

Whither epistemic (in)justice? English medium instruction in conflict-affected contexts

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Higher education has become increasingly diverse in recent years as patterns of migration expand and grow. However, while different linguistic communities are brought together, English is often conceived as the de facto lingua franca for research, teaching and learning. This is perhaps especially so in ethnically diverse conflict-affected settings where English is perceived to be a neutral and unifying language. This study directs attention to two English medium instruction (EMI) universities in two conflict-affected contexts, Afghanistan and Somaliland. Four research questions related to language, conflict and education are examined. Data for the study was collected through document analysis, interviews and artifacts with 12 university educators and analyzed through a critical cultural political economy and decolonial framework. Findings suggest that while English is strongly desired by various members of the universities, it is also deeply implicated in multiple sources of conflict, calling for a more sensitive approach to teaching.

Full paper

The global expansion of English medium instruction (EMI) has attracted much attention in recent years. The choice of using English, specifically, is often conceived as an inevitable response to the increasing multilingual reality in higher education. Yet, although

EMI in East Asia, Europe, and the Gulf region has garnered much research interest (Macaro et al. 2018), similar phenomena in newer universities emerging in conflict-affected settings have not been sufficiently investigated. To fill this gap, this study directs attention to two universities in Afghanistan and Somaliland that operate primarily in English. As an overview, this study seeks to explore the following questions: How is multilingualism manifested in universities in conflict-affected contexts? Why do university policymakers and classroom educators adopt EMI policies in such contexts? What are the limits and possibilities of EMI in conflict zones? How might EMI curriculum and pedagogy serve to ameliorate or exacerbate conflict?

This study builds on a broad range of literature, starting from key publications that examine education in conflict-affected settings (Burde, 2014; Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; King, 2013; Novelli, 2011) before turning to research that brings language to the fore in thinking about conflict, peace and education (Edge, 2003; Karmani, 2005; Neslon & Appleby, 2015). To address the research questions, data was collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and digital artifacts with 12 university educators. Specifically, we adopt a critical cultural political economy of education (CCPEE) decolonial framework to help us further understand distinct hues in the data (Higgins & Novelli, 2020; Kester et al., 2021; Robertson & Dale, 2015; Santos, 2014). This lens emphasizes three analytical moves in our analysis, a critique of: western modernity/coloniality/epistemology (i.e. the cultural); unequal governance and power (i.e. the political); and the multiple violences of neoliberalism (i.e. the economic) (Andreotti 2014; Kedzierski 2016; Kester et al. 2021). In short, we focus on investigating themes from the data that indicate how the academy, as a site for epistemic (re)production, might fit within broader calls for decolonization and epistemic justice.

From our data, we find that the faculty members faced a number of challenges teaching in conflict-affected settings. Major concerns that were repeatedly raised were the physical and mental disruptions that

conflict imposed on the two universities and on those who worked and studied there. According to the participants, conflict has long-term negative effects on the wider higher education system in both Afghanistan and Somaliland, leading to a complex interplay between research, teaching, and development work to support weak, fragile systems. In this study, we zoom into aspects of conflict that are closely related to language, which help to bring out varied perspectives and discourses on the practice of EMI in places that have experienced – or are still experiencing – the effects of conflict, war, and militarization. In particular, the findings draw attention to the privileged status of English in these settings, its impact on curriculum and pedagogy, and the ways in which faculty members creatively and critically responded to linguistic and epistemic power imbalances in their classrooms.

From a CCPEE perspective, the data shows that particular educational policies and practices are not factually independent of the ontologies and epistemologies of the educational actors involved. Hence, the linguistic modes of education in conflict-affected contexts greatly mold the identities of students, limitations of faculty, and the power of donors, all the while those linguistic forms are highly influenced by the funders – be it a foreign government, UN agency, or NGO. Merging CCPEE with the decolonial turn in education, the data also suggests that micro-practices in the classroom could provide opportunities to support the broader objectives of social, cultural, political, and economic change. Yet it is critical too that such practices are explicitly linked with an approach that examines the interchange between education and cultural political economy to ensure that teaching does not remain detached from the broader forces that (in)form it.

In the end, this study offers a nuanced understanding of education and language in conflict-affected contexts, showing how education may contribute to conflict/peace and how language is instrumental in this process. Education's potential for peacebuilding, then, is nested within global and local layers of culture, politics, economics, and languages that afford and constrain its possibilities. By detailing how

EMI exposes (un)just relations between people, knowledge systems, and the broader social world, this study makes explicit the importance of studying language in the contemporary higher education landscape, particularly in conflict zones, and further shares insights into how current higher education EMI research could learn from academics working in conflict-affected contexts.

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