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South Korean University Students' Perceptions of English-medium Instruction Policy

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Abstract: In the last three decades, South Korean universities' pursuit of internationalisation has resulted in the rapid 'top-down' implementation of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) policy, which has been critiqued for inadequately addressing the linguistic challenges stakeholders face. This study focuses on South Korean, higher education, engineering and business students' perceptions of the linguistic challenges they face in their EMI experiences. Constructivist grounded theory is used to investigate two areas: interactions between stakeholders; and, students' access to the subject content. Findings indicate communicating in L2 constrains interactions between stakeholders; therefore, the L1 is used to overcome the constraints. Additionally, students struggle to access subject content through L2 in certain situations, but, in other situations, students struggle to access subject content through L1. The emerging grounded theory is that *South Korean EMI policy leads to epistemic injustices*. Recommendations are made for practical steps to move towards creating an appropriate policy for South Korean EMI.

Paper: The rationale for this study stems from the fact that rapid, 'top-down' implementation of EMI policy, in South Korea, has overlooked students and instructors' English proficiency needs (Kim, 2017). In the process of becoming internationalised, South Korean universities have faced accusations of rapidly implementing EMI policy with the aim of chasing world-ranking status at the expense of providing quality EMI courses (Cho, 2012). Therefore, in courses students face insufficient linguistic support (Kang & Cho, 2020; Kang & Park, 2005). Another rationale for this study stems from the notion that South Korean universities' interest in EMI has diminished in recent years. In 2010, EMI courses averaged 30% at the top ten universities in South Korea (M.J. Kim, 2011), but within a decade this had declined to 20% (Nam & Kwak, 2019). Inadequate linguistic support for stakeholders may be a contributing factor for this decline which warrants further investigation.

The aim of this study is to explore engineering and business students' perceptions of South Korean EMI policy outcomes - i.e. their perceptions of the linguistic challenges they face in their EMI experiences. Exploring their perceptions through a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) provides insights into how stakeholders have interpreted the policy to mitigate the concomitant linguistic challenges. For the purposes of this study, linguistic challenges refer to a lack of content instructors' English proficiency to deliver subject content in lectures and/or a lack of students' English proficiency to process it, and a lack of students' English proficiency to access a depth of learning by using study materials. These challenges can be broadly categorised into two

themes: 'interaction challenges' and 'access-to-subject-content challenges'. To address these challenges in future policies, this study aimed to arrive at a grounded understanding of them through these two research questions:

1. How do linguistic challenges affect students' interactions during their EMI experiences?
2. How do linguistic challenges affect students' access to subject content during their EMI experiences?

This study was set at a leading, research-intensive university in South Korea. A total of 10 students were recruited but only 8 students were included in the final data set as the coding had reached saturation after analysing student eight's data set. In-depth semi-structured interviewing was chosen as the research instrument. On average, each interview lasted 69 minutes with no significant variation (shortest: 63; longest 76). After the initial interviews, further data were generated by two rounds of follow-up email interviews to ask follow-up questions and also for the purposes of member-checking to enhance validity. The larger study on which this article draws comprised over 90000 words (inclusive of both interview transcripts and email exchanges). All data were analysed in NVivo using a constant comparison approach.

Fricker (2007) describes epistemic injustice as follows: "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (p. 1). A consistent theme of the emerging findings from this study is that stakeholders are disadvantaged. For instance, according to the participants, instructors are disadvantaged as they are hindered from delivering content in their L1. As a result, the students are disadvantaged as the quality of the content is being compromised. Students are further disadvantaged as they do not have adequate access to the subject content through L1 study materials; instead, they have to turn to L2 study materials where in some cases their English proficiency hinders access.

This study suggests that future South Korean EMI policy needs to be decided by a situated-ecological approach that takes the situated context into account. A logical first-step to maximise the teaching practices of instructors and the learning potentials of students would be to conduct an extensive needs analysis of the specific situation of their EMI context (see also Galloway et al., 2020 for further discussion). The needs analysis should investigate the language preferences of teachers and students in different situations and then based on this investigation determine what aspects of curriculum materials, instruction and assessment should be done in each language. The outcomes of a needs analysis will help determine more overt multilingual directions for South Korean policies to take.

To summarise, it is important for future policy makers to realise that both L1 and L2 are used for different purposes in different situations in EMI courses. Specifically, future South Korean EMI policy makers need to account for the demands that teaching in English has on faculty members. They also need to account for the diverse linguistic needs students have on South Korean EMI courses as evidenced by this study.

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