
English language ideologies and students' perception of international English-Medium-Instruction (EMI) Master's programmes: A Chinese case study

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Introduction

To be engaged in the economic, political and technological processes of globalization, higher education institutions around the world have included internationalization as part of their long-term mission, and China is no exception. The number of international students on campus is a well-recognized index of the universities' internationalized status. According to the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People's Republic of China, in 2016 there were 442,773 international students studying in China, 209,966 of whom were enrolled in degree programmes in Chinese higher education institutions, and 63,867 (47.42%) studied as postgraduate students (MOE, 2017).

English-medium instruction (EMI) has become a major strategy of universities in non-English speaking countries to attract international students and prepare local students going abroad (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Extensive studies on EMI have been conducted in Europe and Asia (see Dearden, 2014; Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2017). In comparison with the European context, studies on EMI in Asian countries are burgeoning and fewer in number, especially studies examining practice in Mainland China. Existing research has examined the national and institutional EMI policies (Hu & Lei, 2014; Piller & Choi, 2013; Zhang, 2017), the role of L1 and non-native English-speaking instructors in EMI practice (Kim, Choi & Tatar, 2017; Toh, 2016), and EMI practices and intercultural sensitivity of local/international students as influenced by their perceptions of the EMI

policies (He & Chiang, 2016; Kim, Choi & Tatar, 2017).

Research on EMI targeting international students in Chinese universities has examined the EMI policies (Zhang, 2017), the quality of EMI, including Chinese instructors' inadequate English proficiency, cultural differences in teaching styles, and students' beliefs in native English speakers as the exclusive, legitimate EMI instructors (Hu & Lei, 2014). Sociolinguistic studies focused on students' multilingual uses in undergraduate- and postgraduate-level EMI programmes in Chinese universities, finding that English has been increasingly adopted as the lingua franca for international communication and academic learning (Bolton & Botha, 2015; Botha, 2014, 2016). Given the survey-based,



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qualitative research that focuses on the macro-levels of EMI policies in Chinese universities, there is a paucity of in-depth, ethnographic case studies on EMI in the Chinese context.

The present study draws on ethnographic data collected from classroom observation, life story interviews with student informants and EMI policy documents to understand (1) what students' ideologies about the English language are, and (2) how those language ideologies relate to their life trajectories as well as their perception of and practice in the international EMI Master's programmes in a major comprehensive university in China.

Research background

The present study was conducted in two-year EMI Master's programmes at the Department of Political Sciences (hereafter 'the Department') at a major comprehensive university in China. The 2017 introductory brochure on the official website of the university's International Students Office (ISO) reports that the university has over 7,000 international students on campus. The university offers one EMI undergraduate programme in medicine and 22 EMI Master's programmes. Eight of the 22 EMI Master's programmes are double-degree EMI Master's programmes in collaboration with leading universities around the world, where students spend one year in each university and obtain Master-degree diplomas from both universities. All the EMI Master's programmes accept overseas non-degree and exchange students on a semester basis.

Among the first departments to initiate EMI Master's programmes in the university, the Department started its first two-year EMI Master's programme in 2008 and later developed four other two-year EMI Master's programmes with varied research foci, as well as a double-degree EMI Master's programme with a major university in France and a joint-degree EMI Master's programme with a major university in Sweden. The seven EMI Master's programmes share some required and elective courses. Admission requires proof of English language proficiency equal to or above 6.5 points of the International English Language Test System (IELTS) for prospective students who have no living/educational experiences in English-speaking countries. International students were recruited from all over the world while each of the EMI Master's programmes annually reserve 15–20% quota for Chinese students who are typically directly admitted from the undergraduate programmes of the Department.

The EMI Master's programmes were chosen as the case in the present study because of their simultaneous representativeness and uniqueness (Yin, 2016). The case is representative of EMI Master's programmes in China, which is the most typical type of EMI programmes in Chinese universities targeting international students (Kirkpatrick, 2017). The uniqueness of the case resides in the following aspects: (1) quality English-medium instruction and academic background of the professors as generally reported by the student informants, (2) high-level English proficiency and quality tertiary education backgrounds of both the Chinese and international students enrolled in the EMI Master's programmes, and (3) the university with an explicit agenda of internationalization with financial and policy support from the MOE of China.

