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Exploring the Effects of Language of Instruction on Student Academic Performance in Public Universities of Nepal

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Abstract. This study explores the students and faculty's perceptions and experiences of the effect of language of instruction (LoI) on academic performance in public universities in Nepal. It is an extension of a larger study on academic performance in higher education, conducted using a sequential mixed-methods research design in Nepalese public universities. This part of the study focuses on the LoI and its effect on academic performance. In this regard, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students and faculty from the education, humanities and social sciences, management, and science and technology streams of the universities. The analysis of the data reveals three overriding findings: a) the LoI policies and practices in the classrooms are ambivalent; b) students and faculty experienced English-dominant LoI as a matter of tension while relating to the differentiated English Language Proficiency (ELP) and the availability of learning resources; and c) the use of EMI in student assessment is inconsistent. This study also reveals that the LoI is a strong predictor of the students' academic performance. Therefore, issues concerning the LoI in general and the EMI in particular must be addressed, both at the macro-level of institutional policies and practices, and the micro-level classroom pedagogies, at the universities and their affiliated campuses.

Keywords: academic performance; higher education; language of instruction; learning resources; student assessment; Nepal

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1. Introduction

The effect of the Language of Instruction (LoI) on student academic performance has emerged as a critical concern in higher education worldwide today (Sah & Li, 2018; Lin & Lei, 2021; Guo et al., 2022; Vazquez-Noguera et al., 2024). Nepal has been facing several issues in its seven-decade-long history of higher education development (Devkota, 2021). The institutionalization of higher education in Nepal was initiated with the establishment of Tribhuvan University (TU) in 1959.

Nevertheless, there were already a couple of colleges affiliated to the Indian universities during the Rana regime (Timsina, 2019). The establishment of TU aimed to produce human resources required for the nation's development (Wood, 1976). The expansion of TU, institutionalizing several affiliated constituent and community campuses across the country over the next three decades of its establishment, and the establishment of several universities in the late 1980s and 1990s, as well as later, marked a rapid growth of higher education.

However, TU remains the most prominent university, both in terms of student enrolment and the number of higher education programs offered in Nepal. It covers more than 80% of the total students enrolled in higher education. Of the total students enrolled in higher education in Nepal, 76.97% are enrolled in general sciences (education, humanities, social sciences, management, law, etc.), whereas 23.03 percent are in technical sciences (engineering, medical science, forestry, etc.). The management, education, and humanities and social sciences share 46.37%, 17.19%, and 10.96% of the total students, respectively. The figures of general sciences contrast with those of the technical sciences, which comprise 8.38% in science and technology, 6.38% in medicine, and 6.57% in engineering (UGC, 2018/19).

Though it is not the de facto practice, the English language is often used as an LoI in most of the programs under the technical sciences (science and technology, medical science, forestry and engineering). The programs of the general sciences, involving education, humanities, social sciences, management, and law, however, follow inconsistent practices of LoI in teaching, learning, and assessment. Most often, universities and their affiliated campuses have diverse practices in implementing LoI in classroom pedagogy and student assessment. Different patterns of LoI, for example, 'Nepali dominance,' 'English dominance,' 'Nepali for classroom discussion and English for student assessment,' 'test papers in English and students' responses in Nepali in the final exams,' etc., are unevenly practiced at the universities.

These LoI patterns and practices have had multifaceted effects, including inequity in student learning and assessment. Still, the emphasis on English medium instruction (EMI) in a context where faculty and students have low proficiency in English has caused detrimental effects on their pedagogical practices, academic performance, and achievement (Curle et al., 2020; Thumvichit & Laoriandee, 2024). In this context, this study aims to explore the effect of LoI on the academic performance of students in public universities in Nepal.

2. Student Academic Performance in Higher Education Institutions

Academic performance is a key construct in higher education (Macaro, 2018). The issues of academic performance and achievement standards exert significant implications in higher education performance and quality (Royce, 2012). Overall, academic performance is dependent on students' achievement and learning outcomes. Jarrett Report (1985) points out three types of performance indicators to measure the overall performance of any higher education institution.

