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EMI in Tunisian Higher Education: a desired target but with uncertain consequences [1]

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Abstract

In this chapter, I present research findings from a study on university lecturers' views towards English as a medium of instruction in a public university in Tunisia. Through semi-structured interviews with four university lecturers, this chapter highlights the tensions between the global status of English and the local requirements that reinforce the status of French in the Tunisian job market. Furthermore, the study finds that the lack of a coherent educational language policy can produce sentiments of professional anxiety among university lecturers who are concerned about the delivery of equitable education that prepares students for employment. The chapter concludes with recommendations for policy makers on the importance of developing a language policy in consultation with different stakeholders, including employers. It also emphasises the need to consider issues of language access, inequalities and epistemic injustice as part of any national efforts to develop educational language policies.

Introduction

The global spread of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in higher education has attracted a lot of research attention in the past few years. Most of this research directs the attention to the role of neoliberal ideologies in education that seek to justify the increasing dominance of English as the medium of instruction at tertiary level. Neoliberal buzzwords such as knowledge-based economy, human capital, linguistic capital, social mobility, competition, innovation, internationalisation and the job market (Holborrow 2013; Hultgren 2019) are often invoked to rationalise decisions for educational language policies supportive of English. These neoliberal discourses are inextricably linked to globalisation which has driven the internationalisation of higher education as a sector. Internationalisation means different things in different places and to different stakeholders. For example, Coleman (2013) explains that internationalisation entails some sort of competition such as world university rankings, international exchanges and opportunities, attracting fee-paying international students, and recruiting better-qualified international staff and gifted research students. For this competition to be logistically operationalised, a key linguistic tax needs to be paid. That is, the need to adopt one global language to facilitate global movement, exchanges and comparisons. This language is English with its colonial history, ideological hegemony, economic power, political authority, and social dominance. Li (2013) argues that this spread of English has significantly contributed to the disruption of local language ecologies in multilingual societies around the world, producing ideological preferences for English as the language of instruction particularly at higher levels of study. Commenting on this situation, Phillipson (2009) describes the increasing offerings of university degrees through the medium of English as a pandemic that gives English an unprecedented global status and privileges its native speakers. In addition, it creates a system of linguistic stratification (Piller, 2016), whereby English dominates the market and hence 'becomes the

norm against which the prices of the other modes of expression, and with them the values of the various competences, are defined' (Bourdieu, 1977: 652). Consequently, the ideological apparatus associated with English in higher education produces dreams and aspirations in the minds of university students who might be (mis)led to believe that English is the answer to their social mobility challenges. Responding to this, Liyanage and Canagarajah (2019: 432) maintain that there is 'no guarantee that English proficiency will improve or change people's life conditions'.

This chapter discusses university lecturers' views towards the status of English as a medium of instruction in Tunisian higher education. It starts by presenting a brief contextual background about Tunisia and its educational language policies before it problematises EMI as a label. After that, the chapter presents three key challenges associated with EMI, namely: access issues, inequality and epistemic injustice. The sections that follow introduce the study's research questions which are followed by a discussion about the study's methodological design and research findings. Finally, the chapter concludes with some recommendations for policy makers and higher education practitioners.

Contextual Background

Tunisia is a North African country with a population of 11,882,127 people, according to the latest United Nations estimates (Worldometers, 2020). Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956. The country's income level as classified by the World Bank is lower middle income (World Bank, 2019). Sociolinguistically, Tunisia is a highly multilingual country. Its residents speak different varieties of Arabic including Darjah Arabic and Standard Arabic; in addition to French, Berber and some Italian and English repertoires.

Regarding the official language policies in Tunisia, the Tunisian constitution specifies Arabic as the official, national language of the country. It does not specify the country's first

and second foreign languages, and therefore, there is no official policy that regulates the status of French which is a dominant colonial language in the country. Primary education is taught through the medium of Arabic. French and English are introduced as foreign language subjects in Grades 3 and 6 respectively. Moving to secondary education, Tunisian students are faced with a major linguistic challenge since some intellectually demanding school subjects such as maths and science are taught in French.

As for higher education, most university degrees are taught through the medium of French, with the exception of disciplines such as history, philosophy, journalism, Islamic studies and Arabic literature which are taught in Standard Arabic. However, some universities in the capital city of Tunis have gradually started to introduce some business, engineering and law degrees delivered through the medium of English. This chapter presents comments from university lecturers on this linguistic shift.

