

South Korean higher education English-medium instruction (EMI) policy

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From ‘resentment’ to ‘remedy’

Introduction

In the past two decades, South Korean universities’ ‘top-down’ implementation of English-medium instruction (EMI) policy has been critiqued for inadequately addressing the linguistic challenges students and instructors face (Kim, 2017). Research suggests that rapid implementation of such policy is primarily motivated by the pursuit of internationalisation, where global ranking takes precedence over the appropriateness of the policy (D. W. Cho, 2012) resulting in issues of injustices (Williams & Stelma, 2022). As a result, of these injustices, taking EMI courses is not a popular choice amongst South Korean higher education students.

Drawing upon reports of university students’ perceptions of EMI in South Korea as described in both academic studies (e.g. Hwang, 2013; Kim, 2017; Jon, Cho & Byun, 2020) and newspaper articles, written in Korean or English (e.g. Kang, 2014; Park, 2018; Nam & Kwak, 2019), this article provides an overview of how South Korean EMI policy leads to injustices for both national and international students and instructors who may not be first-language English speakers. Recommendations are made for a more overt practical shift, calling for a socially just multilingual policy which will help to address the current injustices and move towards creating an appropriate policy for South Korean EMI.

The current ‘resentment’ of EMI policy

EMI in South Korea is a product of international economic liberation where English is considered

pivotal for international and individual development. This consideration is to the extent that South Korea’s drive for globalisation has been viewed as an ‘English language fever’ (Park, 2009) evidenced by the fact that a decade ago it was reported that South Koreans spent approximately 15 trillion won (US\$ 15.8 billion) on English private education annually (Jeon, 2012). Nevertheless, recent changes to the English component of the CSAT exam (College Scholastic Ability Test, known in Korean as *수능 Suneung*) have been made, in part, to reduce this financial burden. The changes now mean that the English component of the CSAT is graded absolutely instead of relatively meaning that a student’s English score is no longer a key determining factor in their university entrance. However, as a result of this change students are entering universities with lower English proficiencies (Shin, 2018) while having to take some EMI classes to graduate.



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As EMI proliferated in the initial phase of its introduction, a lack of adequate support for the linguistic needs of students and content instructors meant that the challenges were becoming more widespread (Williams, 2015). In 2010, EMI courses averaged 30% at the top ten universities in South Korea (M. J. Kim, 2011), but within a decade this had declined to 20% (Nam & Kwak, 2019) indicating that ‘the reality of EMI [had fallen] short of the imagined goal’ (Kang, 2018). The average decrease in the amount of EMI courses offered by leading South Korean Universities suggest the courses have become less popular. Part of the reason for this sentiment lies in a normative assumption that English should be the language of instruction throughout, and therefore the decrease in popularity may be a consequence of the inadequate support in the policy to cater to stakeholders’ linguistic needs. The decrease may also result from two other factors. First, from 2010 universities that secured a threshold percentage of EMI courses received a full score to secure government funding (Kang, 2018); whereas, prior to this change, funding was determined by the specific percentage of EMI courses offered by each university. Secondly, from 2014 the proportion of EMI courses being offered by universities was excluded from university evaluations conducted by a private newspaper company (Jon et al., 2020). In spite of the decrease, linguistic challenges prevail because the initial unilateral implementation of EMI policy was driven by ‘nonlinguistic motivations’ (Kang, 2018: 35) – i.e. the pursuit of internationalisation - which failed to account for the linguistic support stakeholders require.

Students’ perceptions of injustices

The current ‘resentment’ of EMI policy is further evidenced by students’ perceptions of resulting injustices. As a result of rapid EMI policy implementation, South Korean students, taking EMI courses, believe they are unprepared because of their insufficient English proficiency (Lee & Lee, 2018). To add to this, students are anxious because South Korean universities have neglected the students’ readiness for EMI (Byun et al., 2011). Their anxiety contributes to EMI course avoidance (Chun et al., 2017). According to Hwang’s (2013) survey results, students believe that their lack of English proficiency influences their preference for KMI (Korean-medium instruction) instead of EMI courses (see also Joe & Lee, 2012). Because of their lack of proficiency, students struggle to participate in discussions, write papers, and present

in the English language (Hong, Min & Ham, 2008). Students who perceive themselves as being of low social status also experience stress in EMI class situations (Kang & Cho, 2020).

Students believe they have been forced into taking EMI courses in order to graduate (Cho & Palmer, 2013). For instance, in 2015, Korea University undergraduate students had to take five to ten EMI courses to graduate, and in Seoul National University they had to take one to seven. In both universities, the number of courses varied according to students’ majors (Chang, Kim & Lee, 2015). Some other leading prestigious universities, noticeably science and engineering institutions, have taken EMI implementation to great lengths. In 2007, Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) introduced an institutional reform requiring all undergraduate courses to be taught in the English medium. This meant, in a four-year period (2006-2010), EMI classes shot up by 300%, jumping from 23.5% to 92.9% (Kim, Kweon & Kim, 2017). This reform has also been blamed for contributing to four student suicides at the University which led to some professors at KAIST boycotting the all-out EMI policy (Sharma, 2011). Currently, KAIST offers close to 85% of EMI courses (Shin, 2018); however, Yoon (2014) reports that some professors, of courses advertised as being taught in the English medium on the syllabi, teach in the Korean medium throughout the course. Thus, some international students experience an injustice of having been misled into registering for courses which they thought would be EMI-taught.