Data collection and analysis

As an ethnographic project on EMI and internationalization of higher education in contemporary China, the present study combines two methods of data collection, including student interviews and classroom observation. Classroom observation was conducted in two courses provided to a total of 51 students from the seven EMI programmes under study. The findings reported in the present study are primarily derived from student interview data.

Drawing on the method of purposive sampling of maximum variation, the present study selected 15 student informants with primary reference to their demographic information with a relative balance in gender and the year of study. The student informants include those in both the EMI Master's programmes and the double/joint-degree EMI programmes (see Table 1 below). Two exchange students were also selected because they participated in classroom activities and fulfilled all course work together with full-time students in the enacted EMI Master's programmes. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of the student information.

The student interview method was life story interviews in order to understand and contextualize the student interviewees' experiences, feelings and attitudes in the EMI Master's programmes under study in their individual life trajectories and in connection with their life values (Atkinson, 1998). The interviews were semi-structured (See Appendix 1). The average duration of each interview was approximately 1.1 hours (16.5 hours in total).

The interviews were transcribed into a total length of 37,933 words and were subject to

Table 1: List of student interviewees

No.	Student names	Gender	Nationality	Year of study	Programme type
1	Jin	Female	Korea	2	Two-year EMI Master
2	Dan	Male	Mainland China	1	
3	Yun	Female	Mainland China	2	
4	Anna	Female	Brazil	1	
5	Ram	Male	Thailand	2	
6	David	Male	United States	1	
7	Joanna	Female	Britain	1	
8	Larry	Male	Singapore	1	
9	Roman	Male	Costa Rica	1	
10	Nicole	Female	Republic of the Philippines	1	
11	Ying	Female	Mainland China	2	Two-year double-degree EMI
12	Emilie	Female	France	2	Master with a major university in France
13	Diane	Female	Germany	2	Two-year joint-degree EMI Master with a major university in Sweden
14	John	Male	Luxembourg	2	Exchange student from the University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg
15	Cecelia	Female	Italy	2	Exchange student from the University of Bocconi, Italy

thematic analysis. In line with the inductive approach, codes emerged from and were grounded in the interview transcripts. The deductive approach was used to abstract key themes from the codes in response to the research questions proposed in the present study.

Findings

English as a 'natural' academic lingua franca

When asked whether they would prefer using languages other than English in class, all the student informants said that they took 'English only' as an implicit classroom norm and regarded English as a 'natural' academic lingua franca. Diana mentioned how her home university in Sweden has made great efforts to establish double/joint-degree EMI Master's programmes with leading universities outside Europe and that her programme coordinator was 'very excited' to promote her joint-degree EMI programme because it was by far the only one with a major university in Asia.

Except for Dan, Roman and Anna, all the other student informants have experiences of studying in English-speaking countries as either exchange or full-time students. Dan has also had overseas exchange experiences in Korea and Japan. Roman has attended EMI primary and middle schools in Costa Rica. Anna has been working as a journalist in Brazil and China with English as her primary working language.

The naturalness of English as an academic lingua franca is deeply rooted in the students' educational trajectories prior to joining the EMI programmes in China. In Excerpt 1, Cecelia attributes the importance of English to its dominant role as the medium of academic publication. Student informants from China, France, and Germany shared similar experiences together with those who completed undergraduate studies in English-speaking countries.

Excerpt 1

Researcher: So you learn [political sciences] by reading papers?

Cecelia: Yes, by reading papers, because at a certain level, all the papers you can read are in English. So you are obliged to know and explain in English.

More importantly, EMI is not only the language of academic study but a holistic process of socializing students into English-mediated academic practices, including EMI lectures, academic reading and essay writing in English. John is an exchange student from the University of Luxemburg. He finished his BA in a university in the US and joined an English-French bilingual Master's programme at Luxemburg. Though the Master's programme is termed bilingual, eighty percent of the courses were taught in English. John explained how his EMI experiences have made essay-writing in French a great challenge.

Excerpt 2

John: You learnt to write essays in English. You learnt how to present in English. You do everything in English. I think I enjoy more studying in English now. When I went back to Europe, I had a few courses in French. I don't know. It was very strange for me to write an essay in French even if it's my mother tongue.

Researcher: How different is that in French?

John: The terminology. And being translating things in your head before writing, it takes a lot of time.

Researcher: So you are thinking in English?

John: I'm thinking in English. If I'm thinking in French, I don't know how to write it.