The internal performance indicators (teaching quality, the attraction of research funds, attraction of master and doctoral students, graduation rates and classes of degree, the success rate of higher education degrees, etc.), external performance indicators (acceptability of graduates in employment, publications by staff and citations, patents, inventions and consultancies, membership, prizes, medals of learned societies, papers at conferences, etc.), and operating performance indicators (unit costs, staff/student ratios, class size, course options available, staff workloads, library stock availability, computing availability, etc.) need to be addressed to ensure the quality of university education.

Concerning higher education in Nepal, performance indicators mainly include overall enrollment, enrollment of students from Dalit and other disadvantaged and marginalized communities, learning achievement, teacher performance, and research and publications. To enhance these quality indicators, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has proposed strategies for effective implementation, encompassing governance and management, quality assurance, equitable access, research and innovation, collaboration, coordination, internationalization, institutional development, and financing (UGC, 2023).

Several studies (Kuh et al., 2006; Lopez et al., 2023; Suleiman, 2024) have highlighted that students' academic performance is deeply intertwined with a multitude of factors, including expected and desired goals, attitudes, skills, peer support, and institutional climate for learning. It is also associated with the characteristics involving age, gender, socio-economic status, LoI, and daily hours that the institution allocates for the students' learning. Ali et al. (2013) investigated that gender, age, schooling, teaching faculty, economic status, residential area, tuition trend, and daily study hours affect students' academic performance and learning outcomes.

Hansen and Mastekaasa (2006) found that the social class origin remained a powerful determinant of students' academic performance and achievement. For them, students with high cultural capital tend to achieve higher grades in university courses. Researchers Chen et al. (2022) argued that mature students perform better than their younger counterparts because they tend to be more proficient in cognitive skills. However, McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) found that students' previous academic performance exerts the most significant impact on their achievement in higher education. Vermont (2005) notes that students' learning patterns are closely tied to personal and contextual factors, including their prior educational experiences. Moreover, Zeegers (2004) observed a direct

and measurable impact of prior education on students' learning outcomes and performance in higher education.

3. Language of Instruction: Contestant Space in Higher Education

LoI is one of the fundamental domains widely researched in the present context of higher education across the world. The majority of the studies in Asia and Europe have examined the role of English as the LoI in higher education in different countries (Mahboob, 2017; Guo & Wang, 2022; Lasagabaster, 2022). For example, Lasagabaster (2022) noted that English has been essentialized as "an indispensable part of the market as it helps to make graduates more competitive and marketable" (n.d.). Guo and Wang (2022) argue that China implemented English-medium instruction to integrate disciplinary knowledge and English proficiency in higher education. Equally, Zhang (2018) examined the EMI policy and argued that it [EMI] has been identified as a crucial mechanism for the internationalization of Chinese higher education.

However, Mahboob (2017) argued that English as a LoI has intensified socio-class differences in the context of Pakistan. This finding aligns with the results of several studies in higher education across East Asian countries (Kirkpatrick, 2017; Rahman et al., 2018; Galloway et al., 2020). However, Kirkpatrick (2017) argues that many Asian universities have implemented EMI without adequate planning and preparation, which has ultimately resulted in low participation by teachers and students in learning. Indeed, the practice of implementing EMI without proper planning has threatened the development of local and contextual knowledge in higher education in this region (Rahman, 2018).

In African nations as well, EMI has increasingly been applied to teaching and learning higher education subjects and contents (Brock-Utne, 2014; Pinxteren, 2022). Emergent neoliberal globalization practices in education (Rizvi, 2017) have compelled African universities to adopt EMI policies and practices, although they are not always prepared for them. Fomunyam (2019), in this regard, writes, "the strategic marketing of English and its constituent reinforcement through forces such as globalization and internationalization have led to the collapse of indigenous languages" in the African context (p. 23). Curle et al. (2020) examined EMI to be entangled with several challenges for both teachers and students.

Moshtari and Safarpour (2023) observed that students and university teachers from African countries had limited proficiency in English, leading to poor performance in their higher education degrees. The use of unfamiliar languages, including English, for classroom instruction has led many African students to perform poorly in their higher education classrooms (Kamwendo et al., 2014) and experience inequity (Xulu-Gama & Hadebe, 2022). Therefore, more recent approaches to the LoI in higher education are increasingly informed by the concept of multilingualism (Macaro, 2018). Though EMI is growing as a 'new normal' in the Asia-Pacific countries (Walkinshaw et al., 2017), the approach to using English along with other national-official languages side-by-side has become common, especially in classroom activities, teaching-learning material

production, lecture contents, and academic disciplines at universities (Aizawa & Rose, 2019).

