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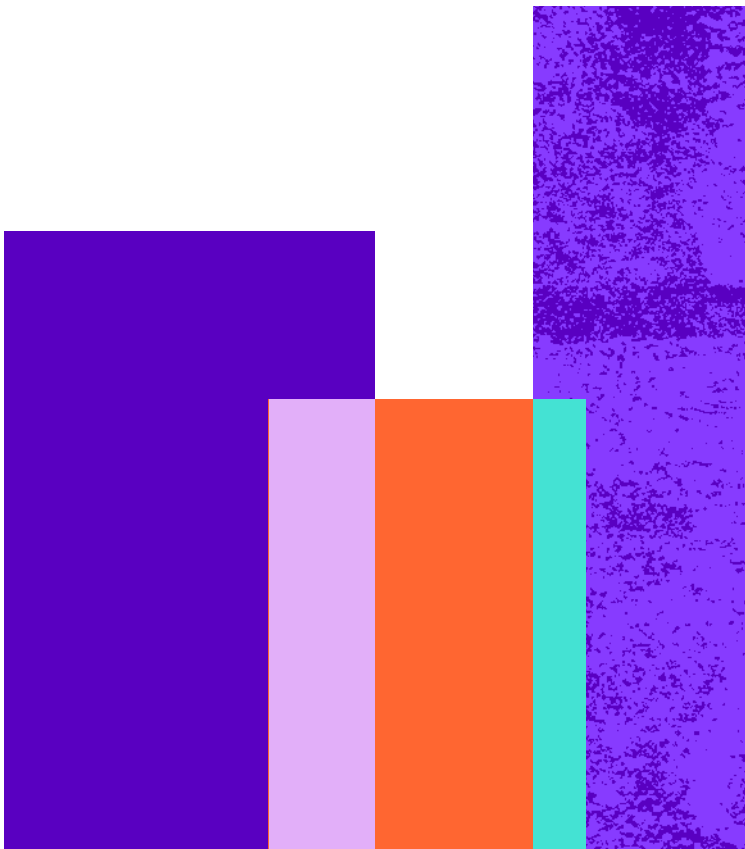
Language policy and practice

A review of the literature on English in education

Dogan Yuksel, Anna Kristina Hultgren and Prithvi Shrestha



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Glossary

BICS	basic interpersonal communication skills
CALP	cognitive academic language proficiency
CLIL	content and language integrated learning
E@S	English as a subject
EAL	English as an additional language
EFL	English as a foreign language
EiE	English in education
ELF	English as a lingua franca
EME	English-medium education
ESL	English as a second language
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
ESP	English for special purposes
EU	European Union
HIC	high-income country
IC	intercultural competence
L1	first language
LIC	low-income country
LiE	language(s) in education
LMIC	low- and middle-income country
LoLT	language of learning and teaching
LSP	language supportive pedagogy
MoE	ministry of education
MTbBE	mother tongue-based bilingual education
MTB-MLE	mother tongue-based multilingual education
MTI	mother tongue instruction
SES	socio-economic status
UMIC	upper-middle-income country
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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Introduction

As English continues to gain prominence as a global language, its role in education has become a subject of growing controversy and debate. The rapid expansion of English-medium education (EME) across the world has raised concerns about its impact on local languages, cultures and epistemologies and about the quality of teaching and learning (Alhamami, 2023; Bhattacharya, 2015; Tupas & Weninger, 2022). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where the appeal of English is perhaps particularly strong, EME has caused unease about the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals of providing quality education, reducing inequality and eradicating poverty (e.g., Choi & Poudel, 2024; Erling et al., 2016; Hultgren et al., 2024; Liyanage & Walker, 2019). At the same time, EME has also been hailed as an important means to lift LMICs out of poverty, and to further the educational, professional and personal objectives of individuals across the world. EME is thus inherently paradoxical, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities through factors like low student and teacher proficiency and lack of resources, as well as further entrenching colonialism and neo-imperialism, while also serving as an essential conduit out of those enduring historical injustices.

To some extent, any challenges associated with EME may be mitigated by strengthened policies and pedagogies to promote and strengthen English as a subject (E@S), content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and other language-supportive pedagogies. Thus, EME raises important questions for how such language-supportive pedagogies could and should be rethought in order to facilitate more equitable, efficient and high-quality EME. While rarely discussed together in the academic literature, this review addresses EME, E@S and CLIL and considers the evidence on how they might shape – and be shaped by – one another to enable more effective, equitable and high-quality EME policies and practices. Although scholars that work within EME, E@S and CLIL all tend to do so under the auspices of applied linguistics, they do not necessarily interact to a great extent, and it is rare for EME research to be influenced by E@S or CLIL and vice versa, although there have been attempts to bridge them (for example, Pecorari & Malmström, 2018). The central questions these scholars work with also differ, with EME scholars tending to be more concerned with the drivers of EME and its consequences, and E@S and CLIL scholars more concerned with curricular and pedagogical issues. Where E@S and CLIL are inevitably affected and reshaped by EME, it is probably fair to say that by far the most dynamic research activity has taken place in the field of EME over

the past few decades. Hence, this report will necessarily reflect these differences, with evidence being limited to the questions that have been addressed by each field.

As what is effective, equitable and high-quality provision of EME will vary considerably across geopolitical contexts, local linguistic ecology and – not least – available resources, the review takes a contextually sensitive approach. It specifically considers five countries, which differ in their economic development, with evidence from other countries drawn on where relevant. The report primarily focuses on basic education, but will occasionally draw on literature on higher education, particularly where this has relevance for English in education (EiE) at pre-tertiary level. It is important to recognise that issues, challenges and the strategies to overcome them will differ significantly across contexts and educational levels. For instance, an issue such as 'intercultural competence' may be more prominent and relevant in higher-education contexts in high-income countries where the student population is globally diverse. In contrast, the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) to facilitate communication in multilingual and multiethnic contexts in basic education will be relevant to contexts such as Nigeria, which boasts over 500 languages.

As English is regarded to be intrinsically embedded in a wider political, economic, social and cultural global restructuring, which reshapes and brings about new power constellations, inequities and injustices, the review will also explore *who* English delivers for – focusing specifically on dimensions of gender, socio-economic status, national context and linguistic minority status – across diverse educational settings. Through this international lens, the literature review aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the global push for EiE, offering insights for more contextually appropriate and equitable policy and practice and where good practices might be shared.

1.1 Aims, guiding questions and outline

This review of literature critically explores the use of E@S, CLIL and EME in basic education. It draws on a broad base of empirical evidence from a range of contexts and policy analysis to examine what factors shape effective, equitable and high-quality outcomes of EiE. The questions that guided the literature review were as follows.

Research questions

1. What are the main challenges, barriers and opportunities involved in successful learning and teaching of, in and through English?
2. Does EiE in different contexts 'deliver' on expectations? Does learning and teaching in/through English:
   - improve English language skills?
   - increase intercultural competence?
   - improve employability?
   - improve educational outcomes?
   - increase opportunity?
3. Who does EiE deliver for (including consideration of gender, socio-economic status (SES) and minority language groups)?
4. What makes for an effective transition to learning in or through English?
5. What strategies do stakeholders (policymakers, head teachers, teachers, parents) employ to overcome the barriers and reinforce the opportunities?

The report is structured as follows. First, it provides an overview of what we mean by learning *of*, *through* and *in* English. The following section focuses on the lure of English – why governments, communities, parents and students find English such an appealing language to learn, to learn through or to learn in, and the extent to which English delivers on its promises, such as improved language proficiency, educational achievement, intercultural understanding, employability and access to opportunity. It then goes on to evidence and discuss some of the challenges associated with English, for teachers, students, educational institutions and wider society. Finally, it considers some strategies that can be adopted at international, national, institutional and classroom level to overcome or at least mitigate against some of the challenges of EiE and leverage potential advantages.

This review also includes a frequently asked questions (FAQs) section, which distils the evidence around the issues most commonly raised by stakeholders regarding the learning and teaching of, in and through English. The FAQ section highlights approaches and contextual factors that may lead to more successful learning outcomes, taking into account variations across low-, middle- and high-income settings.

1.2 Learning of, in and through English

This report focuses broadly on EiE. *EiE* is an umbrella term for three interrelated concepts relating to the learning *of*, learning *in* and learning *through* English. The box below provides definitions of each and highlights the difference between them.

EiE includes (at least) three distinct practices: the teaching and learning *of*, *in* and *through* English.

The teaching and learning *of* English (i.e. English as a subject; E@S) entails teaching of basic English language skills, vocabulary and grammar as an independent subject with an allocated time. Teaching and learning of English is sometimes labelled as English as a second or foreign language (ESL or EFL), depending on the context.

Teaching *in* English, or EME, is 'the use of the English language to teach and study academic content in places where English is not the primary language of communication of the majority of the population' (Patel et al., 2023: p. 187).

Teaching and learning *through* English, (i.e. content and language integrated learning; CLIL) refers to 'situations where subjects or parts of subjects are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language' (Marsh, 2002: p. 15).

In the report, we will use *English* when the distinction between these three concepts is not relevant. By contrast, where the distinction is relevant, we will differentiate, referring to them as, respectively, *English as a subject* (*E@S*), *English as a medium of education* (*EME*) and *content and language integrated learning* (*CLIL*).

It should be borne in mind that EME, CLIL and E@S are but three concepts on a broader spectrum of approaches related to EiE. Figure 1 provides an overview of various EiE practices in terms of their focus on content and/or language proficiency development. Note that E@S corresponds to 'EFL/ESOL' in the diagram below.

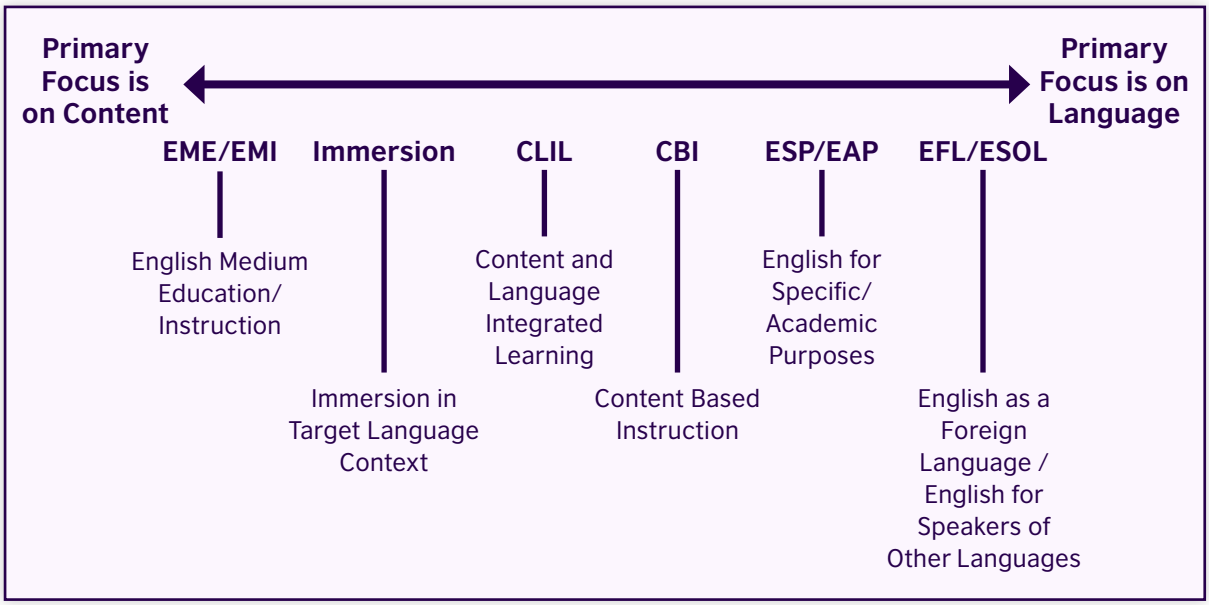

Figure 1. *EiE practices in terms of their language or content focus.*

Source: Patel et al. (2023: p. 188) based on Met (1999) and Thompson and McKinley (2018)

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The lure of English in education

Notwithstanding its well-known challenges, it is clear that English continues to have considerable appeal in education, whether in regard to learning of, in or through English. This section reviews the literature and identifies seven rationales for promoting English in education (EiE). It also seeks to probe and examine those motivations critically in order to assess the extent to which the lure of English is matched by empirical evidence.

2.1 Alignment with national policy priorities

For policymakers across the world, English-medium education (EME) is often regarded as an important policy to align with national priorities and development agendas. In countries like Nepal and Ethiopia, governments have linked the adoption of EME to broader modernisation and globalisation strategies. For instance, Ethiopia's Ministry of Education (MoE, 2009) emphasised the need to integrate English into the education system to support the country's ambitions in science and technology (Arega et al., 2024). Similarly, Nepal's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST, 2019) introduced policy provisions encouraging the use of English to teach science and mathematics at the school level. These policy decisions reflect a growing perception that English plays a role in facilitating a nation's access to global knowledge networks and supporting economic aspirations (Abbagidi & Tsegai, 2024). However, although English is perceived by policymakers and communities as a vehicle for national development, the evidence suggests that this is most effective when English is integrated into inclusive, well-resourced and context-sensitive language policies (Rubagumya, 2010; Sah & Li, 2018).

The perceived benefits of EME vary considerably across regional contexts. In Nepal, EME is strongly associated with opportunity, often linked to notions of quality education and smoother access to higher education (Choi & Poudel, 2024). In contrast, in Tanzania and other African settings, EME frequently acts as a gatekeeping mechanism. Clegg and Simpson (2016) describe how the private sector capitalises on the aspirational appeal of EME, promoting low-cost English-medium schools to low-income families. Meanwhile, Joyce-Gibbons et al. (2018)

demonstrate how a systemic preference for English can deepen educational exclusion and limit upward social mobility. A similar narrative is observed in Ethiopia, where English is embedded in national development discourses. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2009), English is positioned as the principal language for communication in fields such as science, technology, commerce and politics. However, Woldeyes (2022) highlights a central contradiction in this policy, pointing out that Ethiopians are unable to complete secondary or tertiary education in their own languages, which results in widespread alienation from the education system.

Johnstone (2010) warns that although English can offer unique opportunities, it also introduces significant challenges, particularly for policymakers tasked with preventing such benefits from being restricted to elite institutions. Milligan and Tikly (2016) further argue that the widespread belief in English as a prerequisite for opportunity often goes unquestioned, potentially creating barriers to both education and economic participation for a large number of learners. Expanding on this critique, Tikly (2016) situates language-in-education policy within a broader social justice framework, suggesting that EME may exacerbate existing class-based disparities. This concern is echoed by Trudell (2007), who observes that parental attitudes are often shaped by the trend among middle-class, urban elites to enrol their children in schools where instruction is delivered in a global language. This gap between the perceived and actual benefits of EME is also highlighted in Coleman's (2011) analysis, where he cautions against conflating aspirational discourse with empirical evidence. He notes that there is limited concrete data to support the claim that widespread English language instruction consistently yields tangible benefits or represents a cost-effective strategy. From this perspective, EME emerges not as a universally reliable pathway to opportunity but rather as a socially constructed ideal, sustained more by collective aspirations than by demonstrated outcomes.