Nevertheless, student informants from Singapore and China have stressed the importance of having both English and Chinese as the languages of academic learning. Larry conveyed his willingness to select a few content courses in Chinese because his Chinese is good enough to help him learn disciplinary knowledge in Chinese, which will be helpful for his career as a civil servant in Singapore. Dan, on the other hand, stressed that juxtaposing and weighing different perspectives in English and Chinese was a way to foster critical thinking and liberal mindedness.

Excerpt 3

Researcher: I think you are pretty open-minded. Does that relate to your overseas exchange experience?

Dan: I think it's because I learn English. I used to browse English websites a lot and got acquainted with lots of topics ... 'Climb over the wall' is very important. Your searches online reflect who you are, your preferences and your stance ... Your stance determines what kind of world you will see ...

Sometimes I will also 'climb back' to take a look, how the Chinese side discusses about certain issues. Otherwise you are also biased in perspective.

'Climb over the wall' [翻墙] is a set phrase in Chinese to refer to technical means to access censored and blocked sites in Mainland China, such as Google, YouTube, and the New York Times. Instead of scaling knowledge in English as more authoritative or more valuable than those in Chinese, Dan prioritizes access to multiple sources of knowledge and to multiple perspectives as mediated by different languages.

The analysis above suggests that international EMI Master's programmes in China become increasingly involved in the global ecology of higher education internationalization and contribute to the dominant role of English as the language of academia (Björkman, 2013; Bolton & Botha, 2015; Botha, 2014, 2016). EMI programmes in higher education shape students to be outbound, English-speaking students and prospective competitors in the international and local human resources markets.

Learning in China (vs. learning Chinese) as cultural capital

When asked why they would like to apply for the EMI Master's programmes in China, international student informants commonly refer to China as 'the fastest growing developing country' and 'the second economy in the world.' Similar phrases have also been mentioned in the first paragraph of the programme application information brochure released by the Department on the ISO website of the University.

Learning the Chinese perspective on international relations and international politics has been regarded as valuable cultural capital in developing their future career in relevant fields including international business and marketing with and/or in China, diplomacy and other governmental services.

Excerpt 4

Jin: Most Korean students study about the Chinese market, because South Korea and China are much close to each other. So I wanted to come to China to pursue another degree ... I wanted to learn business policy and trade policy ... And I heard from professors in the US. They recommended this programme. That's why I decided to come here.

The politico-economic status of China provokes their interest in coming to China with the belief that knowledge about China together with experiences in China will be valuable for their future

career. Students from both Asia and Europe have told personal stories about how relations between their nations and China have an impact on their lives, such as the recent construction of inter-continental railways between Cecilia's hometown in northern Italy and Beijing, the capital of China.

Learning in China is closely associated with the opportunities of working in China. High English language proficiency has been considered by student informants as a 'niche' in the burgeoning human resources market in China that aims at absorbing international elites.

Excerpt 5

Researcher: Why do you choose to apply for the EMI programme here?

David: Partially it's because there is less competition. If I graduated and I wanted to get an internship in NYC, I mean, I worked as an intern and it's my home. But there are a lot of people to compete with. And also it was just like, there are more specific opportunities for my field. My interest is East Asian Politics in general or, say, public relations in Shanghai ... And we fit in well with international firms operating here [in China].

Researcher: So they will prefer graduates whose English is very fluent or simply those who are native English speakers?

David: Absolutely. I think they prefer English ability before Chinese ability, 'coz that's what they are more used to, you know. I mean, after that, they want Chinese. The more, the better.

Although Chinese language courses are compulsory, the majority of international student informants said that, while Chinese culture is intriguing and learning the Chinese language is an important way to understand China, their current priority is instead learning English-mediated disciplinary knowledge related to China. Aside from the high demand of time and energy in learning Chinese from scratch, the general lack of commitment to learning Chinese is also related to the prestige of English in China, and the very large of Western expatriate population. In the research methodology course under observation, students were assigned the task of conducting a whole-class group interview on international migration. When the topic was shifted to immigrants' learning of local languages, Emilie said, 'Actually, in China, if you don't know Chinese, you can still find a job with English'. Her view on English as the privileged language in the Chinese job market has been supported by all the other international students in class. In fact, 13 out of the 15 international

students in that course, where six of them are identical with the student interviewees in Table 1, are only acquainted with some basic Chinese to navigate daily routines.