Regarding the impact of LoI on students' academic performance in higher education, conflicting views exist in the literature. For example, Dafouz and Camacho-Minano (2016) argue that EMI/non-EMI division does not necessarily entail different results in students' academic achievement. This finding resonates with the findings of Dafouz et al. (2014) and Arroyo-Barrigüete et al. (2022), who observed no significant differences between EMI and non-EMI groups of students in terms of their academic performance in higher education.

However, Xie and Curle (2022) reported that EMI remains supportive to some extent around "the content knowledge acquisition, knowledge application and transformation, and formation of the new mode of thinking" (p. 595). Students and teachers who are less adequately prepared in English find EMI classes difficult and struggle to grasp the concepts presented in higher education classrooms (Phuong & Nguyen, 2019; Zhang & Pladevall-Ballester, 2022). Kamasak and Sahan (2023) note that students' language-related challenges consistently hinder their academic success.

For example, regarding the Saudi students' participation and performance in higher education, Zumor & Qasem (2019) argue, "EMI is a barrier to effective communication between students and faculty during lectures" (p. 82). Therefore, as Kim et al. (2022) pointed out, integrating EMI with translingual practices can be an alternative approach to challenging monolingual ideology and appreciating multiple languages in higher education classrooms. This resonates with several studies (Syed, 2022; Tang et al., 2024), which argue that translanguaging is an alternative approach for addressing the multilingual and plurilingual realities of higher education classrooms and enhancing students' learning outcomes. In this context, this study aims to explore how faculty and students of public universities in Nepal perceive and experience LoI in relation to their academic performance.

4. Study Questions

This study aims to investigate the effect of the current practices of LoI on students' academic performance in higher education in Nepal. Guided by this overarching aim, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1) What are the experiences of the students and the faculty concerning the existing policies and practices of LoI?
2) How do they respond to the effect of the EMI on the students' academic performance and achievement?

5. Methodology

This is an extended part of a larger study that investigated the factors affecting students' academic performance in higher education in Nepal (Devkota et al., 2020). The larger research project covered four universities: Tribhuvan University (TU), Purwanchal University (PU), Pokhara University (PoKU), and Kathmandu University (KU). Twenty-three campuses affiliated to these universities were selected based on the ecological region (Mountain, Hill and Terai), campus type

(constituent, community and private/institutional), stream (education, humanities and social sciences, management, and science and technology), program (bachelor's degree and master's degree), and program delivery mode (semester and non-semester). Eight hundred thirty-three students representing these sample campuses participated in the self-administered survey which included different sorts of information including student demography (sex, ethnicity, linguistic background, socio-economic status (SES), job engagement), pedagogical aspects (language of instruction, motivation, class regularity, teacher feedback, access, opportunity and participation in learning), resource management (curriculum, infrastructure and student support mechanism), and finally, student assessment and examination systems (internal assessment, external assessment and practicum).

Out of these several factors, a large section of students who participated in both the self-administered survey and FGDs reported that LoI stands as the key concern which affected their overall academic performance significantly. Guided by this finding from the large-scale study, this follow-up study was designed and conducted using qualitative methods, particularly in-depth interviews and FGDs.

5.1 Research Design and Methods

The sequential research design, following the mixed-methods research approach, provided the overall methodological guideline for collecting and analyzing the data in this research (Creswell, 2011). Guided by this research design, surveys and in-depth interviews, including FGDs, were used for data collection. A self-administered survey was used to collect quantitative information. In contrast, interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect qualitative information relating to the perceptions and experiences of both faculty and students (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Interviews were conducted with the chief executive officials of the sample universities (Rectors and Deans), officials of the examination boards, heads of the central departments, and the chiefs of the selected campuses and schools affiliated to the universities. FGDs were conducted to explore data from the faculty and the students.

During the interviews and FGDs, the faculty and the students discussed classroom pedagogies, LoI, parental occupation and education, socioeconomic status, household responsibilities and learning opportunities, institutional facilities provided to the students and perceived employability and subsequent effect of such factors in learning engagement and academic performance. Regarding the issue of LoI, approximately 42.5% of the students responded that LoI was a significant factor affecting their academic performance and achievement.