2.2 English as a lingua franca in multilingual societies

In highly multilingual and multiethnic societies, one appeal of EME is that it can serve as a 'neutral' lingua franca to enable communication between teachers and learners who would otherwise not have a shared language in which to communicate. English as a lingua franca (ELF) is 'a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages' (Seidlhofer, 2005: p. 339). In Nigeria, for example, where over 500 languages are spoken, English is sometimes positioned as a unifying medium of instruction that avoids privileging one local language over others, while conveying social status and authority (Danladi, 2013). Taye (2019) similarly argues that English, unlike regionally confined indigenous languages, can serve as a shared academic language across ethnolinguistic groups. This has been presented as a way to foster national unity and promote equal access to education in linguistically diverse regions, though this view remains contested. Critics, particularly within postcolonial and linguistic imperialism frameworks (for example, Phillipson, 1992), challenge the notion of English's neutrality, pointing out its symbolic association with colonial hierarchies and global power imbalances. Nonetheless, some national education policies – such as those in Nigeria and Tanzania – have invoked this rationale in attempts to unify disparate linguistic communities under a common instructional language.

2.3 Parental preferences for English

There are often strong parental preferences for English. Many parents in low- and middle-income countries perceive education delivered in English or other global languages as a mark of quality and upward mobility (Trudell, 2007). This perception has fuelled the proliferation of low-fee private schools in regions such as South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where English is frequently promoted as the medium of instruction (Tikly, 2016). However, research indicates that these schools often do not deliver superior learning outcomes compared to mother tongue-based public education, especially when English proficiency among teachers is low and instructional materials are lacking (Erling et al., 2021; Heugh et al., 2012). Thus, the belief that EME ensures better-quality education is frequently a misconception.

The global recognition of English's economic value by politicians and parents further drives this trend, as they view it as a crucial key to unlocking pathways to higher education and career advancement (Maurer et al., 2025). Despite this widespread perception, the British Council advises against prioritising English over a child's home language and explicitly cautions parents and teachers about neglecting a child's native language to exclusively pursue English instruction (Kioko, 2015; Simpson, 2019). Nonetheless, policymakers and parents often continue to emphasise the importance of developing proficiency in official languages of other countries, believing it will enhance opportunities for mobility, tertiary education and career advancement, even though EME often fails to effectively develop this proficiency (Maurer et al., 2025).

In some cases, growing parental and community demand for English instruction has prompted governments to invest in public education reforms, such as enhanced teacher training, infrastructure or bilingual curriculum design. For example, in Rwanda and Ethiopia, national policies have responded to such pressures by incorporating English earlier in the education system, though these reforms have produced mixed results and remain the subject of debate among educators and researchers (Arega et al., 2024; Brock-Utne, 2010). Overall, while EME may be symbolically linked to inclusion and opportunity, its effectiveness depends heavily on context-specific implementation and must be critically evaluated alongside alternative approaches such as high-quality multilingual or English as a subject (E@S) models.

2.4 Social mobility and professional opportunities

Across various national contexts, research points to a strong and consistent belief that English proficiency enhances socio-economic and employment opportunities. English is often perceived by parents and communities as a pathway to socio-economic advancement, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Rubagumya, 2010; Sah & Li, 2018). Across diverse contexts, proficiency in English is associated with improved employment prospects, especially in sectors such as business, tourism, technology and international development. For instance, Ojha (2018) found that employers in Nepal increasingly demand English skills, particularly in IT, business and hospitality. Similarly, in the Turkish context, Altay and Yuksel (2021) report that industry stakeholders prioritise English proficiency over content knowledge in certain engineering fields.

In South Asia, English is widely perceived as a symbol of social and economic capital. Choi and Poudel (2024) report that English language proficiency is associated with enhanced economic status, social mobility and participation in the global labour market. Across South Asia, 'English is widely seen as the language of social mobility, educational opportunity, employability, global business and dialogue' (Shrestha & Gautam, 2022: p. 9). In the context of Pakistan, Coleman (2011) notes that parents often associate English with the promise of a brighter future for their children, viewing language proficiency as a crucial asset for success. Similarly, Carrier (2011) highlights how English is commonly seen as a tool that facilitates educational and economic opportunities, supports development and fosters international connections. These views contribute to the growing demand for English, particularly among parents who perceive it as instrumental to their children's future achievements (Shrestha & Gautam, 2022).

In African contexts, similar beliefs prevail. In South Africa, de Wet (2002) asserts that English is perceived by many as essential for economic empowerment and upward mobility. Kamwangamalu (2013) reinforces this by noting that even illiterate parents in Africa opt for EME for their children, driven by the belief that it will improve their life prospects. In Nigeria, Danladi (2013) highlights English's prominence in political and educational systems, linking it to status and access to employment. Similarly, in South Africa, many parents view EME as an investment in their children's future, linking English proficiency with access to higher education, well-paying jobs and upward social mobility (Desai, 2016).

In Ethiopia, Arega et al. (2024) report that families – especially those from marginalised backgrounds – strongly favour EME because they believe it offers a potential escape from poverty. These narratives confirm that EME is strongly tied to stakeholder aspirations regarding employment, particularly in global or formal sectors.

The association of English with socio-economic opportunities is present in high-income contexts too. In Spain, students tend to associate EME with enhanced educational prospects and international mobility, expressing confidence that English competence will improve their employment opportunities (García Bermejo, 2021; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2017; Rica-Peromingo, 2009; Wang 2023). Collectively, such views contribute to the symbolic construction of teaching and learning in and through English as a means for achieving social and economic progress.

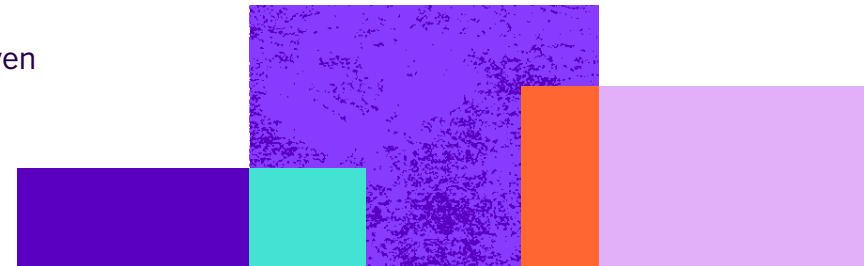
However, existing literature suggests a more complex and, at times, contradictory picture. Despite the widespread perception that EME enhances employability, several scholars caution against accepting this assumption uncritically. As Giri and colleagues (2024) point out, even when students associate EME with professional success, poor English proficiency – especially in speaking – can hinder their performance in job interviews, thus limiting the actual benefits of EME. Milligan and Tikly (2016) critique what they describe as *the instrumentalist view* that English education automatically translates into economic growth and employment. They argue that this view often overlooks structural inequalities and linguistic barriers that can limit access

to quality education and job markets. As they note, teaching and learning in and through English may in fact act as a barrier to engagement with the curriculum for many learners, particularly in under-resourced schools. Tikly (2016) similarly argues that while multilingual competence – including proficiency in English – can enhance access to labour markets in a globalised economy, weak bilingual models often result in poor cognitive achievement and limited academic success. This contradiction underlines the risk of implementing EME without adequate pedagogical support, leading to exclusion rather than empowerment. This concern is also highlighted in Babaci-Wilhite's (2014) study of Tanzania, where parents believe English is the key to employment due to it being the language of job interviews. However, this assumption is challenged by employers, who argue that domain knowledge is more important than language and that it is often cheaper to train employees in English than to hire based on English proficiency alone. Thus, while the attraction of English as a route to employment is strong, it is not always matched by practical hiring practices or labour market realities.

2.5 The promise of English language skills

Although EME is frequently associated with improved English skills, this relationship is far from guaranteed. As Simpson (2019) argues, 'there is little or no evidence to support the widely held view that EMI is a better or surer way to attain fluency in English than via quality E@S' (p. 3). This assertion is borne out in numerous studies across different regions where EME implementation has not yielded significant gains in language proficiency. In the case of Ghana and India, Erling et al. (2017) found that even in EME classrooms, opportunities for students to speak and engage in English were minimal, with classrooms being largely teacher dominated. Students often lacked the necessary English proficiency to understand the content, leading to compromised learning outcomes (Erling et al., 2017). This mismatch between language policy and pedagogical practice is further evident in Desai's (2016) study on South Africa. There, despite exposure to English as the medium of instruction, pupils struggled with basic reading and writing tasks in English. Many were limited to everyday communicative abilities, lacking the advanced academic language proficiency necessary for deeper cognitive engagement. These limitations are not unique to Africa, and similar challenges have been observed in other contexts where students are taught in a language in which they lack academic proficiency (Bhattarai, 2025).

The principle underlying EME's potential to improve English skills is grounded in the notion that 'some incidental language learning is expected due to exposure but without any specific language learning goals' (Aguilar, 2017: p. 726). However, in many low-resource contexts, this exposure is neither sufficient nor meaningful (Erling et al., 2017). Clegg and Simpson (2016) argue that 'many learners in primary school and beyond do not have sufficient ability in English to achieve grade-appropriate subject knowledge' (p. 359), thus limiting both content learning and language acquisition. Moreover, teachers' own lack of confidence in English can 'reduce the range of teaching strategies' and hinder learning (Clegg & Simpson, 2016: pp. 362–363).

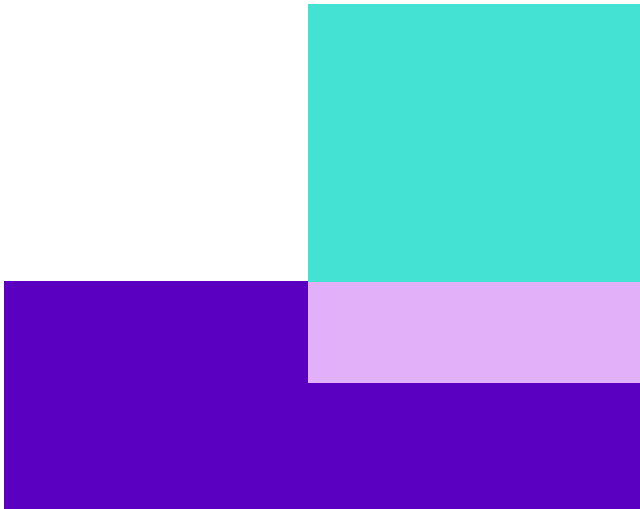


Similarly, in Ethiopia, Mergo and Daba (2024) provide quantitative evidence showing that EME led to gains in verbal scores among Grade 8 students, despite a simultaneous decline in performance in mathematics. This suggests that while EME can support language development, it may do so at the expense of subject comprehension when language proficiency is insufficient. Furthermore, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (2021) reported that students taught by teachers who completed the English Language Improvement Programme achieved significantly higher English test scores, reinforcing the view that teacher proficiency and training are critical to the success of teaching in and through English.

Factors such as teacher proficiency, institutional resources, learners' prior exposure to English and pedagogical practices critically shape the extent to which EME enhances language development. Where EME is well resourced, language-aware and supported by qualified educators – as seen in Spain (e.g., García Bermejo, 2021) or in some urban Ethiopian schools (Mergo & Daba, 2024) – it can foster communicative competence and academic English proficiency. However, in many low- and middle-income countries, EME is introduced top-down prematurely, without adequate support structures, leading to limited English gains and compromised subject learning. Therefore, EME should not be viewed as a panacea for English language acquisition. Rather, it must be implemented cautiously, with careful attention to contextual realities, and ideally supplemented by quality English language teaching. As the research shows, unless these conditions are met, EME may do more to widen educational disparities than to promote linguistic competence.

Another group of studies suggests that teaching and learning in and through English can contribute to improved educational outcomes under certain conditions. In Tanzania, Bainton et al. (2016) found that while EME initially hindered students' exam performance, the use of language-supportive teaching materials in the Language Supportive Teaching and Textbooks project led to improvements in subject learning. Similarly, Bastola and Hu (2024) note that some community schools in Nepal have managed to show strong educational results under EME, which they attribute to improved infrastructure, teacher commitment and parental support.

This pattern is also seen in high-income contexts. In Spain, research indicates that well-structured bilingual or trilingual EME programmes can maintain or even enhance academic achievement. Dobson et al. (2010) found that students in Spain's Bilingual Education Project performed as well as or better than their monolingual peers in Spanish and content subjects. Lasagabaster (2011) similarly concludes that coordinated content and language integrated learning (CLIL) curricula contribute to positive academic outcomes, particularly in science and reading. In these settings, the success of EME is linked to the quality of implementation, teacher proficiency and resource allocation (Llurda & Mocanu, 2024; Palacios-Hidalgo et al., 2022).



2.6 Preparation for higher education and international mobility

One commonly cited rationale for implementing EME in basic education is its potential to facilitate access to higher education and support international mobility. The desire for access to prestigious academic spaces may manifest itself at both the societal and individual level. Governments and policymakers often view EME as a strategic tool for enhancing their populations' competitiveness in the global education and labour markets. For example, Dearden (2014) notes that many ministries of education promote EME with the explicit aim of improving students' access to international universities and increasing employability. Similarly, Crawford and Marin (2021), in a World Bank report, argue that English proficiency can expand access to global research, higher education and employment. However, these policy goals often overlook significant socio-economic barriers that prevent large segments of the population from accessing higher education in the first place – particularly in contexts where school completion rates remain low and where higher education is financially inaccessible to many (Alidou et al., 2006; Erling et al., 2021).

In many countries – especially in former British colonies and low- and middle-income countries – English is the primary language of instruction at the tertiary level, where students are expected to read academic texts, write assignments and participate in lectures in English (Dearden, 2014). When introduced under the right conditions – such as through gradual, well-supported programmes with trained teachers – EME in secondary education may help students begin developing the academic literacy required for success in higher education, including understanding academic conventions, argumentation structures and discipline-specific vocabulary (Coleman, 2011; Hamid et al., 2013).

While EME may create opportunities for a subset of students, especially those from urban or higher-income backgrounds, its benefits are not equitably distributed. Without targeted support systems and broader structural reforms, EME alone is unlikely to bridge existing educational inequalities or guarantee access to higher education for all. A more critical view of EME must therefore consider both its aspirational promise and its real-world limitations.

