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EMI policy and practice divides in China, Japan, Malaysia and Nepal

Policymakers' neoliberal ideologies and multilingual classroom realities in higher education

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, English has become a key medium of instruction in higher education in non-native English contexts, especially Asian countries. Extant research highlights the rapid expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) and challenges in policy implementation, revealing tensions between different language policy levels (i.e., macro, meso and micro). Thus, a multilevel analysis is needed to understand these tensions. This review examines factors influencing EMI adoption in China, Japan, Malaysia, and Nepal, focusing on policy implementation by educators and students. Findings show that EMI adoption is driven by English's role as a global lingua franca and the permeation of neoliberal ideologies at the macro policymaking level. Such a macro-level endorsement of monolingual EMI has resulted in micro-level inequalities for students, with resistance manifested through multilingual practices, such as translanguaging, in the classroom. The discrepancies between language policies and practices highlight the necessity of reassessing the adequacy of monolingual EMI policies and the importance of adopting a multilingual policy framework. The article concludes with a critical discussion of the trends observed in these contexts and recommends several policy directions for the future.

Introduction

In the 21st century, a significant trend in language policy in higher education (HE) is the exponential increase in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) programs in countries where English is not the native language. The expansion has been driven in part by English's role as a global lingua franca in academic, business, and sociocultural contexts (Macaro 2018). This trend is particularly prominent in Asian countries such as Bangladesh (Rahman 2022; Rahman and Hu 2025a), China (Hu 2023), Japan (Aizawa and Rose 2019), Malaysia (Ali and Hamid 2018; Rahman et al. 2025), Nepal (Hultgren et al. 2024; Sah and Li 2022) and South Korea (Williams 2023). Research in these regions has examined the adoption and implementation of EMI, highlighting the rapid growth of English as an instructional medium, identifying challenges in policy implementation across various levels of language policy-making (Kaplan and Baldauf 2003), and underscoring the tensions between policy visions and practices on the ground in multilingual HE settings in Asia.

The rapid and widespread adoption of EMI has also been seen as an outcome of neoliberal and market-driven ideologies in HE (Block 2018). Neoliberalism, which emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the perceived ills of Keynesian economics, advocates for free markets, limited government intervention, outcome-based accountability, and individual entrepreneurship. It posits that an unregulated market will be beneficial for all if individual competition is permitted to function without constraints (Piller and Cho 2013). According to Foucault, emphasizing market solutions to educational problems, neoliberalism-driven educational policies shift the focus of education from its intrinsic values to its economic profits as a commodity, a source of future return on investment (Foucault et al. 2008). Given this prioritization of market logic, efficiency, and economic outcomes over broader educational goals, EMI as a language policy has been promoted in HE contexts to raise institutional competitiveness by attracting more and international students, enhance the employability of graduates

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in the domestic and global job markets, and enable individuals to accrue cultural/symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991) and gain access to social mobility, often at the expense of other languages, particularly the mother tongue. As a result, the uncritical adoption of English as a medium of instruction (MOI) prioritises English-based monolingual education and pedagogy, disrupts the language ecology in each context and limits the use of other languages in HE (Liddicoat 2016). There are, however, both practical difficulties in and resistance to English-only instruction in the classroom (Hu 2023). Thus, although neoliberal ideologies have driven policymakers to promulgate EMI policies in many Asian HE settings, such policies have often failed to be translated into officially endorsed language practices in the classroom. There is increasing evidence that multilingual and translanguaging practices have become both the preferred and practical strategies for achieving various linguistic and pedagogical objectives in EMI or content classrooms (Rahman and Hu 2025b).

Language policy and planning (LPP) in education is inherently complex, involving language practice, management, and ideology (Spolsky 2009). These LPP components operate across multiple levels – macro, meso, and micro – and involve diverse stakeholders, including government bodies, institutional administrators, teachers, and students (Baldauf 2006; Kaplan and Baldauf 2003). Therefore, when analysing EMI policies, it is crucial to examine both the adoption and implementation processes to identify the motivations for EMI adoption in various contexts and explore how these policies are interpreted and enacted at different levels (Lasagabaster 2022). A multilevel analysis of language policy is essential to investigating the (mis)alignments between policy and practice among stakeholders, hence developing a nuanced understanding of MOI initiatives (Liddicoat, 2016). For example, university administrators, teachers, and students may interpret or implement MOI policies differently from the objectives envisioned at the macro level (Galloway and Ruegg 2020). Thus, a comprehensive multilevel analysis of language policy and practice (Spolsky 2009) can reveal the tensions and contradictions between official language policy goals and actual classroom practices (Gazzola and Iannàccaro 2023).