5.2 Participants and Data Collection Procedures

Guided by the aforementioned result from the large-scale survey, this extended study involved 15 faculty members representing four different universities, and their campuses and departments were interviewed. Similarly, 11 FGDs were conducted involving the students of central departments and affiliated campuses of the selected universities. However, when selecting representatives for the FGDs, students who had participated as respondents in the self-administered

survey were also involved. Altogether, 60 students participated in the FGDs and interviews, particularly relating to this part of the research, which aimed to investigate the effect of LoI on their academic performance. The interview and FGD guidelines were developed to explore the linguistic practices of the participants, their perceptions, and experiences regarding LoI in their teaching and learning processes. Five interviews and four FGDs were undertaken online, targeting those participants who were from the university campuses located at a distance and could not attend physically. All the interviews and FGDs were conducted in the Nepali language and audio recorded.

5.3 Analytical framework

The analysis of the data, particularly relating to the effect of LoI on students' academic performance, took place in successive phases. In the first phase, narratives concerning the LoI, derived from both interviews with the faculty and FGDs with the students, were transcribed and translated into English. We [both researchers] coded and recoded data individually and validated the emerging codes using inter-rater reliability. Five thematic codes, particularly concerned with LoI, EMI, and their effects on student academic performance, emerged. LoI practices and policy ambiguities, as well as experiences of students and faculty regarding the use of LoI (also known as EMI), learning resources, and the use of EMI in student assessment, the impact of LoI on academic performance, and student support mechanisms in this regard were the thematic codes that emerged.

These codes were categorized into three broader themes: LoI relating to classroom experiences and policy ambiguities, learning resources and student availability, and student assessment, LoI, and academic performance. These themes are discussed and interpreted in relation to the variables, for example, the types of campuses (constituent and community) and the streams (education, Humanities, management, science, and technology). Throughout the research, ethical concerns were addressed by informing participants about the study, obtaining their consent, and anonymizing identifiable information in the data sheets. The participants were provided with custom abbreviations (e.g., FS for female student, MS for male student, MT for male teacher, and FT for female teacher) while reporting data, making interpretations, and engaging in discussions.

6. Findings

This section discusses the findings that emerged from the analysis of the narratives and fieldnotes derived from interviews, FGDs, and observation. The findings are thematically presented below:

6.1 LoI: The Predictor of Student Academic Performance

The analysis of the data revealed that LoI has a seminal impact on students' academic performance in higher education. The average trend of the five-year achievement of the twenty-three campuses selected in this research shows that students in the science and technology stream performed significantly better than their counterparts in the education, management, and humanities streams in higher education in Nepal. Additionally, students from the constituent campuses

performed better than those from the community campuses in their respective streams.

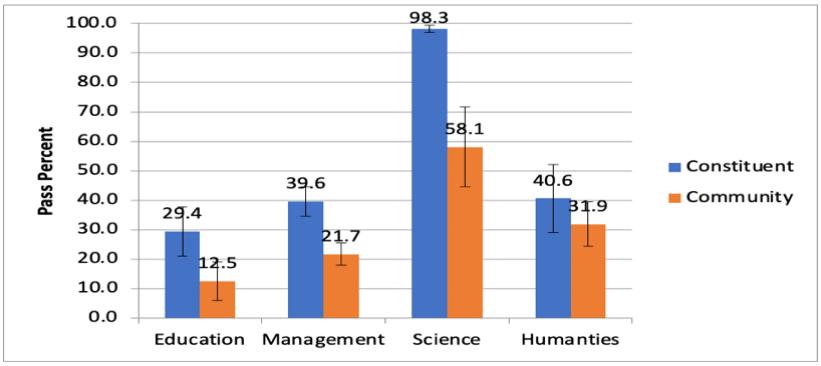

Figure 1: The Five-Year Students' Achievement in Four Streams (2016-2020)

This result raised a fundamental concern about why students in the science and technology stream performed better than those in the education, management, and humanities streams. During the interviews and FGDs, the faculty and the students of education, humanities, social sciences, and management strongly pointed out that the LoI, particularly EMI, is associated with academic performance. Since the university board exams are conducted in English medium, students who have a good mastery of English would perform better.