In many high-income countries, EME occurs mainly at the tertiary level of education. Here it is often associated with increased international mobility and employment prospects, especially in Europe and East Asia. In Spain, students and teachers in the Bilingual Education Project reported that English proficiency was seen as essential for future careers (Dobson et al., 2010). Similarly, García Bermejo (2021) and Llurda and Mocanu (2024) report that employers increasingly require English proficiency, reinforcing the idea that EME plays a critical role in employability, at least in contexts where the labour market explicitly values English.

In the Turkish higher-education context, Yuksel and Altay (2024) looked at how EME graduates' job prospects were perceived by industrial stakeholders. Their findings revealed that company managers and human resources staff perceived obtaining a degree from an English-medium institution as a significant aspect of human capital taken together with other factors such as prior working experience, certificates and/or further training. Altay and Yuksel (2021) in another study, this time with 139 EME engineering graduates, found that different EME academic subjects in the field of engineering had different career prospects in the job market. Moreover, partial and full EME graduates did not have similar opportunities after graduation, with unemployment more common among partial EME graduates.

2.7 Development of intercultural competences

The cultivation of intercultural competence (IC) – understood as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds – is perhaps mostly a concern at tertiary educational level in high-income countries, where EME enables the bringing together of students of different linguistic and cultural identities. A recent systematic review (Kremer & Pinto, 2025) identifies a theme where teaching and learning in English is viewed either as an opportunity for developing IC or as an explicit aim. Six articles within the review report contexts where this perception holds true. For instance, Aguilar-Pérez (2021) highlights the student perspective, revealing how the EME environment 'contributed to increasing their IC because of the opportunity to approach international students and interact with them' (p. 24). This underscores the organic development of intercultural skills through peer interaction in EME settings.

However, a crucial distinction emerges: this gain was not attributed to EME lecturers, who, unlike their English for special purposes counterparts, did not perceive fostering students' intercultural skills as their responsibility. This theme, portraying EME as a catalyst or objective for IC development, aligns with broader findings, such as those by Sahan et al. (2020), whose global literature review also points to EME programmes aiming to enhance the intercultural competence of local students. As Deardorff and Jones (2022) caution, simply participating in study abroad programmes does not automatically lead to students becoming interculturally competent; in fact, some research indicates that students might even become more ethnocentric and closed-minded upon their return. This underscores the necessity for intentional design and explicit pedagogical goals to truly leverage EME for IC development.

Studies from Spain and other European contexts offer promising, though still partial, insights. For example, the British Council's evaluation of bilingual education programmes in Spain highlights how CEFR-based (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) mediation tasks foster 'critical thinking, cross-curricular connections, and cultural awareness', which are components of intercultural communicative competence (British Council, 2024: p. 4). This project also found that students developed confidence in using English across all four language skills (García Bermejo, 2021). García Bermejo (2021) identifies the launch of the first bilingual programme in Spain, the MEC-British Council programme, and the dominance of educational technologies, as major contributors to a substantial rise in English development in Spain.

> The Bilingual Education Programme (BEP) was launched in 1996 as a collaboration between the British Council and the Spanish Ministry of Education. Its purpose was to provide wider access to a bilingual and bicultural education for children across Spain. As the first national bilingual programme in English and Spanish, the BEP's success has served as a model for all other bilingual programmes subsequently adopted by every region in Spain (García Bermejo, 2021).

Similarly, Palacios-Hidalgo et al. (2022: p. 5) identify a positive link between bilingual education and the development of 'language learning, intercultural competence, and mobility'. In these instances, teaching through English (CLIL, in this context) appears as part of a broader multilingual education ecosystem, making it difficult to isolate its unique contribution. However, the evidence for the contributions of teaching in and through English to intercultural competence remains inconclusive and largely indirect. While there are isolated instances in which EME appears to foster cultural awareness, especially when integrated within inclusive and multilingual educational policies, most of the reviewed literature either omits intercultural competence entirely or discusses it only tangentially. The assumption that English language exposure automatically leads to intercultural sensitivity is not supported by empirical evidence. To move the discourse forward, EME research must more deliberately incorporate intercultural frameworks, both conceptually and methodologically, if it is to substantiate its claims of preparing learners for a globalised world.

Although EME is often positioned as a tool for inclusion in linguistically diverse nations, the policy accompanying it rarely considers mechanisms to support multilingualism. As such, teaching and learning in and through English might harm rather than promote intercultural or linguistic competence in many settings (Liddicoat, 2013). Without multilingual policy frameworks, teaching and learning in and through English risks reinforcing linguistic hierarchies and contributing to the erosion of minority languages.

In less well-resourced contexts, IC is less commonly an issue. A review of literature across Nepal and Ethiopia reveals that IC is rarely addressed explicitly as an educational outcome of EME. Studies focusing on countries such as Nepal, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Cameroon suggest that while EME is positioned as a tool for global engagement and national cohesion, the concept of IC is neither systematically defined nor empirically measured in relation to EME practice (Choi & Poudel, 2024; Sah, 2024; Tembe & Norton, 2011). Even when concepts such as cultural awareness, multilingualism or global citizenship appear in policy documents, they are rarely anchored in established models of IC, such as those proposed by Deardorff (2006). For example, although the Ethiopian Ministry of Education promotes interculturality as a national curriculum goal (Ethiopian Ministry of Education, 2021), such goals are not tied specifically to teaching in and through English, nor is there evidence that English education contributes more effectively to these aims than instruction in local or national languages.

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2.8 Conclusion

To sum up, there is no doubt that the global reach, status and linguistic capital of English give it considerable appeal for policymakers, parents, students and other stakeholders. For policymakers, English is often seen as essential to meet national policy priorities, whereas parents and some students, particularly from poorer communities, regard it as offering high-quality education, social mobility and enhanced job opportunities. EME specifically is further seen as offering English language skills, despite lack of consistent evidence that this happens in practice. However, these opportunities are often contingent on contextual factors such as existing socio-economic and linguistic capital, with unequal access and poorly supported implementation undermining the potential benefits of EiE. Without a comprehensive, context-sensitive approach that incorporates multilingual support and equity-focused policies, teaching and learning of, in and through English may risk reproducing the very inequalities it seeks to redress. The positive impact of English is heavily mediated by contextual factors such as teaching quality, socio-economic inequality, institutional support and language policy alignment. Without addressing these structural and systemic issues, teaching and learning in and through English may reinforce rather than alleviate social and economic disparities. In Section 3, we look at some of the key challenges, problems and issues that have been raised concerning EiE.

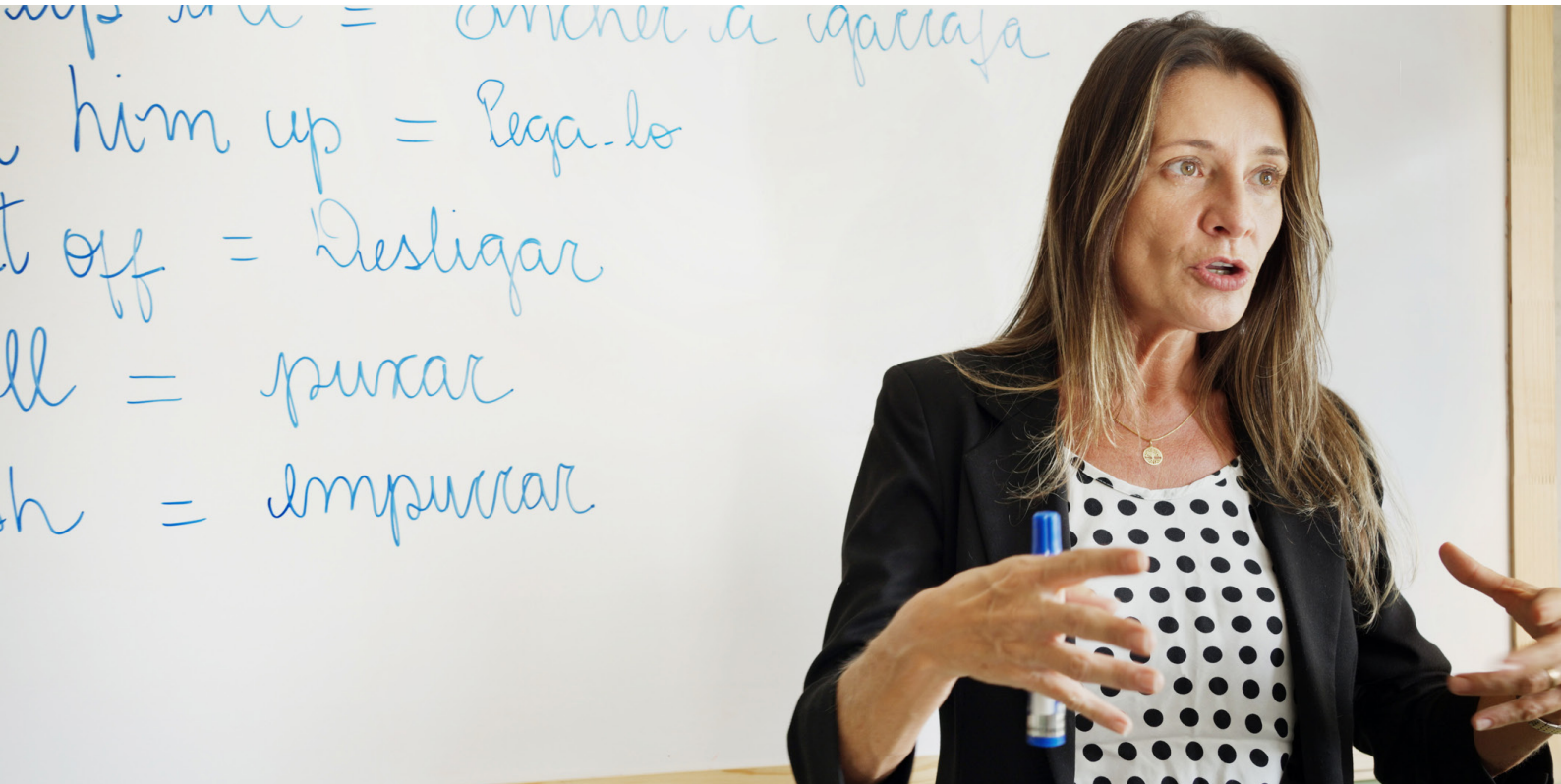
3

English in education: Challenges and problems

While English plays an increasingly prominent role in education policy across multilingual contexts, policies and implementations can present substantial challenges and problems. These challenges are closely linked to issues of quality, equity and educational effectiveness – particularly where systems lack the resources, teacher capacity or pedagogical frameworks to support English learning. This section discusses challenges that affect the successful delivery of English in education (EiE) and contribute to disparities in educational outcomes. It is structured into four types of challenges: teacher-related challenges, student-related challenges, educational challenges and societal challenges.

3.1 Teacher-related challenges

In many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), teachers often struggle with fluency, pronunciation and subject-specific terminology in English, limiting their ability to deliver content effectively (Hugo & Nieman, 2010; Joyce-Gibbons et al., 2018). These challenges are not limited to LMICs; teachers in high-income countries such as Spain and France have also reported language-related anxieties and limitations in English proficiency (Blattès, 2018; Nieto Moreno de Diezmas & Fernández Barrera, 2021; O'Connell & Chaplier, 2014).



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Despite high expectations, actual classroom practices often fall short. As Bastola and Hu (2024) highlight, English-medium education (EME) teachers in under-resourced schools in Nepal and China rarely provide adequate feedback or engage students in meaningful English interaction, leaving students with only rudimentary language skills. This observation mirrors findings from studies in Sub-Saharan Africa (for example, Brock-Utne, 2007), where EME implementation often results in rote memorisation without conceptual understanding.

The consequences of teachers' linguistic limitations are well documented. In Tanzania, teachers with low English proficiency often resort to minimal explanation and simplified discourse in the classroom, resulting in passive and surface-level learning (Joyce-Gibbons et al., 2018). In South Africa, the shift to English as the medium of instruction in Grade 4 places a dual burden on both learners and educators, many of whom lack the skills to facilitate complex discussion or scaffold academic language (Desai, 2016). In Nepal, a shortage of qualified EME teachers has led to reliance on translation and rote methods, undermining both subject comprehension and language development (Khati, 2016; Phyak & Ojha, 2019). Similarly, teachers in Spain have expressed concerns about insufficient training, recruitment challenges and a lack of pedagogical support in EME settings (Nieto Moreno de Diezmas & Fernández Barrera, 2021).

Beyond linguistic proficiency, many English as a subject (E@S) and EME teachers lack the pedagogical skills needed to teach English effectively. Globally, it is common for teachers to have received their own education in mother tongue or non-English-medium institutions, which may not prepare them for the demands of teaching English or using it as a medium of instruction. For example, in Ethiopia, Mergo and Daba (2024) note that EME programmes often lack clear pedagogical objectives, leading to fragmented and inconsistent teaching practices. Similarly, in India and Ghana, Erling et al. (2016) found that teachers frequently rely on rote learning and direct translation instead of fostering active, student-centred learning.

In Nepal, many public-school teachers lack both the language skills and the pedagogical training necessary for EME (Giri, 2010). As a result, they often revert to Nepali or other local languages to explain complex concepts – an approach which, while potentially helpful for comprehension, can reduce students' exposure to English if not used strategically (Seel et al., 2017). It is not the use of other languages per se that is problematic but the lack of clear translanguaging strategies that align with curricular goals, including English development. In multilingual contexts like Nigeria and Ghana, EME policies have also been criticised for marginalising indigenous languages and placing unrealistic expectations on teachers who are not adequately supported (Joyce-Gibbons et al., 2018). The resulting classroom discourse often relies on 'safe talk' – simplified English structures that avoid deeper engagement and critical thinking (Williams, 2014).

3.2 Student-related challenges

Students, like teachers, face significant challenges in EME environments – challenges that are especially acute in linguistically diverse and resource-constrained settings. Many students enter EME classrooms with limited English exposure and lack the proficiency needed to access academic content, particularly in cognitively demanding subjects like science and mathematics.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, students often struggle to achieve grade-level subject knowledge due to low English proficiency (Clegg & Simpson, 2016). In Tanzania, for example, Joyce-Gibbons et al. (2018) and Brock-Utne (2005) documented how students transitioning to EME in secondary school often lack the foundational skills to engage with English, leading to rote copying and minimal comprehension. Uwezo (2010) similarly reported that nearly half of students leaving primary school were unable to read English at even a basic level, suggesting that the transition to EME exacerbates rather than mitigates linguistic challenges. More recent research from Cameroon confirms that students in EME settings often fail to grasp core concepts, especially when instruction is teacher-centred and English is used in rigid, non-inclusive ways (Kuchah et al., 2023). In Ethiopia, Heugh et al. (2007) similarly observed that students frequently rely on rote memorisation rather than conceptual understanding when instruction is delivered in English.