Problematising EMI as a label

There are two key inherent problems with the term 'English as a medium of instruction'. First, a medium of instruction, argues Kyeyune (2003), should be an enabling tool. A tool through which learning, teaching, sharing, discussing and debating occurs. However, by describing English as a medium of instruction, the term misleadingly suggests that the linguistic ability to perform these educational tasks is already established. In many EMI contexts, English cannot be described as a tool or a medium that enables teaching and learning. Rather, it is a *barrier* that prevents teachers from further elaborating the content of their sessions and inhibits learners from critically engaging with the content of their lessons.

The second problem with the term is in relation to the E. With reference to the role of English in EMI settings, Pecorari and Malmström (2018, 499) explain that 'it is the language used for instructional purposes'. Yet, there is no consensus on the type of English used in

these contexts because each has its own characteristics (Doiz, Lasagabaster, and Sierra 2013, 219), its language ideologies and its scope for accessing and assessing linguistic resources (Busch 2012, 520). That said, the exclusive reference to English in the term shields and undermines the translingual practices that occur in multilingual classrooms, giving the impression that learning in EMI contexts occurs only through English monolingual norms. As such, the term is ideologically loaded with connotations that reinforce the supremacy of English which leaves other languages and repertoires unrecognised.

Having problematised the label which I continue to use here bearing in mind its caveats, I now move to problematising EMI as an educational quest.

EMI as an educational quest: issues of access, inequality and epistemic injustice

In this section, I discuss some of the challenges caused by the use of English as a medium of instruction in contexts where English is not a main language for the majority of the population. Namely, I discuss issues of access, inequality and epistemic injustice.

Issues of access refer to the linguistic disparity between individuals that is mainly attributed to unequal access to economic and technological resources. While state education in Tunisia offers the teaching of English as a foreign language from Grade 6, there is a difference between English as a subject and English as a medium of instruction. The former is mainly taught in Tunisia through grammar rules and thematic vocabulary lists, whereas the latter requires advanced linguistic proficiency that enables not only the expression and understanding of academic content but also communicative skills to discuss, negotiate, analyse and debate. This means that while state education offers English as a subject to all students, not all students are equally equipped with repertoires required for EMI. This lack of linguistic resources requires individual investment in developing additional repertoires. Access to these repertoires requires economic resources (e.g. private tutoring), as well as

technological resources (e.g. online tutoring, online educational resources). This access is not equally distributed across the society and is mainly mediated through social class. As a result, those with access to advanced English repertoires are granted privilege in an educational arrangement thought to be just. Such an arrangement does not take into consideration regional, socio-economic and infra-structural disparities and their impact on the quality of education that individuals receive.

Inequality is another challenge which is directly linked to the first. The unequal distribution of linguistic resources creates unequal distribution of social capital. In her study on how university students conceptualise English in EMI, Kuteeva (2019) discusses two types of inequality in EMI settings. First, she explains that native varieties of English are valued by the students who tend to assign low status to post-colonial and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) varieties of English. This creates a situation of linguistic privilege (Piller, 2016), favouring English native speakers. Second, she argues that English creates a mechanism of elite formation among university students, disadvantaging those who resort to translingual practices. Commenting on this, she maintains that, '[t]ranslanguaging can … function as a mechanism of exclusion and reinforcement of language standards by a group of "elite" translinguals'.

In addition to issues of access and inequality, EMI programmes can be complicit in producing epistemic injustice. This challenge is concerned with the role of language in decolonial deconstruction and knowledge production. Stroud and Kerfoot (2020: 3) explain that knowledge production through European languages leads to insidious consequences such as exclusionary language policies and oppressive language ideologies. By insisting on the supremacy of English in EMI programmes, multilingual and multimodal semiotic resources become invisible, leading to the misrecognition of multilingual identities and the downgrading of knowledge produced in languages other than English.

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The discussion of these challenges highlights the need to carefully consider the consequences of developing educational policies based on the exclusive use of English. In the following sections, I explore how university lecturers in a Tunisian institution view the shift to English and highlight some wider social implications of this educational policy.

The Study

Utilising qualitative content analysis of interview data with four university lecturers, this chapter addresses the following research question:

How do Tunisian university lecturers talk about the suitability of embracing English as a medium of instruction in higher education?

The case reported herein is part of a larger British Council project that explored readiness for EMI in Tunisia in different higher education institutions (Badwan, 2019a). This case was chosen because it comes from a public institution that has already embraced EMI. Students admitted to this institution need to meet a high entry requirement based on their baccalaureate exam. They also need to pass a locally designed English test.

