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Theorising epistemic outcomes of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in a South Korean multilingual university context

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper focuses on our research to understand the epistemic outcomes of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in a South Korean university. The paper first describes the research, including the participants, the data generated, and the findings. These findings detail how the Korean and English languages were used and viewed differently by the student-participants, and how this led to undesirable epistemic outcomes in this multilingual university setting. In a second part of the paper, we address how we used theory to understand the epistemic outcomes that we identified. We struggled to find established theory in applied linguistics or higher education to understand the epistemic outcomes. This led us to an integration of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of capital and Miranda Fricker's epistemic injustice. With a particular focus on Fricker's epistemic injustice, we explain how the integration of theory was a multidimensional and interactive process, including input from reviewers and editors.

Full paper

In a recent paper in Teaching in Higher Education - Special Issue on Critical Perspectives on Teaching in the Multilingual University – we

explored the epistemic outcomes of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in a South Korean Higher Education (HE) context (Williams & Stelma 2022). In the paper, we used qualitative interview data generated with ten Business and Engineering undergraduate students. The analysis revealed that the students used and trusted the Korean and English languages differently across different EMI situations. From this, we identified two undesirable epistemic outcomes: (a) students were prevented from using their L1 to negotiate understanding of subject content, and (b) the reliance on English language to give access to subject content negatively affected learning and broader knowledge generation outcomes. These findings resonated with previous frames and findings in the applied linguistics and higher education literatures, including critical perspectives on the relative social power of different languages (Stelma and Fay 2019), English as a privileged language in international communication and knowledge production (Blommaert et al., 2005; Curry & Lillis, 2018), and the associated challenge of ensuring the development of bilingual scientific literacy (Airey & Linder 2008). However, on closer examination these previously used theory-sets did not directly or effectively help us to understand the epistemic outcomes of the EMI situations that we observed.

To make better sense of our findings, we turned to theory from related disciplines. According to Shaw et al. (2018, pp.1-2), cross-disciplinary theory integration may involve looking outside of disciplines "to explain new phenomena", "to crystallize thinking about a particular phenomenon", or "to offer a new way of seeing an issue or phenomenon altogether". We do not believe that EMI and its epistemic outcomes are new phenomena, or that we offered a new way of seeing altogether. Thus, we believe we were reaching across disciplines to 'crystallize thinking' about the epistemic outcomes of EMI.

We want to comment particularly on our use of Fricker's (2007) notion of 'epistemic injustice', which to us resonated with the undesirable epistemic outcomes of EMI that we observed. Epistemic injustice is itself a result of theory integration. The concept originates in the intersections of Ethics, Epistemology and Feminist Philosophy. Fricker defines epistemic injustice as "a kind of injustice in which someone is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower" (2007,

20, original emphasis). Such injustice includes testimonial and hermeneutical aspects. The testimony of distinct societal groups either benefit from credibility excess or suffer a credibility deficit. Moreover, the accumulation of testimonial injustice may generate hermeneutical injustice - a situation where distinct societal groups lack their own epistemic framework, and without much awareness they may have to rely on the hermeneutic resources imposed or made available by more privileged groups. Early in our work, we felt that this could be extended to multilingual situations; the Korean students as a group were disadvantaged by their lack of fluency in the more powerful language – English. However, one of the independent paper reviewers pointed out that Fricker's testimonial injustice causes epistemic dehumanisation, and that the data we presented failed to establish such dehumanisation. We also surmised that since Korean students and teachers relied on English language in their classes, they were relying on linguistically mediated hermeneutic resources supplied by the more privileged (western) academic community. This latter use, or generalisation, of Fricker's theory was not overtly challenged by the paper reviewers.

As we worked on a resubmission, our theory integration began to mature. Our use of Fricker's epistemic injustice shifted, as shaped by our own analytical needs, the reviewer's concerns, and through careful guidance provided by the special issue editors (whom, we were later told, were in dialogue with the critical independent reviewer). This was challenging work because Fricker's unit of analysis is the power and identity of socially constructed groups. By contrast, our unit of analysis was language. Through further engagement with the literature, including Anderson's (2012) work on 'structural' epistemic injustice and Soler's (2021) work on 'linguistic' epistemic injustice, we synthesised a new theoretical integration. To the slight dismay – we suspect - of the mentioned independent reviewer, we still cited Fricker, but we were now careful to express a critical respect for Fricker's original use and meaning of her epistemic injustice. Our final theory integration described a structural form of epistemic injustice where a dominant language, imposed by global forces, may, by way of stakeholders' different levels of linguistic competence, lead to epistemic stratification and unequal opportunities in multilingual academic settings.

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