Additional pressures further complicate learning. In many settings, English carries significant symbolic and socio-economic status. Students may experience stress due to parental expectations and the perceived link between English proficiency and social mobility (Sah & Li, 2018). This pressure, however, is not always matched by the quality of instruction or availability of English outside school environments. Many learners, particularly those from rural or low-income households, lack regular exposure to English in their communities, making it difficult to reinforce school-based learning.

Moreover, students often face disparities related to socio-economic status, gender and home language (Hultgren et al., 2024). In multilingual classrooms, the absence of structured peer-to-peer language strategies can limit both English development and the use of students' home languages as learning resources. While some students may develop strong speaking and listening skills, they often lack comparable proficiency in reading and writing – skills that are critical for academic success in EME systems (Desai, 2016).

Ultimately, student challenges are deeply linked to the systemic issues faced by teachers. Limited teacher proficiency, inadequate pedagogy and insufficient resources contribute directly to students' struggles with both content learning and language acquisition (Woldeyes, 2022). Addressing student outcomes in EME requires not only learner-focused interventions but also substantial investment in teacher education, curriculum and assessment design, and multilingual pedagogical practices.

3.3 Educational challenges

In addition to the above-mentioned challenges faced by teachers and students, there are also wider educational challenges associated with EiE. This section discusses three such, relating to adverse impact on educational quality, exacerbation of inequities and consequences for linguistic marginalisation.

3.3.1 Adverse impact on educational quality

Before discussing the impact of English on educational quality, it is important to be aware that any such discussion depends on how 'quality' is defined and against which specific learning outcomes it is assessed. It is equally important to bear in mind that the learning outcomes will be different depending on whether English is taught as a subject, used a medium of education or used as part of a specific pedagogical approach such as language-supportive pedagogies.

With these caveats in mind, the evidence from a wide range of national contexts in South Asia and Africa, such as Nepal, Ethiopia, South Africa, Nigeria, Tanzania and Kenya, indicates that teaching in and through English, when poorly implemented and inadequately supported, often undermines rather than enhances educational outcomes. Key barriers include low student and teacher English proficiency, lack of appropriate pedagogical strategies, and sociolinguistic marginalisation.

While EME may deliver educational quality in well-resourced systems, its implementation in under-resourced low- and middle-income settings frequently results in compromised learning and increased inequality. In many cases, premature or poorly implemented EME can undermine both content learning and language development. Research has shown that early and poorly supported implementation of EME can impede comprehension and subject learning, especially where teachers lack proficiency or pedagogical training in English (Heugh et al., 2012; Erling et al., 2021). Thus, while EME may reflect parental aspirations and national policy ambitions, it should not be conflated with the broader goal of English proficiency, nor assumed to be the most equitable or effective path toward it. Substantial evidence points to the negative impact of EME on students' learning when it is introduced too early or without sufficient linguistic and pedagogical support. Simpson (2019) argues that the early introduction of EME impairs learning in the formative years and limits educational attainment. He further notes that there is little evidence that teaching and learning in and through English improves outcomes more effectively than quality mother tongue education followed by well supported E@S. This claim aligns with findings from Trudell (2018), who, in a review of educational quality in Eastern and Southern Africa, concludes that English as a language of instruction creates *a central challenge* in primary classrooms where pupils do not speak English and they are 'forced to sink or swim' (Milligan, 2020: p. 4).

Research by Erling et al. (2017) in multilingual classrooms illustrates how linguistic mismatches in EME settings often lead to confusion and weak learning outcomes. The authors observe that in many EME classrooms, instruction was above the linguistic capacity of the students, resulting in diminished comprehension and academic performance. This pattern is corroborated in a World Bank report by Crawford and Marin (2021) from Tanzania, which notes that many children with three years of schooling cannot identify a single written word, with teaching in and through English being a likely cause given that students are taught in a language they do not understand.

Similar challenges have been observed in the South African context. Desai (2016) highlights the discontinuity between learners' home languages and the language of instruction, stressing that this barrier becomes even more pronounced when teachers themselves lack sufficient proficiency. In such settings, EME may not only fall short in promoting academic literacy but may, in fact, hinder its development. Kamwangamalu (2013) goes so far as to contend that EME has failed to fulfil its core objectives of promoting literacy, instead contributing to illiteracy and elite closure, a process where a small, educated class maintains its exclusive position by using a language not accessible to the wider population.

The educational disadvantages of EME are particularly acute when the language of instruction is not aligned with students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Walter (2014) found that Grade 5 students in Cameroon performed significantly better in mathematics when taught in mother tongue-based multilingual education settings than in English-only classrooms. Similarly, Kiramba (2014) reports that Kenyan students struggle to participate in EME classrooms, often unable to express themselves beyond single-word responses due to limited English proficiency. Mergo and Daba's (2024) research from Ethiopia quantifies this effect: their study found that EME lowered students' maths scores while increasing verbal performance. Sah and Fang (2023) caution that the reasons for these problems might be related to the characteristics of EME programmes, such as a lack of pedagogical grounding, rendering them ineffective for academic success.

To sum up, the teaching and learning in and through English is not the cause of improvement or deficit in itself, and contextual and policy-based practices shape the outcomes at various levels. Language-in-education (LiE) policies can benefit from context-sensitive and language-responsive approaches that prioritise comprehension, equity and learner inclusion, and policymakers should consider various factors prior to adopting EME.

3.3.2 Exacerbation of inequities

Despite the appeal of English for social mobility and professional and educational advancement, in multilingual and socio-economically diverse contexts, the growing dominance of English raises serious concerns about equity and inclusion. While some students may benefit from English-medium policies, particularly those with pre-existing access to English outside of school, others – especially from lower-income and linguistically marginalised communities – are more likely to be disadvantaged (Milligan & Tikly, 2016; Sah & Li, 2018; Trudell, 2018). Across contexts, the dominance of EiE risks producing what Tollefson and Tsui (2004) describe as *linguistic gatekeeping*

– where access to quality education, social mobility and participation in public life is determined by English proficiency. Thus, without adequate safeguards, EME can exacerbate rather than reduce educational inequities.

One of the most consistent findings across contexts is that EME often benefits socio-economically privileged groups more than marginalised communities. In Nepal, for example, institutional (private) school graduates are more likely to secure better positions in the job market due to their superior English skills (Shrestha & Gautam, 2022). Conversely, students in community schools – where English teaching is often of lower quality – are disadvantaged in both higher education and employment domains.

This pattern is echoed by Lamb's (2011) analysis in Coleman's British Council report. Using longitudinal evidence from schools in Indonesia, Lamb shows that children's socio-economic background significantly influences how they respond to learning in English. Children from aspirational middle-class families tend to improve consistently in English, while their less-privileged peers often struggle to make progress. As Phyak and Ojha (2019) argue, in Nepal, EME's symbolic capital tends to reinforce existing inequalities, privileging elites while excluding students from minority or rural backgrounds. Similarly, in Ethiopia, EME is widely believed to offer global employment advantages, but concrete evidence remains sparse. As Mergo and Daba (2024) note, the popularity of EME is linked to assumed, but empirically unproven at the basic education level, benefits for job market prospects. In Asia, Kirkpatrick and Bui (2016) note that EME facilitates employability and international mobility, but also caution that these benefits are not equally distributed.

This pattern of inequality is echoed in other low-income contexts in Africa. Kamwangamalu (2013) argues that EME privileges a small, urban elite while excluding rural and economically disadvantaged students who often lack the foundational English skills to benefit from instruction. In Nigeria, despite the widespread practices of teaching of, in and through English, English is reportedly one of the worst-taught subjects due to a lack of qualified teachers, with lower-income students bearing the brunt of this deficit (Christopher, 2008). The association between EME and elite closure is well established: Lamb (2011) finds that students with already better prospects consistently make linguistic gains through EME, while their less-privileged peers are left behind. Thus, EME tends to function less as a tool for broad-based social mobility and more as a mechanism for reproducing existing social hierarchies (Milligan & Tikly, 2016; Phyak & Ojha, 2019). While the perception of EME as a driver of opportunity is nearly universal (Coleman, 2011; Simpson, 2019), the empirical evidence reveals that access to its benefits is largely stratified along class lines. However, Phyak and Sharma (2020) acknowledge that EME can offer children from disadvantaged communities in Nepal the chance to develop English language skills comparable to those gained in private schooling contexts, though such outcomes are not guaranteed.

Even in high-income contexts, English often serves as a marker of class in educational settings. In Spain, for example, concerns have been raised regarding differential access to content and language integrated learning (CLIL) programmes among students from various socio-economic backgrounds. CLIL initiatives often require specialised teacher training, smaller class sizes and access to enriched materials and technological tools – resources that are more readily available in affluent educational settings. Consequently, students in underfunded public schools or those from low-income families are frequently excluded from CLIL opportunities, thereby reinforcing existing educational inequities (Pérez Cañado, 2023a; Rascón Moreno & Bretones Callejas, 2018).

Moreover, the creaming effect – wherein high-performing or well-supported students are disproportionately selected for CLIL tracks – has been noted as a mechanism of social stratification (Bruton, 2011; Lorenzo et al., 2010). This implicit selectivity results in the marginalisation of students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds who may lack the linguistic capital or parental advocacy required to gain admission into such programmes. Even in contexts where bilingual education is being mainstreamed, the legacy of exclusivity continues to impact how CLIL tracks are structured and whom they serve.

Nevertheless, emerging quantitative research challenges the inevitability of this disparity. Several recent studies have revealed that the initial socio-economic bias in CLIL enrolment is diminishing, with randomised studies showing no significant differences in terms of English proficiency, motivation or verbal intelligence between CLIL and non-CLIL students (Madrid & Barrios, 2018). In fact, CLIL may serve as a social equaliser by mitigating rural–urban disparities and levelling the playing field across school types (Pérez Cañado, 2020). When implemented with inclusive principles, CLIL has demonstrated its potential to function effectively in underserved contexts, including rural, low-SES and ethnolinguistically diverse settings (Pavón, 2018).

However, realising this potential requires systemic efforts to adapt CLIL methodologies to diverse learner needs. This includes incorporating differentiated instruction, scaffolding, multimodal resources and flexible classroom arrangements (Madrid & Pérez Cañado, 2018). The DIDI framework (Pérez Cañado, 2023b), for example, redefines diversity to include socio-economic status alongside cognitive and cultural dimensions, advocating for pedagogical responsiveness that ensures CLIL's accessibility to all learners.

3.3.3 Consequences for linguistic marginalisation

In some contexts, teaching and learning of, in and through English is frequently promoted without due consideration for local linguistic ecologies, resulting in the marginalisation of minority language groups. In Nepal, for example, EME has been shown to suppress the use of regional languages such as Bhojpuri and Maithili, leading to a form of epistemic exclusion where learners' cultural identities are devalued in educational spaces (Poudel et al., 2022; Sah, 2024). Rather than fostering added educational value, EME may lead to linguistic homogenisation and alienation from local knowledge systems. A similar pattern emerges in South Africa and Nigeria, where the introduction of EME early in schooling is associated with reduced learning outcomes among students whose first language is not English (Desai, 2016; Kamwangamalu, 2013). In Cameroon, Walter (2014) found that students taught in their mother tongue outperformed their EME peers in mathematics, suggesting that minority language instruction is more effective for conceptual learning.

In many multilingual countries, EME policies have been criticised for undermining indigenous and minority languages. In Ethiopia and Nepal, for example, students from non-dominant-language communities often find themselves linguistically excluded in English- and dominant-language classrooms (Arega et al., 2024). Despite Nepal officially recognising over 123 languages (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012), national LiE policies continue to prioritise English and Nepali, frequently at the expense of mother tongues. This has led to what some scholars call a *linguistic hierarchy,* where English is perceived as superior, while local languages are devalued (Sah, 2024). Sah (2024) argues that this language policy direction reflects neoliberal ideologies that prioritise economic goals over cultural and linguistic inclusion. In some schools, students are even discouraged from using local languages such as Maithili or Bhojpuri, contributing to the erosion of linguistic identities and further marginalising minority language speakers (Sah, 2024).

These dynamics are not limited to South Asia. In francophone Africa, similar concerns arise. Trudell (2018) and Kuchah et al. (2023) note that despite official support for mother tongue education, English and French continue to dominate classrooms in Eastern and Southern Africa, contributing to linguistic marginalisation, inequity and alienation. Students who do not speak the dominant languages of instruction often underperform and disengage, undermining broader goals of inclusive education.

Concerns about linguistic marginalisation are also relevant in high-income countries. In several European contexts, English is increasingly promoted at the expense of regional or minority languages, such as Catalan, Basque or Breton (Gorter & Cenoz, 2011; Lasagabaster, 2005). Some scholars argue that this trend may conflict with the EU's *mother tongue plus two* language policy, which aims to promote linguistic diversity and multilingualism (Bessie, 2018). The growth of English in elite schools and international programmes may also create divides between public and private education systems, with wealthier students having more access to English-rich environments (Hultgren, 2014).

3.4 Societal challenges

3.4.1 Socio-economic disparities

As discussed above (see Section 3.3.2), there is evidence that English can widen the gaps between groups in society that are already advantaged and those that are less so. One of the most pressing equity issues is the unequal access to English language resources, which is intrinsically linked to financial resources. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are often more successful in English-medium systems because they have greater exposure to English through private tutoring, media and home support. By contrast, students from low-income households typically have limited opportunities to engage with English outside school, making them more likely to struggle in EME settings (Jahan & Hamid, 2019; Tikly, 2016). While these students already face challenges due to socio-economic disadvantage, EME introduces an additional cognitive and linguistic burden that can further limit their access to quality education (Erling et al., 2016).

The digital divide exacerbates this gap. In countries such as Nepal, urban students have more access to online English learning resources, television and mobile media, while rural students – particularly girls from low-income families – are doubly disadvantaged (Hultgren et al., 2024; Shrestha & Gautam, 2022), reflecting the intersection of gender, poverty and language inequality in English-based education (Milligan & Adamson, 2022).

3.4.2 Widening of public vs private school sector

A key challenge for contemporary societies is the widening disparity between public and private education sectors. English not only mediates this disparity but also perpetuates it. Evidence from Nepali and Nigerian secondary schools shows that parents and students tend to associate English with high-quality education and are often willing to pay for it (Hultgren et al., 2024). This means that only middle-class families – who have access to greater financial and academic resources – are able to afford it, which in turn segregates education systems into comparatively stronger and weaker learning communities. Moreover, as more resources tend to be invested into the private sector, these schools often have better-qualified, higher-salaried and more dedicated teachers, which leads to environments that are more conducive to learning. English thus serves to exacerbate the learning divide between the private and public sector, further entrenching inequalities in societies, particularly in resource-poor communities.

