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Effects of English-Medium Instruction on Rural and Urban Students in India: An Evidence-Informed Synthesis and Illustrative Quantitative Model

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Abstract - The English-mediated instruction (EMI) has rapidly disseminated in the Indian education system since the family has linked English with mobility and better jobs. In the meantime, the rural-urban inequalities of household resource allocation, the school facilities and the language proficiency of teachers in India, make it questionable that EMI may strengthen the status quo unless the language instruction and teaching subject scaffold is strong. The article is a summary of the evidence in the research and policy on EMI in India and an exemplary and supported quantitative model in rural and urban students. According to the available publications on the matter of English input, vocabulary and reading readiness of learners at the low-socioeconomic-status group, national policy implications of multilingual instruction, we propose a conceptual framework of English multilingual instruction with regard to the learning outcomes, which is grounded on the teacher capacity, exposure to English and access to learning materials. Next, we generate a dataset (size N =800; 4 groups: rural/urban x EMI/non-EMI) that is parameterised to reflect the patterns that are being reported in the literature (e.g., larger EMI with larger resources in urban environment). The results suggest that content learning in the rural EMI settings would be more prone to undergoing trade-offs than that in the urban EMI settings with a weak language support. It has action implications highlighted in the discussion: the necessity to create teacher training that is specific, the use of bilingual pedagogues (including planned translanguaging), bridging courses, and changes in assessment that decouple language and content constructs. The paper concludes that EMI is neither good nor bad and its effects will depend on the quality of implementation and resourcing that is based on equity.

Keywords - English-medium instruction (EMI); rural–urban divide; learning achievement; language proficiency; equity and access; government vs private schools; socioeconomic status (SES); classroom pedagogy; code-switching; multilingual education; student anxiety and engagement; India; educational policy; NEP 2020; assessment outcomes.

I Introduction

English is an interesting phenomenon in Indian education: both a colonial heritage and an international lingua franca, it is also a strong symbol of social prestige. In most states there has been a surge in demand of EMI since parents view the schooling in English medium as a stepping stone to higher education, a paid salary and a chance to engage in the national and international markets (Graddol, 2010). Policy discussions, though, still focus on the fact that early conceptual learning can be best achieved when children are able to apply their own language or language repertoires of familiarity, particularly in primary grades (Government of India, 2020; NCERT, 2006a, 2006b). These strains are polished by the rural-urban disparities in educational standards, teachers distribution, and exposure to the out-of-school English.

Rural students tend to be constrained by multiple factors: a lower socioeconomic status of the household, less books and learning materials, less access to private tuition, as well as less opportunities to learn and speak English outside of a classroom. According to ASER 2022, there are significant learning gaps in rural India, and indicators of reading and arithmetic are worse than before the pandemic (ASER Centre, 2022a). Although in some grades, reading simple sentences in English has been generally unchanged since 2016, reading comprehension is not universal, meaning that decoding does not necessarily result in meaning-making (ASER Centre, 2022a). The importance of these patterns is that EMI involves subject content to be processed by the learners in a second language (L2) which might not even be developed adequately.

Urban students, on the contrary, have higher chances of receiving more resource-laden schools, high-quality English instruction, and extra-curricular learning programs. In the case of EMI, such a variation in enabling conditions can lead to different effects: EMI can advance the development of English among urban learners but cause a two-fold load (language and content) in the context of rural learners unless the instruction is met scaffolded (Treffers-Daller et al., 2022). The EMI question, in the Indian context, as such, is not merely what is being taught, but what is being learned in terms of the discipline, and what it is to learn in terms of capability-building.

The question that will be answered in this paper is as follows: What are the effects of EMI on rural and urban students in India, and in what circumstances can EMI support or inhibit learning? In particular, the following objectives will be fulfilled:

- generalize findings on the EMI-related learning outcomes and mechanisms in Indian schooling;
- put forward a conceptual model between EMI, context (rural/urban), mediators and outcomes;
- provide an exemplary quantitative model (simulated, yet evidence-based) that would help illustrate how the EMI effects might vary by the location, with the socioeconomic status and teacher as the artificially controlled variables.

Since markedly comparable rural-urban EMI microdata that are both nationally representative and available in ready-to-use form are not always publicly available to the same cohorts and assessments, the quantitative section employs a simulated dataset that is calibrated to plausible patterns that have been identified in previous empirical studies. It is well identified that the simulation is illustrative and does not provide any assertions on new population estimates.

