

Language ideology of English-medium instruction in higher education

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A case study from Bangladesh

Introduction

English-medium instruction (EMI) has been perceived as a key strategy through which universities, propelled by academic, political, social and economic motives, respond to the influence of globalisation (Altbach & Knight, 2007). This has been fuelled by the fact that English, defined as the global common language, is needed to create the knowledge base in global tertiary education (Fishman, 2000). In the process, English has become the universal second language of advanced education (Brumfit, 2004), due to the value attached to the language in present times and the advantage of using the language in the existing global language order (Zhang, 2017). These motivations have contributed to the global phenomenon of English being the medium of instruction (MOI), and higher education has been the venue where EMI could be implemented more consistently (Dearden, 2014). This has resulted in the generation of a growing body of work on how universities plan their language policies (Liddicoat, 2016).

In the context of non-native English-speaking countries, internationalisation of higher education has often been initiated and implemented mainly to fulfil the requirements of educational reforms and to restructure education systems to ensure compatibility with the global higher education community (Evans & Morrison, 2017). Clearly, educating local students in this global language is likely to motivate them to pursue higher education and also help them flourish in the job market, both locally and globally (Hu, Li & Lei, 2014; Lee & Lee, 2018; Macaro et al., 2018). This expected



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outcome can happen with the adoption of EMI. It has indeed been adopted widely in non-native English-speaking countries and has also been introduced in the higher education systems of many Asian countries (Rahman, Singh & Karim, 2018), such as Bangladesh (Hamid, Jahan & Islam, 2013), China (Fang, 2018; Song, 2018), Hong Kong (Evans & Morrison, 2017), Malaysia (Ali, 2013), Japan (Rose & McKinley, 2018) and South Korea (Piller & Cho, 2013). Although Asian universities have been adopting EMI, which has been described by researchers such as Macaro (2017) as an unstoppable train in higher education institutes (HEIs) in this region, empirical studies on this topic have been very rare in the Asian context (Hamid, Nguyen & Baldauf, 2013; He & Chiang, 2016; Kim & Tatar, 2018). The bulk of EMI studies on higher education, as suggested by Hu et al. (2014), have been conducted in European contexts. The current study is based in Bangladesh, which is one of the Asian countries where EMI has been implemented, albeit with little documentation (Sultana, 2014).

On account of the current pressure of globalisation and the need to develop a skilled workforce both for local and global requirements, Bangladesh has invested largely in the development of English-language teaching and learning (Rahman & Pandian, 2018). However, it is unfortunate that despite it having one of the largest English-language learning populations, studies pertaining to higher education and EMI have remained unexplored in Bangladesh (Bolton, Graddol & Meierkord, 2011). This is mainly because of the lack of local expertise in English language (Hamid & Erling, 2016) and also due to the poor state of the country's economy, which leads to different priorities as far as conducting research and planning are concerned. Unfortunately, there is no explicit MOI policy available for higher education in Bangladesh. However, results yielded from the study of practices followed across institutions show that English is prevalent in science, technology, engineering and medicine, while Bangla dominates the humanities and social sciences (Hamid, Jahan & Islam, 2013). It is generally expected that a mixture of English and Bangla is used in public universities (Hamid, Jahan & Islam, 2013). On the other hand, in private universities, the MOI policy is different, as they have adopted EMI in their policy. Considering the political influence in public institutions, which is largely negative, the government allowed private universities to flourish (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014). The Private University Act 1992, revised in 2010, encourages

the learning of English at the tertiary level (Rahman, 2015); however, there is no specific directive provided anywhere in the Act regarding EMI. Despite this, private universities have adopted EMI by default in their policy. Presently, there are 103 private universities in operation and, surprisingly, almost all of them describe themselves as an English-medium university.

