12011/1/2012-EDN(SC) Dated Aizawl, the 27th July, 2016*) stating,

“On the recommendation of The Education Reforms Commission, Mizoram and in the interest of public service, the Governor of Mizoram is pleased to order the use of English as a Medium of Instruction from Class-VI onwards in all the Government Schools and Government-Aided Schools commencing from the academic session of 2017-2018.”

Though the government made a decision in switching over the medium of instruction from Mizo to English in all the government and a government aided schools in a massive scale to cover the whole of Mizoram from class VI, there are doubts regarding the success of the EMI in the government schools including the 144 converted Government English Medium Schools. Therefore, this paper discusses policy regarding the use of English medium in government schools in Mizoram and how different stakeholders perceive the use of Mizo versus English language as the medium of instruction in schools. The paper also attempts to explore the factors that motivate government schools to shift to English medium and the possible impact that EMI might have on the school education in Mizoram in general, and on the Mizo students in particular.

Overview of Language Policy in School Education

India stands as a testimony for language policies on many counts. A nation, which does not have a national language in view of its ethnic and linguistic diversity, is also a nation which has transformed the colonial language – English, into a link and library language, and an associate official language initially, now perceived as a language of upward mobility (NCERT, 2005a; Graddol, 2010). English continues to dominate higher education and high level offices of administration and judiciary of the national government. Moreover, English as a dominant medium of instruction in higher education has its wash back effect on school education. English language also finds its place as a link language between Hindi speaking and non-Hindi speaking states.

Since independence the language policy debate in India has been a political question rather than an academic one. This can be noticed even in the recent curricular revision, the National Curriculum Framework – 2005 which states, “The level of introduction of English has now become a matter of political response to people’s aspirations rendering almost irrelevant an academic debate on the merits of very early introduction” (Position Paper Teaching of English (NCERT, 2005c:1)

The National Policy on Education (NEP) 1986/1992 emphasizes 3-Language Formula, implying mother tongue as the first language (L1), which will continue from the primary up to the secondary stage, that is, from classes I to X, and the second language (L2) will be Hindi (in the non-Hindi speaking States like Mizoram) and the third language (L3) will be English, both to be introduced from the upper primary stage, that is from class VI. The second and third languages are expected to be studied upto the secondary stage of school education with a view to removing inequalities among the languages of India and to promote national integration among school children. The scope of the 3-Language Formula is to be introduced from class VI up to the secondary level of education. However, the school system in the country introduces three languages in some form from the primary stage onwards and this is also true in the case of Mizoram. In Mizoram, the study of Mizo language (L1) and English (L2) begins right from class I and the study of Hindi as L3 begins from class III. Despite the policy formulation of commencing the study of L2 from class VI onwards, the study of L1 and L2 is begun simultaneously from class I. Obviously this policy has been adopted to meet the societal aspirations of preparing the Mizo students to be able to use English not only as medium of communication but also to use it as medium of learning at the secondary and tertiary level of education.

Medium of Instruction

The ‘medium of instruction and learning’ in schools has tremendous impact on the quality of student’s learning. It is a common observation that students’ learning is greatly facilitated if the students and their teachers have enough mastery over the language being used as the medium of instruction in the school. In Mizoram, the Mizo language (Mother tongue is conveniently taken as synonymous with the language of the state or the regional

language) is used as the medium of instruction in Government primary schools (class I to class V), and thereafter, English should be the medium of instruction as well as the medium for examination, except with the Mizo and Hindi subjects. However, with regard to medium of instruction, 'The Education Policy of Mizoram 2013' stated that '...importance of English for communication and for the purpose of quality education at the secondary and tertiary levels cannot be minimized or overemphasized. Learning in one's mother tongue at Primary level of elementary education and *in English at the upper primary, secondary and tertiary levels would enhance the quality of education in the State* (Education Policy of Mizoram 2013 p.17).

Though efforts have been made towards the development and enrichment of Mizo language in the state, it is unlikely that it shall become a language of technology, business, education, medicine, judiciary, industry and international relations etc. in the near future. English is, in fact, a medium of learning and it forms an indispensable part of children's intellectual, social and emotional growth and is very crucial for their future studies and career. The higher they study, the more important it is bound to become. The Mizo students will not face difficulty in the use of English in the higher education and professional education programmes, if they start using English medium from at least the upper primary level of education onwards. Currently, all the Government Secondary Schools use Mizo as the medium of instruction though English is very much the medium of learning on paper (Education Reforms Commission, Mizoram 2009-2010). Unfortunately, this is true to some extent in many of the Government English medium schools of Mizoram.

