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## **The scramble for EMI: Lessons from postcolonial ‘old EMI’ universities**

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While more and more universities in traditionally non-Anglophone countries are moving towards English medium instruction (EMI), those of the nominally Anglophone postcolonial world are carrying on with business as usual. Higher education in many postcolonial countries has typically only ever been available through the language of the former colonisers, so many institutions in former British colonies now find themselves ahead of the global trend. This paper considers what lessons can be learnt from postcolonial ‘old EMI’ universities, as we see more and more institutions swept up in the scramble for EMI. Universities looking to join the neo-Anglophone higher education sector would do well to learn from the decades of experience of many postcolonial universities who are still struggling to create the ideal learning and teaching environments for their students and staff through an L2 medium of instruction, and who may now be wondering why others are choosing to follow suit.

### **Introduction**

Higher education in many postcolonial countries has typically only ever been available through the language of the former colonisers – English for those in former British colonies. While the numbers of students reaching higher education in the pre-Independence era remained low, and while colonial school systems were geared towards producing a small elite who would occupy the few available places, the language situation remained tolerable. University education was a new and exciting development, and there was probably nothing specific to the medium of instruction that stood out amongst the very many challenges involved in expanding to tertiary level. However, the rapid expansion of post-Independence

schooling meant that postcolonial universities soon started to grapple with increasing numbers of students who were insufficiently prepared for English-medium tertiary studies (Crocombe and Meleisea 1988, Deverell 1989, Fitzcharles 1983, Galabawa and Senkoro 2010, Hopson 2005).

The rest of the world appears now to have arrived at a similar point from two very different directions. Universities in the Anglophone Centre, who have rarely seen the need to question English as the default language for all, have had to come to terms with an increasingly diverse student body that doesn't fit the mould for which their tertiary system was envisaged. These universities are starting to recognise that academic literacy support is needed by the majority, rather than only by minority groups in the home population and international students arriving from other countries (Wingate 2016, Preece and Godfrey 2004). Meanwhile, a rapidly expanding group of universities has shifted relatively recently to the use of English as their medium of instruction, in full recognition of the fact that this is not the dominant language of the majority of students and staff. These 'new EMI' universities, well aware of the neoliberal forces that have promoted this scramble for EMI, have been forced to confront the challenges of learning and teaching through a second language more abruptly than universities in either the old EMI sphere or the Anglophone Centre.

The experience at postcolonial old EMI universities falls somewhere between these two scenarios. These universities have become accustomed to English as the only available option, rather than a neoliberal choice (Bamgbose 2003), and there has been no sudden diversification of the student body. They have long been trapped in the unchallenged logic of English as the default language of higher education. But they have also had a very long time to recognise the struggles that students and staff face when using a second language as the medium of instruction; to grapple with questions of entry testing, post-entry academic literacy support, and definitions of 'quality'; and to question the whole logic of EMI. Given the notable absence of attention paid to this wealth of experience in publications that set out to evaluate the global phenomenon of EMI (Dearden 2014, Dang, Bonar, and Yao 2021, Carrió-Pastor 2020, Doiz and Lasagabaster 2013, Bradford 2013, Coleman 2006, Dimova, Hultgren, and Jensen 2015), this paper considers what universities in the new EMI sphere can learn from the experience of old EMI universities.

### **EMI in the service of English proficiency?**

The first lesson that those scrambling for EMI can learn from those who have used such a system for several decades is that teaching through the medium of English does not automatically lead to high levels of English proficiency. Macaro et al's (2018) critical review of 83 studies that have investigated the effectiveness of EMI starts from the premise that EMI "should demonstrate some improvement in English language learning and, AT THE VERY LEAST, present no long-term cost to academic content learning" (p.38, emphasis original). If second language learning is indeed what is intended by those currently embarking on EMI, then we need a reality check about what it would mean to turn a university curriculum into an opportunity to teach English through a content-based approach. In their review, Macaro et al found only seven empirical studies from new EMI contexts that attempted to gauge the impact on English proficiency of an EMI university programme, but concluded that these studies showed either a negligible or an inconclusive result. Another study from China that was not included in the review (Lei and Hu 2014) also found that EMI had no statistically significant impact on English proficiency. While we might argue that new EMI universities haven't taken enough interest in researching the impact of EMI on English proficiency, we do have plenty of evidence that many postcolonial Anglophone universities that have been operating through an EMI model for decades also lament the levels of English proficiency amongst their graduates (Weideman and Van Rensburg 2002, Deverell 1989, Kumawat and Tiwari 2020, Bitrus-Ojiambo, Wayumba Mwaura, and Lutivini Majanja 2017, Maharaj 2016, Hopson 2005). Whatever other conditions might account for this situation in postcolonial contexts, it is clear that there is more to learning English than EMI.

