



Reflections on the Mobilities, Immobilities, Inequalities, and Traveling Ideas in Qatar

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Introduction

Education City, a conglomerate of international branch campuses (IBCs) in Qatar, is a unique entity in global higher education. Thanks to the vision of His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani and Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, students from around Qatar, the region, and the world have an opportunity to study degrees within Qatar from world-class institutions that excel in their respective fields. We are very privileged as teachers and scholars to work and be associated with this unique phenomenon in higher education. Through our experiences and studies, we have witnessed how these institutions provide opportunities for student and faculty mobility, with students passing between the institutions housed in Education City as well as between the IBCs in Qatar and the home campus abroad. We have also seen the power of traveling ideas that are brought from the home institutions to their IBCs and how they have inspired young minds. However, we have also taken notice of a darker side of this globalization trend in education commonly referred to as English medium instruction (EMI), one which causes immobilities for students who otherwise have the academic credentials to study in higher education but lack the prerequisite English skills, and the inequalities of language that are being created as a result of a monolingual ideology that drives EMI. In this reflective essay, we would like to take you on a journey into Education City in Qatar. Through our experiences and the experiences of our colleagues, we would like to showcase how Education City provides unprecedented opportunities for mobility and traveling ideas while at the same time perpetuating immobilities and inequalities. From these reflections, we would like to make suggestions for moving away from a trend of globalization in education to one of glocalization, which we believe can help preserve the benefits of mobilities and traveling ideas while eliminating the immobilities and inequalities of EMI in higher education.

An Introduction to Education City

As a prelude to our reflections and experiences, we believe a brief introduction to the setting may be helpful for contextualization purposes. Qatar's education system has gone through major shifts over the last decade, much in line with the global phenomenon of EMI (Macaro, 2018). Qatar's higher education system, most notably, has imported more American IBCs than any other Gulf nation (Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018). The Qatar Foundation, a non-profit organization started by His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani and Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, is responsible for bringing a host of IBCs to Qatar and creating Education City, a community of higher education institutions, each with their own academic specialization but all sharing one commonality—all instruction is through EMI. Much of the motivation to establish Education City revolves around neo-liberal principles that believe well-being is associated with economics, so education should be designed to promote economic growth, and in the case of Qatar, English, rather than Arabic, is the key to access both educational and economic success (Barnawi, 2018).

As one would expect, the establishment of Western IBCs in an Eastern country such as Qatar is not without its controversies. In fact, it seems both Western and Qatari critics have qualms with the arrangement. For Western academics, there are concerns around what the establishment of their institutions in an "illiberal" country means for their liberal ideals which they associate with the goals of Western higher education (Vora, 2018). Many suggest that the establishment of these IBCs are signs of the demise of liberal education in favor of economic gains. From the Qatari perspective, there is a fear that these Western institutions will encroach on local culture, traditions, and identities (Barnawi, 2018). A shift from education which focused on Islamic values to one which focuses on marketable skills in a global economy has many questioning the direction of Qatar's education policy and priorities.

As noted above, all instruction in Education City is in English, which comes at the expense of other languages. The 'E' in EMI presents various ideological, socio-linguistic, socio-cultural, socio-economic, and political phenomena in Qatar. In some institutions, the use of Arabic and other languages is actively discouraged, though some students still use it amongst themselves (Kane, 2014). Bilingual instructors also have reported believing that English should be used exclusively, and Arabic should only be used in very specific circumstances in the classroom (Hillman, Graham, & Eslami, 2019). These views are spawned by monolingual ideologies that reject that languages can co-exist within language spaces. As a result, Arabic and other languages are banished from classrooms, leaving a multilingual void that favors a monolingual English instructional setting.

As for the variety of English, a native-variety of English is taught and promoted, transmitted through the importing of curricula and instructors from the IBCs' home institutions. Students have been reported to be sensitive to this, with one student commenting on how her slip of a non-native variety of English brought laughter to herself and others because it was "English I use at home, not in university" (Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018, p. 9). Through this quote, a socio-linguistic and socio-cultural landscape can be seen emerging through these EMI institutions which sanction the use of certain languages over others. Also materializing is a seemingly growing divide between socio-economic classes—those who speak English in a university-educated way and 'other' Englishes.

Like many EMI programs around the world, the explicit teaching of the English language is not prioritized in academic subject courses, but Education City does provide support for English learning to prepare learners for EMI. Students who lack the English proficiency requirements for EMI programs may join the Academic Bridge Program, which helps transition students from high school to university EMI (Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018). However, such programs once again bring up socio-economic issues of who can and cannot afford extra years in school and raises socio-linguistic and political questions of why English holds so much importance that years should be dedicated solely to its acquisition.