This review aims to identify the driving forces behind the adoption of EMI in HE at various LPP levels and examine how EMI is implemented at the micro level by teachers and students. To this end, it synthesizes findings of existing studies to map out the EMI policy and practice landscape in selected Asian countries. To ensure geographical representation, it focuses on four countries from different subregions that have seen significant recent growth in EMI: China and Japan in East Asia, Malaysia in Southeast Asia, and Nepal in South Asia. The selection of these countries has also been motivated by recent increases in EMI research in these contexts. Additionally, as these countries provide diverse socioeconomic, political, and educational contexts, they may have different goals and aspirations regarding EMI, and the outcomes may also vary. Last but not least, English provision in these countries meets the criteria of EMI that Pecorari and Malmström (2018, 499) discussed and provides the *tertium comparationis*: (1) English is a second or foreign language for most participants; (2) English is not taught as a language subject but used to teach content knowledge; (3) language development is not the primary intended outcome; (4) English is solely used for instructional purposes.

EMI in China

Policy adoption and implementation strategies

Chinese policymakers have regarded EMI as a strategic approach to enhancing national competitiveness, fostering international engagement, raising educational quality, and producing multi-talented citizens. At the same time, there is a society-wide recognition of English proficiency as being linked to power, prestige and social mobility. Compared with other Asian and European nations, China was relatively slow in adopting EMI in HE. However, as noted by Hu (2023), EMI gained momentum at the institutional level following its endorsement by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2001 and its implementation in leading Chinese universities. According to Hu and Lei (2014), policymakers in China have recognized EMI as a crucial strategy for elevating educational standards. English is perceived as 'an integral component of higher education' to fulfil China's objectives for 'development and international interaction' (MOE 2007, cited in Hu and Lei 2014, 557). Thus, the adoption of EMI in China has been driven by the country's ideologies about national development and individual beliefs in the power, prestige, and advantages associated with English such as upward mobility, cultural enrichment, and economic opportunities in domestic and global markets (Hu et al. 2014; Zhang 2018). Galloway et al. (2020) suggest that the implementation of EMI serves a dual purpose: it provides students with the opportunity to enhance their English proficiency while simultaneously advancing academic performance in their disciplinary studies.

Chinese universities, functioning as meso-level actors, have adopted a range of strategies to facilitate the implementation of EMI. These strategies include requiring entrance English examinations as a prerequisite for students' enrolment in EMI programs, providing 'extra sheltered intensive instruction in English in order to raise their English proficiency to a level adequate for EMI' (Hu and Lei 2014, 563), and hiring faculty members who have gained experience with EMI through overseas study or employment (Hu et al. 2014). Additionally, universities provide various incentives to encourage faculty participation in EMI programs. These incentives encompass favourable workload calculations, increased opportunities for professional development in Anglophone universities, tangible rewards and financial support specifically designated for EMI faculty, and symbolic recognition of their contributions to the design and delivery of EMI courses (Hu et al. 2014).

Language practices and challenges

Despite the substantial efforts made to implement EMI, a gap persists between the overarching policy objectives and

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the actual language practices observed in EMI classrooms. One contributing factor is students' limited English proficiency, which leaves them unprepared for the discipline-specific academic English required in EMI programs (Han and Dong 2024). Consequently, serious concerns remain regarding the effectiveness of subject content learning through EMI (Galloway and Ruegg 2020; Hu et al. 2014). The English-only monolingual policy in Chinese classrooms has been challenged at the micro level through translanguaging-based language practices. Fang et al. (2023) highlighted the effectiveness of translanguaging in fostering comprehension, promoting classroom cohesion and enhancing learning outcomes for students with limited English proficiency. Similarly, Hu and Lei (2014) noted the prevalent use of the first language as a means of communication in EMI classrooms, describing it as a form of simplified EMI. Fang and Liu (2020) argued for the necessity of approaching EMI from a multilingual perspective to better understand its (in)effectiveness and the challenges associated with its classroom implementation.