The lack of understanding that learning English and learning *through* English are different, reported by recent papers from new EMI contexts (e.g. Chapple 2015), is an issue that has long plagued postcolonial education systems (Makalela 2009, DeGraff 2019). Educationists writing from and about the Global South have long pointed out that school systems that attempt to replicate immersion models of education without putting in place the necessary conditions that support language learning actually end up with *submersion* models (Chimbutane 2011, Heugh 2011, Lotherington 1998, Shameem 2007) that have consistently been demonstrated to serve learners poorly. Submerging children in a language and hoping for the best is not language pedagogy. It is pragmatism propelled by wishful thinking. The most effective models of education in postcolonial contexts have been shown to be those in which the 'target' language such as English is taught as a separate language subject, following principles of second language learning, while more familiar languages are used as

the medium of instruction across the majority of the curriculum (Brock-Utne et al. 2010, Hartshorne 1992, Heugh 2011, Heugh et al. 2012, Malherbe 1943, Prah and Brock-Utne 2009, Afolayan 1976, Walter and Dekker 2011). What these studies have shown is that language learning must be planned and supported. Their dates of publication reveal that this is hardly new knowledge.

Indeed, scholars from the Global North also pointed out in the 1970s that there was a fundamental difference between the “carefully planned immersion experiences” that were emerging at the time in Canada and the more ad hoc attempts to integrate new arrivals from other countries into the mainstream US school system in a manner that was really just submersion into English (Cohen and Swain 1976, 47). It can be argued that students entering higher education in new EMI contexts will not be being submerged in a completely unfamiliar language like this, but the point still stands that there is vast difference between a pedagogically sound programme that is designed with language learning in mind and the intention to simply start teaching through a new language in the hope that students pick it up through exposure.

Just as colonial school systems were based on imported models of education without sufficient attention paid to replicating the conditions under which those models were assumed to operate, are we now seeing new EMI universities attempting to import a content-based model of language learning, but actually failing to provide the language learning part of the package? A content-based model of curriculum instruction that is provided in a second language, without any attention to the learning of that language, is really just submersion for adults. There is no logical reason why submersion would produce good language learning outcomes in new EMI university contexts, any more than it has been shown to work in other contexts.

If there really is an intention to use EMI as part of a language learning endeavour, then some serious thought needs to be put into curriculum redesign, teacher training, and assessment. English language development will need to stretch far beyond the type of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support that is usually considered to aid the transition *into the university*, to foster ongoing development towards a graduate-ready language profile at the point of *exit from the university*. University administrators must realise that resourcing such a fundamental redesign will require serious investment, and search committees must change the requirements they look for when hiring new faculty. The decades of scholarship from the

field of Second Language Acquisition also needs to be considered, particularly research on content-based approaches to language learning. Universities pride themselves on taking empirical research seriously, but there has been a surprising lack of institutional attention paid to the established, evidence-based principles of language learning when deciding to change medium-of-instruction policy. Old EMI universities do not necessarily serve as good role models here, as they may also be guilty of doggedly pursuing the same hope-for-the-best approach, while lamenting falling standards of English proficiency. However, they do at least provide reminders that EMI does not, by itself, provide the right conditions for English language learning.