Though Education City brings unique EMI programs to Qatar, allowing for mobilities and traveling ideas, the IBCs also are the cause of immobilities and inequalities in higher education. Qatar's EMI

phenomena in the age of mobility of ideas, goods, capital, cultures, peoples, and imaginations pose several questions that demand discussion and reflection. Through our own stories and the accounts of other scholars in the region, we will now look at how these IBCs contribute to the mobilities, immobilities, traveling ideas, and inequalities and discuss and reflect on the questions these raise.

Mobilities

The IBCs of Qatar have created opportunities for various types of mobilities for students and faculty. Education, in and of itself, allows for social mobility, but the IBCs bring a unique opportunity for students in that they provide degree programs that students may otherwise not have access to. We will take our institution, Texas A&M University at Qatar, as an example.

We offer four engineering majors: mechanical, petroleum, electrical, and chemical. While these programs exist at Qatar University, with the exception of petroleum, our university prides itself on the mobility opportunities it provides to the students. This mainly relates to the leadership and career opportunities which are afforded to our graduates. We have just graduated our 1000th engineer and, on this occasion, our alumni had this to say about the experience:

Texas A&M engineers really shine in the workplace by being great team workers and by constantly honoring their honor code with their high work ethic and professionalism.

Studying for my bachelor's and master's degrees at Texas A&M at Qatar prepared me for a successful career in a wide range of engineering fields...in three companies in three countries.

I'm very proud of my Texas A&M engineering degree. Apart from the high-quality academic training it required, it carried with it a whole set of core values that strengthened my leadership skills.

An engineering education from Texas A&M is not only about learning during your studies program but rather the continued network and collaboration among Aggie engineers across the world.

These accounts are published on the university's page on LinkedIn, and they showcase the upward mobility that a degree from an IBC can secure. What is interesting is that the graduates do not only praise the ability to secure a job, but they also appreciate the social and cultural capital associated with their program of study such as collaboration, networking, leadership skills, etc. An important implication of this is the direct challenge to the literature on transnational education and its neoliberal ideologies. These graduates, based on their anecdotes, are not only driven by market forces, but they also appreciate the soft skills an IBC provides them, so they are effective citizens in the 21st century.

The opportunity of mobility is not only available for students; it also has been afforded to us as teachers and scholars. For Zohreh, Texas A&M University's IBC has allowed for a double appointment, providing opportunity to work and research at the Qatar campus as program chair while still remaining on faculty and mentoring graduate students at the main campus. For Keith, who is a scholar interested in EMI and studying at the main campus in Texas, the IBC provides educational opportunities such as working with the IBC faculty and travel to the Qatar campus to participate in scholarly events. The mobilities provided by the IBC have enriched our lives as scholars and instructors and is something we personally feel very privileged to be a part of.

Immobilities

While the IBCs have created social mobility opportunities for some, EMI at IBCs has resulted in many willing and eager students being left out of education. For many students, the one barrier preventing them from receiving the education they desire is English proficiency requirements. Khalifa, Nasser, Ikhlef, Walker, and Amali (2016) report on one student, studying at an undisclosed IBC in Qatar, who shared, “I did my portfolio and studied IELTS. I tried many times to obtain the grade that they want. When I first gave them my papers, they did not accept me because of the IELTS” (p. 8). This student prepared a full portfolio showcasing their talents and abilities but, unfortunately, was denied access to education simply based on an English proficiency test (IELTS). Another student shared a similar struggle:

I sat for the IELTS three times, and I obtained a five every time on the test. Then, I heard about the opening of a new Community College in Qatar and decided to join it and rushed to register, but registration was closed, which compelled me to stay at home for a full semester. (Khalifa, Nasser, Ikhlef, Walker, & Amali, 2016, p. 8)

For this student, not only were they denied the opportunity of entrance into a university program, but they found themselves locked out of other educational opportunities for an entire year simply due to their failed attempts to fulfill an English proficiency requirement. Though this student has decided to explore other opportunities in the future, others go to great lengths to meet English requirements but may eventually give up on their dreams of an education. “The big problem was how to pass the IELTS. I sat for the exam 15 times, and I even went to Bahrain to obtain it but in vain” (Khalifa, Nasser, Ikhlef, Walker, & Amali, 2016, p. 8).

We question an education system that is precipitated on giving access only to those who possess a metaphorical key (English) to the gates. We believe that many students have the potential to offer their talents and knowledge to society, yet we are concerned that many may not be meeting their full potential because an emphasis on EMI is creating immobilities for many, leaving them without an education. While we support our institution’s admission requirements, we believe that the institution has the resources for accommodating students who do not perform well on such high-stakes English exams (IELTS, TOFEL) which may be more appropriate for a program of study in an English-speaking country. We laud such current initiatives which aim to mitigate issues of immobilities. The Aggie Gateway Program, for example, is a provisional admission program at Texas A&M University administered through Texas A&M University Transition Academic Programs as well as the English Foundation Program, which provides support for students to enhance their English language proficiency.