In countries like Bangladesh, India and Nepal, wealthier families often send their children to English-medium private schools, which typically offer smaller class sizes, greater teacher accountability and more instructional time (Borooah & Sabharwal, 2017; Jahan & Hamid, 2019; Sah & Karki, 2023). However, this dynamic is not uniform. Many low-fee private schools – despite advertising EME – may not deliver high-quality English or subject teaching and often rely on poorly trained teachers using rote methods (Erling et al., 2016). Where private schools do outperform state schools, factors such as teacher attendance, student time on task and stronger school management – rather than EME itself – appear to explain the difference (Shrestha & Gautam, 2022).

In Nepal, a lower-middle-income context, Shrestha and Gautam (2022) demonstrate that private EME institutions provide more effective instruction and greater opportunities for English language use compared to under-resourced community schools, leading to better outcomes in higher education and employment. Also in Nepal, students from elite backgrounds are more likely to be enrolled in private institutions, often benefiting from pre-existing English exposure and access to private tutoring (Choi & Poudel, 2024). Choi and Poudel (2024) conclude that the shift to EME in public schools has raised concerns about social justice and quality, as the transition has often resulted in reduced content mastery for some groups of learners. The inadequacy of teacher English proficiency and limited resources in these contexts further compound the problem. Bhatta and Pherali (2017) found, however, that while private EME schools tend to offer higher-quality education than public schools, this is not necessarily because of EME but due to structural advantages. In contrast, public schools often lack teacher training and institutional support, making EME implementation inconsistent and ineffective (Ojha, 2018).

3.4.3 Gender inequality: An underexplored issue

While much of the literature on EME has explored socio-economic and linguistic inequalities, gender remains a relatively under-examined dimension – though notable exceptions include Milligan and Adamson (2022) and Hultgren and her colleagues (2024), who focus explicitly on gendered impacts. Emerging evidence indicates that EME's outcomes are shaped by complex gendered dynamics. In contexts where girls already face structural barriers to accessing quality education, EME can unintentionally deepen existing inequalities. For instance, in rural African and South Asian settings, cultural norms and economic pressures often prevent girls from attending fee-paying EME schools, thereby limiting their access to the linguistic capital that EME can offer (Choi & Poudel, 2024; de Wet, 2002; Hultgren et al., 2024; Milligan & Adamson, 2022).

However, EME also has the potential to empower girls, particularly where it is associated with future employment or status gains. In Nepal and Cameroon, for example, EME is seen by many parents as a route to respectable, white-collar employment for their daughters, enhancing the perceived value of girls' education (Poudel & Choi, 2022; Tembe & Norton, 2011). Yet such benefits remain closely tied to broader factors such as the quality of instruction, institutional support and family background. Hultgren et al. (2024) report that in both Nepal and Nigeria, girls are significantly under-represented in EME streams in public schools, with gendered enrolment gaps reinforced by early marriage, economic constraint and societal perceptions that boys benefit more from English education.

As gender interacts with other dimensions of identity – such as class, ethnicity and language – its influence on EME outcomes becomes even more complex. There is a clear need for further empirical research that disaggregates EME outcomes by gender to better understand how it intersects with other forms of educational and social inequality.

3.5 Conclusion

The implementation of EME presents a complex landscape of opportunity and challenge. On the one hand, EME may enhance English language proficiency, expand access to global knowledge and support students' engagement with internationally relevant academic and professional domains. However, these potential benefits are not guaranteed, and they have different effects on different learners, with resultant educational and societal disadvantages. The future of EiE lies not in blanket adoption but in the development of context-sensitive, equity-oriented policies. As we shall discuss (see Section 4), these must combine strong language support, strengthened teaching of E@S, inclusive pedagogical strategies, adequate infrastructure and ongoing teacher development. When such conditions are in place – though this remains the exception rather than the norm – EME can contribute to broader educational goals. Without these safeguards, EME risks reinforcing existing disparities rather than serving as a bridge to educational justice or global engagement.

4

Policies and strategies for overcoming challenges

Although English in education (EiE), particularly English-medium education (EME), is associated with numerous challenges, as described above, there is evidence of successful mitigation strategies to overcome such challenges. Of course, given that English is intrinsically embedded in a wider global socio-economic restructuring, any adverse effects of EiE cannot be eradicated without more systemic and structural changes that address the global and historical forces that drive the spread of English. Nonetheless, this section discusses the strategies that previous research has shown might mitigate some of the challenges: in turn, strategies for educational policymakers at the international, national and regional levels, school leaders and teachers.

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4.1 Strategies for educational policymakers

4.1.1 Aligning EME policy with practice and strengthening systemic support

In many settings, EME is introduced through top-down mandates without adequate planning, consultation or resource allocation (Early & Norton, 2014). As a result, there is often a disconnect between national policy aspirations and the realities of school capacities and classroom practices. Teachers and administrators report confusion over curriculum expectations, language use guidelines and assessment criteria. Early and Norton (2014) highlight in their study in Uganda that language policies – despite being well intentioned – can become ineffective or even counterproductive when transferred across markedly different contexts, such as from well-resourced urban areas to under-resourced rural communities, or from elite institutions to grassroots settings. To avoid this, governments must develop clear, comprehensive frameworks that outline the goals, phases and standards of EME schools and programmes. Crucially, these policies must be grounded in contextual feasibility studies, as suggested by Ojha (2018), to ensure that they align with local capacities and educational needs.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are often overlooked in EME roll-outs. Without such evaluation, it is difficult to track progress or identify areas requiring support. Standardised English proficiency tests are frequently used as proxies for academic achievement, despite their inability to measure subject-specific understanding. Llinares and Whittaker (2010) stress the need for dual-purpose assessment frameworks that distinguish between language proficiency and content knowledge. These assessments should be complemented by qualitative classroom observations, formative evaluations and teacher feedback systems to inform continuous improvement. Furthermore, EME teachers require ongoing professional development – not only before implementation but throughout their careers. García Bermejo (2021) highlights the positive impact of specialised degrees and teaching certifications in improving EME instruction quality in Spain. Embedding professional growth within institutional cultures, supported by peer networks and teacher learning communities, ensures the sustainability and adaptability of EME initiatives (Dobson et al., 2010).

4.1.2 Gradual and phased implementation

A core principle emerging from the literature is the necessity of a phased approach to EME. A sudden, full-scale shift to English as the language of instruction often results in student alienation, reduced comprehension and widening achievement gaps (Heugh et al., 2007). Instead, a stepwise introduction, beginning with mother tongue instruction (MTI) and incorporating English progressively, enables students to build foundational literacy and conceptual understanding (Trudell, 2018).

Research from diverse contexts supports this model. For instance, Rwanda's implementation of an English bridging year prior to full EME adoption improved student readiness significantly (Crawford & Marin, 2021). Similarly, Mergo and Daba (2024) argue that progressive English training from early grades, rather than abrupt immersion, yields better academic outcomes. In Nepal, a phased model that starts with core subjects like mathematics and science in English, while keeping other subjects bilingual (i.e. Nepali/local language and English), has shown promise (Shrestha & Gautam, 2022).

Furthermore, models that retain MTI during early childhood education have demonstrated long-term academic benefits (Heugh et al., 2007). This is also in line with UNESCO's latest perspective that suggests integrating mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) into the curriculum to build foundational literacy and language skills, while also fostering respect for students' heritage languages and cultural backgrounds starting in the earliest grades (Maurer et al., 2025). Anyadiegwu (2012) notes in the Nigerian context that early education conducted in the home language enhances cognitive development, which later supports English acquisition. This reflects the findings of Lasagabaster and Huguet (2007) in Europe, who emphasise that a bilingual or multilingual transition fosters both academic and linguistic competence.

Comprehensive language planning that recognises linguistic diversity and supports MTB-MLE is critical to ensure equity (Giri, 2010; Woldeyes, 2022). A social justice approach to EME, which recognises that educational policies and practices can either perpetuate or challenge social inequalities, acknowledges the importance of local languages and cultures. This approach seeks to counter the hegemonic influence of English by ensuring that educational systems do not marginalise students based on their linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Sah, 2024). These diversity and equity concerns should be considered by ensuring effective policies for transition from MTI to EME. Without a comprehensive, context-sensitive approach that incorporates multilingual support and equity-focused policies, teaching and learning in and through English may risk reproducing the very inequalities it seeks to redress.

A review of research on transition from MTI to English medium reveals there is 'no best practice in transitioning from mother tongue to English as the medium of instruction in low and middle-income countries' (Boateng, 2019: p. 2). Research consistently shows that students learn best when they first develop robust literacy and academic skills in their home language (Boateng, 2019). This early mastery supports cognitive development, fosters confidence and makes it easier for students to transfer skills to additional languages, including English. A smooth and effective shift to EME necessitates a multifaceted approach, incorporating gradual implementation, supportive pedagogical practices, policy alignment and sustained stakeholder engagement.

4.1.3 Early English exposure and its benefits

Although debates continue around the most appropriate timing and models for introducing EiE, research suggests that English can offer some educational benefits – particularly when taught as a subject and when the approach is carefully designed, context-sensitive and equitably supported (Lin & Morrison, 2010; Mohanty et al., 2010). There is evidence of benefits for early development of English language proficiency; however, this seems to apply when English is taught effectively as a subject by trained teachers in well-resourced contexts (Benson, 2004; Lin & Morrison, 2010). In many Commonwealth countries – including Ghana and India – English is initially introduced as a subject in the early grades and then used as a medium of instruction in later stages, typically after four to six years of MTI, depending on the language policy in place. However, it is critical to distinguish between the effects of sustained exposure to English through English as a subject (E@S) and through EME. While evidence suggests that well-implemented E@S can lead to gains in English fluency and vocabulary (Lin & Morrison, 2010; Mohanty, 2006), findings on EME are more contested, with some studies showing negative effects on subject learning outcomes, particularly when EME is introduced too early or without adequate teacher preparation and support (Heugh et al., 2012; Erling et al., 2021).

Drawing on the Young Lives longitudinal data from Ethiopia, Opare-Kumi (2024) similarly reported that EME had no significant benefit for English performance and was associated with lower mathematics scores, contradicting earlier claims that earlier transition to English improves overall learning outcomes. These findings align with broader research indicating that early exit models – where MTI is replaced by EME after only a few years – can hinder comprehension and conceptual learning, especially in subjects like mathematics that are cognitively demanding (Heugh et al., 2012; Vujcich, 2013). While English is indeed the language of secondary and higher education in countries like Ethiopia, there is limited empirical evidence showing that early EME leads to improved academic success at those levels, especially given the many intervening factors such as teacher proficiency, socio-economic background and instructional quality (Woldeyes, 2022).

Introducing EME in early education may have some benefits when done carefully and gradually, particularly in bilingual settings where both languages are supported through scaffolded instruction. However, attributing cognitive benefits specifically to EME is problematic. Rather, it is bilingualism and multilingualism – regardless of the specific languages – that have been associated with enhanced cognitive flexibility and executive function (Bialystok, 2009; De Bruin et al., 2017). For example, De Sousa (2012) found that bilingual Afrikaans–English-speaking third graders outperformed monolingual peers in certain cognitive tasks, although the effect was significant in only two of 18 subtests, such as hand movements and matrix analogies, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Further evidence from the MultiLila study in India confirms that multilingual learners demonstrate advantages in areas such as attention allocation and language awareness, reinforcing the benefits of additive multilingual education models (Tsimpli et al., 2019).

4.1.4 Teacher capacity building

There is increasing recognition that a systems-wide, transformative model of EME should involve building teacher capacity – in terms of both English proficiency and pedagogical training – so that they can implement inclusive, multilingual strategies effectively (Simpson, 2019). Such initiatives may include the development of language-supportive textbooks and pre-transition materials, as seen in the Tanzanian case study of Form 1 coursebooks designed to ease learners into EME (Simpson, 2019). Additionally, projects such as the Molteno initiative and the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa have demonstrated the value of investing in local teacher training and materials development that reflect multilingual pedagogies (Bloch & Mbolekwa, 2021; Erling et al., 2021; Trudell, 2018) particularly through the use of mother tongue-based bilingual approaches and the creation of culturally relevant storybooks. This is exemplified by the Nal'ibali National Reading for Enjoyment Campaign, which aims to foster a culture of reading and storytelling in both home languages and English (Erling et al., 2021).

This systems-wide, transformative approach to EiE is exemplified by recent innovations in Rwanda. The following two initiatives – the Supporting Teachers' English via Mentoring project and the Language-Supportive Textbooks and Pedagogy project – illustrate how localised, cost-effective interventions can strengthen both teacher capacity and learner engagement in EME contexts.

Supporting Teachers' English via Mentoring (STEM) project

- **Objective**: To improve the English language proficiency of upper primary school teachers to support the implementation of Rwanda's competency-based curriculum.
- **Approach**: Delivered through a **blended learning model**, combining **guided self-study**, **audio resources** and **peer support groups**, minimising reliance on face-to-face training.
- **Delivery**: Materials are used individually or in peer groups, often facilitated by school-based mentors.
- **Outcomes**: Improved teacher confidence and competence in using English in classrooms; increased student motivation and participation in English-medium lessons.
- **Innovation**: Cost-effective, scalable model promoting **teacher collaboration**, **ongoing professional development** and **language-aware pedagogy**.

Language-Supportive Textbooks and Pedagogy (LAST) project

- **Objective**: To design and implement **language-supportive learning materials** for learners studying in English with limited proficiency.
- **Subjects covered**: Mathematics, science and social studies for upper primary.
- **Features**:
  - Bilingual vocabulary support (Kinyarwanda–English)
  - Contextually relevant illustrations
  - Structured opportunities for learners to first explore ideas in **L1 (Kinyarwanda)** before transitioning to **L2 (English)**
  - Supportive reading, writing, speaking and listening activities
  - Dual-language teachers' guides
- **Impact**: In a monitored trial involving over 1,000 pupils, students using LAST materials scored **16 per cent higher** in vocabulary and comprehension than those in control schools.
- **Institutional uptake**: Guidelines from the project were formally adopted by the Rwandan Education Board and now influence national textbook procurement.

4.2 Strategies for school leaders

4.2.1 Institutional support and resources

The transition to EME cannot succeed without a well-resourced framework of institutional support. School leaders must ensure adequate funding, infrastructure and human capital for EME implementation (Tikly, 2016). However, there is a lack of awareness among key stakeholders regarding the role of language in education (Clegg, 2007) and limited leadership shown by African universities in advancing mother tongue and bi/multilingual education (Boateng, 2019). Moreover, Kamwangamalu (2013) contends that market forces, vested interests and insufficient political will hinder policymakers and educational leaders from adopting effective strategies for transitioning from MTI to EME. Stakeholder perceptions further complicate the situation. In Ethiopia, for instance, concerns have been raised about the limited utility of local languages beyond their immediate region, leading to hesitancy in developing writing systems for less

widely spoken languages (Erling et al., 2016). In Ghana, for example, even government-sponsored languages suffer from underinvestment, which impacts on implementation at school level (Erling et al., 2016).