In language policy theories, as Spolsky (2009) indicates, language ideology determines the choice of language to be spoken in a community (e.g., what is used in private universities in Bangladesh). Language ideology constitutes the deeply held attitudes and assumptions about what has been believed to be an appropriate language choice or practice in a community or a context of communication (Spolsky, 2009). The gamut of 'values or statuses assigned to named languages, varieties, and features' (Spolsky, 2009: 4) is important in this selection. As has been shown, many contemporary assumptions regarding EMI influenced language ideology and resulted in the adoption of EMI in Asian contexts (Rahman et al., 2018). Despite this rapid and almost unplanned Englishisation of private higher education in Bangladesh, there is still a paucity of empirical studies that have focused on analysing the instrumentalisation of language ideology in the adoption of such an EMI policy. The current situation of EMI adoption, as Sultana (2014) also highlighted, warrants further investigation of the institutional and individual language ideologies that were instrumental in the adoption of EMI by these universities. It is also important to reflect on the ideology behind the choice of MOI in private universities, because, as indicated earlier, private institutions might have their own ideology of language, needs and aspirations, which may not be harmonised with the macro language policy engendered by a nation's language ideology.

Against this backdrop, this case study aims to reveal the institutional and individual lecturers' and students' ideologies about English language and the choice of English as the MOI. In the context of higher education in Bangladesh, the findings will provide insights with regard to the adoption of EMI by highlighting the ideological construct of private universities, which has determined the adoption of their English-only language policies.

Research design

Drawing on multiple sources of qualitative data, such as an institutional policy statement and individual interviews, this case study explores EMI as a language policy in the context of a specific

EMI programme in a private university (henceforth referred to as the ‘focal university’). The case study method has been implemented because it can provide ‘an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit’ (Merriam, 1998: 34). According to Creswell and Puth (2017), the case study approach provides an in-depth understanding of any phenomenon, which in the present study has allowed us to obtain insights into institutional policies leading to the EMI innovation in the focal university and also stakeholders’ beliefs about EMI.

Research site

The research site is a mid-sized private university based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. At the time of data collection, it had approximately 8,000 students – pursuing both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in seven departments, four schools and three institutes – and around 700 faculty members. More than 30% of the faculty held PhD degrees from overseas universities. Each EMI course had three contact hours a week. As in other private universities, the focal university had also adopted the EMI policy since its inception. In the EMI courses, English textbooks were used, lectures were delivered in English, and exams were set and conducted in English.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this case study consisted of content analysis of policy documents (statement of programmes’ MOI and rationale of study in English) of the university¹, obtained from its website. Data was also obtained through semi-structured interviews with the participating lecturers and students (Yin, 2015). In order to understand the language ideologies with respect to EMI from a diversified perspective, we collected data, maintaining a maximum variation sample, to explore both diversity and commonality (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In order to comply with this, we collected data from 12 participants, both male and female, sophomores and juniors, and from science (EMIS1, EMIS2, EMIS3 and EMIS4), engineering (EMIS5, EMIS6, EMIS7 and EMIS8) and social sciences (EMIS9–EMIS10, EMIS11 and EMIS12) programmes. We purposefully collected data from six senior faculty members who possess a PhD degree (LEMI1, LEMI2, LEMI3, LEMI4, LEMI5 and LEMI6). Each of them had more than seven years’ experience in their respective fields. In addition, we interviewed one senate member (EMIP1) of the focal university to ascertain a policymaker’s

perception with regard to transforming the university into an English-medium university.

The data analysis procedure described by Creswell and Poth (2017) was put into practice when we undertook data coding and analysis in three phases to develop our themes. In the first phase, website content of the focal university² and interviews were transcribed (word count: 19,589) and scanned repeatedly for recurring categories (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In the second phase, the categories and codes were read carefully. These themes are in line with the inductive approach – codes emerged from and were grounded in the interview transcripts. Alternatively, the deductive approach was used to develop key themes in response to the objectives of the study (prominent ideological or belief statement regarding English as MOI). This resulted in three themes corresponding to EMI teachers and students. This repetitive reading, categorising and coding of data resulted in the emergence of three broad themes. Similar views among teachers and students emerged in each of three major themes. In the reporting of findings, the united beliefs and ideologies among all stakeholders could be reported under each of the themes. No parallel differences emerged or were reported in the interview and content analysis.