II. Literature Review

Conceptual and global evidence on EMI

The global studies of EMI depict extremely mixed results, and the level of benefit is determined by the proficiency of learners, teacher training, instructional materials, and assessment plans. The reviews highlight that EMI is potentially helpful in enhancing academic English and exposure to international knowledge and can also diminish understanding and engagement in cases where learners and teachers do not get the support they need in terms of language (Dearden, 2014; Macaro et al., 2018). The theory of common underlying proficiency and the difference between conversational language and academic language, developed by Cummins implies that students need a long-lasting process of academic language development to be successful in studying the content using an L2 (Cummins, 2000, 2001). In the case of L2 academic language

that is not well developed, EMI might result in surface learning strategies, copying and less higher-order engagement.

India: policy guidance and the multilingual classroom

The policy of language-in-education in India has been long running and has balanced the importance of the local languages with the perceived economic benefit of English. According to the National Education Policy 2020, where feasible, the home language/mother tongue/local language should be the language of instruction at least up to Grade 5 and preferably up to Grade 8 and promote multilingualism and quality teaching of English (Government of India, 2020). The meaning of learning a language, cross-curriculum integration, and the shunned nature of rote-based English instruction were also mentioned in the position papers of NCERT (2006a). These documents correspond with the international standards according to which early education in well-known languages promotes cognitive growth and further learning a second or a third language (UNESCO, 1953, 2008).

Simultaneously, the sociolinguistic studies warn that decision-making in schooling is connected with power, symbolic capital and social stratification (Bourdieu, 1991; Phillipson, 1992). EMI in India has been widely linked to elite education whereas education in vernacular medium has been correlated as low status (Ramanathan, 2002). With the increase in demand in English, low-cost private schools that are provided in EMI have increased in number, with poor teacher proficiency and insufficient pedagogic guidance, prompting some to wonder the effect of English on name and little on practice (Endow, 2021).

Evidence on learning readiness, exposure, and teacher capacity

One of the mechanisms that play a critical role in EMI outcomes is preparing to learn in English, namely reading and vocabulary. Treffers-Daller et al. (2022) examine low-SES students in government schools and demonstrate that input in English and oral vocabulary are associated with reading skills that are important to EMI achievement. That implies that merely changing the medium of instruction without adding more comprehensible input of the English language and vocabulary growth may not help the situation especially to the underprivileged learners.

Classroom and institutional language practice studies also indicate that teachers and students tend to use flexible bilingual practices to ensure content can be understood, even where policy should result in English-only classrooms. The ethnographic research in Gujarat captures the ways the English-vernacular divisions are negotiated within actual educational practices, with institutional restrictions defining the ways of literacy practices (Ramanathan, 2005; Ramanathan, 2003). These results are consistent with the idea that the facilitation of comprehension and participation can be made through planned use of the entire linguistic repertoires of learners (Garcia and Wei, 2014).

Rural-urban inequality and the "double disadvantage" risk

Rural-urban inequality has the potential to interact with EMI in three manners. To begin with, rural students usually have less exposure to the English language and less practising experience, which may slow down the acquisition of academic language. Second, there can be shortage of teachers and lack of professional development of teachers in rural schools that will influence the quality of language-sensitive content teaching. Third, the rural households might lack the resources to access additional

coaching, books or digital information. English skills have also been attributed to wage premiums and improved employment outcomes, which support the demand of English and EMI by parents in labor-market research (Azam et al., 2013). Nevertheless, when rural students are provided with low-quality EMI, the policy could unwillingly promote inequality by increasing disparities on both the subject learning and English proficiency.

Summary: what the literature suggests

According to the literature, EMI effects are not steady. EMI can help in development of English in the cases where teachers are competent, pedagogy is language-sensitive and where there is enough input and practice of English to the learners. EMI can impair learning whereby it imposes language barrier to learning the material especially among rural and low-SES students with low exposure to English. Hence, an analysis of EMI has to consider medium, location, resource, teacher capacity, and learner background interactions.

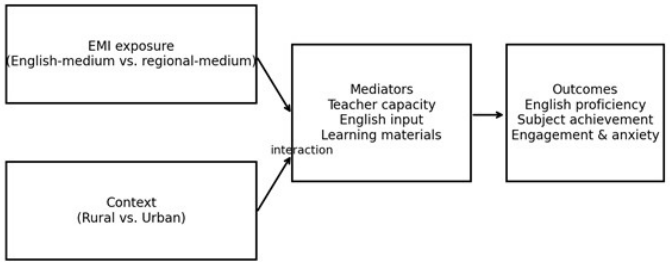

Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking EMI, rural-urban context, mediators, and outcomes.