### **Is English simply the key that unlocks the EMI curriculum?**

The second lesson that Old EMI institutions have to offer is that teaching through the medium of a second language presents serious challenges for active engagement in learning and scholarship. The assumption seems to be that, provided students and staff have high enough levels of English proficiency, they will be able to access a translated version of the whole tertiary experience and carry on as before. Once again, there seems to have been a bizarre innocence or naivety about what was likely to happen when universities joined the scramble for EMI, as we see reflections such as this from the front matter of a recent edited collections on the challenges faced:

Institute-wide EMI implementation has often been imposed by top-down decisions, in combination with the optimistic view that the horse should always be placed before the cart. However, emerging evidence suggests that the delivery of such programs to NNES students has led to new pedagogical challenges and learning problems that go beyond the scope of language learning and teaching and deserve immediate attention. (Su et al, 2021)

Again, the Global South can provide a wealth of evidence of the impacts of teaching through an unfamiliar language on learners' ability to understand what they are learning (Makalela 2009, Galabawa and Senkoro 2010, Heugh et al. 2012, Heugh 2011, Desai 2016, Mohanty 2006, Brock-Utne 2010); the teacher-centred practices that inevitably arise out of this situation (Alidou and Brock-Utne 2011, Arthur and Martin 2006, Bunyi 2005); the interactional practices of "safe-talk" that are used to cover up the discomfort and ensure that learning is seen and felt to be proceeding (Martin 2005, Hornberger and Chick 2001, Chick 1996, Arthur 1996, Chimbutane 2011, Rubagumya 2003, Ndayipfukamiye 2001, Bunyi 2001,

Fitriati 2016); the psychological effects of frustration and alienation in the classroom (Prah 2005, Tsui 1996); and the sociological division between those who do and do not feel comfortable using the medium of instruction (Mohanty 2006, Bamgbose 2003, Kamwangamalu 2007, Bisong 1995, Bhattacharya 2013). The literature also shows how teachers' own limited language proficiency may exacerbate these challenges (Alidou and Brock-Utne 2011, Probyn 2001). Much of the research in postcolonial contexts has focused on primary and secondary education, but there is evidence that the same issues arise at tertiary level too, when students and faculty are expected to interact and learn in a language with which they are not sufficiently comfortable (Galabawa and Senkoro 2010, Sultana 2014, Evans and Morrison 2011, Hamid, Jahan, and Islam 2013).

The assumption on which EMI is based is that students and staff at university have sufficient proficiency in English to use this language as a tool for learning across the curriculum. However, it is clear that tertiary students in many new and old EMI institutions do not come close to being comfortable in the language in which they are expected to learn, and there is clearly concern that many teaching staff are in the same boat. What kind of graduates are produced by a system in which students are kept just a little bit quieter than they might be if speaking in a more familiar language? What level of critical engagement are we expecting in this environment, and to what extent can we expect new knowledge to be created and contested? Calls to move beyond transmission models of learning within higher education are immediately undermined by a decision to make it harder to engender interaction between teachers and learners, between learners and learners, and between learners and texts. While university students may not be locked out of their learning in quite the same way as young children entering the primary classroom for the first time, it is logical that many of the same characteristics of silent or teacher-centred classrooms will ensue, and it is self-evident that students who struggle to understand or participate will experience negative associations with education.

The tendency has been to pour resources into the support structures placed around the system, to help students make the transition to tertiary level. These support structures may include entry testing, remedial English classes or foundation years, compulsory or optional EAP provision, ad hoc workshops and drop-in support, and a variety of academic literacy approaches embedded into the mainstream curriculum. They may also include adaptations to the mainstream teaching style, for example through codeswitching or translanguaging, the provision of multimodal materials, or explicit scaffolding for assessments. These support

structures are invaluable and may often be done extremely well, and yet there is an odd balance of resourcing when so much effort goes into propping up a pedagogical system that isn't necessarily appropriate. All the focus is on preparing students to cope, or ideally do well, in an environment that hasn't been designed with the realities of learning in mind.

Once again, many old EMI universities do not have good track records of dealing with these challenges either. We have fewer resources to support our EMI systems, and we often struggle to conceptualise what might be involved in a change to the status quo, particularly as any attempt to question EMI is considered to buck against the global trend towards English. But, once again, the decades of experience with EMI should show others that there is rather more to learning through a second language than administrators are typically willing to engage with, and those rushing to embrace EMI should approach the situation with more realism. Macaro et al (2018) note that the majority of EMI research appears to have focused on perceptions of the value of EMI, rather than its practicalities, and it is likely that the focus of institutional attention has been similar.