EMI in Japan

EMI as part of Japan's higher education policy framework

The Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) announced the 'Top Global University Project' (TGUP) in 2014, a major investment initiative aimed at developing globally oriented world-class universities, enhancing the role of foreign languages in Japanese HE, and cultivating global human resources (Rose and McKinley 2018). Notably, the concept of EMI, which was prominent in the policy documents of the previous 'Global 30 Project', is conspicuously absent from the explicit goals outlined in the TGUP policy directives. Instead of explicitly advocating for EMI, the Japanese government has placed a greater emphasis on the internationalization of HE at the TGUP universities, which actually encourages the adoption of EMI in an implicit way (Aizawa and Rose 2019).

At the meso level, Japanese universities have interpreted the TGUP policy in alignment with the top-down directives from MEXT. Rose and McKinley's (2018) analysis of English language policy planning in TGUP universities revealed that 17 out of 37 institutions explicitly addressed the role of English and offered programs and courses in English. These English-medium programs were designed to provide domestic students with opportunities to learn English alongside international students and to use English in conjunction with other languages in a bilingual or multilingual educational context (Rose and McKinley 2018). Language policy at TGUP universities mandated that the language of instruction for all programs be clearly categorized and labelled in their online syllabi as Japanese, English, Japanese/English, or English/Japanese, depending on the languages used. In addition, TGUP universities stipulated English proficiency goals, as highlighted in Aizawa and Rose's (2019) policy analysis. Their findings indicated that the university examined in their case study set the clear target of increasing the percentage of its students achieving an IELTS proficiency level of 6.5 from 38.5% in 2013 to 50% by 2023. Furthermore, faculty recruitment policies at TGUP universities emphasized the requirement for English proficiency among new EMI lecturers to ensure they could effectively use English to deliver both lectures and tutorials.

Implementation challenges at the micro level

While the TGUP implicitly promulgates EMI through its focus on the internationalization of Japanese HE, discrepancies exist in the adoption and implementation of the policy directives at various levels. Previous studies examining EMI policy implementation in Japanese universities documented that the intended effects of MEXT's macro-level policy initiatives and universities' meso-level policy goals did not fully materialize at the micro level of classroom language practice, revealing the multitude of challenges in translating the policy goals and plans into concrete actions and outcomes (Aizawa and Rose 2020). At the micro level, several factors contribute to these implementation challenges in TGUP universities. Bradford (2016) identified a number of linguistic, cultural, and structural factors (such as administrative, managerial, and institutional issues) as primary causes of policy implementation failure at this level. Teachers' and students' insufficient English proficiency was noted as a significant barrier to effective EMI implementation. Aizawa and Rose (2020) explored the language-related challenges faced by native Japanese-speaking undergraduate students transitioning from school to EMI at university and found that students with prior exposure to English encountered fewer difficulties than those without such exposure. Additionally, the mixed use of Japanese and English as mediums of instruction reflects linguistic difficulties among micro-level users in the Japanese EMI context (Aizawa and Rose 2020).

EMI in Malaysia

Policy and ideological divides at the marco and meso levels

Malaysia's LPP landscape is characterized by divisions among macro- and meso-level language ideologies, practices, and management concerning MOI (Ali and Hamid 2018). The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in Malaysia has announced its ambition to become an internationally recognized HE destination by 2025, aiming to attract 250,000 international students (Rahman and Singh 2022a). By offering a common language for both domestic and international students, it is anticipated that English will aid Malaysia in achieving its goal of becoming one of Asia's leading educational hubs (Rahman and Singh 2022a). However, at the macro level, policymakers have not explicitly promulgated EMI in HE. Instead, English functions as a de facto MOI in Malaysian HE (Rahman and Singh 2022a). No formal written directive has been issued to prescribe the implementation of EMI in the Malaysian HE sector (Rahman et al. 2025). According to Ali (2013, 73), the absence of formally formulated and circulated macro-level directives leaves policy adoption and implementation 'open to interpretation by academic staff at the university level'.

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Macro- and meso-level actors are divided with respect to the adoption of EMI. One group supports EMI, whereas the other group questions the exclusive use of English in the teaching and learning of content knowledge (Rahman and Singh 2022a). EMI is currently implemented in many programs at both public and private universities in Malaysia, with the assumption that it will enhance students' exposure to English in HE, raise their competence in the language, and prepare them for opportunities in both local and global job markets (Rahman et al. 2025). These meso-level language ideologies are supported by institutional language management initiatives, such as establishing standard language proficiency requirements for university admission and offering English for Academic Purposes courses to EMI students (Rahman and Singh 2022a).

