Review of English as a medium of instruction in Chinese universities today: current trends and future directions

FAN (GABRIEL) FANG

New language policies to promote multilingualism and language support for EMI will be needed in Chinese tertiary contexts

Introduction

The use of the English language in China, and especially in Chinese education has been increasing for several decades, despite various attitudes towards its use (Hu, 2009; Niu & Wolff, 2003; Wang, 2015). In the traditional perspective of world Englishes (Kachru, 1992), China lies in the expanding circle, where English is regarded as a foreign language. However, since China's implementation of the opening-up policy, the teaching of the English language has gained momentum by becoming a key subject in China's education system. Currently, policies in China make English a subject of study from grade three at primary school and as one of the three compulsory subjects in the national university entrance exam (*Gaokao*), and a compulsory course for university students of all majors (Hu, 2003; Li, 2016).

China's modernisation agenda has driven this expansion of English language education by the central government. Amid the growing popularity of English learning, in 2001 the MOE (Ministry of Education) published guidelines for improving the quality of undergraduate teaching of English. According to Hu and McKay (2012: 346–47), the directive 'required that within three years 5–10% of undergraduate courses offered by tertiary institutions be conducted in English or other foreign language'. The policy of using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) was initiated to demonstrate the high quality of university teaching (Botha, 2014; Hu & Lei, 2014; Hu, Li & Lei, 2014), and in

response, many Chinese universities, especially top-ranking universities in first-tier cities, have designed EMI content courses. More than a decade after the publication of these directives, there is a need to evaluate in depth the implementation of EMI in Chinese universities and understand the driving force behind the movement. The current paper aims to fulfil this aim by reviewing studies of EMI in the Chinese context to understand current EMI practices and unpack the future development of EMI in the Chinese education.

ELF and EMI in Chinese universities

In order to investigate the implementation and trends of EMI in Chinese tertiary contexts, I first
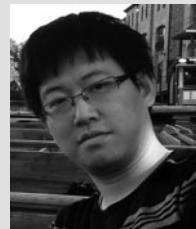
FAN (GABRIEL) FANG obtained his PhD from the Centre for Global Englishes, University of Southampton, UK, and an MA from the University of Leeds, UK. He is currently Associate Professor in Shantou University, China. His research interests include Global Englishes, language attitude and identity, intercultural communication, and ELT. He has published articles in journals including Language Teaching Research, System, English Today*, and* The Journal of Asia TEFL*. Email: ffang@stu.edu.cn*

discuss the wider impact of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in the field of English language teaching (ELT). Today English is used not only by its native speakers or as a nation-bound variety, but internationally across boundaries in intercultural communication among people whose first languages often are not English (Baker, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011). From an ELF perspective, the notion of the idealised native speaker no longer exists as it is more essential for people to be aware of their linguistic repertoire as a resource to negotiate understanding with people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. In particular, the ELF paradigm argues the importance for individuals to become fluent bilingual (or multilingual) speakers while retaining their national identities in accent and the special skills required for intercultural communication (Baker, 2015; Graddol, 2006).

The development of ELF has encouraged mastering the language for various purposes and popularised EMI in various contexts. To some extent, the adoption of EMI to initiate the internationalisation process of universities and the quality of higher education can be taken for granted, but the effectiveness of implementing EMI in content courses has not yet been widely investigated. The development of ELF and the growing trend of EMI have given rise to some concerns, such as whether ELF is a vehicle for the internationalisation of tertiary education, or whether the overemphasis on the exclusive use of English can be blamed for minority and local language death, linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), and the loss of local linguistic and cultural identities (Guo & Beckett, 2007; Niu & Wolff, 2003). From an ELF perspective, linguistic norms are no longer dependent on native English speakers (NESs), and ELF researchers have adopted poststructuralist perspectives and perceive communication as fluid, hybrid and dynamic (Baker, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011).