### **Why the scramble for an EMI that others are so desperate to decolonise?**

The third lesson that new EMI contexts should reflect on follows directly from the second. Instead of trying to paper over the cracks of an EMI system through student learning support structures, scholars at old EMI institutions have called for a far more radical overhaul - or outright rejection - of the system itself. Stroud and Kerfoot (2013, 5) explain that “a transformative epistemology of multilingualism for HE is one in which all available languages and semiotic resources are used and promoted in pursuit of learning and which encourages a questioning of monodiscursive, monolingual norms in education”, in which we “engage with core issues around language in (academic) transformation, namely what roles language/multilingualism can play in changing structures of academic privilege, and what models and sets of strategies exist – or need to be developed – that can make this goal possible.” (ibid., 16). This is a much bigger set of questions than those we ask around the edges of an EMI system about how to ensure that students have good enough English to cope. But these are issues of social justice, given “the dangers of reproducing inequalities through the hegemony of English” (Mayaba, Monwabisi, and Angu 2018, 3). Language has always been intrinsically tied up with academic privilege and disadvantage, and the view that EMI can level the playing field by converging on the only common international language is a dangerous myth that elite universities may be happy to perpetuate.

Old EMI institutions demonstrate that English is not just a neutral tool for learning, and thus the “hubris of the zero point” (Pennycook 2019, 174, following Mignolo 2009) at which English is considered separable from its cultural and political past needs to be challenged. Pennycook (2019, 181) makes the case that everyone involved in teaching English needs to “consider how all that we do in the name of English teaching is ineluctably connected to power and politics, coloniality, and modernity”, and to “unsettle the role that English plays in the world, [bringing] translanguaging as a broad cultural practice fully into the center of our educational practice”. However, as DeGraff (2019, xii) points out in his preface to Macedo’s (2019) ‘Decolonizing Foreign Language Education: The Misteaching of English and Other Colonial Languages’ (in which Pennycook’s chapter is published), while “coloniality in the teaching of foreign languages” is indeed a problem requiring radical action, “decolonization is even more urgent when the *medium* of Education is a foreign language that disenfranchises most of the population” (emphasis original). The question is why new EMI institutions think they can create conditions for the educational use of English across their curricula that will not cause the same disenfranchisement. The confusing aspect of wholesale EMI adoption in traditionally non-Anglophone contexts (old or new) is that it is the majority rather than any minority that is ostensibly marginalised, at least at the outset. Quite rapidly, the better off will have greater access to the English and associated academic practices that enable success, and the inequality between the haves and have-nots will become apparent, but it is precisely the mainstreaming of disadvantage that renders EMI less of a visible threat.

These are also issues of the type of knowledge that is created and valued in higher education. The Pacific Vernacular Language programmes at my own university enable many students to take certificates and BA majors in their own languages<sup>1</sup>, which include courses such as Cook Islands Māori Epistemology, Values, Ethics. Not only is this course delivered and assessed through the medium of Cook Islands Māori, the guided components of its first offering in 2021 were led collaboratively by 13 experienced Cook Islands researchers from different disciplines, before the students conducted their own action research, the results of which they presented at a final symposium. The whole ethos of the course was grounded in ways of knowing and researching in the specific context of the Cook Islands, an opportunity that would have been unimaginable through the medium of English. A very different opportunity is provided at the University of Limpopo via a joint degree in Contemporary English Language Studies and Multilingual Studies, with the latter half taught and assessed

through Sesotho sa Leboa and tackling a range of theoretical and analytical perspectives on contemporary multilingualism in South Africa (Ramani et al. 2007). These examples challenge not just the languages used in predominantly EMI settings, but the whole business of learning, teaching and researching, and demonstrate how we must be missing out on so many other “alternative ways of doing science [that] reconfigure epistemological traditions and research methodologies, the role of intellectuals and their engagement with the current conditions of the world, including ways in which scholars’ gazes are constituted” (Bagga-Gupta and Carneiro 2021, 322).