Micro-level challenges

At the micro level, resistance to EMI and nationalist sentiments have been observed, with the parallel use of English and Malay as MOIs in classrooms. The Malaysian HE context exhibits mixed ideologies and practices concerning MOI. According to Gill (2006), a minority of academics driven by nationalism vehemently oppose the use of English as the MOI and advocate for Malay instead. However, recent studies (Ali and Hamid 2018; Rahman and Singh 2022a) have reported positive attitudes among teachers and students toward the implementation of EMI in HE, emphasizing its necessity given the global importance of English (Gill 2006; Rahman and Singh 2022a). Despite such positive attitudes, there is increasing resistance to implementing meso-level EMI policies. Rahman and Singh (2021) reviewed studies conducted over a decade and found that conflicting MOI policies, instructional deficiencies, inadequate teaching and learning materials, limited opportunities for teachers' professional development, and nationalist sentiments left little space for the broader function of English and EMI. Similarly, Ali and Hamid (2018) noted the coexistence and fluid use of English and Malay in classroom interactions and campus communication. STEM teachers entrusted with EMI were often compelled to adopt blended MOIs because they had received their own education through Malay and had had insufficient opportunities to develop their competence in English as an academic language (Ali 2013). Rahman et al. (2025) characterized such micro-level language practices as translanguaging, viewing them as a practical response to the meso-level English-only language policy at the English-medium university that they studied.

EMI in Nepal

EMI adoption driven by neoliberal ideologies

Nepal has seen a significant shift toward EMI at various educational levels, including tertiary education (Sah 2023). English is increasingly used as a de facto MOI in Nepalese universities (Phyak 2024). This shift is part of a broader trend where EMI is increasingly viewed as a means of enhancing educational quality and aligning with global standards (Sah and Karki 2023). The adoption of EMI in Nepal has been a top-down policy decision, influenced by neoliberal market-oriented ideologies (Sah and Li 2017). These ideologies equate the use of English with quality education and global competitiveness (Sah and Karki 2023). Policymakers have embraced EMI as a strategy to improve educational outcomes and prepare students for participation in the global economy. This approach reflects a belief that proficiency in English can open up opportunities for students, both locally and internationally (Phyak 2024). As Sah (2022, 72) pointed out, 'the EMI policy is a neoliberal endowment for Nepal's HE that has been developed through the state's policies and dispositions of privatization, internationalization and capitalism', institutions' pursuits of commodification and individual aspirations for upward socio-economic mobility.

Classroom practices and resistance

At the micro level, the implementation of EMI in classrooms often diverges from the macro-level policy aspirations. Research by Sah (2022) and others has demonstrated that teachers and students do not uniformly subscribe to the monolingual ideologies behind EMI. Instead, many teachers actively resist these ideologies to ensure meaningful participation for all students in classroom activities. This resistance is frequently manifested through translanguaging practices, where teachers and students fluidly switch between English and local languages to facilitate understanding and engagement. For example, Poudel's (2010) study revealed that students often used Nepali to ask questions, whereas teachers responded in both English and Nepali, with lectures primarily conducted in English but frequently transitioning to Nepali.

Such resistance notwithstanding, language ideologies that valorize English and EMI remain dominant at the micro level, as documented by Sah's (2024) study, where teachers tried to maintain the dominance of English. Although EMI is perceived to offer benefits, its widespread implementation has raised concerns about epistemic injustice, particularly for students from indigenous communities (Phyak 2024). These students often encounter significant barriers due to their low proficiency in English and limited access to educational resources (Neupane Bastola and Hu 2024; Sah 2023). The imposition of EMI can marginalize their linguistic and cultural identities, creating an unequal playing field where only those with prior English exposure can succeed (Phyak 2024). In addition, Hultgren et al. (2024) highlighted that the recent trend of offering English-medium education could undermine progress in gender equality, leading to unequal outcomes for boys and girls, potentially restricting girls' future opportunities, and worsening overall gender inequality in society. This situation underscores the risk of exacerbating existing educational inequalities and undermining the educational experiences of marginalized social groups (Hultgren et al. 2024; Sah 2022, 2023).

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Discussion and conclusion

Analysing research on MOI policies in the HE systems of China, Japan, Malaysia and Nepal at different LPP levels enhances our understanding of the dynamics in various EMI contexts (Gazzola and Iannàccaro 2023). This multi-level examination of EMI policies in terms of language ideology, language practice, and language management (Spolsky, 2009) not only highlights the disparities and gaps among the goals and intentions of stakeholders at macro, meso, and micro levels (Kaplan and Baldauf 2003) but also illuminates the intricate and multifaceted nature of these relationships and the distinctive priorities for embracing EMI in HE.