They also highlighted that the university and its campuses did not have specified policies regarding LoI, which had led the students to rely entirely on how their respective campuses decided. Except for science and technology and English language-related disciplines, EMI was not generally adopted in teaching and learning in education, management, and the Humanities. However, the English medium was highly demanded for student assessment in most universities and their affiliated campuses.

6.2 Policy Ambiguities and Student and Faculty Experiences

The analysis of data derived from interviews and group discussions with the teaching faculty and students revealed that universities and their affiliated campuses did not have specified policies relating to the medium of instruction. Hence, the choice of LoI was guided by the interest and the proficiency of the faculty and the students in English. The level of English proficiency of the faculty and the students guided the choice of LoI in the classroom. The students of these four different streams made conflicting responses.

For example, more than eighty percent of the students from science and technology reported that they mostly studied their content areas in the English medium. The faculty members of that stream explained that most of their students, specializing in science and technology fields such as chemistry, physics, biology, botany, and zoology, preferred English to Nepali for teaching and learning. Only a few students with a bachelor's degree in this stream and those from a community school background responded that they could learn science content better if it were taught in Nepali along with English.

Unlike the students of the science and technology, those specializing management, humanities, social sciences, and education reported that Nepali was more dominant in classroom discussions. They explained that the slides and other reading materials were delivered in English. However, the student-student and teacher-student interactions took place in Nepali. The faculty members from these disciplines mostly noted that most of the students enrolled in education, humanities, and social sciences came from community schools of remote districts where Nepali was primarily used as the LoI. In humanities and social sciences, the students with major economics, sociology, anthropology, and population studies were expected to use English more compared to those with major geography, culture, and history.

A female student pursuing educational studies (FS1) at a TU-affiliated public campus located in a remote area remarked:

> ''*I feel afraid of English; I mean, I am not very good at English. I studied in a Nepali-medium community school when I was a school student. I did not have good exposure to English at the time. When I enrolled at the university, I found English difficult. Language is just for communication; getting content knowledge is more important. I would feel comfortable with concepts in both Nepali and English.*''

Another female student with an economics specialization (FS2) under humanities and social sciences at the central department of the TU, however, explained:

> ''*The knowledge of English is a prerequisite for us. You know, our subject requires us to consult the learning resources written in English. We do not have many learning resources in Nepali; English is the undeniable option for me to acquire disciplinary knowledge in economics.*''

The analysis of the narratives of these two female students reveals that they contrast in their perceptions and experiences regarding LoI. The student pursuing educational studies preferred Nepali to English, whereas the student with a major in economics preferred English to Nepali. Both FS1 and FS2 graduated from Nepali-medium community schools. FS2 also did not find English to be a comfortable language for learning. However, she perceived it as a prerequisite for consulting learning resources and acquiring the disciplinary knowledge required. Thus, the disciplinary knowledge they pursued in higher education requires them to choose among different LoI.

The faculty members tutoring at different streams of TU and PU also had different opinions regarding the LoI. A female teacher tutoring educational studies at a constituent campus of TU (FT1) explained:

> ''*Students who had Nepali as the medium of instruction in school grades would perform well if they were taught in Nepali. However, as per the requirement of our university curriculum, we expect them to read and write in English, not the language they are familiar with. Some of our students tell us that they could perform better if they were allowed to write in Nepali rather than in English.*''

However, a male teacher teaching zoology at the central department of TU (MT1) remarked:

> *''In our discipline, we connect our content knowledge with students' local knowledge systems. However, we need to prepare them to express their knowledge in English. So, although we use Nepali for discussion, we use English for delivering content and engaging them in writing. Since students with better previous educational backgrounds enroll in our science and technology program, our students face a slight problem concerning LoI compared to those in educational studies, humanities, and social sciences.''*

However, another teacher working as an instructor for Business Studies at PoKU (MT7) explained his experience differently:

> *''In our stream, we stress content more than language. We recommend reading materials in English; however, classroom discussions are conducted in Nepali. Our students conceptualize in Nepali and write in English and Nepali on a parallel basis.''*

Overall, the narratives of the students and the faculty members above reflected that the universities and their affiliated campuses do not have a specified policy regarding the choice of any specific language, English or Nepali, as the LoI at the institutional level. Thus, the choice of LoI depends on the motivation, interest, and English proficiency of the students and the faculty members. However, the nature of the disciplinary knowledge to be delivered also determines the choice of the medium of instruction. Students of educational studies, humanities, and social sciences mostly preferred the Nepali language to EMI due to their limited English language proficiency. This leads teachers to choose Nepali in classroom discussions, regardless of whether they prepare their PowerPoint Presentations in English.