The Decision Making Process for Changing to EMI

The Education Reforms Commission (2009 – 2010) Report and The Group of Expert (2010-2011) Report, a major policy and programme document to improve the quality of education and reform the education system in Mizoram, have made it clear that *considering the Mizo people's positive attitude towards English (as medium of instruction), it would be advisable to switch over from Mizo medium to English medium, at least from class VI*. This can be implemented immediately (GoE 2010-2011, page 17). This policy seems to be operating, as the parents interviewed reported that during the study, they wanted their children to study in English medium. Generally, only those parents who could not afford to send their children to private schools chose government schools and the shift to EMI helps them to feel that their children have access to greater opportunities in life. One parent stated: "I cannot pay the fees of the private schools for my child but the school has helped poor people like me to educate our children in English medium". Another commented: "I am not in a good financial state and therefore I cannot send my children to private schools. Other parents like me asked the school to start English medium instruction here and they listened to our voices. Now my children get the opportunity to study in English and this has given me hope that they will be able to improve their English. I can provide them with good education at a minimum cost now". The school's authorities also thought that teaching in English would improve the reputation of the school. Not all stakeholders were unequivocally supportive of the decision,

however. Teachers, who had the greatest role in implementing EMI, seem to be worried about how they would cope with the change, and were not confident that they could teach in English medium because they were so used to teaching in Mizo medium.

The students seemed to have a positive attitude towards the decision made by the schools to shift to English. For example, a student studying in class VII regretted that he could not receive his own education in English because the school started EMI one batch after his admission to the school: "If I had had a chance to study in English medium, I would have done far better than now. Other students who got enrolled one batch after me are lucky because they can study in English medium in a government school." This reveals that students studying in the same school – with the same resources and the same teachers – think that those who study in English medium have an advantage over the ones studying in Mizo. This shows that students seem to share the widespread perception that they can do better if they are educated in English medium. They are not totally wrong, because, today English is a link language among different semi-educated and educated linguistic groups in India, a window to the world. It is the language of opportunities. Most jobs require knowledge of English. In most of the interviews a candidate is questioned as in English language, he might be required to work anywhere in a multilingual India or could even be posted abroad. Moreover, international trade, conferences and reports of scientific and technological discoveries, communication, computers and diplomacy are mostly in English or are with the help of English interpreter. Most of the scientific research is reported or translated into English. Almost all the computer languages and programmes are in English. Internet also speaks, writes and prints in English. One student said: "If we had studied in English medium, we could have improved our English language and this would help us get better jobs later". Indicating the possible benefits of English language proficiency, another student added: "Those who know English well can get good jobs; therefore, we like studying in English medium schools". These stakeholders' views revealed the collective decision making process being used in schools to take the decision to shift the medium of instruction to English.

Problems in the implementation of EMI

Lack of English language proficiency of the teachers seems to be the biggest problem as well as challenge the government schools are facing to implement EMI because most of the teachers in government English medium schools have *never studied in English themselves and were never trained to teach in English and have been used to teaching through the medium of Mizo for years*. In a context in which the pedagogy for Mizo medium instruction itself is generally regarded as flawed and has not been able to deliver good results, *use of a second language for instruction may compound the difficulties for both students and teachers. For teachers who are not able to deliver the curriculum effectively in their mother tongue, using English to teach the same content is almost guaranteed to do more harm than good*. The students are unlikely to understand the content taught in English by teachers who do not have appropriate proficiency to explain concepts in an intelligible way. With respect to these challenges, the views of the teachers, parents and head teacher in this study were found to be

contradictory. One of the parents said “teachers should not have any problem teaching in English to the children as they know more English than the young ones”, perpetuating a myth that only limited English is needed to teach at lower levels of schooling. In contrast, data in this study reveals that *the teachers themselves face difficulties in explaining subject matter in English confidently and, therefore, they frequently make use of Mizo in the classroom*. One teacher stated, *“It is difficult for us to teach in English because we have forgotten the English language and have been used to teaching in Mizo for years”*. This is the reason behind the maximum use of Mizo as a medium of instruction in the Government English medium schools.

The head teacher acknowledged teachers’ initial difficulties but argued they had now become accustomed to teaching in English saying, *“They didn’t feel comfortable to teach in English in the beginning, but now most of them report that they have developed proficiency and confidence to use EMI”*. Interestingly, the head teacher’s views did not match with students’ experience. One student, when asked whether the teachers teach exclusively in English or use Mizo as well in the class, expressed: *“Teachers use Mizo to explain the content and allow us to ask questions in Mizo but we have to write our answers only in English because the teachers tell us that we are studying in English medium school and the examinations will be conducted in English medium.”* Use of Mizo is also partly a response to students’ needs, as one of the teachers said *“The students don’t understand the content if it is not explained in Mizo as well as in English”*. The students and teachers thus seem to have developed a practice in which *studying in English medium means reading books and writing answers in English but explaining content in Mizo*. Proficiency of the teachers appears, then, to be a major problem and challenge to implement EMI in government schools while use of EMI from the early grades is also difficult due to the low entry levels of English proficiency of the students.