Konai Helu Thaman (2019) laments her own experiences “learning to think in the language of strangers” in her reflection on “Indigenous education in a colonized and globalized Pacific”, and, while many other scholars who are contesting the coloniality of higher education in Oceania do not explicitly challenge the use of the former colonial language, their calls for the centrality of relationality (Airini et al. 2010, Helu-Thaman 2008, Ka’ili 2005); for “a dramatic foundational shift that shatters the Eurocentric colonial knowledge system that binds our higher learning institutions and destines us to universities and worlds in which our very being is determined by race, capital and the heteropatriarchy” (Leenen-Young et al. 2021, 12); and for an approach that “values coherent local knowledge as way forward, but reminds of the need for disentanglement from the imposed judgments of the past” (Sanga and Reynolds 2020, 257) make clear that language has to be central to decoloniality. In their depiction of the postcolonial university as a “knowledge prison” (following Smith, Funaki, and MacDonald 2021), Leenen-Young et al (2021, 2) note that scholars feel “limited to personal acts of decolonization while the wider structural and foundational coloniality of the institution remains intact”, a key element of which must be the very language through which it operates.

Antia and Dyers (2019, 97), writing from South Africa, make similar reference to a sense of imprisonment, but tell more joyfully of “an almost cathartic sense of release from the entrapment of an institutional culture of anglonormativity” when multiple languages are used for learning and assessment. It is not just understanding that is enhanced, but a sense of inclusion and a lowering of anxiety, which then opens up new opportunities for discovery and meaning making, and thus active and critical engagement with learning. Their multilingual and multimodal pedagogy strove to “de-alienate the academy for marginalised students in order to help heal some of the accruing injuries of coloniality” (ibid., 98). This embrace of multilingualism goes far beyond the tolerance of code-switching to support tricky concepts in

English, in other words to scaffold an EMI curriculum. It conceptualises “multilinguality” as an educational goal in itself (Agnihotri 2014, 371), from a perspective that seeks to open up new “spaces of subversion” for a “truly critical pedagogy” that “might eventually allow human beings to interact on a more equal level, leading to greater harmony” (ibid., 364-5). Without such a perspective, the multilingualism doesn’t go away, but remains “an absent presence, rendered illicit by hegemonic monolingual ideologies” (Kerfoot 2020, 70), with languages other than English “smuggled” into the classroom (Probyn 2001), but still excluded from the real business of meaning-making. As Michael-Luna and Canagarajah (2008, 72) note, while “educational research has spent the last 50 years trying to change students to fit the academic discourse, perhaps we might consider the ways that monolingual, monocultural academic discourse can be transformed and enriched by multilinguals.”

It is this third lesson that new EMI institutions would do well to heed. Old EMI universities are not doing well at providing opportunities for the development of English proficiency throughout their programmes, and nor are they doing well enough at finding effective mechanisms to support an EMI content curriculum, precisely because EMI is not a model of education that has been designed with pedagogy at its heart. But old EMI institutions are doing well at showing their dissatisfaction with the injustice of the status quo, and calling loudly for radical change. As noted in the introduction to a recent special issue of this journal devoted to ‘Possibilities and complexities of decolonising higher education: critical perspectives on praxis’, “the socio-cultural, political and epistemic change processes involved in the ‘decolonial turn’ in higher education are anything but straight forward or uncontested”, requiring “a heterogeneity of conceptual, strategic and practical approaches to taking up the decolonial project” (Hayes, Luckett, and Misiaszek 2021, 888, cf. Andreotti et al. 2015, Leenen-Young et al. 2021). This article is not so much concerned with how old EMI institutions can decolonise their practices, but with why all these new EMI institutions are blindly scrambling for the very model that so many others want to decolonise.

If ever there was a time to listen to scholars from the Global South, it is surely worth reflecting on why there are so many calls to decolonise higher education, and reject its monolingualising tendencies. It is baffling to watch the norms of the Anglophone Centre once again spreading outwards unchecked, with so little critical reflection on issues of social justice and knowledge creation.

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<sup>i</sup> Programmes are currently available in Cook Islands Māori, Fijian, Hindi, Rotuman, Tongan and Niufo'ou, and Vagahau Niue.