

Policy Versus Practice in the Implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction in Public Higher Education

Dadajon Dadabayev Rustamovich¹

¹Vice-Rector for Youth Affairs, Faculty of Business Administration, Turan International University,
Namangan, Uzbekistan. E-mail: dadajon3008@gmail.com,
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7058-3116>

Abstract: The rapid globalization of higher education has led to the use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in state institutions worldwide. Although the national policies tend to impose a rigid English-only pedagogy structure to make the country more competitive in the global market and institutionally prestigious, there is a big de jure/de facto disparity between these top-down requirements and the real-life classroom activities. The current paper explores the tension between the official policy and the reality in the area of public higher education, and specifically the institutions in the region with language diverse student bodies. The study employs the Spolsky Language Policy Framework and a qualitative case study method to outline key obstacles to alignment, such as different degrees of linguistic proficiency among the faculty, under-preparedness of students, and the unavailability of special pedagogical tools. The results demonstrate that translanguaging, or the intentional use of local languages to explain complex ideas, is a survival strategy that is needed, but not commonly recognized, by teachers and students. This hidden bilingualism implies that hard monolingual policies can unintentionally result in surface learning and overworking of the mind. This paper concludes that to close the divide between theory and practice, it is necessary to change the ideologies of English only towards more adaptable, multilingual models. Suggestions are formalization of translanguaging into policy documents, faculty-level special training on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and creation of bilingual or bridge materials. Institutions can safeguard the academic rigor by matching policy expectations and the sociolinguistic realities of public universities, and attain the aims of internationalization.

Key Words: english as a medium of instruction (EMI), language policy and planning (LPP), public higher education, translanguaging, internationalization of higher education, pedagogical challenges, policy-practice gap

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Introduction

In the present age of educational globalization, EMI has evolved from being an option to becoming a necessity. EMI refers to teaching academic subjects in English in countries where the dominant native language is not English. It acts as a link between researchers and students around the world. Institutions all over the world implement EMI programs to improve their internationalization at home, thereby preparing their graduates with the linguistic capital to compete in the multinational job market (Agai-Lochi, 2015).

There has been much pressure on public HEIs to embrace EMI strategies to be competitive with their private rivals and in international rankings. The government is known to compel EMI use in accordance with its strategy for development, seeing it as a means of modernizing its economy. This trend is more prevalent in the regions of Asia and Europe, where EMI takes place in an effort that is described as top-

down, meaning that English will be incorporated into the curriculum of STEM and Management departments.

Problem Statement

The disconnect between de jure policy and de facto practice is the most imperative challenge of higher education in modern times. Whereas the formal condition is a clear English only classroom environment, the reality of the world is dictated by a huge linguistic divide between the high level of competence that the curriculum requires and the realistic abilities of the faculty and students. This disconnect causes undue pedagogical pressure, compelling a transition towards a non-interactive, student-focused approach in favour of memorization as a means to deal with language barrier issues. Furthermore, this imbalance also creates profound issues of identity and equity, in which students with a history on vernacular medium are put into a systematic marginalization and local academic languages are endangered with extinction.

Objectives

The objective of this study is to critically review these mismatches within the context of public HEIs. The specific objectives include:

- To assess the forces driving the current EMI policy framework.
- To determine the socio-technical and linguistic constraints in implementing EMI within the classroom setting.
- To suggest a model for comparing the expected results against the linguistic reality of public HEIs.

The paper organization includes that Section II will provide the necessary background, highlighting past literature on the subject of EMI implementation. Section III will discuss the policy framework supporting EMI within the public HEI context, and Section IV will tackle its application and challenges. Section V will compare the policy and practice, while Section VI will discuss the findings. Section VII will summarize the conclusions.