Roman also considered his near-native English language proficiency as a valuable resource to provide him with a fallback job opportunity as an English language teacher in China after graduation.

Excerpt 6

Researcher: Where did you get the impression that English is very much valued in China?

Roman: The fact that you can actually get English teaching classes that cost 2,000 RMB for native speakers. So it's also a good fallback. If you don't get something [a job] on what you're studying, you can fall back to teaching English.

While multicultural adaptability is frequently mentioned as one major benefit of joining international EMI programmes, it is commonly framed by the student informants as the ability of using English as a lingua franca to communicate with people from different countries and cultures. It resonated with the neoliberal ideology of English as the indispensable linguistic capital for international mobility and international career advancement (Piller & Choi, 2013).

Summary and conclusions

The present study takes language ideologies as a theoretical lens to investigate students' perception of international EMI Master's programmes in China. The student informants in the EMI programmes under study predominantly believe that English functions as the natural academic lingua franca and holds promises for career advancement in both local and global contexts. The language ideology is shaped by multi-scalar factors. First, as one of the widespread strategies of higher education internationalization around the world, EMI takes the form of overseas degree programmes, inter-continental joint/double degree programmes, short-term exchanges, as well as English language programmes in English speaking countries (Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2013). Those EMI experiences have already been part of the students' life trajectories prior to their enrollment in the EMI Master's programmes in China, which have helped legitimize the role of English in support of international mobility and academic study by serving as a natural and necessary medium of international communication and learning. Second, recurrent stories told by their friends, classmates and family members played a vital role in naturalizing the positive correlation between English language

proficiency and well-paid job opportunities. Similar to previous studies elsewhere, the ideology of English as the globally valuable language of knowledge and competition has been reinforced by the neoliberal economy in the era of globalization (Holborow, 2015).

In the present case, the English language ideologies have a direct impact on the students' perception of the international EMI Master's programmes in China. Experiences of learning in China have been regarded as valuable cultural capital in the human resources market. Though acknowledging the value of Chinese in the linguistic market, most of the international students in the programme still preferred devoting energy to learning Chinese perspectives and English-mediated knowledge about China. The lack of commitment to learning Chinese is also partly shaped by the institutional mechanism that imposes segregation between CMI and EMI and between international and Chinese students, which is commonly identified by previous research (Bolton & Botha, 2015). The segregation is also replicated in the present case as exemplified by separate dormitory arrangements for international and Chinese postgraduate students. In addition, while students enrolled in the CMI Master's programmes are required to take one or two courses in the EMI Master's programmes, international students cannot take CMI courses even if their Chinese language proficiency enables them to complete required course work in Chinese.

As for practical implications, the present study contributes to existing research on EMI in China by drawing attention to the elite cases of EMI in China and calling for adjustments in EMI policies. By equating higher education internationalization with developing EMI courses and programmes, the elite EMI cases risk entrench the dominance and prestige of English as the language of academia, knowledge and competition and contribute to the development of neoliberal personhood as demanded by the global knowledge economy. Chinese universities could blur boundaries between CMI and EMI programmes and use bi-/multilingual notices when publicizing campus events so as to foster more interaction between local and international students (Li & Ruan, 2015; Zhang, 2017). Critical pedagogy concerning English language ideologies could also be incorporated in internationalizing curricula in order to help students negotiate multiple linguistic repertoires as inherent part of global citizenship and whole person development. Further studies on other EMI cases as well as comparative analysis of CMI and

EMI in China will help enrich the current understanding of EMI in China and other non-native English speaking countries.

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Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview questions

1. Could you briefly account your living and educational experiences before joining the current EMI programme?
2. Why did you choose to apply for the current EMI programme in China?
3. How did you learn and/or improve (academic) English?
4. How do you feel about the English-language instruction here?
5. How do you feel about your interaction with other international/Chinese students in and out of the class?
6. Have you met any challenges in completing coursework in English (e.g., completing reading requirements, doing academic presentation and in-class discussion, group work and writing term papers)? Would you mind to give an example?
7. Are you learning Chinese? Why do you think it is (not) important to learn Chinese?
8. What are the languages you use on a daily basis and for what purposes?
9. Would you choose CMI programmes here if EMI programmes were not available? Why?
10. What is your future plan after graduation?
11. How do you think the EMI programme in China can relate to your future plan?
12. How do you think high proficiency in English/Chinese/other languages can help with your future study/career?