After obtaining permission to access the institution, I introduced myself to many lecturers and described the project and what participation entails. Four participants volunteered to take part in the study. Interviews took place in a quiet classroom. The following table (Table 1) introduces the participants and provides details about the duration of the semi- structured interviews.

Interview no.	Duration	Gender	Discipline
Interview 1	40:44	Male	Mathematics
Interview 2	13:50	Female	Mathematics
Interview 3	38:28	Female	Marketing
Interview 4	38:40	Male	International Politics

Table 1: Introducing the participants

Findings: Lecturers' professional anxieties

While discussing EMI and its value to their students, the lecturers in this case study reported sentiments of professional anxieties caused by different reasons. The first reason is the uncertainty about the suitability of EMI considering local requirements. Another reason for this professional anxiety is caused by concerns about students' linguistic abilities and readiness for EMI. The final reason is related to questions about the identity of the country and its education system. I present these types of anxieties in relation to interview data below.

Uncertainty about the suitability of EMI

Lecturers' interviews indicate that while they are convinced that English enables their students to study and work abroad, they maintain the view that French is a de facto pre-requisite for employment in Tunisia. The lecturer in interview (1), while highlighting that the decision to use EMI in his institution was made based on using language as a differentiation marker, a strategy for brand-building and attracting students, explains that:

> Most enterprises, most businesses in Tunisia require French so students
>
> need to make sure that their French is good enough to communicate.
>
> (Interview 1)

This tension between the prestigious global status of English and the dominant status of French in the country was featured in the feedback the institution received from parents and employers as the lecturer in interview (4) demonstrates:

> The only serious criticism we've received is that 80% of our students
>
> remain in Tunisia. 15% leave, go. It is an issue with brain drain but it is a
>
> relatively small percentage and I am for an open door policy. The ones who
>
> stay in Tunisia are then asked to switch from commercial English to

commercial French. That's why we started to teach two business courses in French to respond to the Tunisian market.

In addition, the above quotation shows how English is ideologically perceived as a tool that facilitates brain drain, which is a common view that was echoed by several educators in the wider study. It is worth highlighting that French was not linked to brain drain even though many educators explained that many of their graduates work in France after completing their academic qualifications. Concerns about brain drain and retaining graduates were raised by the teacher in interview (3):

We're preparing students to what? Are you preparing them for the Tunisian market? Maybe then there is no need for English. But if you are preparing them to leave the country, this is happening now and we don't have to hide this. We are preparing them to go to Germany, Canada. Again, we are preparing them for what? We should provide positions and an environment that welcomes them. Otherwise, they'll be depressed, anxious and will create problems. Some are going abroad and this is a short term solution as they are not asking the government to employ them but we are preparing them for others who did not invest in them or spend money to educate them. So we are losing. We are avoiding problems but we are losing but providing people to work for other countries.

This lecturer expresses a sense of professional anxiety, as she is not sure about the purpose of the education she delivers is. She is also concerned about the social consequences of the mismatch between educational language polices and employment requirements, and how it could cause unemployment and mental health problems among the Tunisian youth. Later in the interview, she admits that it is hard to be certain about what her students need:

> Sometimes English is a barrier. If they learn everything in English and are
> employed in a company where everything is required in French, it is
> difficult for them to shift to French again. At the same time, they will have
> access to new opportunities. It is hard to tell.

On the other hand, the lecturer in interview (2) seems more confident that EMI is part of a wider social change that aims to challenge the status of French:

> The mentality in Tunisia is changing. Parents are pushing their kids to
> study in English from a young age. English definitely has future here. The
> Tunisians are trying to detach themselves from the French influence. There
> is a mind-set change in the country.

Lecturers' responses above reflect some wider debates in Tunisia regarding the language of instruction in HE and its alignment with local and global demands. EMI, in this complex socio-political context, offers both an opportunity and a barrier in a chicken-and-egg situation. Should change start with the language of instruction in HE or should it start with employers changing the linguistic expectations they place on university graduates? Due to the lack of coordination between policy influencers, the lecturers expressed a sense of professional anxiety regarding the shift to English (see also Badwan, 2019b).

Concerns about students' readiness for EMI

Two of the participants in this study raised concerns about students' readiness for EMI. The lecturer in interview (3) argues that:

> I do not think that all students are prepared for such an experience. They
> need to be prepared earlier to make them ready for HE in English

Moreover, she highlights that readiness for EMI across the country is not consistent. In the following quotation, she draws attention to regional disparities and how they influence educational language policies:

> I worked in another part of Tunisia and even if I teach in French they don't understand it. There are differences between regions. English worked in pioneering schools but when we consider other schools, other regions they are very different.

