



## **English Medium Instruction Innovation in Higher Education: Evidence from Asian Contexts**

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### **Introduction**

There are many educational settings using English as the medium of instruction (EMI). Recently, as reported by Dearden (2015), the use of EMI is a rapidly growing global phenomenon in grade school and higher education (HE) outside the Anglophone world. However, EMI has been influenced by a number of factors including educational, political, and economic motives (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Evans & Morrison, 2016). The most significant reason for the growth of EMI is perhaps that it is inextricably linked to the establishment of English as an international language, which has resulted in greater student mobility across countries and a need for EMI. This phenomenon has been termed as *internationalisation* in education (Knight, 2013, p. 84). For the past decade, HE institutions in non-English-speaking Asian countries have seen a rampant growth in competition of internationalization in their institutions (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013). The internationalization of HE in these non-English-speaking contexts has often been initiated and implemented mainly to fulfil requirements for educational reforms and to restructure education in accordance with an emerging global HE community (Evans & Morrison, 2016). Evidently, due to the intention to equip local students with this global language that will allow them to flourish more in the job market and to pursue higher education, both locally and globally (Macaro, Akincioglu, & Dearden, 2017), an inevitable trend of EMI adoption has been observed in non-native English-speaking countries.

Although, as we have described earlier, EMI innovation in HE is a global phenomenon, the focus in this study is on Asia. EMI in Asian countries illustrates the deeply rooted importance attributed to English proficiency in many non-English Asian societies (He & Chiang, 2018). This study is a comparative analysis of EMI policy innovation in HE in Asia. The rationale behind our endeavour is the paucity of research that considers EMI in Asian countries together with presenting a comprehensive scenario that reflects the outcomes of such policies from social, economic and educational perspectives. This report is organized as follows. In the next section, we introduce a conceptual analysis of EMI in light of language in education policy (LEP) and language policy and planning (LPP) theories. This is followed by a

detailed account of EMI innovation in different Asian contexts. Lastly, we discuss EMI innovation in Asia from the critical lens of LEP theories, in relation to social, economic, and educational implications of such policies.

### **Conceptualizing EMI**

To define EMI and to avoid any ambiguity in this study, we employ Dearden's (2015) definition of EMI which is "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English" (p. 2). By articulating that, we also admit that the operational use of English in higher education institutes (HEIs) is often partial and that it often includes code switching.

The other related discussion, pertinent to the conceptualization, is its contested and unclear relationship with language in education planning (LEP) under language policy and planning (LPP). The mode of instruction (MOI) is the first question that needs to be answered when LPP is initiated (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). The fundamental difference between MOI and LEP is in the nature of their implementation (Hamid, Nguyen, & Baldauf, 2013). MOI is a top down policy of implementing a language as the medium of communication. Whereas LEP, being one of the four components of LPP (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003), is a much broader arena which discusses all micro- and macro-level policies as well as their planning of implementation. Their relationship has been clearly acknowledged by Tollefson and Tsui (2003). They argued that the most important policy decision in language in education is the choice of language as MOI, and it should be evaluated from the perspective of LPP theory.

Broader perspectives of LPP deal with deliberate and planned changes in languages and language behaviours (e.g., EMI) in a given context (e.g., Asian HE) (Cooper, 1989). Similarly, appropriate to the context of Cooper's argument, Shohamy (2012) also argues that "the teaching of EMI at universities cannot be detached from broader settings where medium of instruction approaches are implemented" (p. 197). The implementation of LPP is expressed as a concern in the work of Lo Bianco (2010) and Spolsky (2009). Spolsky focuses on the language practices, beliefs, and management efforts of speech communities. Lo Bianco (2010), on the other hand, recommended that a mixed approach of language policy be adopted. He explains policy as texts (document-macro level policy making), as discourse (macro to micro dissemination) and as performance (implementation). Cooper (1989, p. 98) identifies the following eight questions related to LPP:

1. What actors?
2. What behaviour they attempt to influence?
3. Of which people?
4. For what ends?
5. Under what conditions?
6. By what means?
7. Through what decision-making process?
8. With what effect?

