

The scramble for EMI: Lessons from postcolonial 'old EMI' universities

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Research Domains

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Abstract

While more and more universities in traditionally non-Anglophone countries are moving towards English medium instruction (EMI), those of the nominally Anglophone postcolonial world are carrying on with business as usual. Higher education in many postcolonial countries has typically only ever been available through the language of the former colonisers, so many institutions in former British colonies now find themselves ahead of the global trend. This paper considers what lessons can be learnt from postcolonial 'old EMI' universities, as we see more and more institutions swept up in the scramble for EMI. Universities looking to join the neo-Anglophone higher education sector would do well to learn from the decades of experience of many postcolonial universities who are still struggling to create the ideal learning and teaching environments for their students and staff through an L2 medium of instruction, and who may now be wondering why others are choosing to follow suit.

Full paper

Many postcolonial universities have become accustomed to English as the only available option, rather than a neoliberal choice (Bamgbose 2003). They have also long recognised the 'language problem' of EMI. This paper considers what universities scrambling for EMI can learn from this experience.

The first lesson is that EMI does not promote English proficiency. While new EMI universities are only now raising this concern, postcolonial EMI universities have long been troubled by their graduates' English proficiency (Weideman and Van Rensburg 2002, Deverell 1989, Kumawat and Tiwari 2020, Bitrus-Ojiambo, Wayumba Mwaura, and Lutivini Majanja 2017, Maharaj 2016, Hopson 2005). Whatever other conditions might account for this situation, there is clearly more to learning English than EMI.

The second lesson is that EMI presents serious challenges for active engagement in learning and scholarship. There has been a bizarre naivety about what would happen when new universities joined the scramble for EMI. The Global South provides far-reaching evidence of the impacts of teaching through an unfamiliar language on understanding (Makalela 2009, Galabawa and Senkoro 2010, Heugh et al. 2012, Heugh 2011, Desai 2016, Mohanty 2006, Brock-Utne 2010); teacher-centred practices (Alidou and Brock-Utne 2011, Arthur and Martin 2006, Bunyi 2005) and "safe-talk" (Martin 2005, Hornberger and Chick 2001, Chick 1996, Arthur 1996, Chimbutane 2011, Rubagumya 2003, Ndayipfukamiye 2001, Bunyi 2001, Fitriati 2016); frustration and alienation (Prah 2005, Tsui 1996); and sociological divisions between those who do and do not understand (Mohanty 2006, Bamgbose 2003, Kamwangamalu 2007, Bisong 1995, Bhattacharya 2013, Sultana 2014). What kind of graduates are produced by a system in which students are kept quieter than they might be if using a more familiar language? What level of critical engagement are we expecting, and to what extent can we expect new knowledge to be created and contested?

The tendency has been to pour resources into support structures around the system, to help students make the transition to tertiary level. These structures are invaluable but there is an odd balance of resourcing when focusing on propping up an inappropriate system. This leads to the third lesson. Instead of trying to paper over the cracks of an EMI system, scholars in the Global South have called for a radical overhaul of the system. Stroud and Kerfoot (2013, 5) explain that "a transformative epistemology of multilingualism for HE is one in which all available languages and semiotic resources are used and promoted in pursuit of learning and which encourages a questioning of monodiscursive, monolingual norms in education".

This goes far beyond code-switching to support tricky concepts or scaffolding an EMI curriculum. It conceptualises “multilinguality” as a goal in itself (Agnihotri 2014, 371). As Michael-Luna and Canagarajah (2008, 72) note, while “educational research has spent the last 50 years trying to change students to fit the academic discourse, perhaps we might consider the ways that monolingual, monocultural academic discourse can be transformed and enriched by multilinguals.”

Thaman (2019) laments her experiences “learning to think in the language of strangers”. While many other scholars contesting the coloniality of higher education in Oceania do not explicitly challenge EMI, their calls for the centrality of relationality (Airini et al. 2010, Helu-Thaman 2008, Ka’ili 2005); for “a dramatic foundational shift that shatters the Eurocentric colonial knowledge system that binds our higher learning institutions and destines us to universities and worlds in which our very being is determined by race, capital and the heteropatriarchy” (Leenen-Young et al. 2021, 12); and for an approach that “values coherent local knowledge as way forward, but reminds of the need for disentanglement from the imposed judgments of the past” (Sanga and Reynolds 2020, 257) demonstrate that language has to be central to decoloniality. The view that EMI can level the playing field by converging on a common language is a dangerous myth that elite universities continue to perpetuate.

It is this third lesson that new EMI institutions would do well to heed. This paper is not so much concerned with how old EMI institutions can decolonise their practices, but with why all these new EMI institutions are blindly scrambling for the very model that so many others want to decolonise. If ever there was a time to listen to scholars from the Global South, it is surely worth reflecting on why there are so many calls to decolonise higher education and reject its monolingualising tendencies. It is baffling to watch the norms of the Anglophone Centre once again spreading outwards unchecked, with so little critical reflection on issues of social justice and knowledge creation.

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