Similarly, the lecturer in interview (2) explains the types of language skills that her students need to develop further in order to improve readiness for EMI:

> They don't have a problem understanding me but they have a problem with practising it because they don't use it outside university…Students are capable of expressing themselves in writing but they are not very comfortable speaking in English.

Both lecturers explain that they resort to translingual practices to engage students and to offer them the chance to discuss and comment on the educational content. Without these practices, the students could feel alienated and silenced. In addition, the lecturer in interview (3) explains that the use of Arabic Darjah changes the feel in the room especially when she notices that her students are tired.

Nonetheless, the other two lecturers who did not raise concerns about EMI readiness did not make a distinction between general English skills and the academic repertoires required for EMI. For example, the lecturer in interview (1) reports that they recruit the most competitive students with the highest baccalaureate English results and hence he does not see issues concerning readiness for EMI. In a similar vein, the lecturer in interview (4) argues that younger generations are more proficient in English:

> The new generation have smart phones to listen to things all the time. The
>
> difference between this generation and the one before is massive. Current
>
> 18 years are relatively comfortable with English

These views suggest the complexity of discussing readiness for EMI. Without an awareness about the range of repertoires and skills required for successful engagement with EMI programmes, the common perception that younger generations are attached to their devices and are more proficient in English could shield the linguistic challenges caused by EMI policies.

Questions about the identity of the country and its education system

Commenting on language educational policies in Tunisian education, two lecturers mention concerns about the identity of the country and its education system. For instance, the lecturer in interview (3) speaks about the need for a national policy and explains that the majority of the students require advanced French repertoires:

> I don't know what they [the government] will be doing with French but if
>
> the government will have relations with English-speaking countries English
>
> will be mandatory. Otherwise, English might work for the short term….
>
> We have a lot of funding and projects that require French in Tunisia.
>
> Students want to study abroad but UK's costs of education is very high and
>
> it will not work for the majority.

In addition, the lecturer in interview (4) shares the concern that the spread of EMI raises questions about the identity of Tunisia:

> We expect that many other public universities will start giving courses or
>
> even full programmes in English. I would expect other types of arguments
>
> regarding the identity of the country… I am not for a full replacement…

> Tunisian university education gives little importance to Arabic unless you
>
> are going to study Islamic studies

In other words, the lecturers in this theme call for a national discussion about language in education and the implications of existing practices on the national identity of the country.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this case study indicate that while EMI remains a desired outcome in response to neoliberal pressures that seek to homogenise the global higher education sector, the spread of EMI in Tunisia continues to raise questions about its suitability for local demands and concerns about language access and social inequalities. For many university lecturers, English is not seen as an enabling tool that facilitates learning and becoming. Rather, it is a linguistic barrier with uncertain consequences. So what needs to be done to address this educational challenge?

Kyeyune (2003: 179) explains that '[m]any educators believe in the logic of suggesting that if children are failing to learn through English, the obvious alternative is the mother tongue'. However, this suggestion is without challenges. One of the key challenges is domain loss and lack of academic resources in Arabic. One possible middle grounds solution is to consider multilingual education and training in translanguaging as the medium of instruction. This is an equitable solution in a highly multilingual country. University lecturers and students have access to a range of shared multilingual resources that they can draw on and utilise. In doing so, education can contribute to addressing issues of epistemic injustices by validating the multilingual identities of individuals and recognising alternative ways for knowledge production that are not mainly governed by Anglo-centric norms.

To address the uncertainty concerns raised by the lecturers in this study, it is important for policy makers at different levels, be national or local, to engage with a range of

language policy influencers such as teachers, students, parents, employers and educational funding agencies in order to develop a coherent policy that aligns the education system with local and global demands (Badwan, 2019b). As part of these wider national consultations, it is crucial to draw attention to issues of language access, inequality and epistemic injustice and to consider policies that address these challenges in order to produce just arrangements. As such, this study agrees with Kirkpatrick's (2019) recommendation that the implementation of EMI cannot be successful without engaging with all stakeholders. It is possible that these consultations could push language policies in different directions as tensions between the local and the global emerge. However, I would argue that the surfacing of these tensions is beneficial to developing national and local decisions about educational priorities. Coordinating these efforts and consultations means offering the Tunisian youth more certainty about the language(s) of instructions and the value of their university degrees.

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