Findings

English and internationalisation of higher education

Internationalisation appeared recurrently as a buzzword and it was clear in the policy documents and interviews. The collected internet-based documents suggest that, in the focal university, the use of the English language is mandatory, and the MOI and assessment of all the academic programmes are done in English. The university’s website is also presented in English. The university has adopted an EMI policy bearing the notion of internationalisation in mind and also to produce graduates who would gain proficiency in communicating in English on the global platform. This is evident in the policy statement, which states: ‘English medium instruction is a need for this century to develop human capital and internationally competitive graduates.’ In line with the institutional goal, the English-only policy is clearly articulated in the programmes’ philosophy statements. For example, the Master of Science Programme, which is an EMI programme, aims to train science graduates who can adapt to the global advancements in science and technology where use of

English is almost unavoidable. The statement on the university website³ is as follows:

With rich faculty members and resources, we offer an internationally recognized program . . . The medium of instruction of the program is English that prepares our graduates to work in enterprises requiring extensive English use, and provide opportunity for their further studies internationally.

The interview with the policymaker, who is a member of the academic council, corroborated this view. EMIP1 asserted that: ‘English is a passport to a global world. At [focal university], we care about the quality of our graduates, not only quantity’. The quality of education in English and internationalisation have apparently acquired notable support from both lecturers and students. Three of the lecturers (LEMI2, LEMI4 and LEMI6) and five of the students (EMIS1, EMIS3, EMIS4, EMIS6 and EMIS7) explicitly reinforced the important roles of English and EMI in their individual pursuits for the future and in meeting global demand for institutional internationalisation. According to one professor (LEMI4), EMI is a positive strategic policy to train graduates to meet the demands of economic globalisation and to build a workforce that can work effectively – both locally and internationally. A student (EMIS1) asserted how he and his parents were attracted by the features of the university’s EMI science programme as well as its recent internationalisation policy that allows students to transfer credits in universities abroad, which encouraged him to eventually enrol in the university.

Economic benefits of learning English

Another important factor that leads to the adoption of an EMI policy in the universities, and in the society as a whole, as pointed out by the participants, is the benefits that come with competence in English. Five students (EMIS1, EMIS2, EMIS3, EMIS7 and EMIS10) and two lecturers (LEMI3 and LEMI5) believed that English is a booster for one’s career path. One lecturer from a science discipline (LEMI3) asserted:

If you compared our programmes with the Bangla-medium public universities [Bangla is the native tongue], our students are better equipped with English language, which is very important for skilled jobs and going abroad for further education.

Likewise, a student (EMIS7) observed:

English is immensely important for the job market. For example, in the workplace, business graduates

like us need to do business communication both in written and oral forms. Surely, our courses allow us to be more competent for the job.

These views, which are in sync with and echo the policymakers’ views about teaching in higher education, largely depend on the success and failure of students following their graduation. EMIP1 believed: ‘We initiated EMI since it will help our students to be proficient in English, and English will provide an extra edge to the students in their job competition.’

English as the language of the academy

Another factor that influenced the ideological belief in EMI among the students and the lecturers is that English is the most commonly used international language of their subjects and that of the textbooks, articles and teaching materials they use. LEMI2 asserted:

Look, EMI is reality, you cannot isolate it. The language of higher education is English, meaning that you have to read English texts in sciences, and you have to write in English if you want to be a part of the global scientific scholarship.

Another lecturer from engineering, LEMI6, spoke about the benefits of using English in the classroom:

Since the examples I bring to my students from scientific papers and textbooks are in English, it is easy for me to use English for communication rather than first translate it into Bangla and then explain.

EMIS4 asserted his future plan to become a scientist. According to him: ‘The language of international publication is English; though you would find a few academic journals that accept non-English publication, they are certainly not in Bangla.’

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the contents of the focal university’s policy documents and website as well as the interviews with both faculty members and students reveals that English is the language of choice and also the MOI. No differences emerged between the lecturers’ and students’ perspectives in terms of their language ideology regarding English being beneficial for higher education. Furthermore, the views of students and lecturers perfectly echoed those of the policymaker and the policy documents in terms of having a belief in EMI and the ideology regarding the use of English, the internationalisation

of higher education, and the economic benefits attached to the English language. No explicit views emerged from the policy document analysis on the role of English as an academic lingua franca influencing language ideology and EMI adaptation. However, it came to be a salient language-related ideology among EMI students and lecturers, appearing in the interview data as an additional theme of the study.