III. Methodology

Design

The methodological orientation of this study is a mixed approach involving an integrative narrative review in addition to having an illustrative quantitative approach using simulated data, which is recommended in the case of nationally comparable micro-level datasets (Kingdon, 2017; Ramanathan, 2005). The narrative review is based on the synthesis of the available empirical studies, policy documents, and assessment reports on the topic of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in India, paying special attention to the rural-urban differences (ASER Centre, 2022; Meganathan, 2015; UNESCO, 2025). The quantitative aspect involves the use of a simulative method, through which analytical strategies (group comparisons and regression models with interaction effects) are transparently illustrated, and parameter assumptions are based on patterns that were repeatedly documented in previous Indian EMI studies, including the different exposure to English and the readiness of teachers in different locations (Borooah, 2021; Treffers-Daller et al., 2022). In education research, simulation is common to evaluate the hypotheses of theoretical mechanisms and methodological soundness when the limited access to harmonized datasets becomes an obstacle (Endow, 2021).

Conceptual variables

Medium of instruction (English-medium versus non-EMI/regional-medium) is the main independent variable in the conceptual framework, and rural to urban location is the modulating context that determines the magnitude and the orientation of the EMI effects (Bhattacharya, 2013; Groff, 2017). The model utilizes the existing literature on EMI and multilingual education to include the major mediators and control variables. The socioeconomic status (SES) is modeled as a combined indicator of household educational and material resources, and it has always been demonstrated to affect language and academic achievement in India (ASER Centre, 2023; Kingdon, 2017). The English in the outside school exposure is a measure of exposure to contact with the English language weekly in the media, with peers, or in individual tutoring and has been found to positively correlate with achievement and confidence (Meganathan, 2015; Mukhopadhyay, 2025).

The qualification of teachers and language proficiency are also provided as a proxy of instruction quality and language support in the classroom, which is evidence that the teacher preparation is a mediator of the effectiveness of EMI, especially in rural schools (Kumar, 2024; NCERT, 2006). Dependent variables will include English achievement, subject achievement in mathematics and science, and affective outcomes - student engagement and listening anxiety, which are identified as the most important non-cognitive aspects of EMI experiences (Ramanathan, 2003; Treffers-Daller et al., 2022).

Sample and data generation

The simulated data are of the form of N = 800 students, divided in four groups (analytical balance) according to rural EMI, rural non-EMI, urban EMI and urban non-EMI (n = 200 in each group). The balanced design allows the direct comparison of the mean results and the effect of interactions with a minimum level of group-size bias (Endow, 2018). Outcome variables are created to represent the trends in the Indian studies, which are empirically observed. In particular, urban EMI students are simulated to record a greater positive change in English performance, which can be explained by superior SES, enriched environment of exposure, and enhanced teacher capacity (ASER Centre, 2024; Borooah, 2021). The rural EMI students are designed to exhibit smaller gains in English and, in other studies, poorer performance in subjects where a group has less instructional scaffolding, which replicates the complaints found in qualitative and assessment-based studies (Bhattacharya, 2013; NCERT, 2022). In all groups, both SES and teacher capacity were outlined as positive predictors of not only cognitive but also affective outcomes, which is in line with national and international data (Kingdon, 2017; UNESCO, 2025).

Analysis plan

The analysis is performed at three steps. First, descriptive statistics will be calculated to describe the background variables and outcome distributions of the four groups. Second, the mean comparisons are performed to compare the differences in the English achievement, subject achievement, engagement, and listening anxiety according to the medium of instruction and place. Third, simple least squares (OLS) regression estimates are computed that consists of an EMI × urban interaction term along with an SES, English exposure outside school, and teacher qualification index. The interaction term assesses whether the effect of EMI on learning and affective results are systematically dissimilar in rural and urban settings, which is one of the concerns of previous EMI discussions in India (Groff, 2017; Kumar, 2024). The proposed analytic plan is

consistent with the existing methods in education economics and applied linguistics studies (Kingdon, 2017; Treffers-Daller et al., 2022).

Ethical considerations and limitations

Since the quantitative aspect of the research is solely based on artificial data, there have been no human subjects recruited and no identifiable identifiable data obtained about the subjects, which also denies it risks related to consent, confidentiality, or data protection. Published academic literature and official policy documents are the only sources of data used in the narrative review part, which guaranteed transparency and reproducibility (ASER Centre, 2022; Government of India, 2020). However, there are some critical limitations, which should be admitted. The synthetic results can not be construed as prevalence estimates and causal impacts at the national level but are instead demonstrative of the possibility of mechanisms and analysis. Also, the research fails to reflect intra-regional linguistic differences or school-level differences in instruction, which are also known to affect the outcomes of EMI in India (Meganathan, 2015; Ramanathan, 2005). These shortcomings are the reason why prospective studies with harmonized, large-scale longitudinal data should be used in order to better estimate rural-urban EMI impacts.