Inadequate access to quality learning materials remains a persistent barrier in EiE. Many schools rely on direct translations of national curriculum textbooks, which are often poorly adapted and fail to reflect the linguistic needs of EME classrooms. Gautam (2021) critiques such materials for providing insufficient opportunities for authentic language engagement. Arega et al. (2024) argue for the design of English textbooks that gradually increase in complexity, scaffolding language and content simultaneously. Developing localised, bilingual resources that contextualise learning and validate students' linguistic backgrounds is equally important. This is not only a challenge in low-resource settings. Across Europe, EME programmes are also grappling with a scarcity of high-quality materials tailored to specific educational contexts and learner profiles.

The lack of materials, curricula and practical support for MTI also needs to be addressed (Opoku-Amankwa et al., 2015). In most cases, teaching syllabuses and materials – except for language textbooks – are in English. As a result, teachers must translate lessons into local languages – an impractical task if they are not fluent in the local language (Erling et al., 2016). Given the prevailing preference for English, investment in MTI is often seen as both financially unviable and logistically complex due to the multilingual nature of society (Boateng, 2019).

4.2.2 Teacher training and professional development

A central concern in teaching in and through English is the limited English proficiency of many teachers, especially in public schools and rural areas. In many contexts, educators are required to teach complex academic subjects in English despite lacking the language (Curle et al., 2020) and pedagogical (Andúgar & Cortina-Pérez, 2018; Rose et al., 2020) skills necessary for effective instruction. Programmes such as the English Language Improvement Programme (ELIP) in Ethiopia have attempted to build capacity since 2002 (Abbagidi & Tsegai, 2024). In the European context – particularly in Spain – where children are increasingly introduced to English or EME during the Early Years Foundation Stage (ages 0–6), there remains a significant lack of specific pedagogical training for teachers working at this foundational level, often leaving them underprepared to integrate English in developmentally appropriate ways (Andúgar & Cortina-Pérez, 2018). Moreover, as Heugh et al. (2007) note, teachers tend to lose their acquired English skills quickly when they lack opportunities for sustained practice and language use. To overcome this, more continuous and integrated professional development initiatives are needed. These should include both general English proficiency and subject-specific language training, delivered through modular in-service programmes, mentoring systems and school-based professional learning communities. Mergo and Daba (2024) emphasise that sustained professional learning support is crucial for the success of EiE, while Ojha (2018) advocates for targeted training in EME-specific pedagogy to ensure instructional quality.

ELIP is a major national effort in Ethiopia. As part of the Ethiopian Government's Teacher Development Programme, and with support from the British Council, it aims to boost the English language skills of primary and secondary school teachers, along with teacher trainers and trainers of trainers. This initiative has already benefited over 15,000 educators. ELIP uses a cascade model to implement its programme nationwide, and a key goal is to empower teachers and help establish English Language Improvement Centers in schools.

Beyond language proficiency, many teachers lack adequate pedagogical preparation to teach in English. Instruction often remains teacher-centred and dependent on rote memorisation, failing to engage students or support content comprehension (Bhatta & Pherali, 2017). This challenge is exacerbated by large class sizes and a lack of methodological guidance. To improve practice, interactive and student-centred teaching strategies must be prioritised. Shrestha and Gautam (2022), focusing on the Nepali context, recommend training that integrates pedagogical models such as content and language integrated learning (CLIL), which has shown promise in balancing subject knowledge with English acquisition. Fernández-Sanjurjo et al. (2019) further suggest the use of *soft CLIL* approaches – gradual and scaffolded EME – that reduce cognitive overload and ease the transition for both teachers and students.

The competence and confidence of teachers are fundamental to the success of EME initiatives. Across contexts, research underscores the need for ongoing professional development, particularly in English language proficiency and EME-specific pedagogy (Mergo & Daba, 2024). Teachers often lack formal training in delivering subject content in English, which can impede student learning (Erling et al., 2016). This is particularly challenging for primary school teachers, who are often not language specialists, yet are required to teach multiple subjects across the curriculum (Boateng, 2019).

Structured mentoring and peer-support programmes (Read & Enyutu, 2005) facilitate the exchange of best practices and might provide critical pedagogical support during the transition. Such programmes are especially effective when embedded within whole-school EME strategies (Dobson et al., 2010).

4.2.3 Strengthening E@S

Given the mixed and often disappointing outcomes of using EME, particularly at the primary level, a growing body of research advocates for a stronger and more sustained focus on E@S as a more effective and equitable route to English language development. English proficiency is more reliably achieved through well-designed and well-resourced E@S programmes, especially when delivered by trained and motivated teachers (Coleman, 2011; Erling et al., 2021). Simpson (2019) supports this view, asserting that 'fluency in English is best served through strengthening the teaching of E@S' (p. 7), especially during the early years of schooling.

This perspective is reinforced by evidence that students from low-income backgrounds, even after six years of English instruction, often fail to attain functional proficiency (Coleman, 2011). These challenges are particularly acute in multilingual, low- or middle-income contexts, where systemic underinvestment in teacher education and inconsistent classroom language practices undermine the effectiveness of EME. Macaro (2018) notes that EME's limited benefits to vocabulary and grammar acquisition are heavily dependent on sustained, high-quality language exposure – conditions that are rarely met in under-resourced environments. Without the complementary support of systematic language instruction, the potential advantages of EME remain unrealised. Viewed in this light, efforts to improve English language outcomes should prioritise enhancing E@S provision, particularly at the primary level. This includes targeted investment in the professional development of English teachers, curriculum reform to link English instruction with other subject areas, and careful planning of progression routes from E@S to EME.

4.2.4 Promoting CLIL

CLIL, underpinned by a dedicated pedagogical approach to focus on both language and content learning, has been widely regarded as an effective strategy to overcome some of the challenges of EME (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). CLIL, however, tends to be restricted to high-income contexts in Europe. In Spain, teaching and learning of and through English has demonstrated measurable success. The Bilingual Education Project, supported by the British Council, which incorporates CLIL, has led to strong proficiency in English writing and reading (Dobson et al., 2010). Similarly, in Catalonia and the Basque Country, EME is embedded in inclusive policies that support local languages, promoting both linguistic diversity and intercultural competence (Llurda & Mocanu, 2024; Palacios-Hidalgo et al., 2022).

In CLIL settings, particularly in junior vocational secondary education, students and teachers alike perceive learning through English as a meaningful and motivating experience directly linked to career prospects and further education (Denman et al., 2013). This perception reflects a broader trend in European education systems, where dual-focused models such as CLIL are designed not only to foster linguistic competence but also to equip learners for international mobility and labour market integration (Pérez Cañado, 2013). By enhancing cognitive flexibility, critical thinking, problem solving and interpersonal skills – alongside foreign language proficiency – CLIL provides students with a multidimensional skillset that aligns with 21st-century employability demands (Marsh et al., 2020; Pérez Cañado, 2010). However, this potential is not automatically realised across all learner groups. Research cautions that in contexts where access to high-quality CLIL provision is uneven – due to socio-economic disparities or school-level selectivity – marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, may not equally benefit from these employability-linked advantages (Llinares and Evnitskaya, 2021; Relaño Pastor, 2015). While recent findings suggest that well-implemented CLIL programmes may reduce rural–urban and SES-based disparities over time (Pérez Cañado, 2021), equitable access remains a prerequisite for realising CLIL's full promise in promoting employability across diverse learner populations.

In some contexts, CLIL has been linked to improved academic engagement and critical thinking, particularly in middle- and high-income educational settings with well-prepared teachers and resources (British Council, 2010; Coyle et al., 2010). Nevertheless, such outcomes depend on multiple variables, including teacher training, curriculum design and the sociolinguistic context. Concerns about cognitive overload in young learners are valid, but when English is introduced gradually and supported through strong pedagogical practices, it can result in positive developmental outcomes, particularly when aligned with students' home languages and learning needs (Cummins, 2000).

Further empirical evidence reinforces the potential cognitive benefits of CLIL, particularly when instruction is developmentally appropriate and strategically aligned with learners' linguistic and conceptual readiness. Jäppinen's (2005) longitudinal study of 669 Finnish learners across three age groups found that CLIL environments – where instruction occurred in English, French or Swedish – were associated with measurable gains in cognitional development, especially among learners aged 10 to 14. These gains manifested as more advanced conceptual structures, or 'meaning schemes', suggesting that dual-language processing can foster analogical reasoning and enhance higher-order thinking skills. However, the study also underscores important caveats. Among the youngest learners (aged seven to nine), CLIL instruction was equally effective as MTI in supporting general cognitive development, but difficulties emerged with abstract or peripheral content areas, such as spatial reasoning. This finding highlights the importance of careful curricular planning in early CLIL contexts, where content should initially focus on familiar and concrete domains. Overall, while CLIL can enhance cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness, its effectiveness is closely tied to age, content complexity and the extent to which instruction builds on learners' existing linguistic and cognitive resources.

4.3 Strategies for teachers

Although the success of teaching and learning of, in and through English in multilingual contexts is significantly dependent on resources and effective and supportive leadership at the government, regional and institutional level, teachers can also help to make it work through their classroom practices. This section focuses on language-supportive pedagogies and on how teachers can promote linguistic inclusion.

4.3.1 Language-supportive pedagogies

An effective transition to EME hinges on language-aware teaching practices that scaffold both language development and subject comprehension. This requires a fundamental shift from traditional, lecture-based instruction to interactive, student-centred pedagogy, which is essential in EME contexts (Clegg & Simpson, 2016; Erling et al., 2017; Milligan & Tikly, 2016). A key aspect of this shift involves the integration of language-supportive learning materials that make the linguistic dimensions of subject content explicit, thereby reducing the cognitive load on students (Bainton et al., 2016). This scaffolding becomes even more critical in contexts where learners – and often teachers – have limited English proficiency.

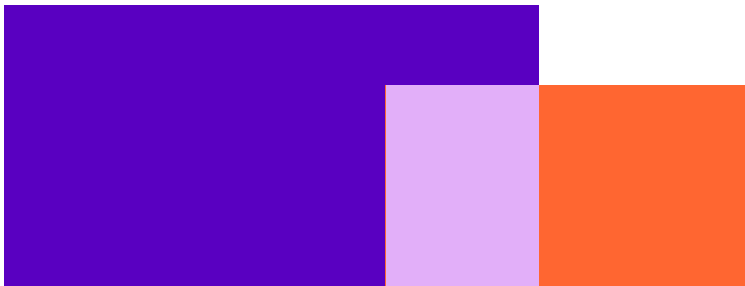
In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), the gap in second language (L2) proficiency is increasingly viewed as an equity and social justice issue (Simpson, 2019). This is because it directly affects a student's ability to access curriculum content and demonstrate their knowledge effectively. To address this, a language-supportive pedagogy aligns the language of instruction, textbooks and assessments with learners' existing levels of English. This requires adapting both teaching methods and materials to support content understanding in English as an additional language contexts. Such accommodations are essential for making assessment more equitable and allowing students to display their subject knowledge in a linguistically accessible manner (Simpson, 2019).

Pedagogical strategies like translanguaging and code-switching are vital in this process, allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires to access complex concepts (Kamwangamalu, 2013; Sah, 2024). These practices not only support cognitive understanding but also help mitigate the risk of marginalisation for students from non-dominant-language backgrounds, thus promoting inclusive and equitable learning environments.

The potential of language-supportive strategies has been evidenced in models like the Language Supportive Pedagogy (LSP), developed for science education in L2 contexts in countries such as Tanzania and Rwanda (Deutschmann et al., 2024). LSP recognises the role of European L2s in the classroom, while also leveraging the learners' first language (L1) to support content learning. This approach focuses on strategies like informal L1 discussions and providing structured support for formal L2 discourse, adapting teaching methods to match students' proficiency levels (Clegg & Milligan, 2021).

A truly effective transition to EME necessitates a systems-wide approach that goes beyond just focusing on language training for learners. This model, often promoted by local providers and international agencies like the Molteno project, addresses multiple core aspects of the education system (Erling et al., 2021). This includes the following.

- Language policy: Governments must set policies that recognise that children learn best in the language they know best. An 'early exit' strategy to EME, where a foreign language is adopted too soon, often allows insufficient time for foundational skill development, particularly in reading (Simpson, 2019).
- Curriculum and textbooks: A systems-wide approach recognises the lack of alignment between the complex language of the curriculum and learners' limited English. It seeks to integrate language and content in subject syllabuses by making explicit the connections between them. An example of this is the LAST project in Rwanda, where textbooks were developed with bilingual vocabulary support, contextual illustrations and activities that encourage L1 and L2 use (Simpson, 2019). A study of this project found that after just four months, learners using the new materials achieved 16 per cent higher scores in vocabulary and comprehension tests than those in control groups (Simpson, 2019).



- Teacher capacity building: The major challenge of low English proficiency among teachers must also be addressed. Projects like STEM in Rwanda have been designed to build the confidence and competence of primary school teachers to teach in English. This blended learning approach provides self-study materials and school-based mentoring, leading to considerable improvements in teachers' classroom English and pedagogical techniques (Simpson, 2019).
- Assessment: Assessing learning in a limited L2 can depress student performance in high-stakes examinations. To ensure equitable assessment, various accommodations should be considered, and language experts should work with examination boards to address technical issues related to EAL contexts (Simpson, 2019).

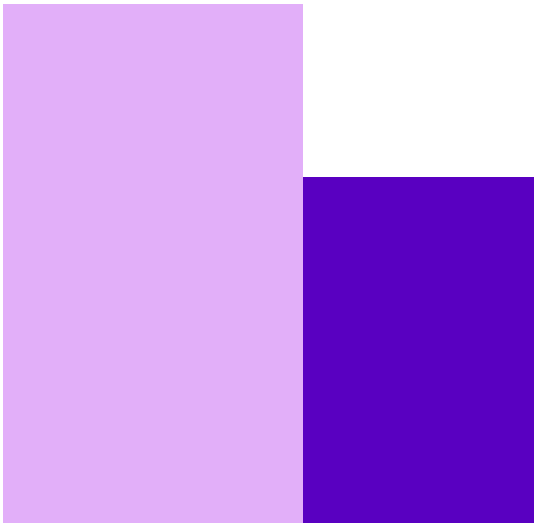
While critiques have emerged suggesting that some multilingual approaches may still lead to predominantly monolingual outcomes, these models remain crucial starting points. The linguistic diversity of regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, coupled with the need for social equity, demands nuanced and flexible understandings of multilingual practices. Ongoing research and evaluation are therefore imperative to refine these models and align them with the unique challenges and opportunities of diverse linguistic landscapes (Deutschmann et al., 2024).