The Impact of EMI

The use of English has had great impacts on government schools in Mizoram. One of the major changes is visible in the *increase in number of students enrolled in these schools after the introduction of EMI* (Republica, 2016). Not surprisingly, the schools themselves take an increase in the number of students as a significant achievement, as the head teacher of the school under study commented: *After the introduction of EMI in our school, some of the parents have brought their children to our school from (English medium) private schools*. This is a great achievement as we have gained the trust of the parents. The number of students seeking admission in some of the model English medium schools is increasing every year. However, when asked about the academic achievement of the students, the head teacher and the teachers did not seem to have a very clear idea about their levels. One of the teachers mentioned *“the students have better English language proficiency and the overall result of the school has improved”* but did not give specific details. Parents were also happy about the impact of EMI. One of them shared her view that she feels *“happy as the children can speak English to some extent after getting enrolled in this school”*. All the participants in the study agreed that both the local community and the students have developed a positive attitude

towards the whole school after the introduction of EMI. Though the increase in enrolment is positive, the impact of EMI on students' academic achievement is still not clear as no research comparing achievement levels pre- and post-EMI in individual schools in Mizoram has been found.

There is a notion that using L2 as the medium of instruction carries the danger of putting the Mizo identity and educational achievement of the children at risk; students may also end up not knowing either Mizo or English, especially in situations where the teachers themselves weren't fluent in the language delivery. There is a possibility that the language used to deliver the school curriculum pulls down the educational performance of many of those who do not use it at home, particularly those who do not have regular access to it outside school. However, there is a chance to improve the quality of education through EMI in Mizoram, if implemented successfully. It could have tremendous impact on the education system of the state. Learning through English medium is crucial for Mizo students in acquiring proficiency in English language – the tools required for their future higher studies and for their future career as proficiency in the language is a pre-requisite for effective communication and knowledge acquisition.

Suggestions and Conclusion

It is clear from the study that the schools have shifted to EMI to ensure their continued existence and the decision has nothing to do with delivery of quality education. Teachers are not prepared to teach in English medium, neither psychologically nor in terms of their English language proficiency. It is interesting to note that teachers of the government English medium schools feel more comfortable using Mizo during the teaching learning process in the school even after conversion of the school to English medium. It is the teacher who is responsible for the realization of educational objectives not only through effective transaction of the prescribed curriculum but also through experience-based interventions in curriculum development and also by maximizing the utilization of available instructional and infrastructural facilities. The teacher's role in improving the quality of education assumes added significance in the context of Mizoram due to the presence of a large proportion of professionally unqualified teachers in the school systems, which is obviously due to non-availability of professionally qualified teachers because of weak and inadequate system of teacher education in the state. Poorly trained teachers impart poor language skills. Therefore, the invigoration of the teacher education system is suggested for revamping school education.

Moreover, Government elementary schools should not be in a hurry to shift their medium to English without the required preparation such as providing English language and pedagogy training to the teachers or arranging materials to teach in English medium prior to making the change to EMI. The twin demands of expecting the teachers to become fluent and then deliver quality education in a second language in a government schools without proper planning is a very unrealistic dream. Even policy makers and regulatory bodies should monitor the preparation and progress of the schools before and after the implementation of EMI so that once a programme begins, it can be implemented smoothly and successfully.

The government should also carefully examine applications received from the schools to convert from Mizo medium to English medium schools with due care and consideration taking into account the availability of professionally qualified teachers and necessary resources for the successful implementation of EMI; it is also necessary to have broader discussions with all stakeholders and experts regarding the rationale, procedures, challenges and potential impacts of the introduction of EMI before any programme is launched so that it can actually bring about the desired changes in the education system.

Finally, EMI will have huge impact in the education system of the state in a positive way, and increase students' enrolment, if it is implemented successfully. It would also improve the quality of education as desired by the education policy document of the state. Some research evidence also suggests that 80% of a human brain developed within the first 3 years of life. This means that by the time most children hit school age, they have already passed some of the most important years in terms of learning, in whatever language their environment allows. In view of the nation-wide trend of teaching L1 and L2 from class I onwards and to equip the Mizo students to acquire sufficient proficiency in the English language, both written and oral, there is no harm in continuing the study of L1 and L2 from class I. Therefore, if the Mizo students are well versed with the L2 and have proficiency in English language they will not face difficulty in the use of English in the higher education or in acquiring information and knowledge, if they start using English medium at least from the upper primary stage of education as envisaged in the Education Policy of Mizoram 2013. However, unfortunately EMI is not yet successfully implemented in the state. Therefore, the state government has tremendous responsibility to ensure the success of EMI in the state by organising and providing requisite professional training to enhance the teachers' English language skills, equipping the schools with necessary resources like the language laboratory, and other teaching aids etc., in order to produce a large number of professionally qualified teachers capable and competent enough to impart education through English medium. Those teachers will create favourable environment conducive for learning and acquiring the necessary English language skills at school– the tools requisite for their higher education and for their future career. Eventually, EMI will become successfully implemented in the state and will definitely have great impact in the school education system by improving the quality of education in the state as advocated by the state education policy. The quality education will ultimately produce large numbers of human resources for the state and for the people of Mizoram.

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