Table 1. Sample characteristics by group (simulated dataset).

Location	Medium	n	SES Mean	SES SD	English exposure (hrs/wk) Mean	Teacher qualification Mean
Rural	EMI	200	0.35	0.12	5.81	0.59
Rural	Non-EMI	200	0.34	0.12	4.61	0.56
Urban	EMI	200	0.59	0.14	9.18	0.67
Urban	Non-EMI	200	0.59	0.14	8.21	0.63

IV. Results

Descriptive findings

Descriptive analyses show apparent differences in the outcomes of learning based on location and medium of instruction. Urban EMI students in the simulated data have the highest average scores in English achievement, which is consistent with the previous data that EMI works best when there is a consistent exposure to the English language, stronger school resources, and more trained teachers. Conversely, the rural EMI students show only slightly better English performance, which is indicative of the limitations that have been generally reported in the rural settings, i.e., less instructional scaffolding and less availability of using English in real life beyond the school. It is interesting to note that the content subjects perform much better by the rural non-EMI students than the rural EMI students. The trend indicates that the acquisition of the main subject in a local language can act as a buffer to understanding and conceptual knowledge in the context of English proficiency yet developing and is also in line with

the results of multilingual education studies that focus on cognitive accessibility with reference to the mother or stronger language.

Mean outcome comparisons

These patterns are also explained through mean comparisons across the four groups (see Table 2). To achieve English performance, the ranking of groups means goes in the order, urban EMI, urban non-EMI, rural EMI and rural non-EMI, showing that both place and exposure to EMI are part of the performance disparity. In mathematics and science, urban students perform in general better than rural students, which can be explained by the fact that, there are more structural benefits which are attributed to urban schooling environment. In the rural context, non-EMI students are slightly better than EMI students in content subjects, which supports fears that premature and unsupported EMI can hinder subject learning. Relating to affective outcomes, listening anxiety is more in EMI environments than non-EMI environments, whereas the highest levels are registered with rural EMI students. This trend is in line with the assumption that language barriers may increase cognitive load, decrease classroom engagement, and may result in stress when instructional support is inadequate, especially in linguistically challenging EMI classrooms.

Regression models (interaction effects)

In order to test the hypothesis that EMI effects depend systematically on location, ordinary least squares regression models were estimated with adjustments due to socioeconomic status, English exposure outside school, and teacher qualification. The findings imply that EMI x urban interaction of achievement in English and mathematics in the simulated analysis was positive and statistically significant. Such interaction implies that the advantages of EMI in urban settings as compared to rural settings are considerably higher despite controlling background traits and teaching potential. In all models, both SES and teacher qualification have a powerful positive correlation with both the cognitive and affective outcomes, which highlights their core contribution to influence student performance. These results emphasize that the results of EMI cannot be discussed out of context of the larger factors of equity; on the contrary, the success of EMI is strictly tied to the state of socioeconomic affairs and investment in teacher capacities and language support systems.

Table 2. Mean outcomes by group (simulated dataset).

Location	Medium	English (0-100)	Math (0-100)	Science (0-100)	Engagement (1-5)	Listening anxiety (1-5)
Rural	EMI	56.6	43.7	43.8	3.32	3.29
Rural	Non-EMI	52.0	46.9	46.7	3.21	3.01
Urban	EMI	81.8	61.2	59.9	3.95	2.93
Urban	Non-EMI	70.7	59.5	57.7	3.59	2.62

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Table 3. OLS regression results with EMI x urban interaction (standardized covariates).

Model	Predictor	B	SE	p	Interpretation (brief)
English score	emi	2.43	0.81	0.003	Difference for EMI vs non-EMI (rural baseline)
English score	urban	8.88	1.01	0.000	Difference urban vs rural (non-EMI baseline)
English score	emi:urban	6.88	1.12	0.000	Additional EMI effect in urban context
English score	ses_z	2.69	0.43	0.000	Effect of +1 SD SES
English score	exp_z	4.25	0.42	0.000	Effect of +1 SD English exposure
English score	tq_z	1.32	0.29	0.000	Effect of +1 SD teacher qualification
Math score	emi	-3.36	0.87	0.000	Difference for EMI vs non-EMI (rural baseline)
Math score	urban	6.76	1.05	0.000	Difference urban vs rural (non-EMI baseline)
Math score	emi:urban	4.90	1.23	0.000	Additional EMI effect in urban context
Math score	ses_z	4.18	0.42	0.000	Effect of +1 SD SES
Math score	tq_z	0.45	0.32	0.156	Effect of +1 SD teacher qualification
Listening anxiety (1-5)	emi	0.29	0.05	0.000	Difference for EMI vs non-EMI (rural baseline)
Listening anxiety (1-5)	urban	-0.31	0.06	0.000	Difference urban vs rural (non-EMI baseline)
Listening anxiety (1-5)	emi:urban	0.03	0.06	0.677	Additional EMI effect in urban context
Listening anxiety (1-5)	ses_z	-0.05	0.02	0.038	Effect of +1 SD SES
Listening anxiety (1-5)	tq_z	-0.04	0.02	0.008	Effect of +1 SD teacher qualification