An edited volume on medium of instruction policies (Tollefson & Tsui 2004) explores EMI policies in various settings. The many contributions in the volume see a tension between 'the centralizing forces of globalization and state-mandated policies' (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004: 284) and the 'demands for language rights by ethnic and linguistic minorities' (ibid.). Although Tollefson and Tsui (2004) do not focus specifically on the Chinese context, this tension has been discussed that inner circle native speaker ideology can result in unequal ownership of English and reproduce an unbalanced relationship of power in language policies. For

example, the privilege of English and marginalisation of other local languages in language policies and classroom practices have generated several debates in ELT (Canagarajah, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2016). Recent research also points to the lack of awareness of students' first language (L1) as an important resource in language policies and classroom instruction in the Chinese context (Hu, 2009). Although English functions as a Multilingua Franca (Jenkins, 2015), ELT today still largely focuses on inner circle native speaker ideology and may not reflect multilingual language policies (see, e.g., Hu & Alsagoff, 2010; Tollefson & Tsui, 2004).

I recognise the importance of exploring ELT, and the recent trend of EMI in China has especially high importance as it is strongly linked to the Chinese socio-political climate (Adamson, 2004; Fang, 2017). However, there is still a dearth of research on EMI in the Chinese context, particularly within the ELF framework. The more recent development of EMI in Europe aims to 'standardise university degrees across Europe so as to facilitate student and staff mobility and credit transfer' (Kirkpatrick, 2014: 4). In China, regional universities, particularly offshore branch campuses of English-speaking countries, have adopted EMI and accordingly promote themselves as international. These include Ningbo Nottingham University, Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University, New York University Shanghai and Duke Kunshan University, among others. Many Chinese prestigious universities, including Peking University, Fudan University, Sun Yat-sen University and Zhejiang University offer English-taught programmes, along with MA and PhD degree programmes (Bolton & Botha, 2015). Universities use these EMI programmes for marketing purposes to attract more applicants, increasing their competitiveness.

Overall, we need to understand the increasing demand for, and complexity of EMI in various settings including China, given that the ELF paradigm envisages the current linguistic landscape where language contact has become far more fluid and complex. Therefore, it is worth exploring the actual practices of EMI to better understand the implementation of EMI in various settings. In the following sections, I draw on research by Botha (Bolton & Botha, 2015; Botha, 2014, 2016), Hu (Hu & Lei, 2014; Hu et al., 2014; Lei & Hu, 2014) and a more recent study by Fang and Xie (forthcoming) to further evaluate the issue of EMI in China. I also present some practical implications of teaching through EMI and directions for future studies in terms of EMI in tertiary education contexts.

Botha's EMI research

Botha ([2014](#)) investigated the use of English in Guangzhou and Macau, focusing on two universities, one in mainland China and one in Macau.[1] Botha found that there were many bilingual Chinese-English medium courses in mainland China, although there were no official policies guiding the adoption of EMI. Botha ([2014](#)) reported that English was mostly used in the humanities and the business schools. Despite the promotion of EMI, the students reported that exposure to English varied among schools, from 'about half' to 'all'. More than 70% of the Chinese students participated in his study agreed or strongly agreed that universities would be more 'international' if they offered courses in English and saw the introduction of EMI courses as making universities more 'competitive'. However, the students also acknowledged that they were not able to fully benefit from EMI 'because the universities' policies are either not evenly implemented across all the academic units, or there is a lack of well-defined policies to inform teachers on how to use English as a medium of teaching' (Botha, [2014](#): 6). Botha ([2014](#)) observed that students recognised the Chinese variety of English but did not feel satisfied with their teachers' level of English proficiency. Students at this Chinese university commented that teachers of EMI courses generally had good reading and writing skills but did not have proficiency in spoken English. Botha's findings require teachers to achieve high-level English skills to prepare for the possible adoption of EMI in classroom instruction, but he argued that the English level of teachers who conduct EMI courses has been insufficiently researched (Botha, [2014](#)).

In a more recent publication, Botha ([2016](#)) reported that international undergraduate students in medicine at a Chinese university also agreed that the adoption of English would help internationalise the university, while less than 20% of students believed that the use of Chinese would have the same result. However, students viewed the EMI courses negatively, partly because the teachers could not express their ideas in English and simply read PowerPoint presentations (see also Bolton & Botha, [2015](#)). Hence, Botha ([2016](#): 46) concludes that:

> research on the spread and use of English in mainland China's universities needs to be contextualized within multilingual contexts of language use and language ecologies in the region, especially with

regard to the rich multilingual worlds of students in China's higher education.

