

# Language injustice and social equity in EMI policies in China

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the issue of language injustice in implementing English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in China, with a focus on social justice and language ideologies. In China, EMI is seen as crucial for developing globally competitive students. However, most EMI policies advocate for English-only instruction, disregarding the multilingual realities of China. This leads to deviations from teaching objectives and potential injustices for both teachers and students. This paper reviews EMI policies since 2001, highlighting the absence of detailed national guidelines, which results in schools adapting EMI to their specific circumstances. English-only policies may exacerbate educational inequalities, making it challenging for rural and public school students to meet EMI's English language requirements, thus impeding access to quality education. This paper advocates for a more inclusive EMI approach that acknowledges and utilizes multilingual resources to promote social justice, ensuring all students have equal access to academic knowledge. Additionally, the paper suggests future research should examine how EMI policymakers and stakeholders perceive multilingualism and its impacts on social justice in classrooms and society at large.

**Key words:** monolingualism; (bi-)multilingualism; EMI; China; justice

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## 1 Introduction

In a developing country like China, English has been a significant cultural capital and a tool for social mobility, issues of equity, and social justice related to English as a medium of instruction (EMI). EMI is defined as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English" [1]. In China, implementing EMI has been regarded as a necessity for cultivating local students with global competitiveness and attracting international students [2]. Scholars have increasingly focused on the implementation of EMI at the school and practical levels and have identified two main language ideologies during its implementation. One is rigid monolingualism, which ignores the fluidity of languages used for communication. The other is translanguaging or multilingualism, which advocates the linguistic repertoire that regards languages and cultures as a resource rather than a hindrance [3]. Without a national guideline, the effectiveness of EMI largely depends on schools and teachers, who exert the impact of EMI on students.

This paper first reviews EMI policies and practices, giving an overall map of language ideologies that existed in EMI implementation in China. It then discusses language ideologies from a social justice perspective and how these language ideologies promote social (in)justice in the classrooms and society at large, aiming to raise the multilingualism awareness of EMI stakeholders and promote social justice from a bottom-up level.

## **2 Literature review on EMI policy and practices in China**

In the context of China, the progression of EMI has been accelerated by numerous national policy initiatives since 2001[2][4][5]. These policy initiatives advocate the construction and implementation of EMI courses; however, the lack of an official national document detailing the procedures for implementing EMI into practice is a concern. The absence of such documentation leaves room for schools to personalize EMI policies based on their specific situations, including their funding budgets, teachers' capabilities, students' abilities, and so forth.

Various scholars have scrutinized EMI policies using different analysis methods, including critical discourse analysis (CDA) and thematic analysis. They have found that most of these policies advocate for an English-only approach, arguing that a monolingual English-centric setting is optimal for Chinese students to acquire subject knowledge. However, there are two primary reasons why the English-only policy should be reevaluated. The first one is the ignorance and neglect of bilingual or multilingual environments. According to the definition of EMI, the teaching contexts of EMI are the countries or jurisdictions where the L1 of the majority of the population is not English [1]. Thus, the multilingual reality must be addressed in both the national environments and classroom teaching practices.

The other is the displacement of EMI objectives. According to the objectives of EMI [1], EMI is supposed to be content-oriented instead of language-focused. In other words, the primary and explicit teaching and learning objective of EMI courses is subject knowledge, although improving English language proficiency is regarded as the subordinate and implicit objective by some students. It should be noted that strict English-only instruction in the classrooms may result in students' misunderstanding or failing to understand the subject knowledge. Consequently, EMI courses seem to deviate from their original intentions in this manner.

Given the two major factors, most Chinese classrooms are claimed to be translingual or multilingual. Most teachers and students advocate that using the mother language aids in comprehending subject knowledge without the need to simplify the teaching contents, which aligns with the primary objective of the EMI courses. Nevertheless, some teachers use the English language only in the classroom with the compensation of content simplification. Students who support English-only policies are due to their expectations for improving English language proficiency.

## **3 Discussion of EMI policies and practices from social justice lens**

Given the contradictory situation between monolingual ideology and translingual or multilingual ideology, it is worth rethinking the language used in EMI courses and policies from social justice lens.

