Identity and English as a Medium of Instruction

At the World Innovation Summit for Education in Doha, Qatar, in December of 2010, Kiong Byun, the vice-director of the Higher Education Policy Research Institute at Korea University spoke out about his and his colleagues’ concern with the increasing implementation of an English-medium of instruction policy (EMI) in Korean universities. EMI is derived from bilingual, immersion education programs, and involves varying uses of English for the teaching of school subjects (Hu, 2010a). There are varying forms of EMI, such as the prominent European variant CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), where an additional language is used more specifically for the learning and teaching of both content and language (Costa & Coleman, 2012). Byun concluded his speech stating, “academics and policymakers in South Korea, and in other countries pursuing similar policies, (need) to ask themselves whether the ‘global’ benefits of studying in English truly outweigh the detrimental impact on local students’ learning” (Cunnane, 2010). Byun’s actions need to be commended, as institutions and teachers have a responsibility to the teaching profession to interpret how pedagogical practices challenge or promote the dominant social hierarchies (Ricento, 2005).

Before Byun’s proclamation at the summit in Qatar, there had been only a few studies challenging the language policy (Hu, 2010b). However since 2010, significant contributions to the discussion have been made that are either optimistic about providing solutions for the constraints posed by the policy, (Al-Quaderi & Al Mahmud 2010; Botha, 2013; Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim & Jung, 2011; Costa & Coleman, 2012; Denver, Jensen & Mees, 2014; Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011; Hengasdeekul, Koul & Kaewkuekool, 2014; Hou, Morse, Chinag & Chen, 2013; Iyobe & Li, 2013; Kung, 2013; Lai, 2013; Lo & Lo, 2014; Mahboob, 2014; McKay, 2014; Sears, 2012; Taguchi, 2014; Wei, 2014; Werther, Denver, Jensen & Mees, 2014) and those who see the policy’s inherent difficulties as extremely difficult, or impossible to overcome (Hu, 2010a; Hu, 2010b; Hu & Alsgoff, 2010; Hu and Lei, 2014; Lei & Hu, 2014; Sultana, 2014; Wilkinson & Yasuda, 2013). This paper begins by examining the state of the problem through analysis of the policy’s benefits and detriments in research conducted since Byun’s speech, then links some of the crucial determinants to Norton’s theoretical work related to identity (Norton, 2010a; Norton, 2010b; Norton-Peirce, 1995). The paper concludes with contributions from the author based on observations as an instructor of English as a foreign language and offers suggestions for further research.

Teachers’ lack of proficiency

Before addressing the arguably more important issue related to EMI, regarding learner’s identity, other prominent themes related to the imposition of the language policy found in the literature, such as teacher’s ability, teacher training, cost, and the limitation of EMI instruction to a select few need to be addressed. According to the majority of research on the effectiveness of EMI and CLIL, teacher’s lack of proficiency of the target language (L2) is the most serious problem related to EMI (e.g. Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim & Jung, 2011; Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011; Hou, Morse, Chinag & Chen, 2013; Hu, 2010a; Hu, 2010b; Hu & Alsgoff, 2010; Hu and Lei, 2014; Kung, 2013; Werther, Denver, Jensen & Mees, 2014). Kung’s (2013) study for instance, which used questionnaires with 104 students at a university in Taiwan indicated that all students felt their teachers were not proficient bilingual
speakers which crippled their development of both content knowledge and language. Kung argues, however, that this is not an insurmountable constraint, suggesting improved training strategies for teachers and arguing that the EMI program should not be discarded because there is a lack of qualified teachers (p. 380). After conducting a study involving analysis of 18 recorded lectures at a Danish university, questionnaires completed by 1794 students from varied disciplines learning under EMI, and 30 minute interviews with each student, Werther, Denver, Jensen and Mees (2014) concur with Kung’s idea that teacher’s lack of proficiency is the most serious problem, and also agree that it is a fixable problem. Werther and colleagues also conducted in-depth interviews with 4 lecturers, all admitting to their lack of proficiency – one lecturer stating that his lack of ability and confidence to tell funny stories, improvise, and digress was cause for much concern for his practice. Results from Werther and colleagues’ study also showed that teachers who spent at least 2 months in an English speaking country as part of their training showed the highest proficiency and confidence (p. 454), which suggests a possible method of teacher training.