Hu's EMI research

Hu's team identified some driving forces of EMI in higher education in China. For instance, Hu and Lei ([2014](#)) investigated the adoption of EMI at the national, institutional and personal levels. They found that, at the national level, the MOE implemented EMI to improve and guarantee the quality of Chinese higher education. At the institutional level, EMI was expected to help the focal university become 'international', particularly in university rankings. At the individual level, EMI was believed to help students better master English. To summarise, participants in Hu and Lei ([2014](#): 557) viewed EMI as 'capable of bringing many important national, institutional, and personal benefits against the backdrop of ever deepening globalization and increasing competition' (Hu & Lei, [2014](#): 557). In this context, English was uncritically viewed as linguistically, culturally and economically important for China's development. The deep-rooted language ideology revealed in this study was that English proficiency was perceived as beneficial for both the nation and the individual and was 'embraced as capable of accruing both symbolic cultural capital and material gains of various types' (ibid.: 559). However, the interviewees in this study lamented that the low English proficiency of both students and teachers has hindered the effective implementation of EMI.

Similarly, Hu et al. ([2014](#)) found that the adoption of EMI served as a means of promoting internationalisation and offered individual benefits of improving language proficiency. However, the participants also questioned the role of English in gaining certain opportunities, such as 'securing access to educational opportunities in Anglophone countries' (Hu et al., [2014](#): 31). Hu et al. ([2014](#)) revealed that the EMI practices in the focal university still reflected the inner circle native speaker ideology linked to traditional ELT practices and that there were other misalignments and tensions between policy support and actual language practices. Furthermore, Hu et al. (2014: 37) claimed that their most striking finding was that the adoption of EMI in this particular university 'tended to perpetuate and accentuate inequalities'. They criticised this EMI policy as a manifestation of an ideology which reinforced 'the status of English as a gatekeeper' (ibid.: 32). They called for a more equitable approach to implementing EMI in

higher education in China and for more empirical research on EMI to be conducted, particularly on a more feasible language policy support and the allocation of resources to support its implementation. Regarding language policy support, these findings were, to some extent, similar to Kirkpatrick's (2014: 5) call for the revision of EMI programmes and policies to 'take into account the use of ELF and encourage bi- and multilingualism'.

Lei and Hu (2014) summarised the trends and features of EMI, exploring various issues connected to EMI in China, including courses taught by young faculty members, the use of textbooks published by Anglo-American universities, the different English proficiency levels of teachers and students and concerns about students' English proficiency. Lei and Hu (2014) revealed some negative consequences from the implementation of EMI courses in China; for instance, one EMI programme 'was not effective in improving either students' English proficiency or their English learning and use affect' (ibid.: 118).

Hu and Alsagoff (2010) discussed other challenges in implementing EMI in China, including shortages of qualified teachers and instructional materials and the lack of a sociolinguistic environment conducive to EMI. To a large extent, the current ELT situation in China remains largely exam-oriented. The effectiveness of EMI implementation in China is questionable, and actual practices are under-investigated. In sum, when investigating medium-of-instruction language policies, we should recognise that 'the tension between retaining the culture and values associated with the mother tongue and the adoption of a national identity symbolized by a foreign language is not easy to reconcile' (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004: 7; see also Liu & Fang, 2017).

Fang's EMI research

Fang and Xie (forthcoming) investigated the linguistic diversity at a southeast Chinese university, focusing on EMI practices. They found that the adoption of EMI was promoted in the Business School, Law School and Medical College through several programmes, including the Foreign Legal Affairs English programme and the English Emergence programme in the Medical College.[2]

In Fang and Xie (forthcoming), syllabi analysis and interviews were carried out to investigate the language policy and practices at this particular university. 16 syllabi were analysed, and 12 students then taking EMI courses in the Business School,

Law School, and School of Journalism participated in the interviews. Fang and Xie (forthcoming) found several trends among the EMI programme offered at this university. First, language prerequisites were missing as students were not required to achieve a certain level of English proficiency before taking EMI courses. There were no language prerequisites in the syllabi, and the students confirmed this lack of prerequisites during the interviews. This situation was quite different compared to Hu's investigations (Hu et al., 2014, Hu & Lei, 2014). In that case, only students who scored 120 or higher out of 150 possible points on the *Gaokao* were eligible for admission to the focal university's EMI program. Second, the students reported that the teachers did not use English throughout the EMI courses. For example, even in a course listed as EMI, the teachers and students might use Mandarin almost exclusively, with only the textbook or PowerPoint presentations in English. Again, the university had no specific policy governing what language should be used during classroom instruction. Third, students recognised the importance of implementing EMI but stressed that it should not be imposed blindly. They did not see the clear benefits or necessity of EMI programmes compared to mother-tongue instruction and held a more critical view of the implementation of EMI. The results of Fang and Xie's research support Lei and Hu's findings (2014) that students' English proficiency and attitudes towards English learning greatly affect their satisfaction with EMI and perceptions of its necessity.