Background and Literature Review

The fast growth of the English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is one of the pillars of the wider phenomenon of Englishisation of the higher education in the world (Galloway et al., 2020). The systematic reviews show that EMI is no longer a phenomenon of Anglophone nations but has become an international phenomenon, especially in Europe and Asia, with institutions seeking to gain international prestige and global rankings (Macaro et al., 2018). In East Asia, Japan and China have embarked on huge national programs to expand the number of English-taught courses to win foreign talent and a globalised student population (Zhang, 2018; Rose & McKinley, 2018). To interpret these changes, it is important to have a strong theoretical light to differentiate between official requirements and the reality in the classroom. In this study, Spolsky Tripartite Model is used, which examines language ideologies (beliefs), practices (actual usage) and management (official rules). Such a framework is critical towards investigating how meso-level institutional policies tend to conflict with micro-level classroom practices (Aizawa & Rose, 2019; Hamid et al., 2015). Moreover, the Language Policy and Planning (LPP) approach emphasizes that the policy is not a received order but a multifaceted mechanism that includes the historical legacies and social possibilities, whereas the ROAD-MAPPING model explains the multilingual character of modern universities where English and local languages have to coexist (Dafouz & Smit, 2016; Wiley & García, 2016).

Past research highlights a long-standing tension between policy intention and real performance in various geographical settings. In Asian cultures, namely Malaysia, Vietnam and Bangladesh, study results indicate that even though EMI is supposed to support modernization of education, it usually results in a shifting paradigm where the quality of pedagogy is compromised in favor of linguistic objectives (Ali, 2015; Anh, 2022). Both students and teachers in the Gulf and Middle East complain of a steep cognitive load of studying complex topics in a second language that often leads them to adopt a pragmatic stance of bilingual education despite monolingual policies (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015). Cross-cultural analyses of Western and non-Western attitudes further indicate that although teachers believe EMI to be conducive to career development, teachers are more than apprehensive about the issue of surface learning and professional training (Dearden & Macaro, 2016; Simanjuntak et al., 2022). The intersection of four key areas can be used to analyze these challenges, namely Educational Policy, dictating high-level institutional direction (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015); Language Policy, dictating authorized language use (Ou et al., 2022); Implementation Studies, which study the process of translating paper policies into practice (Nyoni et al., 2023); and the Medium of Instruction (MoI) as a pedagogical innovation that needs to be managed carefully to avoid academic alienation and high dropout rates (Rahman et al., 2018; Hamid et al., 2015; Chan & Hu, 2023).

The literature review indicates that there is a significant international mismatch between the idealized policies of English-medium instruction (EMI) and the real-world ability of public higher education systems. Although EMI is embraced in institutions in an effort to meet the international ranking measures and economic interests, the study reveals that such a top-down strategy often overlooks the sociolinguistic realities of the local classrooms. The uniformity of a so-called Policy-Practice gap in different parts of the world, including East Asia and the Middle East, emphasizes that, in most cases, linguistic barriers contribute to lower academic standards and superficial learning. Finally, the literature concludes that to make EMI sustainable, policies should shift to multilingual systems that are flexible, based on multilingualism, and focus on pedagogical support rather than on linguistic compliance.

Policy Framework for EMI in Public Higher Education

In this study, the qualitative case study methodology will be adopted to understand the integration of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in the higher education institutions in India. Adopting the descriptive-exploratory research method, the investigation seeks to examine the gap between the policy provisions and their implementation in the classroom setting. The research is based on the Tripartite Model by Spolsky, namely, it analyzes the interaction between the linguistic ecology and the language management. The data collected will be analyzed by adopting the thematic analysis method, particularly looking at the factors responsible for the 'Policy-Practice Gap' during the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

Overview of the Official Policy on EMI

The official policy on EMI in public higher education systems is typically not a single policy statement but rather a combination of national educational policy documents, language legislation, and globalization strategy documents. In the public sector, the policy tends to be oriented toward moving from a native-first or bilingual system to an English-intense system. Such policies tend to be top-down policies in which the shift is dictated from above by the national education ministry or other governing body.

Government and Institutional Mandates

Mandates regarding language usage are usually implemented through two major mechanisms of power. At the national level, wide-ranging mandates sometimes call for all courses related to Medicine, Engineering, and Information Technology, and other courses deemed valuable to be taught in English only in order to gain international recognition. On the other hand, at the institutional level, the mandates are converted into internal guidelines and circulars mandating the professors to prepare all academic documents such as syllabi, lectures, and exam papers in English. This becomes even more difficult due to the fact that promotion depends upon EMI success.

National and Institutional Objectives

This desire for EMI stems from a combination of goals that seek to align state and university interests in the realm of globalization. At the national level, governments aim to make their country economically competitive through the creation of a labor force that can work within the knowledge economy, as well as scientific research through publications in prestigious English journals. In the context of universities, institutions promote EMI to enhance their ranking on global university indexes, such as the QS or Times Higher Education rankings, and bring in diverse sources of income through the recruitment of international students.