**Expenditure**

Using Francois Grin’s framework for evaluating a language policy, Hu and Alsgoff (2010) conclude their evaluation of EMI by arguing that as implemented in Asian contexts, EMI fails on each level. The levels of the framework include: 1) normative justification, using human rights as a standard; 2) practical feasibility, i.e. shortage of teachers; 3) allocative effectiveness, benefits and societal/financial costs; and 4) distributive justice, fairness through identification of winners and losers (p. 370). Depriving students of the enjoyment of learning through their mother tongue undermines normative justification (this contributes to a sense of disempowerment which will be addressed later in this paper), and, a shortage of qualified teachers, training, and quality control undermines the practical feasibility of EMI. Hu and Alsgoff argue that the policy has “huge resource consequences for the central government and local governments at various levels…it requires tremendous governmental spending on teacher training, teacher employment, instructional facilities and learning materials development” (p. 373). As a result of the increased expenditure, EMI programs, as Hu and Alsgoff state, benefit only a select few, “perpetuating the unequal distribution of power and access” (p. 374). Hou, Morse, Chiang, and Chen’s (2013) study involving in-depth interviews with four Taiwanese university accreditors produced similar results. All accreditors agreed that “the most difficult parts of developing quality EMI program are stable funding and qualified staff” (p. 369). However, Hou and colleagues conclude by suggesting that with the appropriate allocation of funds and with sufficient teacher training programs, EMI can benefit local communities by having more students completing their studies at home rather than traveling abroad (p. 369).

**Students’ lack of proficiency**

Second to teachers’ insufficient proficiency in the L2 and arguably the most important element of the discussion, student’s level of proficiency was amongst the most common constraints to EMI found in the research. Results from Lei and Hu’s (2014) study, for instance showed that almost all 118 EMI university students felt their proficiency level made it difficult to focus on the content, and results from testing indicated that their level of proficiency did not improve as a result (122). Their study utilized College English Test Band 6, Gardner’s Attitude/Motivation Test Battery, a 10-point Likert scale questionnaire, short semi-structured interviews, and group meetings to obtain their data at 27 universities in China.
A common response to students’ impressions of EMI in Lei and Hu’s (2014) study was that it had problems, most importantly students’ lack of proficiency (p. 115). Apart from not being able to understand much of the lectures, studies also showed that weaker students could not, or did not want to participate and practice their English in class due to their lack of proficiency, and therefore went largely unnoticed by their teachers (Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011; Lei & Hu, 2010; Sultana, 2014). Doiz and colleagues’ study, for instance, consisted of three unstructured group interviews at an hour and 30 minutes each, which was videotaped and coded. Participants including six CLIL instructors at a university in Spain, from three different faculties. Not surprisingly, the most serious problem discussed was the adequacy of teachers’ linguistic competence, and second to that was the difference in English ability among students (Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011, p. 352). Many students felt insecure and would rarely participate which the teachers felt was detrimental to their learning (p. 353). However, despite the shortcomings of CLIL as implemented at their university, they Doiz and colleagues felt positive about its future, and suggested some ways to improve it. For instance, 1) more substitute teachers to lessen the workload, 2) careful planning of the introduction of CLIL subjects, 3) increase teacher motivation to make appropriate efforts, 4) articulate a clear language policy to balance the languages taught, 5) student barriers to which inhibit participation need to be overcome, and 6) the effect of EMI on content learning needs more research.

**Lack of Proficiency and Disempowerment**

Another prominent theme throughout the literature was issues related to the disempowering of students through EMI in various ways. Sultana’s (2014) study, for instance employed student questionnaires with 115 university students in Bangladesh, and 30-minute semi-structured interviews with three of the students to extract data about students’ experiences, attitudes, and perceptions about EMI. Analysis of the questionnaires and interview data suggested that most were afraid and embarrassed about their proficiency, which made it difficult to study and made them feel inferior to others (p. 33). Sultana argues that a lack of competence in the target language in EMI classes can lead to low self-esteem, low confidence, and students’ “knowledge, life experience, and other language resources may get unrecognized and underappreciated” (p. 18). McKay’s (2014) literature review regarding the imposition of EMI in Hong Kong raised similar issues about self-esteem, concluding with the consideration that maybe EMI may not be warranted in some social contexts, and should not be pushed (p. 228). Hengsadeekul, Koul, and Kaekuekool’s (2104) investigation of motivational factors that influence preferences for EMI for university studies also provided insight into constraints on students’ learning. The study used questionnaires with 2252 at three different institutions in Thailand, in nine different fields with the goal to illuminate the level of student preference for EMI and what type of environments are most beneficial to both content knowledge and language acquisition. Results showed that learning environments that “strongly support integrative and mastery goals and minimize conditions that create language anxiety will encourage the desire to study in English-medium programs for higher education” (p. 43). Wilkinson and Yasuda (2013) concur with the belief that appropriate environments need to be created, after the outlining of a Japanese university’s CLIL course. They argue that well-designed content-based instruction is required to take into consideration the potential burden CLIL can have on each student in different ways (p. 348). Iyobe and Li’s (2013) observations of students’ reactions and development in an EMI economic course at a Japanese university over a year, also suggested that the linguistic burden needs to be lessened to allow for more cognitively demanding activities (p. 380).
Learner Identity