The framework presents an analytical tool to understand LLP policy measures taken in the Asian contexts from the perspective of actors, agents, and policy goals, which is the aim of the current study.

### **EMI Innovation in Asian Contexts**

Asian countries by and large bear the legacy of British colonialism in English language teaching and learning (Rahman & Pandian, 2018). The British left Asia decades ago; however, their influence is still

evident through the educational systems that they had established. Moreover, the recent phenomenon in post-colonial countries and other Asian countries is the rising EMI innovation in HE (Hamid & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2014, 2017). A description of EMI in Asian HE is presented in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1  
*EMI Situation in Asian Polities*

Country	EMI situation
Bangladesh	All private universities have adopted EMI as their <i>de facto</i> medium of instruction. In contrast, public universities have maintained the university act of 1974, in line with the nation’s political desire to promote Bengali to consolidate a newly born nation in 1971 (Banu & Sussex, 2001), where Bengali was recognized in HE as the medium of instruction with few exceptions (Hamid, Jahan, & Islam, 2013; Hamid & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Islam, 2013).
China	The leading Chinese universities have adopted EMI for many of their disciplines in order to attract international students in China. Chinese EMI programs are not designed for language education but for majors like computer science, engineering, business, medicine, etc. (Botha, 2015; Hu, 2009)
Malaysia	English is not officially recognized but it is the <i>de facto</i> choice of MOI in HE in Malaysia (Gill, 2014). All the private universities have adopted EMI. Although Malay remains the MOI in public universities, among 20 public universities, due to heavy pressure to internationalize the HE, most of them have adopted or are in the process of adopting EMI (Ali & Hamid, 2018).
Pakistan	English in Pakistan has been and arguably will remain the primary MOI in institutions of HE for the foreseeable future (Mahboob, 2017). However, it does not guarantee the undisputable nature of the policy, since the language proficiency of the learners in Pakistan still remains under the standard level. Besides, as English remains the doorkeeper of success in HE, the desire of educating children in English-medium schools remains high across social levels (Mansoor, 2005).
Thailand	Being an outer circle English speaking country, Thailand has been implanting English in every domain of education, including HE. Most of their public funded universities are currently focusing to enhance their international outlook and generate an English skilled workforce for the nation (Thitthongkam & Walsh, 2011).
Saudi Arabia	Although Saudi Arabia primarily focused on EMI for the health care sector, Suliman and Tadros (2011) noticed that recent innovation by the Saudi Ministry of Education (MoE, 2013) emphasized English language proficiency as one of its major eleven goals. On that note, most of the universities have adopted EMI (McMullen, 2014)
South Korea	Now with the goal of internationalization of HE (Ministry of Education, 2016), more and more universities have been incorporating EMI (Kim & Tarar, 2018). As of 2013, EMI programs are available in the majority of the 420 South Korean universities which compete with one another to enhance their yearly international rankings (Piller & Cho, 2013).
Vietnam	After the commencement of the “National Foreign Language 2020 Project” in 2008, at least 70 universities have introduced EMI programs to adapt the global pace of internationalization in HE and to give tertiary students in Vietnam better opportunities to work and study abroad (Hamid et al., 2013).

By and large, these contexts represent much of Asia’s HE. The table is an example of how the economic benefits attached to English language learning instrumentalizes EMI in Asia and an understanding of policy goals and motivations behind Asian EMI innovation. Despite several issues that we have discussed here, the united outlook in Asian nations are driven by the inevitability of developing human capital in introducing English as a medium of instruction in the tertiary level. English has been presented in these Asian contexts as the same book with a different cover, namely internationalization. No surprise, the global acceptance of English as the lingua franca (ELF) has played a crucial role in such measures (Jenkins, 2011).