Examination of Policy Documents, Guidelines, and Reforms

Critical examination of the contemporary reforms shows that there is an emerging pattern of over-aggressive internationalization based on inaccurate linguistic assumptions.

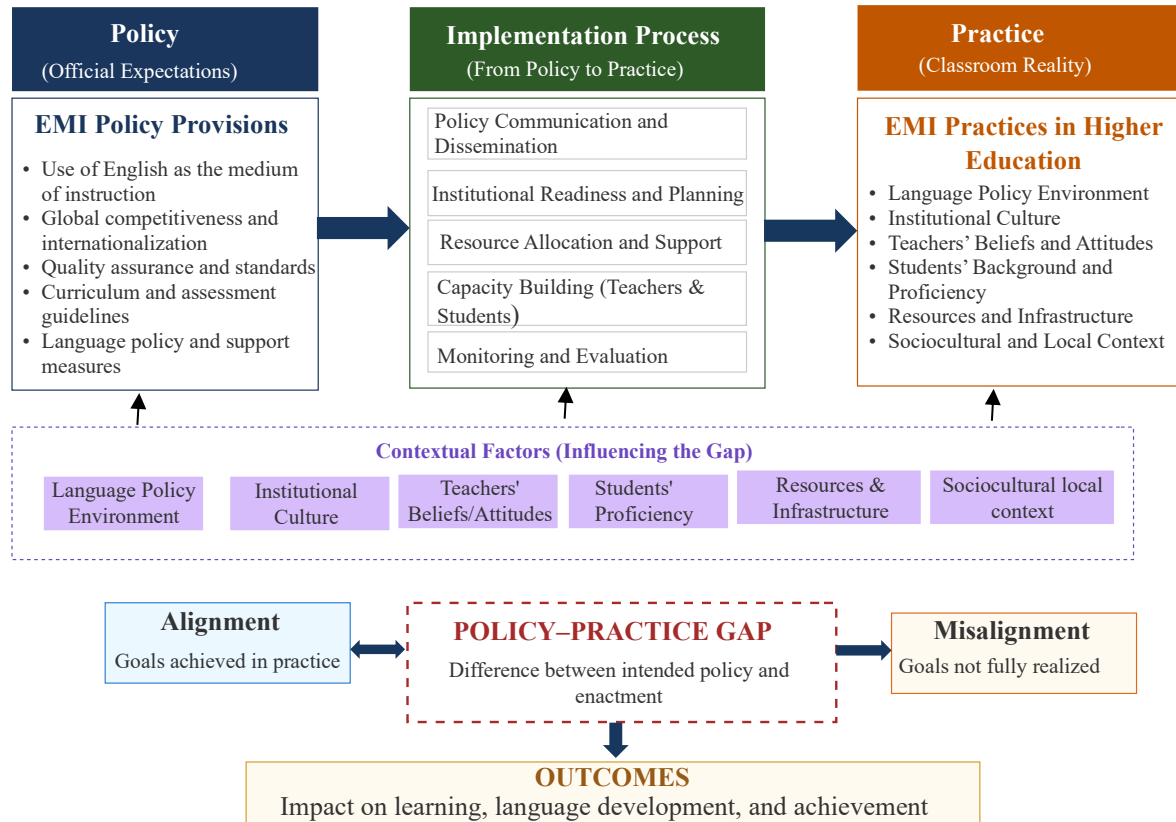


Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework of the Policy-Practice Gap in English Medium Instruction (EMI)

The assumption made in most of the policy papers is that all lecturers and students have standardized levels of B2 or C1 skills but do not consider offering bridging programs and other assistance mechanisms. Moreover, whereas reward schemes focus on motivating compliance, little has been done to establish procedures in cases of students facing language-related problems. There seems to be a paradox in such reforms because although the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is emphasized, there is little attention given to the local sociolinguistic ecology.