4.3.2 Promoting linguistic inclusion

Translanguaging practices – where teachers and students use both English and local languages – are emerging as effective strategies to support learning. While some traditional pedagogical approaches have viewed this as a sign of weakness, translanguaging has been re-evaluated as a productive tool for enhancing understanding and fostering cognitive development (Erling et al., 2017). In Ethiopia, Gelagay (2023) observes that, in many classrooms, the strategic use of Amharic and English improves conceptual clarity for struggling students. Danladi (2013) notes that code-switching, defined as using more than one language or code within a single stretch of discourse (Belz, 2002: p. 61), can act as a valuable teaching tool, particularly in subjects rich in content such as science and mathematics.

To promote linguistic inclusion, Giri (2010) underscores the importance of targeted interventions – such as providing bilingual textbooks, subsidised digital tools and language labs. While these interventions are highly effective, their implementation would require significant resources, making them challenging to achieve in all contexts. Equally critical is the integration of remedial programmes within public schools to offer additional support to struggling learners, including after-school tutoring, holiday language camps and differentiated instruction during lessons.

Another dimension of the EME challenge lies in its potential to marginalise indigenous and minority languages. While EME may offer economic advantages, its rapid and uncritical adoption risks undermining linguistic diversity and weakening cultural identity. In many countries, constitutional provisions support mother tongue-based education (Wa-Mbaleka, 2015). However, these policies are often poorly enforced or sidelined in favour of English-dominant instruction. Sharma (2024) notes that although Nepal's constitution guarantees mother tongue education, schools rarely operationalise this right due to systemic neglect. Kamwangamalu (2013) proposes a dual-medium education model in which students begin learning in their local language before gradually transitioning to English, which has been shown to improve both learning outcomes and identity affirmation. Phyak (2019) adds that well-planned bilingual programmes can lead to better academic performance and long-term language development. These programmes should not be viewed as transitional compromises but as legitimate and empowering pathways for multilingual learners. Muszynska (2015) lists effective bilingual programmes in primary education in Europe and highlights the importance of a balance between linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes.



4.3.3 Use of digital resources

Digital resources – such as mobile apps, e-books and interactive platforms – have the potential to enhance English language learning by providing multimodal input, authentic content and individualised pacing. When aligned with appropriate pedagogy, they can support instruction *of*, *in* and *through* English, particularly for multilingual learners. However, digital inequality remains a major and growing concern, particularly in rural and under-resourced regions. Evidence from LMICs reveals deep structural disparities in access to electricity, internet connectivity and digital devices, disproportionately affecting learners in remote and marginalised communities (GEEAP, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic further exposed and entrenched these gaps, as remote learning initiatives largely failed to reach those most in need. Even where connectivity exists, screen-based reading has been shown to be less effective than print for certain learners, especially younger children or those acquiring a second language.

While policy frameworks often call for investments in digital infrastructure – including electricity, device procurement and ICT training (Giri, 2010) – progress remains slow and uneven. In the case of Myanmar, for instance, political instability and economic constraints make such investments difficult to implement at scale, raising critical questions about the feasibility of large-scale digital interventions. Patel et al. (2023) highlight that in many contexts, including parts of Latin America, low-tech alternatives such as television and radio have become more viable channels for English language instruction, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach to EdTech (educational technology) is unlikely to be effective.

Moreover, the mere presence of technology does not guarantee pedagogical impact. The GEEAP (2022) emphasises that digital tools must be meaningfully integrated into teaching practice through sustained professional development based on frameworks like TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge). Without this, digital interventions risk reinforcing traditional, teacher-centred methods and failing to support active language use. Patel et al. (2023) caution that unless technology is affordable, context-sensitive and carefully implemented, it may deepen existing inequalities rather than mitigate them. Paradoxically, while technology can help expand access to English – particularly through social media and mobile platforms – it may also challenge its relevance, as AI-driven tools increasingly offer instant translation, potentially reducing the perceived need to learn the language.

In sum, for digital resources to play a transformative role in EME, education systems must not only expand infrastructure and access but also prioritise equity, contextual relevance and pedagogical integration. Without such alignment, technology risks becoming another layer of exclusion rather than a bridge to inclusion.

4.4 Conclusion

The successful implementation of EME depends on the active involvement and collaboration of stakeholders at all levels: international education organisations, governments, municipalities, school leaders and teachers. Top-down policies often fail because they neglect the concerns and insights of those most affected by EiE, i.e. teachers and students (Early & Norton, 2014). Thus, addressing the challenges of English requires a comprehensive, inclusive and context-sensitive strategy. Procuring resources to strengthen teacher capacity and training, strengthening E@S, ensuring access to materials and promoting language-supportive pedagogies are all essential components of an effective EiE framework. Rather than pursuing English monolingualism, successful EiE programmes recognise the value of linguistic diversity and draw on local resources and knowledge systems to create equitable and empowering learning environments.

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Concluding remarks

The global spread of English in education (EiE) has widespread repercussions for educational policymakers, educators, students, parents and societies across the world. As this literature review has shown, the teaching and learning of, in and through English is increasingly positioned at the heart of education reforms in low-, middle- and high-income settings. This phenomenon involves three distinct, though related, strands.

1. The teaching of English (i.e. English as a subject; E@S) entails teaching basic English language skills, vocabulary and grammar as an independent subject.
2. Teaching and learning in English (i.e. English as a medium of education; EME) typically involves using English as the primary vehicle for subject-matter instruction, often in a submersion-style model where language support is not the main focus.
3. Teaching and learning through English (i.e. content and language integrated learning; CLIL) refers to 'situations where subjects or parts of subjects are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language' (Marsh, 2002: p. 15).

While the appeal of using English for content instruction (both EME and CLIL) is considerable, this appeal is sometimes unrealised in practice, and the implementation of all three strands presents distinct challenges and opportunities.

However, the implementation of EiE policies is not without significant complexities. It is critical to distinguish between the effects of E@S and EME/CLIL. While evidence suggests that well-implemented E@S can lead to reliable gains in English fluency, findings on EME are far more contested. When EME is introduced without a strong foundation in E@S, many teachers lack the proficiency to deliver effective instruction, and students often struggle to understand lessons. These challenges are not limited to low-income settings. Even in high-income contexts, CLIL programmes face significant issues of equity. Concerns have been raised regarding differential access for students from various socio-economic backgrounds, as CLIL often requires specialised resources more readily available in affluent settings. This can lead to a *creaming effect*, where high-performing students are disproportionately selected for CLIL tracks, reinforcing social stratification and marginalising disadvantaged learners (Bruton, 2011).

Despite these challenges, the review of literature also identifies promising strategies. Given the mixed outcomes of EME, a growing body of research advocates for a stronger and more sustained focus on E@S as a more effective and equitable route to English language development. For content-based instruction, emerging research challenges the inevitability of disparity in CLIL. When implemented with inclusive principles, CLIL has shown potential to function as a *social equaliser* that can mitigate rural–urban disparities and function effectively in underserved, ethnolinguistically diverse settings. Realising this potential requires systemic efforts to adapt methodologies to diverse learner needs, such as through the DIDI framework, which advocates for pedagogical responsiveness to ensure CLIL's accessibility to all learners. For EME, gradual transitions from the mother tongue and other language-supportive practices remain crucial.

In sum, the teaching and learning of, in and through English can be a bridge to global engagement, but only if it is grounded in equity, local relevance and pedagogical soundness. The evidence suggests that a more just approach requires moving beyond assumptions of EME or CLIL as inherently beneficial. Instead, policymakers must prioritise high-quality, well-resourced E@S provision as the foundation for language development. Where EME or CLIL are introduced, they must be grounded in equity and supported by specific, language-supportive pedagogies. Done well, a balanced EiE framework that strengthens E@S while carefully and inclusively managing content-based instruction can become not only a tool for mobility but a driver of meaningful educational transformation.

6

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

6.1 Does teaching in English improve students' English skills?

It can – but only when students and teachers are well supported and policies and practices are well organised, learner-centred and monitored. In many places, students struggle with understanding lessons in English, and teachers may not be confident (nor proficient) in using English. Without proper support, students may not improve their English and can fall behind in other subjects too.

It can – but not automatically, and not across all skills equally. While English-medium education (EME) may enhance certain macro-skills (e.g., listening, reading) or vocabulary, more complex micro-skills like grammar and pronunciation often require explicit support. Outcomes depend heavily on teacher proficiency, pedagogical content knowledge in English and learner-centred approaches.

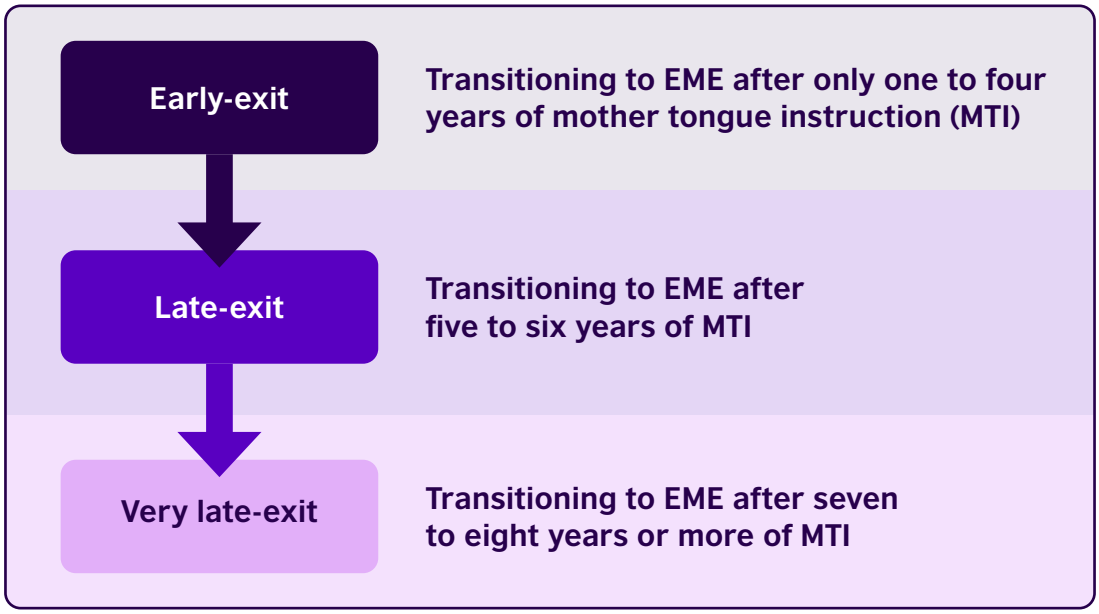
Examples from Indonesia, Malaysia and Turkey show that shifting to EME without thorough consultation, preparation and systemic planning rarely delivers the expected linguistic or academic benefits. Even when reforms are well intentioned, success is not guaranteed. Teacher readiness, along with cultural and societal factors, must be central considerations – not just policy directives – if meaningful language and learning outcomes are to be achieved.

6.2 Does learning in and through English lead to improved educational outcomes?

Existing evidence offers limited support for the claim that teaching in English improves educational outcomes. In fact, in under-resourced settings, early transitions to English often lead to poorer outcomes in core subjects. For example, a study in Ethiopia found that one year of EME led to only modest gains in English but a reduction in mathematics achievement. Similarly, research in another country reported no significant benefit for English performance and a decline in maths scores. These findings challenge the idea that earlier exposure to English improves overall learning and reflect broader concerns about early-exit models, which can disrupt a student's conceptual understanding in cognitively demanding subjects.

The definition of 'too early' varies by context but generally refers to a transition point before students have acquired sufficient English proficiency and foundational knowledge in core subjects. Educational research has identified three main transition models:

Research consistently shows that students learn best when they first develop strong literacy and academic skills in their home language. This early mastery supports cognitive development, fosters confidence and makes it easier for students to transfer skills to additional languages, including English. A gradual and planned transition, ideally beginning after learners have acquired age-appropriate first language (L1) literacy – often around the later years of primary education – is considered the most effective approach for many students.



Teacher preparedness is also a critical factor; low teacher proficiency in English and a lack of training in EME pedagogy can further hinder learning. These issues have prompted several countries to reverse early EME policies. For instance, Malaysia returned to MTI after national exam results showed declining performance in science and mathematics under EME. Similar policy shifts have occurred in Turkey and Indonesia due to concerns over student achievement and teacher language competence. Even in high-income contexts like Spain, the success of teaching and learning through English (e.g., content and language integrated learning; CLIL) relies on a well-supported system that includes teacher training, curriculum adaptation and ongoing support for students' language development. Bilingual or transitional models that maintain the mother tongue alongside English often offer more effective pathways by supporting both comprehension and language acquisition.

6.3 Who benefits most from the teaching and learning of, in and through English?

In contexts where well-designed language-in-education policies are matched by effective classroom practices, students can benefit from the teaching and learning of, in and through English. However, this is contingent on several enabling conditions – most importantly, the language proficiency and pedagogical readiness of teachers, as well as the learners' own English skills and prior learning experience. Without these foundational elements, even well-intentioned policies are unlikely to produce positive outcomes.

A well-designed policy in this context refers to one that takes into account learners' linguistic backgrounds, allows for gradual transition from the mother tongue to English, provides targeted teacher training in both language and content instruction, and includes mechanisms for ongoing support and monitoring. Effective classroom practices include the use of scaffolded instruction, code-switching where appropriate, formative assessment that considers language development, and inclusive strategies that accommodate varying levels of English proficiency.

In practice, such conditions are rarely met in many low- and middle-income settings. Students from wealthier families, urban areas or private schools often benefit more from EME because they tend to have greater access to qualified teachers, supplementary resources and exposure to English outside the classroom. In contrast, students from poorer or rural backgrounds, minority language communities or under-resourced community schools may struggle significantly, particularly when both teachers and students lack English proficiency or confidence in using the language for learning.

Gender disparities also contribute to unequal outcomes. In some contexts, boys are more likely to be enrolled in EME programmes due to socio-cultural norms or household economic priorities, leaving girls disproportionately excluded from the potential advantages of EME education and further entrenching educational inequality.

6.4 How does teaching and learning of, in and through English affect children from minority language backgrounds?

For children from minority language backgrounds, teaching and learning in English can make education more difficult and may contribute to poorer learning outcomes. Excluding children's home languages from the classroom can lead to declines in comprehension and academic performance, particularly in early grades and in subjects like reading and mathematics. Evidence from India also illustrates this challenge. Minority language speakers from monolingual households – who do not receive mother tongue education – underperform in reading the regional language compared to majority language speakers.

While multilingual home environments can enhance children's performance in English, the absence of MTI disadvantages literacy development in both the local and school languages. These findings suggest that mother tongue education and multilingual support are critical for equitable literacy outcomes.