6.3 Learning Resources Available to the Students

Student academic performance is deeply embedded in the availability of learning resources and the feedback they receive from their instructors. During the fieldwork, most students and faculty members reported that the learning resources provided by the university and its affiliated campuses are predictors of students' academic achievement. The students of educational studies, humanities, and social sciences often explained that they did not have access to good learning resources on the one hand, and on the other, the available learning resources were also not written in the Nepali language, which they would feel comfortable with linguistically.

A male student studying educational studies at a PU-affiliated public campus narrated:

> *''We do not have a good library on our campus, nor do we have good internet access. We mainly consult a few books published many years ago. We are mostly dependent on the class notes that our teachers provide us. For the course we studied last year, our teacher prepared notes and provided them to us for the preparation of the final exam. The materials downloaded from the internet are in English, which we find difficult to comprehend. (MS1)''*

With a similar experience, a female student of the TU constituent campus located in the eastern hill district (FS3) narrated her learning trajectories as:

> *''In my case, I did not see the books recommended for our study at all. I collected the class notes from the earlier batches and those of students studying on campuses in Kathmandu. I also collected some reading materials from the internet and prepared notes by simply translating them into Nepali. I attempted my final exam, but I am worried about getting a good result. (FS3)''*

The narratives above are familiar among other FGD participants who studied at campuses located in remote districts. These campuses lacked the required facilities, including labs and e-libraries. Since most of these campuses are built on the model of community schools, they often lack adequate infrastructure and efficient human resources to run university programs. The students involved in the interviews and FGDs reported that they had hardly any reading materials, particularly the books prescribed by their respective courses. In a situation of inadequacy of the basic learning materials required, students could hardly perform well.

A male teacher working at the TU constituent campus in the headquarters of a hill district (MT2) in Western Nepal explained:

> *''Our students are mostly dependent on the lecture notes that we faculty members provide them. Even the faculty members do not have access to adequate learning/reading resources. Some of the reading materials we provide are in English, which the students find difficult to read and understand. There is still a lack of reading resources written in Nepali. (MT2)''*

A female teacher working at the central department of science and technology of TU (FT2) also pointed out an inadequacy of relevant and timely reading resources in her discipline. She reflected,

> *''In our department, we lack adequate learning/reading resources for both students and faculty members. Sometimes, we recommend books and academic papers to them; however, they cannot purchase them, and the department also cannot buy them for the students. Good reading resources are too expensive, tagged in US dollars, and they are hardly affordable. It is difficult for us. (FT2)''*

From the narratives of the students and faculty, three key concerns regarding the availability of learning resources emerged. First, the campuses were situated in remote settings and lacked the necessary infrastructure to support students' learning. Even the central departments lacked sufficient and relevant learning resources for their students. The campus authorities reiterated that they lack funds to update their libraries with more recently published references. Second, students with low English proficiency had difficulty coping with learning resources written in English. Moreover, third, very few reading resources have been published in the Nepali language, which are hardly adequate in terms of content depth and range for students to achieve the learning goals expected in higher education.

6.4 Inconsistent Assessment and Academic Performance

One more pertinent issue that emerged from the analysis is an inconsistency between the classroom language and the language that students are expected to use in their assessment, i.e., both in internal and external examinations. At these universities, the curricula of all programs, both of bachelor's and master's degrees, expect students to attempt written exams in the English medium. However, classroom discussions are usually dominated by the Nepali language in most disciplines, including education, humanities, and management. As a result, most students find attempting exams in the English medium more difficult. The students and the faculty members reflected on their experiences in this regard.

