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Editorial

English as a Medium of Instruction in Postcolonial contexts: moving the debate forward

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Editorial

English as a Medium of Instruction in Postcolonial contexts: moving the debate forward

This special issue brings together scholars from the fields of language education and comparative education to critically discuss the issues of English as a Medium of instruction in postcolonial contexts. Almost all low- and middle-income, postcolonial countries now use English or another ‘global language’ as the medium of instruction at secondary and tertiary level. An increasing number use English language as a medium of instruction in the latter stages of primary schooling and at pre-school levels although it is not the mother tongue for the majority of learners. The predominance of English is linked in part to the colonial and postcolonial legacies that have favoured global languages and that have often led to the undervaluing and underdevelopment of indigenous languages. In the context of globalisation it is also linked to a view that widespread proficiency in English is a key indicator for expected economic development (Crystal 2003; Casale and Posel 2011; Dearden 2014). Proficiency in English is often presumed with little or no provision made for supporting language development. Years of research evidence shows how consequently for many students living in communities where English is not spoken outside of school, English medium of instruction acts as a barrier to engagement with the curriculum (see Brock-Utne et al. 2010). This has been described by Johnson and Swain (1994) as the ‘Language 2 (L2) proficiency gap’ with other authors arguing that it is one of the main equity issues in the low income world with implications for social justice (Probyn 2005; Alidou et al. 2006).

The nature of this language proficiency gap is especially pertinent in the context of the current emphasis on learning and the quality of education in current debates and in the context of the Education Sustainable Development Goal. As several contributors to the special issue make clear, language is central to learning but is rarely given sufficient prominence in international debates. Furthermore, much of the existing debate on the use of English as a medium of instruction in postcolonial countries tends to be highly polarized. On the one hand there is a dominant, instrumentalist view held by many policy makers, which links the use of English to economic growth. This instrumentalist approach also tends to be shared by many parents who can perceive early immersion in English as essential for success in the labour market (Tembe & Norton, 2011). This approach does not take account of the enormous variety of linguistic contexts within and between postcolonial countries and how these impact on the linguistic needs and educational outcomes of different groups of disadvantaged learners. These differences in context militate against a 'one size fits all' approach and the unproblematic transfer of language policies across contexts.

On the other side of the debate, exponents of mother-tongue based education advocate education in the mother tongue as a human right (see Benson & Kosonen, 2013). These scholars argue convincingly for mother-tongue based education for a minimum of six years, seeing it as both essential for pedagogical reasons and to support the maintenance of wider language rights in and through education. While there is significant value in this literature promoting mother tongue based education, particularly in the first six years, the polarised nature of the debate has tended to leave issues related to the processes of learning in EMI classrooms under-researched. The literature that does exist focuses on teachers' challenges in implementing language-in-education policies (see, for example,

Clegg & Afitska, 2011; Early & Norton, 2014). The editors of this special issue took as a starting point that greater understanding of existing challenges for learners and educators and potential strategies that can support more effective teaching and learning in EMI classrooms can improve the quality of education in a range of postcolonial contexts.

The first collection of papers provide an overview of the key issues related to learning in English medium instruction (EMI) contexts that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between learning through the medium of English, the development of linguistic capabilities and learning outcomes for different groups of learners in low- and middle-income postcolonial countries where the majority do not speak English as a mother tongue. Trudell's paper introduces findings from a review of language-in-education policies from across East and Southern Africa. By drawing on these policies and the research literature that has studied the impact of such policies, the paper builds a strong evidence base showing how learning through the medium of English impacts significantly on learner outcomes. Trudell's conclusions question the policy assumptions that a single language of instruction is preferable and puts forward the case for effective mother-tongue based bilingual education.

Erling et al.'s article draws on relevant literature from two postcolonial countries – India and Ghana – to provide an overview of the realities facing learners and educators in an array of EMI contexts. The authors argue that English language education should be part of a more holistic language-in-education policy that promotes 'sustainable additive multilingualism' understood as mobilising students' mother tongues in education as a resource to help meet educational needs and the rising demand for English. Kuchah's paper focuses on one particularly interesting case study of EMI. He shows that the use of

EMI in Cameroon is highly political and situated within the postcolonial divides of French and English speaking parts of the country. Qualitative findings from learners, teachers and parents show that their learning in English impacts on educational quality. Kuchah suggests that given the politicised nature of the English-French bilingual education policy, EMI classrooms will remain the reality and that more needs to be done to support learners who are struggling to learn effectively in such contexts.