Figure 1 outlines the multi-dimensional process of implementing EMI in public higher education institutions. The illustration shows the journey from Official Policy Expectations (the “de jure” intention) to the Implementation Process, where there is an assessment of the institution’s capacity and readiness, until the Classroom Reality (the “de facto”). This figure emphasizes the role of different Contextual Factors in moderating the Alignment or causing Misalignment between policies and practices in EMI. Ultimately, this illustration points out that the Policy-Practice Conflict is the key determinant of the Outcomes.

EMI Practice in Public Higher Education: A Case Study

The Context of Indian Higher Education: The shift to EMI in Indian higher education has roots in the country’s colonial past as well as its aspiration to become a scientific leader on a global scale. Nevertheless, the use of EMI in public universities shows an acute discrepancy between policy and practice. According to this study, the English-only mindset in South Asian higher education fails to account for the fact that students come from multilingual environments. The present study will focus on the Indian case, where vernacular-medium students (Sah, 2022).

In practice, the use of EMI does not adhere to a purely monolingual framework but rather a mixed pedagogic approach. Along with the more recent study, it can be argued that translanguaging occurs as a matter of course in the classroom. While technical explanations may be provided using English, teachers may revert to using the local language when explaining complicated theoretical arguments, as suggested. Assessments also take this situation into account by focusing on content mastery rather than linguistic form.

Several factors influence the effectiveness of EMI at the grassroots level, and the most significant one among them is the distinction between urban and rural areas. According to this previous study, students studying in rural, vernacular schools experience a shock of language which is not experienced by urban students who go to private schools. Moreover, teacher competence is another essential constraint (Hamid et al., 2015). The earlier study reveals that even subject specialists lack Pedagogical English skills and are unable to foster classroom debates.

The barriers to successful EMI adoption in India include structural barriers and psychological barriers. There is a considerable disparity between the meso-level and micro-level policies regarding EMI education. The lecturers often find themselves facing pedagogical resistance, thinking that their imposition of English in the class prevents them from engaging in deep conceptual conversations with the students. In addition, cognitive overload dealing with new knowledge and another language at once is likely to cause high attrition and poor performance by marginalized students (Macaro et al., 2018).

Policy versus Practice: A Comparative Analysis

Comparative Analysis of Policy Intentions vs. Practical Realities

The clash between the presented aims of EMI and the classroom reality leads to the emergence of the so-called shadow curriculum, according to which the learning process occurs in the cracks of the official policy.

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of Policy Intentions vs. Practical Realities in English-Medium Instruction

Feature	Policy Intentions (De Jure)	Practical Realities (De Facto)
Language Use	Strict Monolingualism (English only)	Strategic Translanguaging (Code-switching)
Classroom Interaction	High-level academic discourse and debate	Simplified explanations and reduced participation
Inclusivity	Merit-based access for all students	Advantage for urban, elite-schooled students
Pedagogical Focus	Content mastery via English	Language decoding often takes precedence over content

The key gap between De Jure and De Facto in English language teaching is outlined in Table 1. It raises the recurring dilemma of how the official demand for total monolingualism and the high discourse on one hand contrast with the actual need to translate and simplify instructions on the other. It also highlights the inherent inequalities in policies, which claim to be based on merit and inclusion but, in most cases, favor the urban elite and compel teachers to teach language decoding rather than knowledge acquisition.

Barriers and Gaps in Aligning Policy with Practice

There are multiple gaps in the structure and system that impede effective implementation. The first such gap is known as the Resource-Expectation Gap, meaning that even as there is a necessity for EMI, there is an absence of adequate budgetary provisions made for certain laboratories in English, computer-based assistance, and bilingual tutors. The second problem arises from the Assessment Gap, meaning that while classroom education can indeed take place via a mixed method, the high-stakes assessment itself will be entirely in English. In doing so, it discourages any students that might have already understood all the key ideas taught at school but still lack the particular language proficiency to express more complex ideas in academic writing. Thirdly, the Time Gap creates an issue regarding timelines of adopting EMI, which can be rather fast-moving and does not take into account years of practice necessary for building language skills.

Student and Faculty Perceptions of EMI's Effectiveness

Relations towards EMI in popular institutions are in many ways contradictory, a blend of professional desire and anxiety. The perceptions of the faculty are often colored with a feeling of professional inadequacy when teachers are compelled to teach only English. The limited fluency is feared to jeopardize their authority in the classroom or eradicate the depth and correctness of their expertise in the subject it teaches. Contrastingly, student perceptions are also divided; although the majority of students are in favor of EMI due to its perceived market and global prestige and employability, it also claims higher levels of stress. This results in alienation and an unceasing feeling that are not acquiring as much depth in their subject matter as their counterparts in vernacular-medium tracks are.