The students of subject-specific disciplines, except for English, mathematics, science, technology, and ICT, reported that they rarely discussed the content in English in their classrooms. However, the test papers were set in the English medium. This led many students, except those in the aforementioned disciplines, to find it challenging to understand the meaning of the test items they were expected to answer. For example, a male student pursuing a bachelor's degree with the specialization of economics education at TU public campus (MS2) narrated his experience:

> *''One of the factors that has affected our performance in a bachelor's degree is 'English'. As we struggle with poor English communication skills, we often struggle to answer questions set in English effectively. At our campus, we are fully taught in the Nepali language; teacher-student interaction proceeds through Nepali. However, the exams are conducted in English. It not only leads us to confusion but also makes it hard for us to get the concept of the questions. So, we cannot attempt the questions well. What I feel is that either we should be taught in English from the very beginning, or exam questions should be asked in Nepali as well. (MS2)''*

In a similar tone, a female student of a constituent campus of TU (FS4) explained her experiences during examinations, hence:

> *''Up to the +2 level (higher secondary grades), we studied all subjects except English in the Nepali medium. The questions in the exams were also asked in Nepali. It was easier for us to attempt the exam in the Nepali medium. However, after we enrolled at the campus, we were mostly taught in Nepali, but we had to attempt questions in English…We complained, but the university authority did not listen to our voice. I feel we fail in most of the subjects because we find it difficult to understand the meanings of the questions [which are in English medium]. In the exam last year, I was unable to attempt many questions because I could not understand the meanings of the questions, which were in English. (FS4)''*

The faculty members who were involved in teaching at these campuses for a decade also accept this fact. Most of them stated that there is an inconsistency between the LoI and the language in which the final question papers are set. For them, a large number of students, particularly those who do not specialize in English, science, and technology, including ICT and mathematics, fail in the exams for two reasons. First, the students demonstrate low proficiency in English;

and second, the classroom instruction is dominantly occupied with Nepali. These evidence contradict the universities' policies of setting question papers in English only. A female teacher with a decade-long experience in teaching educational sciences at a PU-affiliated campus (FT3) reported:

> *''Most of the students enrolled in the bachelor's degree program at our campus failed their last year's exam. One of the reasons for their failure is their limited proficiency in English. When asked [the students] why they could not attempt the questions well, most of them replied that they could not get the meanings of the questions asked in the exam.''*

Another faculty member from the TU constituent campus located in a rural setting (MT3 explained:

> *''In our campus, mostly daughters and daughters-in-law enrol. Their choice is mostly education and management. We run classes in Nepali, and only the technical terms are given in English. We need to translate English into Nepali because our students request it, as they have limited proficiency in both spoken and written English. (MT3)''*

Other faculty members also pointed out that setting test papers in English is a deficit policy in higher education, as most students come from a Nepali linguistic background and do not have adequate exposure to English. For instance, a teacher with experience of teaching social sciences for more than a decade at the central department of TU (MT4) remarked:

> *''I am still confused. Why does our university not have a policy of setting test items in both English and Nepali? At this level, content knowledge should be given more priority, and students can also express themselves in Nepali better than in English.''*

Thus, the above-mentioned remarks of the students and the faculty members imply that the language of the test papers should not be a hindrance to the acquisition and delivery of content knowledge in any discipline. Although LoI is not considered a genuine issue at universities and their campuses, students, particularly those studying subjects other than English, science, technology, ICT, and mathematics, face a serious challenge in coping with content and learning resources written in English.

7. Discussion

The findings presented above demonstrate that LoI in Nepalese universities is entangled with multiple issues, including language education policy, the availability and preparation of learning resources, and students' academic performance. Regarding the language education policy, the public universities and the campuses affiliated to them have implemented their programs without specifying the LoI and student assessment. In most of the academic programs, the higher education institutions assume EMI with the aspirations of producing competitive human resources required for the national and international job markets.

However, in this study, the students and faculty mainly reported having a low level of English proficiency to attain the expected competencies. Kirkpatrick

(2017) explained that EMI implementation in higher education in non-English countries is deeply embedded in several critical concerns, including the relative language proficiency of faculty and students in English, policy ambiguity, and the availability of adequate and appropriate learning resources. As revealed by the field, universities and their affiliated campuses were driven by the notion that EMI could be a panacea for improving higher education quality (Bowles & Murphy, 2020). It is considered a key indicator of student academic performance (Lin & Lei, 2021; Sahan et al., 2021).

The growing influence of neoliberalism in the economy and development in Nepal after the 1990s, and its subsequent impacts on higher education policies and programs, motivated higher education institutions to adopt performance-based funding and quality standards (Dougherty & Natow, 2020). In the guise of these forces, English has been appreciated as "the desired linguistic capital for developing advanced English skills, enhancing educational achievements, and access to higher education, and ultimately, increasing the chances of upward social and economic mobility" (Sah & Li, 2018, p. 120).

