

‘Equitable’ Medium Instruction: Challenging the ‘E’ of ‘English’ Medium Instruction

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Abstract

This talk argues that to foster more equity in a South Korean Higher Education English Medium Instruction (EMI) learning environment, future policies should be multilingual. First, the talk provides an overview of current South Korean EMI challenges and by drawing on data of a larger study presents examples of translanguaging practices used to offset these challenges. The study explored ten South Korean University students’ perceptions of how translanguaging affects access to subject content in their EMI experiences. The findings imply that students place ‘trust’ in the L1 or L2 system in certain EMI situations, which may constrain their learning. This talk further argues translanguaging should be viewed as a viable, equitable, socially-just medium of instruction to overcome these constraints. Recommendations are made for how students can be given the opportunity to be involved in critiquing and changing the social structures in which they learn, to co-imagine a socially-just translanguaging future.

Full paper

The argument of this talk is based on three factors: South Korean Higher Education language policy does not overtly promote multilingualism; linguistic challenges prevail in the EMI classroom; and a translanguaging pedagogy is perceived to be a way of addressing these linguistic challenges.

EMI has been adopted by many universities in South Korea as a means of promoting Internationalisation at Home and enhancing the competitiveness of their graduates in the global job market. However, it is facing various challenges due to the low English proficiency level of students and professors. Consequently, instructors proficient in the Korean language commonly resort to using it to convey the content, as a lack of instructor English proficiency contributes to the challenges faced by students. Although there is evidence supporting the use of translanguaging pedagogy to address challenges in the EMI classroom (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter 2022), this pedagogy is not explicitly incorporated into South Korean EMI policy. Consequently, a normative assumption - to use English as the medium of instruction - prevails which constrains instructor’s teaching practices and students learning experiences and does not foster an ‘equitable’ medium of instruction in South Korean HE.

The data gathered for this research was collected through semi-structured interviews with ten students majoring in business or engineering at a prominent research-intensive university in Seoul, South Korea.

The following research question was being investigated: *How does the use of L1 and L2 affect students' access to subject content during their EMI experiences?* Each interview lasted around one hour on average, and they were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. Charmaz's (2014) constant comparison approach was used for analysis which led to a Constructivist Grounded Theory.

The study was further informed by two theoretical starting points. The first, Bourdieu's notion of *linguistic capital* (1991) enabled human experience to be viewed as a *market* where legitimate social structures and practices emerge and become capital. Linguistic capital suggests that individuals who possess language skills, particularly those associated with prestige or dominance in a given society, have an advantage in terms of social, economic, and cultural capital. Linguistic capital therefore equates to English competence, and in South Korea this capital may earn a young person admission to a prestigious university, may provide better employment opportunities, and is associated with wealth and status (Park 2011).

The second theoretical starting point, Fricker's notion of *epistemic injustice*, refers to unfairness in the way people are treated in terms of their knowledge and credibility which Fricker describes as 'a kind of injustice in which someone is *wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower*' (2007, 20, emphasis in original). From a language perspective, this form of injustice can occur when there is a lack of available concepts or shared language to express and understand the experiences and knowledge of a particular group. Therefore, in South Korea, the dominance of English language may lead to a reduction in knowledge production in the Korean language. The English language dominates because there is an assumption that EMI is synonymous with monolingualism.

A grounded theory emerged from analysis suggesting that students experiences can be interpreted through the concept of 'trust' – defined as *having confidence in a resource or system to facilitate a learning outcome*. Specifically, the Grounded Theory suggests that *the students trust in the English or Korean language codes, respectively, reinforces a binary choice between the two languages across EMI situations*. It is these binary choices, which are monolingually framed, that appear to give rise to epistemic injustice as language policy does not overtly promote multilingualism.

To promote just epistemic outcomes, the talk concludes with the suggestion that future teaching and learning practices should harness a translanguaging pedagogy as a more overt part of future policy which recognises and utilises the linguistic diversity present in the classroom (Cenoz & Gorter 2022). Recommendations are made for how students can be involved in critiquing and changing current pedagogical practices. By harnessing such a pedagogy, the role of culture and identity will be given more value in the learning process to address the prevalence of current epistemic injustices.

Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard University Press.

Cenoz, J., & Gorter, D. 2022. *Pedagogical Translanguaging*. Cambridge University Press.

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Park, J. S. Y. 2011. The Promise of English: Linguistic Capital and the Neoliberal Worker in the South Korean Job Market. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 14(4) 443–455. doi:10.1080/13670050.2011.573067.

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