Impacts on Learning Outcomes and Academic Engagement

The policy-practice tensions have practical and, in many cases, negative effects on the overall quality of education. Reduced Academic Engagement is one of the most noticeable effects that often takes the form of the silence of the students. Students are afraid of making language mistakes and, therefore, never want to ask questions or engage in group discussions which makes the classroom, more passive and teacher-centered. In order to overcome this obstacle, Surface-Level Learning is practiced by numerous students; that is, memorize and operate in the culture of copy-pasting, instead of critically analyzing and thinking independently. Such linguistic challenges have long-term effects of Higher Attrition and Failure Rates, especially in marginalized groups where the cognitive burden of learning a foreign language and a complex subject can be overwhelming. This will eventually result in Erosion of Subject Depth because teachers can just simplify the curriculum itself to make their English lectures more comprehensible by a flailing audience.

Discussion

Considering different policies and practices, it is possible to state that English in Public Higher Education is the example of performative policy. Although universities claim that it comply with all the necessary requirements to receive accreditation and get ranked, practices shown by them in classes reveal that it works with the help of practical bilingualism. As a result, hidden bilingualism occurs, because while students learn in local languages, examinations and syllabuses remain English only. The existence of this paradox reveals the fact that monolingualism ideas are not only ineffective, but also harmful for the academic development of students. It occurs owing to the Borrowed Policy strategy when a certain policy is used without taking local conditions into account. What is more, the lack of multilingualism policy makes native languages sources of interference, which leads to the necessity of using the strategies kept in secret due to their inefficiency. Finally, the issue of the deeply entrenched language inequality becomes topical as a result of ignoring social stratification within the English-speaking community.

From the implementation experiences worldwide, success comes with a slow and holistic approach rather than imposing mandatory measures. Successful implementations are characterized by first teaching in the local language, then in a 50/50 bilingual mode, and lastly in EMI. In addressing the present gap, there is a need for policies that will integrate translanguaging where English is used for specific vocabulary while the local language is employed for the comprehensive comprehension of concepts. There is a need for professional development programs to include dual competency training through the CLIL model where teachers can explain complex concepts through illustration and simple language. It is also crucial to offer transition materials such as bilingual dictionaries and intermediate books to help translate difficult ideas into easy language. Lastly, there is a need for changes in assessments where transitional periods are created, allowing students to explain difficult concepts in their native languages.

Conclusion

This study points out an ongoing and structural disconnect between the monolingual ambitions of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) policies and the multilingual realities of the public higher education classes. The results suggest that although top-down mandates are mainly motivated by the need to be globally competitive and have an institutional prestige, their practical execution is often undermined by the different degrees of teacher competence and student under-preparedness. The main lesson learned is that the existence of shadow bilingualism, in particular, the strategic translanguaging, does not indicate the policy failure, but rather the needed pedagogical survival strategy employed to overcome the linguistic

barrier and guarantee the conceptual comprehension. In turn, the existing English-only policy in publicly-funded HEIs demands a radical change to more accommodative and realistic models. The future policies of language should recognize multilingualism as a supportive scaffold and not as a barrier, and focus on pedagogical training and not a simple test of proficiency. This change would necessitate the faculty being trained to teach content in a second language without compromising academic rigor, and the structural supply of bilingual materials and bridge materials to make sure that students with vernacular-language backgrounds are not systematically disadvantaged. Though this paper dwells on the policy-practice gap at the moment, additional empirical study is required to narrow down EMI implementation strategies. Future research areas that are recommended are longitudinal research studies of long-term learning results with strict EMI tracks versus hybrid models. Also, the digital integration with a particular focus on how generative AI and digital translation tools can help in overcoming the linguistic barriers to both faculty and students is of high importance and needs to be explored. The psychosocial effects of EMI on student identity and classroom anxiety and how EMI contributes to socio-economic stratification between urban, privately-schooled students and their rural, publicly-schooled counterparts should also be considered in research. Finally, it is necessary to match policy with the sociolinguistic ecology of classroom to ensure sustainability of educational reform.

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