Traveling Ideas

One stipulation for IBCs that are invited to Education City is that they will provide an identical education as is provided on the home campus. This is made possible by traveling ideas, an important but hegemonic feature of the ideology behind transnational education, transmitted through imported curricula, textbooks, and often even lectures. Kane (2014) documents how many of the lectures at the Weill Cornell IBC in Qatar are often broadcasts of lectures from the home campus. This is not very different from the situation at our own campus of Texas A&M, as the curricula are identical to that of the home campus. The dilemma with the imported curricula is how to support the indigenous cultures and language(s) while benefitting from the mobilities that EMI offers via a language of wider communication.

Our observations attest to suppression of local traditions and knowledge including language variation and cultural diversity by the discourses of globalization. As Canagarajah (2005) submits, it is therefore essential to work out a greater negotiation between global processes and local conditions. In order to strike a delicate balance between the global and local, we need to steer EMI practices away from

neoliberal imperatives and develop a contextualized understanding of what EMI means in different localities (Rubdy, 2009). Localizing EMI means reshaping it by transcending the global and local dichotomy to facilitate the global and the local to work together to dynamically bring new realities and realize the best potential of the students. Students can develop bi/multi-literacies and bi/multi-culturalism through culturally situated pedagogies. Hybrid oral and written texts can be used in the classroom, and all the linguistic resources and repertoire students have can be used to teach content and make it comprehensible, relevant, and empowering (Eslami, 2017).

Inequalities

As noted above, the IBCs provide opportunities for traveling ideas to enter Qatar from many parts of the globe. However, at times it feels that inequalities exist in terms of what ideas are allowed to enter the curriculum and what languages are permitted in the classrooms. Though in cases such as Texas A&M University at Qatar where IBCs are required by governments (e.g., the Texas State Legislature) to teach certain topics, we contend that these policies create inequalities in what types of knowledge is valued and worth learning and which knowledge is left out, being seen as unequal or unworthy. The students at Texas A&M University at Qatar are required to take courses such as “History of the United States,” “American Military History,” “American Indians History,” and “Blacks in the United States after 1877.” We have numerous concerns about this mandated curriculum, one being the relevance of these courses to the students’ experiences and lives. But in terms of inequality of knowledge, we worry that this implicitly sends the message to students that learning about Western governmental structures and history are the only important knowledge to learn given the absence of any courses on local or regional governments or history.

One of the goals of transnational education is to bring international curricula (an American educational model in the case of Texas A&M University at Qatar) to the local context. However, these curricula, while celebrated by some, are resisted and questioned by others. One case in point is the constant questioning of our students regarding the teaching of American history and American State and National government (required political science courses) on a campus in Qatar. The campus has recently been visited by the National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine to share with us their work on the intentionally integrated approach to higher education connecting arts, humanities, and STEM fields. They met with some of our students and they pointed out that some of the students asked them about why they are learning Texas and American history and government in Qatar. Another example of resisting the hegemony of traveling ideas comes from a female student who expressed her discontent and disappointment at canceling classes at the TAMUQ campus to commemorate the passing of George H.W. Bush., the 41st president of the U.S. The point to drive home is that traveling ideas have serious and, sometimes, debilitating effects in local educational contexts and create unequal educational opportunities at the expense of promoting local knowledge.

Within IBCs, an inequality of languages also seems to permeate, with English being valued over other languages. Though there is not necessarily any explicit language policy in the IBCs preventing the use of other languages, an implicit monolingual ideology seems to be associated with EMI, restricting multilingual students and faculty from utilizing their full linguistic resources. When asked about positions on using Arabic in an IBC classroom in Qatar, one instructor told us:

I don't want to say [that] I don't want to [speak Arabic], but it is an American university, you know, and I just...why do [students] care if I speak Arabic or not? They came here; it's all English, so they should expect that everybody speaks English (Hillman, Graham, & Eslami, 2019, p. 50).

What is most striking about this is the belief that students may not care whether the instructor speaks Arabic or not. However, Qatar, through its 2030 vision, aspires to promote the Arabic language, local

heritage, among others. Therefore, we believe that it is vital for professors to use the Arabic language which will contribute to the maintenance and promotion of local culture and heritage, especially professors who share the students' linguistic and cultural background. For example, the second author, Aymen Elsheikh, a speaker of Arabic, tries to raise his students' awareness of this through incorporating Arabic in the courses he teaches. One of the activities he uses to achieve this is 'intertextuality'. Students respond to a reading using both Arabic and English. While some students appreciate the activity, others, who did not study in Arabic medium public schools, find it very challenging. This shows that, although we operate in an EMI context, there is always space for maneuvering, so the background we share with students can be put to good educational use.