The second set of articles identify and critically discuss the potential of different strategies for the development of both linguistic capabilities and learning outcomes of disadvantaged groups learning in the medium of English. These strategies, in different ways, stem from bilingual practices and the papers highlight the importance of the inclusion of learners' first language in EMI classrooms, particularly in the transitional years. These authors draw on theoretical developments in which languages are increasingly seen not as monolithic but as fluid entities with permeable boundaries, leading in turn to more imaginative and strategic approaches to language use in multilingual contexts on the one hand and to the recognition of a range of 'Englishes' on the other.

Milligan et al.'s paper presents a convincing argument for the role of language supportive learning in Rwandan EMI classrooms. The paper draws on positive findings related to learners' outcomes and engagement across the curriculum when language supportive textbooks are introduced into the classroom. Desai's paper similarly considers potential strategies to support learning in English in one urban context of South Africa. This is situated within a wider discussion of the political and economic environments that shape EMI policy. A key finding that emerges from across Milligan et al.'s and Desai's papers

is the potential impact that such language supportive and bilingual practices could have on learning for all learners, particularly those in socio-disadvantaged rural and urban contexts.

Clegg and Simpson's paper contributes to the limited but growing recognition of the potential of the use of bilingual approaches that have been used for many years in high income countries in low and middle-income, postcolonial settings for developing linguistic capabilities in both indigenous and global languages. The article considers a range of relevant bilingual and language supportive practices that may bring about positive improvements to EMI policies across Sub-Saharan Africa.

The final group of papers in the special issue are more focused on a critical analysis of language-in-education policy in postcolonial contexts. Barrett and Bainton's paper uses an example of an innovation in Tanzania that aims to improve language and subject learning amongst lower secondary school students making the transition from using an African language, Kiswahili, to using a global language, English as the language of instruction to develop a framework for evaluating learning processes and outcomes that is grounded in sociocultural theories of learning. The framework aims to take into account the specific cognitive and language demands of subject learning in secondary education consistent with principles of sustainable development. The authors conclude that implementing the 2030 education goals as part of a broader ambition towards sustainable development, demands re-contextualisation of its targets in a way that makes explicit our underpinning theories of learning including language learning.

Kedzierski's paper applies a Critical Cultural Political Economy of Education (CCPEE) approach to explore the use of EMI at tertiary level in the East Asian context. Drawing on an existing evidence base the author develops a cogent theoretical account of historically and spatially situated socio-political and socio-economic processes that have favoured the use of EMI in the region. The focus is on the dialectical relationship between hegemonic imaginaries (semiosis) and material practices in relation to the value attached to particular linguistic resources, where value is understood in both economic and symbolic terms, and how this is often tied to neoliberalism and discourses of competitiveness in the context of the knowledge economy.

The final paper in the collection builds on many of the key arguments from across the special issue to develop a framework for learning in English based on theories of social justice and human capabilities. Tikly contends that existing instrumentalist and rights based perspectives rarely take sufficient account of the complexity of language rights and the relationship between language, education and development in the postcolonial world. Critically building on a rights approach, the paper argues, from a social justice perspective, for the need to develop capabilities in both indigenous and global languages. The article considers the implications of considering language-in-education as a capability that has the potential to contribute to human well-being and to social justice. It considers the pedagogical, institutional and wider social barriers to achieving linguistic social justice in education and means for overcoming these barriers. Based on this understanding Tikly sets out a research agenda aimed at supporting the realisation of linguistic social justice in education across the three inter-related domains of the school, the home/community and the education system.

It is hoped that the contributions to this special issue will both take the debate forward regarding English as a Medium of Instruction in postcolonial countries and lead to greater discussion in the context of current global agendas of the implications of learning in English for the quality of education for all learners.

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