## **Implantation of EMI in Asian Contexts**

We have utilised Cooper's (1989) framework to understand LLP policy measures taken in the Asian HEIs from the perspective of actors, agents, and policy goals. The motivation behind the policy goals of EMI in HEIs in Asia seek to achieve internationalization, but not in the same manner and with the same aims in each country. China wants to be the global super power—be it in trade, commerce, education, and research—and it aims to achieve soft power by becoming a foreign student hub (Hu & Lei, 2014). Therefore, they have both an inbound and outbound flow in terms of sending their own citizens abroad and bringing foreigners to China (Hu, Li, & Lei, 2014). On the other hand, private HEIs of Bangladesh are mainly introducing EMI to ensure opportunities for their graduates globally and to build a skilled workforce for local needs (Hamid & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Malaysia's introduction of EMI is mostly education-based and driven by their desire to become the South East Asian hub for international students. However, they also have an outbound flow of their own students who want to pursue higher education abroad but need English language skills to do so.

Studies from Asian contexts explain that there is an evident mismatch from the policy level to micro-level policy implementation when implementing EMI in these HEIs. Many issues have contributed to this mismatch, such as MOI planning in schools which are mostly native language based, for example, in Bangladesh and Pakistan (Mahboob, 2017; Sultana, 2014), or issues related to recognising multi ethnic-lingual-cultural rights, for example, in Malaysia (Gill, 2014), or poor EMI quality being offered both from learners and lecturers, for example, in China (He & Chiang, 2016). The actors are not internally consistent with the policy goals of EMI, and in most cases, learners are not even considered as an agent of policy making. Moreover, many scholars have identified teachers as policy implementers (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003), but that their perceptions, quality, and adaptability have not been evaluated before enforcing the EMI policies in Asia. As a result, the outcomes of the EMI policy have largely remained far from a successful implementation in Asian HE contexts.

### **Educational Outcomes of EMI**

Educational equity has been a primary question to be answered in the top down EMI innovations in the HEIs in Asia. These EMI-based universities teach in English; thus they pick students who have higher English language proficiency. Pritasari, Reinaldo, and Watson (2018) studied the entry level English requirement increase and have found that they can exclude the native Indonesian from getting into the university, despite having fulfilled all other requirements. This is not a straight forward issue to be answered since the consequence of adopting EMI on learners does not stop in admissions only. Moreover, the EMI policy in HE and national school language policy are mostly not in line with each other in many Asian countries, which has led to problems for EMI education (Fang, 2018; Mahboob, 2017; Prapphal, 2003; Sultana, 2014).

In contrast, although English language policy has been successful in Singapore, Bolton, Botha, and Bacon-Shone (2017) reported that “overseas postgraduate students in particular may need much greater support in dealing with the university's EMI system than has been offered to them in the past” (p. 926). Moreover, the educational outcome must also be questioned due to subject teachers' unpreparedness to adopt the policy of EMI. Policy makers must keep in mind the basic difference between teaching English as a subject and implementing EMI. To implement EMI, teachers from other subjects must possess the language proficiency to teach the content in English (Zhang, 2017). They must not be imposed to teach their subject, as what Kang and Park (2005) reported was the case in Korean universities. The more serious matter that policy makers should consider, as Joe and Lee's (2013) study has pointed out, is that the overall learning of the students is more severely impacted through EMI lectures than from those in the native language. In such circumstances, it is hard to tell what or how these universities will achieve the learning goals in HE, which perhaps is the greater need over planning EMI-based innovation. Therefore,

when we analyse the findings of these contexts' MOI, we find a clear lack of planning in the policy goals which threatens the development of knowledge in HE through the ill-utilization of language policy.

### **Socio-Economic Reality of EMI Implementation**

Economic reality is closely associated with the MOI debate in Asian HE. It has been an instrument of economic division among the population (Tollefson, 1991). How these language policies represent the bottom half of the population, regarding their needs and aspirations, is a serious question that policy makers should provide logical explanations about. Certainly, learning English was not their priority in selecting EMI as the MOI in HEIs in Asia. In India, where fluent English leads to a prestigious identity and is a key to economic success, many parents leave their small towns and come to big cities in order to obtain EMI schooling for their children (Erling, Adinolfi, Hultgren, Buckler, & Mukorera, 2016). Parents are motivated by the hope to enrol their child in top medical or engineering schools in India where the MOI is English. In order to provide this education for their children, parents pay very high tuition fees (Erling et al., 2016). EMI is an expensive product for its consumer, therefore some scholars believe that offering EMI education is an evil business designed to make money, which ultimately results in economic inequality (Bhattacharya, 2013).

