

Situated Linguistic Capital Theory: Understanding the Dynamics of Trust in EMI

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper introduces Situated Linguistic Capital Theory to explore the dynamics of trust in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses at South Korean universities. It highlights how EMI's rapid adoption overlooks students' linguistic challenges and unique needs. The theory builds on Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital by considering how trust in both first and second languages affects student experiences. Through semi-structured interviews with students, key themes emerged: past experiences shape trust, trust influences access to content, and trust affects student interactions. The study also addresses epistemic injustice, where students with lower English proficiency face barriers in understanding content and engaging with the curriculum. To mitigate these issues, the study advocates for translanguaging and multilingual approaches in EMI, recommending policies that cater to the specific needs of students and create inclusive environments. Ultimately, the paper emphasizes the importance of contextualized EMI practices for a more equitable educational experience.

Full paper

This paper explores the experiences of South Korean university students in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses, proposing Situated Linguistic Capital Theory to understand the role of trust in EMI contexts. The rapid adoption of EMI in South Korea, driven by internationalization policies, often overlooks the linguistic challenges students face, neglecting their unique needs (e.g. Byun et al. 2021; Kim, 2017). Drawing from a study at a research-intensive university in South Korea, this paper investigates how trust in linguistic capital, shaped by students' past experiences, influences their academic access and interactions within EMI programs.

Theoretical Background: Bourdieu's Linguistic Capital and Situated Contexts

Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital (1991) views language proficiency as a form of social capital that grants access to prestigious universities and better job prospects. However, his theory does not consider how linguistic codes differ in varying contexts. This study extends Bourdieu's work by introducing a situated perspective of linguistic capital, emphasizing how trust in both first and second languages shapes student experiences. Linguistic capital is thus not static but shaped by individual interactions and contexts.

Methodology: Constructivist Grounded Theory Approach

The research uses Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014) to integrate data with theoretical insights. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students from engineering and business programs at a South Korean university. Three key micro-themes emerged: "Past Experiences Shape Trust," "Trust Affects Access," and "Trust Affects Interactions." These themes reveal that trust, influenced by past experiences, plays a critical role in students' engagement with EMI content and interactions with peers and instructors.

Situated Linguistic Capital Theory: Trust and Affordances

The central contribution is Situated Linguistic Capital Theory, which posits that trust and linguistic affordances interact dynamically. Trust, shaped by students' past experiences, affects their engagement with content and interactions within the learning environment. Trust in linguistic abilities influences access to subject content, and this access in turn strengthens trust. This reciprocal relationship between trust and linguistic capital affects students' actions and engagement, creating a cycle where each influences the other.

Epistemic Injustice and Linguistic Stratification

The study highlights potential epistemic injustice in EMI, where students face disadvantages due to their linguistic proficiency. Building on Fricker's (2007) ideas of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, the study identifies two key issues in EMI: students' difficulty in understanding content taught in a second language and the marginalization of students with lower English proficiency. This leads to situated linguistic injustice, where proficient students access higher education content more easily, while others struggle. This linguistic stratification creates a divide where some students can engage fully with content while others face comprehension barriers.

Towards a More Equitable EMI: Translanguaging and Multilingualism

To address epistemic injustices, the study advocates for a translanguaging approach, allowing students to use both first and second languages to aid understanding and engagement. By integrating students' full linguistic repertoires, EMI programs can support those with varying English proficiency. The study calls for a contextualized EMI approach, where policies are tailored to students' specific linguistic needs and available resources.

Instead of a one-size-fits-all model, policies should reflect the unique needs of students and instructors in each setting. This context-sensitive approach can reduce linguistic injustice and ensure equal opportunities for success in EMI programs.

Implications for EMI Policy and Practice

The study advocates for equitable and inclusive EMI practices, recommending policies that incorporate multilingualism and translanguaging to support students with lower English proficiency. Programs should create environments that respect linguistic diversity and empower students to use their full linguistic resources. The paper suggests shifting from top-down policies to bottom-up language planning and policy (LPP), which considers students' actual needs and abilities. This approach can reduce inequalities and create a more inclusive learning environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study introduces Situated Linguistic Capital Theory, offering insights into the role of trust in shaping students' EMI experiences. The findings suggest that EMI programs should adopt more contextualized, multilingual approaches that address linguistic challenges. By integrating trust, translanguaging, and inclusive practices into EMI programs, institutions can create a more equitable learning environment. These changes could make EMI a more inclusive and effective educational model for diverse student populations.