Future directions of EMI research

Studies reviewed in this paper reveal an increasing demand of EMI courses in the Chinese context and point to a need for further exploration of the costs and benefits of EMI in Chinese tertiary education. From a critical perspective of EMI, Shohamy (2013) has pointed out some similar issues, including 'content versus language', the 'inequality that English may bring to different groups of people' and 'biases due to the assessment in second languages'. Supporting previous research on EMI in the Chinese context, I recognise that EMI will continue to develop in Chinese tertiary education. However, the dominant ELT ideology still views English from the perspective of native standards, overlooking the population of international students who use English against the backdrop of multilingualism (Jenkins, 2014). I suggest that the English used in EMI courses should not be

limited to a native-speaker variety but should embrace ELF from a multilingual perspective (Kirkpatrick, 2014; Shohamy, 2013). I next discuss possible future routes for more appropriate implementation of EMI.

First, the delivery of a coherent, contextualised EMI policy to stakeholders is necessary. Previous research showed that language policies for implementing EMI are insufficient and often inappropriate, and discrepancies between EMI policies and practices exist. At the moment, EMI appears to be a top-down policy imposed with little consultation of stakeholders. It remains questionable whether EMI is more effective than mother-tongue education. Therefore, EMI implementation requires more bottom-up consultation, contextualisation and stakeholder participation in the policy-making process.

Second, if EMI is more widely implemented in various contexts for internationalisation purposes, EMI instructors and students should both be given substantial language guidance and support. Prerequisites for stakeholders' English proficiency and the availability of linguistic facilitation should be taken into consideration. The growing body of international staff and students in Anglophone settings has created a greater need for language support (Jenkins, 2014). However, in this review essay, I argue that such language support is also crucial for native English-speaking teachers to understand how people use this international language differently, for example, in both Anglophone and local academic settings to help students better transfer to EMI programmes (Jenkins, 2014). Despite the popularity of EMI, empirical research does not show that EMI necessarily leads to optimal outcomes in both content subject learning and improvement of students' English level (Hu, 2009; Hu & Lei, 2014). Therefore, constant guidance and language support for EMI are necessary and crucial as English proficiency is the key to high-quality, satisfactory EMI courses.

Third, the implementation of EMI should acknowledge the linguistic diversity from the multilingual paradigm. A monolingual approach to EMI will not work well. Instead, the linguistic resources of teachers and students should be encouraged. Both parties must break the entrenched inner circle native speaker ideology of the English language, and recognise the current linguistic landscape in which English is used as a lingua franca and challenge the ownership of English. Therefore, teachers should understand the local linguistic context and envisage local varieties of English in their own classroom settings. The *E* in EMI can no longer represent only native varieties of English but also the *E* in the ELF paradigm. This will demand that both teachers and students recognise the multilingual skills used in ELF as beneficial not only for the development of students' English competence but also as communicative strategies in today's multilingual world (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed several studies on EMI in the Chinese context. The implementation of EMI is a constantly growing and even inevitable trend as universities view EMI as an important means to internationalise and to attract more international students. From a more critical perspective, I argue that language policies and language support are lacking in many settings, as revealed in the literature, and I call for an ideological shift from insisting that EMI means native-standard English only to viewing EMI from a multilingual perspective. I believe that the findings in the literature and my suggestions can be applied to similar settings, such as international universities which regard English as a foreign language but see multiple reasons to adopt EMI.

I conclude that, if EMI is to be more broadly implemented in higher education in China, it should be contextualised with more guidance for faculty members, students and administrators. EMI does not mean English only and should not be imposed as a top-down policy; rather, EMI policies should recognise other linguistic resources and encourage bilingualism and multilingualism (Kirkpatrick, 2014). It is hoped that, in the future, EMI will be implemented against the backdrop of multilingualism with an understanding of ELF in order to better fit different settings.