However, the analysis of the data above revealed that EMI exerted a detrimental effect on the academic achievement of students who were primarily enrolled in university-affiliated campuses located in semi-urban (district headquarters) and rural settings. The students of such campuses often reported that they had graduated from the non-EMI schools and experienced a severe paucity of English proficiency required for coping with the knowledge embedded in the learning resources and lectures. Danilowicz-Gosele, et al. (2017) argue that students' previous educational backgrounds and grades are strongly associated with their academic performance in higher education.

Educational background, including LoI that the students had had during their school career, strongly shaped their learning engagement, achievement, and progress in higher education as well (Rahman, et al., 2018). A couple of students explained that learning English was associated with anxiety and contributed to tension in their academic performance (Jie & Sulaiman, 2024). Second, many students reported having limited access to learning resources. They had to struggle significantly to acquire the required disciplinary knowledge. Those students who had low-level English proficiency struggled more when attempting the term and final exams and translating the learned knowledge into their answer sheets.

Of the four different streams investigated, students from education, humanities, and social sciences reported that they experienced an inequitable learning situation due to not having the required proficiency in English, on the one hand, and not having access to adequate learning resources in the language they felt comfortable with, on the other. The higher education policy emphasized EMI for student assessment, which strongly contradicts the classroom instruction, which is primarily conducted in Nepali. Such a contradiction in both policy and practice deeply embeds monolingual ideology, leading to the functional spread of English as the sole language of instruction in higher education.

It has reinforced educational injustice for students who lack access to quality learning resources and a firm grasp of written and spoken English (Sultana, 2023). The inconsistency of the choice of language in the student-teacher interaction in university classrooms and the language for the assessment. The analysis of teacher and student narratives reveals that Nepali is preferable to English in teacher-student interactions in most disciplines of education, humanities, and social sciences. Thus, as several scholars (Syed, 2022; Tang et al., 2024) have argued, instead of mere EMI, translanguaging may be more appropriate to capture the multilingual, even plurilingual realities, and foster students' academic performance in higher education in Nepal.

Overall, the discussion of the findings above has revealed some complex experiences of students and faculty relating to the LoI in higher education. EMI is expected to have a positive impact on student academic performance at universities. However, pedagogical practices, particularly classroom interactions between faculty and students of education, humanities, social sciences, and management, are primarily conducted in the Nepali language. Such a practice contradicts the EMI-dominant assessment. It has reinforced students' language-related challenges and academic success in higher education (Kamasak et al., 2024).

Still, the issues associated with the EMI, as reflected in the narratives above, are deeply realized in the participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, those of a different gender, and those with limited access to learning resources and English learning opportunities. Besides policy ambiguity, inadequate learning resources, and inconsistency between classroom pedagogy and student assessment practices, a deeper investigation into LoI and its impact on academic performance needs to be extended in relation to educational, technological, and socio-cultural factors.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study, a part of a larger research project on student academic performance at the public universities in Nepal, explored the impact of LoI on student academic performance. Delving into the lived experiences and narratives of faculty and students, this study demonstrates that LoI has been associated with the policies, classroom pedagogies, learning resources available, and student assessment practices in higher education. The policy ambiguity realised in the choice of English or Nepali medium has led the universities and their affiliated campuses to practice LoI ambivalently.

Therefore, students, other than those in English subjects, science, technology, ICT, and mathematics, experienced a serious difficulty in participating in higher education, particularly due to their limited English language knowledge. Those students who enrolled in campuses located in rural settings faced an inadequacy of learning resources, which affected their academic performance. The inconsistency between the classroom pedagogies and student assessment regarding LoI led them to demonstrate poor performance in the term and final exams. By means of this, the classroom pedagogy was hugely facilitated in the

Nepali language, whereas the student assessment was more dominantly undertaken in English. This has pushed the students into confusion. Such findings revealed that LoI is not less important in shaping student academic performance in higher education in Nepal and similar contexts. Therefore, it should be seriously taken into account when framing higher education policies, designing and implementing higher education programs and classroom pedagogies, developing learning resources, and finally, engaging students in various forms of assessment practices. This research has opened up a new avenue for future researchers to explore LoI relating to gender, regionality, and ethnolinguistic specificities.

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