This is an ideal example showing how a positive English language ideology, both in institutional and individual level, converge on the deep-seated belief that English proficiency would be beneficial to the university in general, and to students and lecturers at the individual level. The findings of the present study are congruent with the growing amount of EMI literature on higher education in non-English-speaking countries (see Botha, 2015; Bradford, 2016; Costa & Coleman, 2013; Evans & Morrison, 2017; Hu & Lei, 2014; Islam, 2013), which highlights the belief that English will bring unquestionable benefits locally and open up opportunities globally. Spolsky's (2009) language ideology constitutes the deeply held attitudes and assumptions about what has been believed to be an appropriate language choice. From the findings, it is evident that the rhetoric of English as a language and MOI that brings development, internationalisation and economic benefits, and as the preferred language of academia, constitute the popular language belief of the focal university, both at the institutional and individual levels. These assumed benefits attached to English have also been the rationale behind adopting EMI and providing motivation to adopt new language practices. However, such a narrative of the economic benefit of learning English or using English as MOI has not been proved empirically (see Kirkpatrick, 2014; Macaro et al., 2018); rather, such ideology has been criticised widely due to its vicious utility in the creation of economic divisions (Rahman et al., 2018). Thus, Lo Bianco (2010) has argued in favour of the importance of keeping to one side the national, strategic and economic goals, and considering the humanistic aspects of language utility.

The findings of the study are also congruent with previous studies conducted in the context of Bangladesh where English has been perceived as needed in academia due to the benefits that proficiency in English brings, uniquely, in helping equip students with the skills needed to be successful in a context of internationalisation (Islam, 2013). Such adoption based on the rhetoric of internationalisation has been criticised widely in the literature, since it resonates with the neoliberal

ideology of English as indispensable linguistic capital for international mobility and international career advancement (Piller & Cho, 2013). Such use of English has also been perceived as a power symbol in many developing countries due to its use in the domains of power, thereby making the knowledge of English a crucial indicator of social class and people considering it superior to other languages (Haidar, 2018). This phenomenon explains the use of English as a weapon of linguistic imperialism in education through social and individual ideologies that establish a linguistic hierarchy by glorifying English as the dominant language in the context (Philipson, 1992). In a similar vein, in the context of Bangladesh, Hamid and Baldauf (2014) have discussed how such an ideology related to English has materialised as linguistic capital in the educational sector in Bangladesh.

The current study has explored the united language ideology that stakeholders hold, at both the institutional and individual levels, which is instrumental in EMI adoption in the focal private university. Furthermore, Hamid and Baldauf (2014) have pointed out that this is not usual in a country like Bangladesh where historically the mother tongue Bangla is the basis of nationalism and the monolingual entity of Bangla is evident in all the domains in society. Moreover, in higher education, Bangla has a greater and parallel stronghold in public universities in the country. In contrast, this study has highlighted a prevailing contemporary English-focused ideology of language choice in the focal private university when it comes to selecting a MOI globally.

In the present case study, language ideologies such as the role of English in the internationalisation of higher education, associated economic benefits of English in today's world and the reality of English as an academic lingua franca have a direct influence on the perceptions of policymakers, lecturers and students towards the EMI programmes of the focal university. Such EMI policy adoption based on the beliefs and ideology associated with English resulted in it becoming a symbol of linguistic capital in the private higher education sector in Bangladesh. Furthermore, EMI is likely to divide the nation based largely on language in the future since a parallel situation regarding a language symbolising distinct values and ideology is found in public universities.

Notes

1 To comply with the ethical considerations of the study with regard to safeguarding the focal university's

anonymity, reference links are not provided for quotations from its policy documents.

2 To maintain the anonymity of the university, the weblink is not provided.

3 To maintain the anonymity of the university, the weblink is not provided.

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