Notes

1 I focus on EMI in mainland China, so Botha's discussion of EMI in Macau is not included in this paper.
2 The Medical College is not located on the main campus, so I did not research the EMI programme offered by the Medical College, although I feel the need to investigate it in the future.

higher education division of the Department of Education of Guangdong Province).

References

Adamson, B. 2004. *China's English: A History of English in Chinese Education*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Baker, W. 2015. *Culture and Identity through English as a Lingua Franca: Rethinking Concepts and Goals in Intercultural Communication*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

Bolton, K. & Botha, W. 2015. 'English in China's universities: Past and present.' *World Englishes*, 34(2), 190–210.

Botha, W. 2014. 'English in China's universities today.' *English Today*, 30(1), 3–10.

Botha, W. 2016. 'English and international students in China today.' *English Today*, 32(1), 41–47.

Canagarajah, S. 1999. *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fang, F. 2017. 'World Englishes or English as a lingua franca: Where does English in China Stand.' *English Today*, 33(1), 19–24.

Fang, F. & Xie, X. forthcoming. 'Linguistic diversity on a Chinese university campus: Myths of language policy and means of practice.' In J. Jenkins, & A. Mauranen (eds.), *Linguistic Diversity on the International Campus: Insider accounts of the use of English and other languages in ten universities within Asia, Australasia and Europe*. Abingdon, New York: Routledge.

Graddol, D. 2006. *English Next*. London: British Council.

Guo, Y. & Beckett, G. H. 2007. 'The hegemony of English as a global language: Reclaiming local knowledge and culture in China.' *Convergence*, XL(1–2), 117–31.

Hu, G. 2003. 'English language teaching in China: Regional differences and contributing factors.' *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 24(4), 290–318.

Hu, G. 2009. 'The craze for English-medium education in China: Driving forces and looming consequences.' *English Today*, 25(4), 47–54.

Hu, G. & Alsagoff, L. 2010. 'A public policy perspective on English medium instruction in China.' *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 31(4), 365–82.

Hu, G. & McKay, S. L. 2012. 'English language education in East Asia: Some recent developments.' *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 33(4), 345–62.

Hu, G. & Lei, J. 2014. 'English-medium instruction in Chinese higher education: A case study.' *Higher Education*, 67(5), 551–67.

Hu, G., Li, L. & Lei, J. 2014. 'English-medium instruction at a Chinese University: Rhetoric and reality.' *Language Policy*, 13, 21–40.

Jenkins, J. 2014. *English as a Lingua Franca in the International University: The Politics of Academic English Language Policy*. Abingdon, New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, J. 2015. 'Repositioning English and multilingualism in English as a Lingua Franca.' *Englishes in Practice*, 2 (3), 49–85.

Kachru, B. B. (ed.). 1992. *The Other Tongue: English Across Cultures*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Kirkpatrick, A. 2014. 'The language(s) of HE: EMI and/or ELF and/or multilingualism?' *The Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 4–15.

Kumaravadivelu, B. 2016. 'The decolonial option in English teaching: Can the subaltern act?' *TESOL Quarterly*, 50(1), 66–85.

Lei, J. & Hu, G. 2014. 'Is English-medium instruction effective in improving Chinese undergraduate students' English competence?' *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 52(2), 99–126.

Li, W. 2016. 'New Chinglish and the post-multilingualism challenge: Translanguaging ELF in China.' *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 5(1), 1–25.

Liu, J. & Fang, F. 2017. 'Perceptions, awareness and perceived effects of home culture on intercultural communication: Perspectives of university students in China.' *System*, 67, 25–37.

Niu, Q. & Wolff, M. 2003. 'China and Chinese, or Chingland and Chinglish?' *English Today*, 19(2), 9–11.

Phillipson, R. 1992. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Seidlhofer, B. 2011. *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shohamy, E. 2013. 'A critical perspective on the use of English as a medium of instruction at universities.' In A. Doiz, D. Lasagabaster & J. M. Sierra (eds), *English-Medium Instruction at Universities: Global Challenges*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, pp. 196–210.

Tollefson, J. W. & Tsui, A. B. M. 2004. *Medium of Instruction Policies: Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?* Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Wang, W. 2015. 'Teaching English as an international language in China: Investigating university teachers' and students' attitudes towards China English.' *System*, 53, 60–72.