Asian societies are largely multicultural and multilingual. Therefore, "the tension between retaining the culture and values associated with the mother tongue and the adoption of a national identity symbolized by a foreign language is not easy to reconcile" (Tollefson & Tsui, 2003, p. 7). Moreover, Philipson (1992) has characterized the spread of English as linguistic imperialism, and he seems to have posited the major question in relation to our discussion, being whether or not the spread of EMI amounts to cultural-linguistic imperialism/neo-colonialism in Asia. This question has remained largely unanswered. The impractical exhibition of EMI in HE is not backed by social consensus in Asian contexts, which apparently strengthens the argument of the aforementioned scholars. The outcomes primarily result in obliterating socio-cultural-lingual identity of these Asian L1 speech communities (Fang, 2018). Moreover, such policy may result in expanding the existing socio-cultural division to a greater extent, such as what is now occurring in Malaysia. Most private universities in Malaysia have adopted EMI, where mostly Chinese and Indian students' study. As a result, the adaptation of EMI in most private HEIs has contributed to the development of English language skills among Chinese and Indian communities and has opened the gateway for them in privately owned multinational companies where English is an essential requirement. On the other hand, Malays coming from Malay-medium schools and mostly studying in Malay-medium universities end up doing public sector jobs (Gill, 2005, 2014). Chowdhury (1992) conceptualized the whole phenomenon of being bilingual/multilingual as a personal choice of the individual. He further added, in the context of Bangladesh and other similar Asian contexts, to impose bilingualism on the whole nation is impractical and undesirable, and ideally it should be voluntary rather than obligatory on citizens who belong to a different speech community.

EMI is a widely prescribed choice in HE in Asia, not a default need. These ideas are motivated by different popular terms, such as globalization and internationalization, that are mostly unrelated to the lives of most citizens. Therefore, as Lo Bianco (2010) has argued, it is important to keep national, strategic, and economic goals aside, and to consider humanistic aspects of language utility, such as human subjectivity, values, experiences, and identity. Caution should be taken in the adaptation of national policy. However, in the context of Asian education, this caution is generally absent. Clear implication for language policy is needed. Moreover, the feasibility of adopting a bilingual or multilingual policy acknowledging the cultural pluralism of the context would allow the establishment of a relationship between national and foreign languages (Lo Bianco, 2010).

## Implications and Recommendation

An attribute of globalisation entails knowing others and learning from others, and in this case, adapting feasible and contextualised education policies. Thus, this study can contribute to information exchange among HE contexts in Asia and allow them to learn from their success as well as their failures. We will conclude the article with some recommendations based on our findings.

1. *Acknowledging diversity.* HEIs need to acknowledge diversity in terms of social (race, religion, class etc.), economic, and educational backgrounds. Their policies should be devised considering these basic differences. Therefore, they should carefully investigate whether their EMI policy is prompting any division among the population in the context that they are based in.
2. *Cultural-lingual pluralism.* HEIs are created to transform people into free thinkers and to be cognizant about their rights and identity. The use of MOI should therefore act as an inclusive tool to establish pluralism in terms of language and culture. It should not be used as a weapon of exclusion from HE for the unprivileged or, in most cases, the native language and culture.
3. *Needs analysis of EMI.* Before implementing an EMI into HEI, a thorough investigation of needs of such policies should be piloted. Whether HEIs need intensive English language courses to equip learners with language or content and whether these courses should be taught in the target language must be amongst the first questions to be answered.
4. *Learner agency.* Consider whether the learners are the most important actors of language policy. Are they capable of adapting English as a MOI? If not, then what will this policy achieve?
5. *EMI based teacher development.* Policy should be backed by planning. EMI in HE requires English language proficiency from its content and subject teachers. It is a desired skill, but not a compulsory skill for HEIs in most Asian countries. Therefore, when creating an EMI policy, policy makers should make sure that there are teacher development facilities beforehand to facilitate teachers to implement the policy as intended.

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