Beyond academic performance, the use of English-only instruction may also erode children's confidence and weaken their connection to cultural and linguistic identity. Without recognition of their linguistic background in the classroom, students may feel alienated or less valued. Studies highlight that mother tongue education and multilingual approaches can enhance reading skills in both local languages and English. These findings reinforce the importance of inclusive language policies that do not position English against local or home languages but instead support the development of all.

6.5 Is teaching and learning of, in and through English the same across all contexts?

No, it varies significantly – not just between high- and low-income countries but also within countries and across communities. While high-income settings often have greater access to trained teachers, digital resources and well-developed language-in-education policies, this does not automatically guarantee success. Similarly, low- and middle-income countries face challenges such as underprepared teachers and limited instructional support, but outcomes also depend on additional factors that go beyond income level.

Key among these are students' proficiency in their first language (L1) and the linguistic distance between their home language and English. Research shows that strong L1 literacy provides a foundation for acquiring additional languages, including English. Conversely, when students have not developed adequate literacy in their home language, learning through English becomes significantly more difficult. The degree of similarity between the home language and English can also influence how easily students transfer skills between languages.

Moreover, the success of teaching and learning in and through English is shaped by local language ecologies, teacher language proficiency, community attitudes and language support mechanisms. As studies in Ethiopia and India have shown, early exposure to English in poorly supported settings can hinder performance in both English and core subjects like mathematics, particularly for minority language speakers.

Therefore, rather than a simple divide between high- and low-income settings, it is more accurate to view the effectiveness of teaching and learning in English as shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic, linguistic, individual and institutional factors.

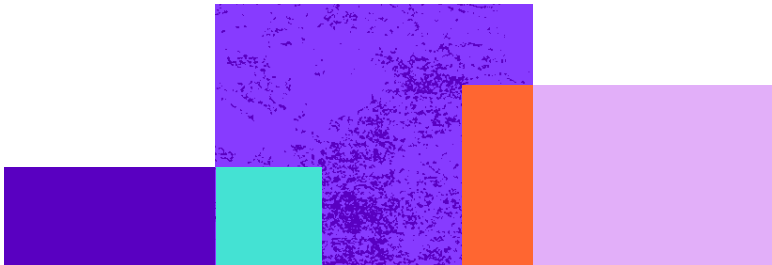
6.6 What challenges do teachers face with teaching and learning of, in and through English?

One of the most consistent challenges in teaching of, in and through English is that many teachers lack sufficient proficiency in English – particularly in fluency, pronunciation and subject-specific vocabulary. This issue is well documented across both low- and high-income contexts, including countries like Tanzania, Nepal, Ethiopia, Spain and South Africa. In such settings, teachers often resort to simplified English, rote learning and direct translation to bridge linguistic gaps. While this may help with short-term comprehension, it limits students' exposure to rich, academic language and constrains higher-order thinking. Furthermore, teachers themselves are often products of non-English or monolingual education systems and have not received training in how to teach content through English, especially in linguistically diverse classrooms.

Beyond language proficiency, a lack of pedagogical training limits teachers' ability to use interactive, inclusive and student-centred methods, such as guided group work, collaborative problem solving, contextualised language tasks and strategic translanguaging. These methods have been shown to support both subject learning and English development, particularly when learners can draw on their first language as a cognitive resource. One promising approach is Language-Supportive Pedagogies, which recognise the central role of second languages (especially global or regional languages like English or French) in education, while deliberately integrating students' first languages to scaffold content understanding. However, without structured support and clear pedagogical frameworks, many teachers fall back on passive instruction and 'safe talk' that avoid complex explanations or student participation. The result is classroom discourse that often fails to meet students' linguistic or academic needs. Addressing these challenges requires sustained investment in teacher education programmes that integrate both language development and multilingual teaching strategies aligned with curricular goals.

6.7 What strategies help students succeed when learning in English?

Students are more likely to succeed in EME when policies and practices support both language development and subject learning in contextually appropriate ways. A growing body of evidence, including UNESCO's *Languages matter: Global guidance on multilingual education*, emphasises that bypassing the home language and introducing English too early undermines educational outcomes, especially in multilingual and low-resource settings.



Effective strategies include:

- age-appropriate English learning opportunities from the early years (0–6), rather than intensive or premature English instruction, particularly where English is not the home language
- acquisition of foundational literacy in the mother tongue before transitioning to EME – this supports both comprehension and cognitive development
- a gradual and planned transition to English, ideally beginning after learners have acquired age-appropriate L1 literacy, often around the later years of primary education
- high-quality teacher training, both in subject content and in the language of instruction, with specific emphasis on multilingual pedagogies
- access to supportive learning materials, including bilingual resources, dual-language books and digital tools that bridge students' home language and English
- opportunities for students to use their home languages in the classroom when needed, through practices such as translanguaging, which facilitate deeper understanding and help maintain linguistic and cultural identity.

6.8 Does learning in English increase job opportunities?

There is a widespread perception – particularly among parents and communities in low- and middle-income countries – that learning in English increases access to higher education and improves employment prospects. This belief is especially strong in contexts where English is associated with global mobility or sectors such as business, tourism, IT and international development. For instance, employers in Nepal increasingly demand English skills in fields like hospitality and business, while in Turkey engineering employers sometimes prioritise English proficiency over subject expertise. In parts of Europe, including Spain, English is effectively a minimum requirement for many jobs, often verified through standardised language tests or English-language interviews. Because of this, EME is often viewed as a gateway to upward mobility – even in local or rural areas, particularly those connected to tourism or international markets.

However, the actual benefits of EME for employment depend heavily on how and where English is taught. English language proficiency – rather than mere exposure to EME – is the key factor in determining employability. Without strong English language skills and a solid grasp of subject content, students may struggle to succeed in the job market. Poorly implemented EME can even undermine job prospects if learners emerge with weak language and academic foundations. Moreover, in some rural or local economies where English has limited functional value, vocational skills or proficiency in local languages may be more directly linked to employment. While English has the potential to expand job opportunities, its impact is highly context-dependent and contingent on both instructional quality and local labour market demands.

6.9 What's the best way to transition from teaching in local languages to English?

The most successful transitions are gradual, well planned and grounded in a strong foundation of MTI. Research consistently shows that students learn best when they first develop robust literacy and academic skills in their home language. This early mastery supports cognitive development, fosters confidence and makes it easier for students to transfer skills to additional languages, including English. EME should be introduced incrementally after building up proficiency and confidence via E@S. Maintaining the mother tongue alongside English, especially in the early years, not only improves overall learning outcomes but also promotes equity and inclusion, particularly for learners from linguistically marginalised communities.

6.10 Can teaching in English support intercultural understanding?

Not necessarily. English can serve as a gateway to global communication and access to information and diverse perspectives, but intercultural understanding is not inherently tied to any one language. Simply using English in the classroom does not automatically foster intercultural competence. In fact, complex and culturally embedded ideas are often best explored through the language most familiar and appropriate to learners. Building true intercultural awareness requires intentional pedagogical approaches – such as guided discussions, critical reflection and engagement with multiple worldviews – regardless of the language of instruction.

6.11 What can governments do to make teaching and learning of, in and through English more successful?

- Develop clear, evidence-based language-in-education policies with realistic timelines for introducing English, ensuring they align with students' language development and local educational contexts.
- Invest in comprehensive teacher education systems, including both pre-service and ongoing professional development, with a focus on English proficiency, multilingual pedagogy and subject knowledge.
- Engage communities and parents in policy development and language planning, recognising their role in supporting learning and ensuring policies reflect linguistic and cultural realities.
- Ensure the development and distribution of inclusive, language-appropriate teaching and learning materials, including bilingual and culturally relevant resources.
- Promote additive multilingualism by formally recognising and supporting students' home languages in education systems, rather than positioning English as a replacement.

6.12 Why do so many teaching and learning of, in and through English policies fail in practice?

Policies promoting the teaching and learning of, in and through English often fall short because they are introduced without sufficient attention to the realities of classrooms and learners. In many contexts, policies are shaped by aspirational goals – such as economic mobility or global competitiveness. As a result, transitions to teaching in English are sometimes implemented rapidly, without realistic timelines, adequate teacher training or suitable materials. This disconnect between policy design and on-the-ground capacity can lead to low English proficiency, superficial subject learning and increased inequality among students.

Another common reason for policy failure is a top-down approach to decision making. Policies are often developed at the national level with limited consultation with teachers, local education authorities or communities who best understand the linguistic and educational challenges learners face. For any English-related policy to succeed, it must be grounded in clear goals, supported by realistic and phased implementation plans, and aligned with the actual language skills of both students and teachers. Equally important is sustained investment in teacher education, multilingual learning resources and community engagement to ensure the policy reflects and respects local linguistic ecologies.

6.13 How does digital access affect the success of teaching and learning of, in and through English?

Digital technology can support the teaching and learning of, in and through English by providing access to interactive tools, audio-visual materials and online resources. However, these benefits are not automatic and depend on a range of factors – most critically, equitable access to electricity, internet and devices, as well as the availability of high-quality content in English. Evidence from low- and middle-income countries highlights persistent digital divides, where students in rural or disadvantaged areas are significantly less likely to benefit from digital resources than their urban or wealthier peers. Moreover, screen-based reading may not foster the same depth of comprehension as traditional print, particularly for younger learners or those reading in a second language. The Covid-19 pandemic deepened these inequalities, and remote learning efforts were largely ineffective for the most marginalised students, with GEEAP (the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel) warning that the long-term educational costs will be severe unless urgent action is taken.

Importantly, success with digital tools depends not only on access but also on how they are used in the classroom. The GEEAP report stresses that simply training teachers in ICT is insufficient; rather, professional development must support teachers in changing their pedagogical practices to integrate technology meaningfully – what is referred to as the TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) framework. Without this, digital tools are unlikely to improve learning and may even reinforce ineffective, passive teaching methods. In fact, GEEAP cautions that many digital interventions are a 'bad buy' unless they are cost-effective, well implemented and targeted towards improving foundational learning. As such, governments and education systems should prioritise affordable, context-relevant digital content, sustained teacher support and pedagogical alignment if technology is to play a meaningful role in improving English language education.

6.14 Is there one 'best' age or grade to start teaching in or through English?

There is no universal 'best' age or grade to begin teaching in or through English. However, research consistently shows that a gradual and well-supported transition, introduced only after students have acquired foundational literacy in their home language, is more effective than early, abrupt shifts to EME. While strong E@S can begin in the early years – through age-appropriate exposure and language-rich environments – teaching through English (i.e. using it as the medium of education for subjects like maths and science) should typically wait until students have developed reading and writing proficiency in at least one language.

The definition of 'too early' varies by context, but in many low- and middle-income countries, transitions to EME are sometimes made in the early primary grades – often before students can read or write in any language. This can result in surface-level learning, over-reliance on rote memorisation and poor comprehension, as documented in studies from Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. A coherent approach – backed by international guidance from UNESCO and the World Bank – emphasises the importance of additive multilingualism, mother tongue literacy and well-trained teachers. In this view, EME is not inherently harmful or beneficial – it depends on when, how and with what support it is introduced.

6.15 What is *translanguaging*, and why is it useful in teaching in and through English classrooms?

Translanguaging is when teachers and students use more than one language to help understand a lesson. For example, a science teacher might explain a concept in English but use the local language to clarify difficult parts.

While it was once discouraged, translanguaging is now seen as a powerful tool – especially in multilingual classrooms. In Ethiopia and Nepal, using both English and local languages helped students understand lessons better and reduced learning stress.

6.16 Can teaching and learning of, in and through English help promote unity in multilingual countries?

In some countries, English is seen as a 'neutral' language that can bring together people who speak different mother tongues. For example, in Nigeria or Ethiopia, using English avoids choosing one local language over others.

However, this only works when teaching and learning of, in and through English is inclusive and does not marginalise home languages. Otherwise, it can create resentment and alienation. Promoting both English and local languages through multilingual education policies can build unity while respecting diversity. To support both unity and diversity, governments must invest in teacher training on multilingual pedagogies, including strategies like translanguaging, use of bilingual materials and context-sensitive language planning.

6.17 Is E@S (not as the medium of education) a better option in some contexts?

Yes. In many contexts – particularly in low- and middle-income countries, rural areas or schools where students have limited prior exposure to English – focusing on E@S can be more effective than switching prematurely to teaching in English. Research shows that when English is introduced gradually, with six or more years of well-supported instruction as a subject, learners often achieve stronger English proficiency than those in early EME settings with underprepared teachers and limited resources. In such cases, a well-taught English class can be more beneficial for language acquisition than learning mathematics or science in English – particularly when neither students nor teachers are linguistically ready.

Teaching E@S also allows learners to build communication skills and prepare for future academic or employment opportunities without sacrificing comprehension in core subjects like maths or science. Moreover, E@S programmes – when supported by quality materials and teacher training – can introduce students to global cultures and ideas, fostering intercultural understanding while maintaining cognitive clarity in content learning. Importantly, the choice between E@S and EME should not be framed solely in terms of a country's income level. Factors such as linguistic distance from English, historical language policies and education system readiness must also shape the decision. Rather than assuming that EME is inherently more advanced, international organisations such as UNESCO and the World Bank increasingly advocate for context-responsive, multilingual approaches that prioritise strong learning outcomes in both language and subject content.

6.18 What does a 'language-supportive' classroom look like?

A language-supportive classroom is one where teaching explicitly acknowledges and scaffolds both language development and subject learning, helping students succeed in English without marginalising their home languages. These classrooms go beyond teaching vocabulary to support a wide range of language and literacy skills, including word recognition, reading and listening comprehension, and academic language use. Teachers in such

classrooms adjust their language level, use formative assessment to monitor understanding and adapt both language and content delivery to meet students' needs. They integrate bilingual and age-appropriate strategies such as gesture and movement in the early years, and draw on learners' full linguistic repertoires through translanguaging, code-switching and bilingual assessment practices where appropriate.

Language-supportive pedagogy also involves the use of visual and contextual aids (e.g., pictures, real objects, charts), encouraging student talk and creating an inclusive classroom culture where asking questions and using different languages to process content is normalised. In Tanzania, for example, the Language Supportive Teaching and Textbooks project trained teachers to implement language-supportive strategies, which coincided with improvements in both English and subject comprehension (Bainton et al., 2016). While the findings are not strictly causal, they support a growing body of research showing that language-aware, inclusive classrooms – especially those that incorporate local languages and interactive methods – can mitigate the learning challenges commonly associated with EME (Clegg & Simpson, 2016; Erling et al., 2017).

6.19 How can parents and communities support English learning if they do not speak English?

Even without speaking English, parents and communities play a vital role:

- supporting children's schooling in general (encouraging reading, study time)
- valuing all languages – helping children develop strong skills in their home language, which supports second language learning
- working with schools to make sure children are not overwhelmed or left behind by EME policies
- providing community support, which also helps ensure that language policies reflect local realities and needs.

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