Although most EMI policies propose English monolingual ideologies, it has been argued that using English as the only medium may not meet the content-oriented objectives but rather promote English hegemony and diminish the belongings of local languages and cultures. English monolingual ideologies are mainly rooted in neoliberalism and globalization, viewing English as a capital [6]. Believing English monolingualism as the only practical and successful English learning strategy is ingrained in English hegemony and undermines multilingual approaches' intrinsic value and potential. English hegemony is primarily related to history. The colonial expansion led to the spread of the English language. English has been viewed as the prioritized language and the access to the upper class. Learning English has been a way of enforcing English hegemony, as nations have been divided into three circles according to their languages [7]. English-speaking countries are in a central circle, whose English has been viewed as native, standard and perfect for a long time, pursued by English learners in the expanding circle who speak English as a foreign language. The pursuit of native, standard, and perfect English has never stopped and changed for a long time. It continues to influence the current policies concerning English teaching, including EMI. English-only EMI policies keep strengthening the imbalance, inequality and injustice rooted in the English language hegemony.

As for the teaching practices of EMI, they have enlarged the existing gap of social injustice. In EMI, English is the only medium of teaching and learning academic knowledge, meaning that English language proficiency is a threshold for teachers and students. EMI teachers are mostly subject teachers. They may not have sufficient English to teach subject knowledge or lack training to teach subject knowledge in another language, English in this case. In this way, even though these teachers are highly proficient in their subjects, they may only teach subject knowledge insufficiently with limited English or without effective instruction in another language. This is an injustice for students as they lose the opportunity to acquire sufficient subject knowledge. Some argue that teachers should prepare the English language when they prepare content for teaching. This seems to go against EMI's content-oriented objective.

Apart from teachers, students also face injustices in the EMI classrooms. The first one is the language requirements set before attending EMI courses in many universities. The language requirements are usually based on the score of a single test, aiming to screen students with sufficient English knowledge regardless of their subject knowledge, being a barrier for students with English language deficiencies. English threshold divides students into groups simply based on their English requirements without considering their previous education experiences that are highly connected to their classes and economic conditions. Without accessing sufficient teaching and learning resources, students in rural areas tend to have lower English language proficiency. Students from private schools may have higher English language proficiency. Under this condition, students from urban areas and/or private schools are likely to obtain sufficient English and meet the English threshold set for the EMI entry level. In other words, students from rural areas and/or public schools may have fewer chances to attend EMI courses simply due to their inadequate English proficiency caused by their class and economic conditions. This strengthens education inequity, which is caused by inequality of class and economy.

The second injustice for students is the limited access to more proficient subject knowledge caused by insufficient English language. Students who meet the English language requirements for EMI courses may also find it challenging to understand, comprehend, and acquire subject knowledge in English. Therefore, they have to invest more time and energy in acquiring academic knowledge in English-only classrooms, which fails to satisfy the content-oriented objective of EMI. Using mother languages seems to be a compromise to help students understand and comprehend academic knowledge regardless of their English proficiency level. Using translanguaging or multilingualism in EMI classrooms also benefits students by allowing them to embrace their mother languages and cultures, and view language with an inclusive mindset.

#### **4 Conclusion**

This paper explored the complexities and challenges of EMI in China, particularly through the lens of social justice and language ideologies. From a social justice perspective, the monolingual ideology in EMI reinforces English hegemony, marginalizes local languages and cultures and perpetuates educational inequities. To address these issues, it is essential to adopt a more inclusive approach to EMI that recognizes and leverages the multilingual abilities of both teachers and students. Adopting translanguaging and multilingual approaches should align with the content-oriented goals of EMI and promote social justice by ensuring that all students, regardless of their linguistic background, have equal access to quality education. Policies and practices that support translanguaging can help bridge the gap between language proficiency and subject comprehension, fostering a more equitable and effective educational environment. This paper is based on the literature review and the theoretical analysis, lacking the support of empirical research and data. Future research can explore how EMI policymakers and stakeholders perceive multilingualism in EMI classrooms and its influence on social justice in the classrooms and society at large.

## Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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