Students also believe that their proficiency negatively affects their access to the subject content. For instance, Park (2006) found that EMI students who lack English proficiency struggle to achieve academically. This struggle was confirmed in another survey study where approximately 30% of students comprehended more than 80% of EMI (Lee & Hong, 2015). D. W. Cho (2012) reports a similar picture as the level of students’ general understanding of EMI stood at approximately 70%. This study further reported that courses given in English improved neither the students’ English proficiency nor their confidence to take EMI courses. Because of this, 67% of graduate students and 60% of undergraduate students expressed negative opinions about the possibility of expanding EMI courses. In comparing EMI and KMI courses at a leading engineering university, Kim and Yoon (2018) discovered that 44% of surveyed respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the EMI classes. The reasons for their dissatisfaction

included low scholastic achievement (32.2%), instructors' lack of English proficiency (25.8%), and students' lack of proficiency (21.5%). The above indicates that for students, communication and comprehension issues prevail in current EMI courses. Moreover, these issues negatively affect students' acquisition of the subject content (Byun et al., 2011; K. R. Kim, 2011) which results in injustice.

Students' perceptions of using the Korean language

To help cope with the challenges of having to teach and learn in the English language it has been widely reported that the Korean language is viewed in South Korean EMI situations as a valuable 'learning tool'. Kang (2014) discovered that, if given a choice, 64.5% of surveyed students would prefer Korean over English medium instruction (see also Kim et al., 2017). Joe and Lee (2012) suggest a reason for this preference is that the Korean language reduces students' anxiety and creates a congenial atmosphere than when students are faced with having content delivered in English. Moreover, in a survey of over 500 students conducted at three engineering universities, Kim et al. (2017) discovered that over 90% of students perceive that L1 should be used to facilitate learning. For instance, students perceived that it should be used for students to ask questions and for instructors to explain difficult materials, or to provide summaries at the end of a class. Byun et al.'s (2011) study also reports a call by students for Korean usage in the EMI classroom; over 1,200 (25%) of the students surveyed wanted Korean to be used. Specifically, they wanted it to be used as some students struggled to fully comprehend courses taught solely in English. Moreover, the Korean language does appear to be openly used in EMI classes. Based on a survey conducted with approximately 2000 students, Lee and Hong (2015) discovered that in approximately 60% of taught EMI courses content instructors used Korean to help with proficiency issues. This sample may reflect the standard practice of the wider population.

Research indicates that students perceive delivering content knowledge in English to be a challenge for Korean-first-language, and other English-non-first-language, EMI instructors. It appears that the use of the first language (i.e. Korean) to deliver content is commonly used to overcome this challenge by instructors proficient in the language. A lack of English proficiency to

deliver content contributes to the challenges that students face. For instance, in Kwon's (2015) study, one student referred to his professor's English use as 'unrecognisable and somewhat ambiguous at times', while another said, '... if I had taken this course in Korean, I could have learned more with the professor's full explanation in Korean' (p. 32). D. W. Cho's (2012) study almost mirrors this finding. A chemical engineering student interviewed opined, 'Professors in their fifties aren't usually fluent enough to deliver their lectures in English effectively. Their English sounds like Korean-style English' (p. 156). To add to this, a respondent in Kim and Yoon's (2018) study believes 'The lack of English proficiency on both the students' and professors' parts create[s] serious communication problems in class' (p. 190).

Even though the Korean language is viewed as a valuable learning tool, it does have its limitations. Another injustice concerns the fact that in EMI classes the Korean language is being further marginalised. Williams & Stelma (2022) discovered that when students are accessing the subject content from printed materials (i.e. textbooks) and engaging with specialist terminology, the English language is valued more. This is because students believe that accessing content through English text and terminology is more efficient as there are awkward translation and limited information when the original English versions are translated into Korean. The injustice described here is a colonial legacy resulting from the English language dominating the publishing industry. This injustice will likely increase in the future if there is a reduction in publishing in the Korean language. Moreover, in future EMI classes, placing more value on English to access content from textbooks and to engage with specialist terminology implies a continued reliance on the English language system and a gradual loss of the Korean language for constructing new knowledge and conceptualisations. All this points to a linguistic injustice as students and instructors will be relying on 'linguistic resources that are sub-optimal for understanding the subject content and their own experience' (Williams & Stelma, 2022: 466).

A 'remedy' to the injustices

In South Korean higher education the haphazard pursuit of internationalisation has imposed an inappropriate, poorly executed policy where hegemonic normative assumptions have resulted in prevailing injustices. To counteract and prevent further escalation of these injustices necessitates a

'remedy'. Moving forward in this vein, an 'intra'nationalised dynamic needs to be accounted for in future policy. An 'intra'nationalised dynamic will involve a reflection on the realities of what happens/has been happening *within* the context where EMI is situated. Globally, linguistic challenges of both students and instructors exist in different EMI contextualised systems. Therefore, a social context of a classroom needs to be fully understood so that classroom methodologies can be 'appropriate for different situations' (Holliday, 1994: 9).