English language learning has been a key motivation for policymakers in China, Japan and Nepal to adopt EMI. However, as a former British colony, Malaysia already has a history of exposure to English, which has been institutionalized in the country. Furthermore, English is already a de facto second language for many people in Malaysia (Rahman and Singh 2022a). Thus, English language learning is not explicitly mentioned as one of the country's MOI policy goals. On another front, China, Japan and Malaysia all aspire to establish themselves as regional HE hubs and aim to attract international students, which provides another major impetus for adopting EMI.

EMI policy initiatives in these countries have been driven by ideologies enshrining English as a global lingua franca and fuelling neoliberal, market-oriented educational reforms in pursuit of economic gains (Karim et al. 2023). Consequently, a discourse has emerged that favours English-medium education over mother-tongue-based education, positioning English as the guarantor or saviour of educational quality (Rahman and Hu 2025a). Thus, Nepal's motivation to adopt EMI stems in part from an apparent desire to empower local students and develop human capital – the skills and knowledge that they need to compete successfully in the market (Phyak 2024; Sah 2024). It is noteworthy that a polity such as Nepal (or Bangladesh, as noted by Rahman and Singh 2022b) can adopt EMI for reasons distinct from those observed in other contexts.

In some cases, EMI is covertly promoted under the guise of internationalization. For instance, Japan and Malaysia both give utmost precedence to the goal of internationalizing HE in their policy documents. Although EMI featured prominently in the preceding Global 30 Project but is not explicitly listed as a TGUP goal, the TGUP places a strong emphasis on the internationalization of Japanese HE, which relies critically on the adoption and implementation of EMI at TGUP universities (Aizawa and Rose 2019). Malaysia, on the other hand, employs a strategy of macroization of micro-policy (Hamid and Baldauf 2014), whereby the lack of explicit direction on MOI at the macro level allows universities to adopt EMI under the guise of HE internationalization. This strategy is recognized as covert language policy in the literature (Shohamy 2006). However, it is important to remember that internationalization is not motive-neutral; it has been criticized as a variant of anglicization or a Trojan horse sneaking English in as the neoimperial language (Phillipson 2008).

At the micro level, mismatches between policies and practices are often reported. Studies in the four contexts under examination have shown that language practices on the ground frequently diverge from those envisioned or required by macro- and meso-level English-only policies, with the native languages often observed in EMI classrooms. Translanguaging practices are common in EMI courses/programs in all four national contexts, regardless of whether they are officially sanctioned by the MOI policies (Aizawa and Rose 2020; Hu and Lei 2014; Rahman et al. 2025; Sah 2022). This has resulted in a divide between policies and practices. Furthermore, the outcomes of such policies are disconcerting. Since the majority of students attend L1-medium schools in China, Japan, Malaysia, and Nepal, English as the MOI creates inequalities, brings along issues of access, and gives rise to serious concerns about the quality of teaching and learning through an incompetently commanded language (Hu 2023; Rahman et al. 2025; Rahman and Singh 2022a, 2022b). Therefore, there is a need for a policy shift from an exclusive focus on English to a bi/multilingual approach in HE in Asian contexts.

Rather than achieving noble educational goals, such as providing access to resources and upholding national cultures and languages (Rahman et al. 2020), universities in these contexts have normalized the adoption of EMI in pursuit of neoliberal objectives (Block 2018; Piller and Choi 2013). This process has established English proficiency as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991). The formulation and adoption of EMI policies often occur without adequate consultation with or preparation of stakeholders at the micro level, leading to a divide between policies and practices and generating non-compliance or resistance at the micro level. To minimize these gaps and enhance the quality of EMI programs, policymakers should provide the following support:

1. Establish English language support centers and offer effective English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses that leverage AI technologies to raise students' competence in English.
2. Implement EMI curricula in a thoughtful and inclusive manner, involving a diversity of stakeholders at the macro, meso, and micro levels.
3. Provide training for EMI instructors to teach effectively through English and ensure they have adequate time to prepare EMI teaching materials.
4. Increase the use of pedagogical strategies such as translanguaging, audiovisuals, and technology to foster greater interaction between students and teachers.

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