Zohreh Eslami (third author of this paper), teaches the 'Intercultural Communication' course. In this course, in addition to the readings related to the U.S. culture and context, she attempts to recover and reclaim the local by using readings related to students' cultural and social backgrounds. She intentionally discusses the use of English as an international language and the importance of using communication and pragmatic strategies to reach mutual intelligibility. Ownership of English and the majority of bilingual users of English compared to monolingual speakers and their hegemonic practices is explicitly discussed to cover issues related to intercultural and business communication. In terms of disciplinary knowledge, she provides space for local varieties of English and other linguistic resources, identities, knowledge and cultures of teaching that encourage a multidisciplinary and multifaceted knowledge flow. In place of top-down curriculum dictated from the home campus, she tries responsive ways of negotiating with existing knowledge of students and their sociocultural realities.

EMI is not benign and has consequences both academically, professionally, and personally. Kane (2014) shares a story about a medical student who learned meningitis as "an abstract concept" and never made the connection to background knowledge on the disease in Arabic until the student had seen a bilingual leaflet in a hospital (p. 108). From an academic perspective, one could ask whether this medical student had learned anything at all having not made this connection in class. Similarly, Yyelland and Paine (2009) share about an EMI graduate's struggle to use Arabic in the workplace:

I find it very, very hard to deal with my Qatari or Arabic clients when I am speaking about design because I don't know what the terms are in Arabic, but I try to make it a point to speak in Arabic and it has made me very self-conscious about not being Westernized and preserving my culture and heritage and traditions (p. 127).

For this student, a lack of Arabic knowledge from study through EMI has resulted in both issues professionally, in terms of speaking with clients, and personally, where this student feels self-conscious about the "Westernization" of their identity. The inequalities of language, with English taking a superior position, is resulting in unfortunate consequences for many students.

A New Way Forward

As it currently stands, there is a lot to celebrate about the IBCs in Qatar in terms of the opportunities they provide for mobility and traveling ideas. However, we are equally concerned about the immobilities and inequalities that these institutions also foster. With these problems in mind, we would like to close our reflection with some suggestions for a new way forward, one which takes the great opportunities brought by globalization but prevents the local problems associated with it. In a word, we would hope for glocalization in Qatar's higher education. We believe glocalization would continue to allow for student and faculty mobility between IBC campuses and their home campuses, but perhaps even open up collaborations with local institutions that are not EMI, allowing students and faculty to flow freely and interact both globally and locally.

In some ways, this may help with the issues of immobility presented in this essay, but we believe more action should be taken. We are adamantly opposed to denying access to bright and capable students based on acquisition of an additional language. Though we fully recognize that allowing low proficiency students into EMI programs would not provide for a positive learning experience, we believe that more local language and perhaps multilingual programs should be opened to provide opportunities to students at all stages of multilingualism. We worry about the opening of monolingual EMI programs at the expense of local language programs and believe all should have access to world-class education in the language(s) of their choosing.

On a similar note, we are increasingly concerned about the inequalities of local language and knowledge in favor of English-only ideologies and Western ideas. We need to focus on the learning strategies that work for the students and the changing needs and purposes of the students themselves. A disciplinary revamping involving a pluralistic conception of language and multiple sources of knowledge production, positions the global and local as equal partners in the new discourses and practices that are developing in teaching and research within contemporary globalization (Rubdy, 2009). Recognizing that English is now a heteroglossic language and known as ‘Englishes,’ we will need to make our students sensitive to a repertoire of codes as students are being exposed to even more diverse varieties in the world of computers, Internet, and technology. Students of today’s world need to be strategically competent multilingual and multidialectal language users to be able to manage face-to-face and online communication demands of the postmodern era. As Canagarajah (2005) points out, where earlier students learned English typically to gain access to a native-speaker community, we now have to enable them to move in and out of different communities, and this entails orienting students to focus on strategies and processes for negotiating language variation.

Traveling ideas from around the world have a lot to offer everyone and should be continued and promoted. However, we do not believe this should be at the expense of local ideas. Every context is different and traveling ideas that fit well in one context may not fit well in another. Therefore, we suggest that a glocalized approach to education is needed. Students need to learn both about the local and the global ideas for their industry. They also should be allowed to translanguage and learn through multiple languages, taking advantage of and developing the full breadth of linguistic resources. Though much of the current conversation revolves around to EMI or to not EMI, we believe this bifurcation of educational language policy is limiting. Instead, we should be talking about the dissemination of local and global ideas through the use of multiple languages—a glocalized education.

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