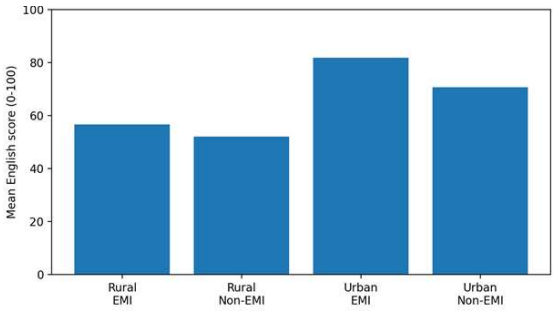

Figure 2. Mean English achievement by location and medium (simulated dataset).

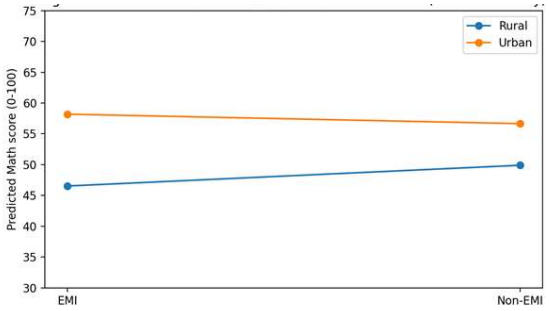

Figure 3. Predicted Math score showing an EMI x location interaction (simulated dataset; covariates held at mean).

V. Discussion & Conclusion

Interpreting the evidence: why EMI effects differ by location

The literature as well as the illustrative model points to a conditional, context based narrative. EMI has the potential to bring about chances in developing English language, though it increases the linguistic barrier to subject matter learning. In urban settings that are well equipped students are more inclined to get richer input in English, access competent teachers and have access to supportive learning material. In this case, EMI can promote English performance without compromising the subject performance especially when pedagogy is language conscious and the assessment demonstrates the learning objective.

The rural situation is that EMI is a possible double disadvantage policy: not only do the students have less exposure to English and less support, but also have content learning taught in a language they are learning. The existing empirical data on low-SES children in government schools show that the vocabulary in English and the classroom tasks are highly correlated with reading abilities that can be used in the context of EMI preparedness (Treffers-Daller et al., 2022). In case these prerequisites are weak, learners can be guided by memorization, copying and little participation. Ethnographic studies also indicate that bilingual practices are commonly employed by teachers and students in order to make meaning; the prohibition or stigmatization of bilingual practices may decrease access to content (Ramanathan, 2005; Garcia and Wei, 2014).

Policy and practice implications for equitable EMI

The fact would indicate that the EMI policies are to be taken into account and presented by the means of the capacity-building reforms rather than be the language switches. Priority actions include:

- Teacher professional development: grow the English competence of teachers and, most significantly, their ability to deliver content to a student with the assistance of language scaffolding (ex: pre-teach vocabulary, use images, scaffolded talk, and formative checks).
- Bridging and transitional models: implement a model of strong mother-tongue/home-language education in lower grades and gradually add more and more exposure to English through meaningful interaction and reading which follows the recommendations of NEP.

- Bilingual pedagogies: include an effective plan of strategic translanguaging, wherein students are given the freedom to be able to find a strategic intent of using home languages to the strategic aim of comprehending and reasoning and constructing academic English.
- Materials and assessment: create bilingual glossary, graded readers, and subject materials that help to understand; draw the line between the difficulty of the language and the construction of the content where it is needed in the assessment.
- Rural support: allocate a greater number of resources to rural schools that embrace EMI like teacher supervision, language laboratories and exposure to good audio visual input.

Limitations and future research

The quantitative part of this study estimates data based on simulation and thus would not be able to assert national effect sizes. A combination of administrative data on medium of instruction with standardized testing results and school location variables should be used to study the future work employing quasi-experimental designs (e.g., difference-in-differences around medium-switch policies) to infer causation effects. Inference about mechanisms would be enhanced by mixed-method designs which involve classroom observation and teacher language tests.

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