A pragmatic first step to maximise the teaching practices of instructors and the learning potentials of students would be to conduct an extensive needs analysis of the specific situation of their EMI context (see also Galloway et al., 2020 for further discussion). The needs analysis should focus on investigating the teaching and learning outcomes of EMI, linguistic proficiency challenges, teaching methodology challenges, cultural influences, disciplinary differences, and the necessary contextualised institutional support systems needed for both teachers and students. Moreover, the needs analysis should investigate the language preferences of teachers and students in different situations and then based on this investigation determine what aspects of curriculum materials, instruction and assessment should be done in each language. Reports in this study suggest L1 is being used on an *ad hoc* basis in current South Korean EMI teaching practices; in spite of this, there are no specific policy guidelines on multilingual EMI approaches. The outcomes of a needs analysis will help determine more overt multilingual directions for South Korean policies to take.

The outcomes of the needs analysis will take time to come into effect. In the interim, Korean-first-language EMI instructors of low English proficiency need to clearly state on their syllabi how, and for what purposes, both the English and the Korean languages will be used during their EMI courses. The multilingual aspects of course curriculums should also be communicated clearly on syllabi when all students (i.e. national and international) are registering for courses as this will help make the languages of the curriculums less 'hidden'. Students need to have clear awareness from the outset as to: which lectures, or parts of lectures, will be delivered in the English/Korean medium; how the instructor intends to use English/Korean during the course; how students are expected to use English during the course; and what medium will be used for the exams. From the moment of registering for an EMI course, students should have full transparency of the linguistic challenges they are likely to face.

This article implies that international students who come to study in South Korea may need proficiency in the Korean language to take EMI courses. This study has discovered that both the English and Korean languages are used in some South Korean EMI courses taught by Korean first-language instructors. Given the prevailing linguistic issues and continuous lack of support, this multilingual dynamic will continue to be in effect. Thus, international students' survival of such courses may depend upon them having a sufficient level of Korean proficiency. Language inequality (Shohamy, 2013) seems to prevail in current South Korean EMI policy, and some international students will face this inequality when instruction is in Korean in the EMI class (e.g. see Park, 2018). In contrast, some South Korean students will face inequality if Korean is being strictly excluded from EMI. To address this inequality, as stated above, transparency on course syllabi may enable students to be aware of and assess the potential linguistic challenges they are likely to face on EMI courses.

Moreover, it may well be the case that a high proportion of international students who come to South Korea would prefer to have classes offered in Korean rather than in the English medium as a number of them have chosen to study in South Korea to improve their Korean language proficiency (J. H. Cho, 2012). According to the language learning app, Duolingo, Korean was the seventh-most popular language to study on the app and was the second fastest-growing language in the world in 2020 (Kim, 2021). The Korean culture and language has received growing attention in recent years thanks to the Korean Wave (or *한류 hallyu* to give it its Korean name). Therefore, this growth in popularity may also coincide with international students' motive to learn Korean which implies that the Korean language should not be marginalised on account of EMI policy. The reports in this article suggest that there is a call for it to have more of an overt presence in future EMI policy. What is also evidenced by this article is that focusing solely on the English language should not compromise students' access to a quality of education or their learning experiences.

Conclusion

To summarise, it appears that South Korean universities, in their pursuit of internationalisation, have focused on providing a quantity of EMI courses by overlooking the quality of EMI instruction. As a result, some students and instructors

are significantly limited in EMI courses because their language proficiency challenges are being overlooked. It is important for future policy makers to realise that both the Korean and English languages are used for different purposes in different situations in EMI courses. World-wide, to fully understand the EMI situation at a University, an extensive needs analysis is the first step. The outcomes will help policy makers of EMI settings world-wide come to a better understanding of how L1 and L2 are a present dynamic in teaching and learning and that a move towards contextualised models of 'intra'nationalisation is also a move towards a socially just multilingual future. In other words, in their respective contexts policy makers need to give more consideration to the question of, 'How English should English-medium instruction be?'

By focusing on reports of students' perceptions of injustices in their EMI experiences, this study has identified that the students' linguistic challenges are context-bound. The outcomes of this study recommends a move towards a more overt multilingual policy and that future South Korean EMI policy needs to be decided pragmatically on a case-by-case basis by taking the situated University context into account. This shift will involve accounting for the demands that teaching in English has on faculty members and the diverse linguistic needs students have on South Korean EMI courses as evidenced by this study. In a move towards a multilingual policy, future research should focus on how L1 can have a presence in the EMI class when the content instructors lack proficiency in it.

In terms of the injustices described in this article, if South Korean policy makers are not prepared to make room for students and instructors to be a part of critically reflecting on current EMI practices, the injustices described in this article will continue to happen again, unabatedly.

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