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Medium of instruction policy implementations, disruptions and future possibilities in Bangladeshi higher education: A translanguaging perspective

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This article reports on findings from a doctoral research project that explored the promise of translanguaging pedagogies at two public and two private universities in Bangladesh. Four language learning and four content acquisition courses offered in the first year of undergraduate programmes were observed. A 'Russian doll approach' was employed to analyse the macro, meso and micro levels of policy decisions and implementation to build two robust case studies on public and private universities. Findings reveal a disconnect between macro-level language policy and actual practice at meso and micro-level within universities. The study demonstrates varying degrees of natural translanguaging practices in the classrooms of both public and private universities. Under the particular contextual circumstances, this study recommends promoting translanguaging pedagogies to enhance students' language and content learning while promoting local languages and cultures in Bangladeshi higher education through translanguaging practices.

Full paper

This empirical study provides a sociolinguistic description of Bangladeshi higher education (BHE) from a translanguaging

perspective. Translanguaging is an umbrella term that encompasses the entire spectrum of linguistic performances of multilingual speakers (Wei, 2011) and a pedagogical approach for systematically manipulating such performances in education (Duarte, 2016; Rafi & Morgan, 2022a; 2022c). As part of a larger project, an ethnographic research design was employed to collect four large datasets: classroom observations, pedagogical interventions, focus group discussions with students, and semi-structured interviews with teachers from the first-year classrooms of the English and Anthropology departments of two public and two private universities (henceforth, public university-1, public university-2, private university-1 and private university-2) in Bangladesh. However, the dataset featured mixed disciplined students since all undergraduate students must enrol in English language and Introductory Anthropology/Social science courses in Bangladeshi universities. Approximately 400 students and eight teachers participated in the study. The study relied primarily on observational data, with occasional references to focus groups and interview data to strengthen the validity and credibility of the findings. The findings were presented using a Russian doll (nested multi-case study) approach with macro, meso, and micro-level analysis. These three layers provide a framework for probing the national agendas in BHE, beginning with an in-depth investigation of each focal university's policy structure and then investigating how such policies are implemented in actual classrooms.

At the macro-level, BHE lacks an explicit medium of instruction (MOI) policy. Different epistemological stances and worldviews were documented in BHE MOI landscapes. Whereas linguistic nationalism, protectionism, and additive bilingualism inform the public university MOI, internationalisation, globalisation, and the perceived economic benefit of English underpin MOI policy decisions and westernisation of curriculum in private universities (Hamid, Jahan, & Islam, 2013, Rafi &Morgan, 2022b). The meso-level analysis revealed that public university-1 designed its MOI with department and subject orientation in mind. Its English department adopted EMI except for subjects offered to English majors by other departments, whereas the Anthropology department adopted translanguaging in the guise of Bangla as the norm while offering a few subjects in EMI. Public university- 2 wholly deviated from the macro-level narrative through

its strict implementation of EMI. Private universities 1 and 2 aligned with the private sector macro-level description as EMI institutions. The micro-level analysis of classroom observation along with other datasets at these four universities revealed that seven out of eight teachers accommodated translanguaging or allowed students to translanguage to varying degrees primarily for three reasons: meeting the diverse proficiency levels of students, keeping students engaged throughout the lecture, and achieving quality content learning objectives.

This study revealed a discrepancy between macro-level language policy and actual practice at the meso and micro levels within universities. These findings have significant ramifications for universities in international contexts that adopted EMI to internationalise and marketise higher education in a competitive HE market. EMI and the westernisation of curriculum, according to one teacher participant, is a "selling point" for all private universities in BHE. Local languages and cultures are ghettoised due to such policy decisions, creating distinct realities in non-English speaking contexts. "After coming to the university, I realised I entered a new world where everything functions in English," a student said, reflecting on the stark linguistic difference between inside and outside the university premises. The ecology of the other two EMI universities was also obliterated by these linguistic and cultural erasures. Private university-2 symbolically celebrates an 'English-speaking day' for all employees (academic and administrative) and reserves the right not to provide services on those days if not requested in English. Public university-2 explicitly displayed 'English please' signs on the classroom walls enforcing an embargo on local languages. Nonetheless, these policy implementations frequently ignored teachers' and students' English proficiency thresholds. Teachers who strictly implemented EMI created a teacher-centred classroom environment, reducing student engagement and necessitating more counselling hours for struggling students. Teachers who disrupted EMI policies, in contrast, experienced guilt, fear, and shame as a result of their actions.

The translanguaging practices featured in overall policy disruptions at EMI universities and the absence of a policy at public university-1 lacked the focus, design and materials of translanguaging

pedagogies. However, the documented disconnect between policy and practices also provided the opportunities for scrapping these MOI policies and promoting translanguaging pedagogies to provide the participants with holistic teaching and learning experience accommodating diverse languages, cultures and knowledge structures in pedagogical discourses as an alternative to the promulgation of westernised curriculum and anglo-normative practices through EMI in multilingual universities (Rafi & Morgan, 2022c; 2022d; forthcoming).

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