While concerned with improving, or in some cases shunning EMI and CLIL programs through discussions of teacher and student proficiency, funding, disempowerment, and in some cases the ideological underpinnings driving the language policy (as seen in Al Quarderi & Al Muhumud, 2010; Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim & Jung, 2011; Hu, 2010a; Hu, 2010b; Hu and Alsogoff, 2010; Hu and Lei, 2014; Lei & Hu, 2104; Piller & Cho, 2013), there is a lack in the discussion about EMI programs in relation to learner identity. Sears’ (2012) study, however, recorded and analyzed 40-minute long interviews with 76 students from a variety of cultures at a multinational middle school in Spain. An overall summation of the analysis of the data showed that “individual learners are capable of challenging unfavorable identity positions”, through establishing a sense of ownership of English, and through a resistance to identity positioning. Norton (2010a) argues that learning becomes meaningless if learners can not obtain a sense of ownership over meaning-making, and meaning-making can not be facilitated if students are not in a position of relative power (p. 10). This is in reference to developing English literacy in an ESL context, but can be equally applied to the sense of disempowerment due to a lack of proficiency or an underappreciation of learners’ knowledge and life experiences associated with EMI students in EFL contexts. Norton (1997) adopts Cornel West’s notion of identity, and how it related to “a desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety” (p. 410), and argues that people who have access to resources (linguistic or material) have access to power. As was mentioned, despite their limitations, studies have strong suggestions of alienation and powerlessness in weaker proficiency students participating in an EMI course.

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Lack in the research on EMI

Sears (2012) concludes her study of identity and EMI by stating that there should now be no further need for studies examining the ways learners negotiate their identities in EMI contexts (p. 135). A number of studies have been done related to identity in EFL contexts (e.g. Yeh, 2013; Harumi, 2010; Torres-Olave 2011), but to suggest that nothing further is needed with regards to EMI is grossly unfair and unbeneficial for the international language teaching community and for individuals such as Kiyong Byun who are genuinely concerned about understanding the effects of EMI in a deeper way. Not only are studies related to EMI and learner identity severely limited in terms of number, but also limited in terms of context and methodology employed. Sears’ study examines a large number of learners aged between 8 and 14 at a multinational school in Europe. As the literature suggests, research into the effectiveness of EMI is most needed in Asian contexts, such as China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Japan, and at the university level where it is mostly being implemented. The majority of the studies about EMI utilize questionnaires, and on occasion short interviews. Although there is value to the data presented in these methodologies, as Ricento (2005) states, first person-narratives, collective stories, longitudinal studies, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic research have generated a “rich source of data and have deepened and widened our understanding of the complexity of identity” (p. 905). The various contexts where EMI is operating inhabit sites where dialectic analysis of social identities can contribute to the literature on identity and to a greater understanding of students’ experiences within these sites.

Personal Observations and Future Considerations

Individual teacher observations are also rich sources of information and can contribute significantly to a greater understanding of classroom phenomena, and as an experienced teacher at a university in South Korea, I can share my opinion regarding English-medium instruction in an Asian, EFL context. Sears (2012) argued that students have the ability to challenge their unfavorable identity positions by, for instance embracing their own identity with pride, positioning themselves as a particular speaker of English such as a British speaker, or discussing issues with family members (p. 134). I would argue that in EFL contexts where a negotiation of identity position for the purposes of acquiring an imposed language of study, teacher encouraged student investment would better benefit university EMI learners. Norton’s (1995) notion of student investment captures the “complex relationship of language learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to speak it” (p. 9). My observations of EMI-type classes taught with the same material but in different ways suggest that students invest in the language when provided the opportunity to do so. For instance, when teaching straight from a book that promotes Western ideals without any connection to the students lives, student investment is at a bare minimum, whereas if learners are empowered through teachers’ recognition of elements related to the complex relationship of students’ investment, there is greater investment and then greater success in acquisition class-wide.
Studies that explore learner identity also have the potential to reveal important information about individual learner struggles in EMI classrooms. For instance, in-depth interviews conducted with two students at a “free-talking” English Café at a university in Korea revealed that one student was able to claim the right to speak in English classes taught solely in English due to her particular learning styles, learning preferences, and personality traits. The other participant, her friend on the other hand saw EMI-type classes as discouraging and scary due to her continued sense of being disempowered. Norton Pierce (1995) provides a similar account of a Czechoslovakian immigrant to Canada and how her resisting being marginalized or disempowered allowed her to “claim the right to speak” (p. 23). In-depth studies such as these have the potential to paint a more detailed picture of the intricacies involved in students’ experiences with EMI. As is mentioned in the literature, issues such as teacher lack of proficiency, lack of training resources, a limited number of qualified teachers, expenditure, etc., have obvious potential solutions, however, the issues related to learner identity and EMI are not so obvious. English-medium instruction is a complex and multifaceted issue, which is why more studies of student perceptions and identity would benefit the understanding of the benefits and disadvantages to the language policy greatly. Since Kiyong Byun’s speech research has of yet determined whether the disadvantages outweigh the advantages to EMI, and therefore I suggest more small-scale, in-depth, longitudinal studies to illuminate individual experiences and concerns under the language policy.

References


