

S.A. Manan¹, A. Kazhigaliyeva^{2*}

¹Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan;

²Astana International University, Astana, Kazakhstan

(Corresponding author. E-mail: aigerim.kazhigaliyeva@aiu.edu.kz)

¹ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8703-5876>

²ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2720-4458>

Ethnography of English medium instruction policy and practice in the multilingual context of a private university in Kazakhstan

The research is devoted to the Ethnography of English Medium of Instruction policy and practice in the multilingual context of a private university in Kazakhstan. The main aim of the study is to investigate language-in-education policy and practice at a private EMI university in Astana. The research consists of six sections. It includes the context of the study and the central issue, the rationale for this research where I explain why I decided to focus on the EMI policy and practice. The results provide sufficient evidence for other stakeholders such as policymakers to prioritize aligning EMI policy aims with institutional realities, considering the diverse linguistic landscape. Specific areas that may be considered include comprehensive English proficiency assessments for students and faculty before enrolling in EMI programs, which could help evaluate preparedness and identify areas for improvement. To implement EMI effectively, institutions must establish robust support structures for both students and faculty. Faculty members should receive adequate training and resources to adapt to multilingual classrooms, incorporating local languages to enhance comprehension. Enhanced institutional support, such as reducing workloads and offering pedagogical assistance, will help teachers address challenges related to EMI.

Keywords: English Medium of Instruction (EMI), Ethnography of English Medium of Instruction, EMI programs, EMI policy, multilingual context, private university, EMI environment, globalization

Introduction

The topic of this research study is Ethnography of English Medium of Instruction policy and practice in the multilingual context of a private university in Kazakhstan. The main aim of this research study is to investigate language-in-education policy and practice at a private EMI university in Astana. The chapter consists of six sections. It includes the context of the study and the central issue, the rationale for this research where I explain why I decided to focus on the EMI policy and practice. Next, I present the research questions, the aim of the study, and the nature and significance of the study. The final section provides an outline of the study.

The Context for This Study and the Central Issue

Globalization has changed policies towards higher education institutions and given rise to the process of internationalization (Bowles & Murphy, 2020; Doiz et al., 2012; Dumanig & Symaco, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2011; MSHE, 2023; Rose & McKinley, 2018; Shohamy, 2007) [1-7]. Internationalization of higher education and the use of the English language as a lingua franca in academia appears to drive educational institutions to introduce English medium instruction (EMI) programs, largely since most of the universities are competing for students' fees to attract international students into educational institutions [1], [8].

As a result, there is an increase in the number of courses offered by different university programs using EMI policy. Scholars also argue that the process of internationalization of higher education has profound implications not only for teaching and learning contents through the English language, but also has effects on overall language practices and language choices in the classrooms. Evidently, such policies largely promote English-only practices at the expense of native/indigenous languages, thus potentially leading to the demise of multilingualism by overemphasizing English [2], [4], [8].

Due to the dominance of the English-speaking countries and the need to compete in the global arena, the role of the English language has increased tremendously. English is not just a foreign language, but it has

become the most widespread language used in academia across the world as a result of the internationalization of higher education [1], [8], [9].

Like many other Asian countries, the Republic of Kazakhstan has also been significantly influenced by the wave of globalization and internationalization of higher education. We find that the policy of internationalization of education has affected various aspects of the higher education system such as the concepts of language in education policy, EMI, employability, academic mobility, international research, staff mobility, internationalization of institutions [2], [10-12].

Traditionally, university courses in Kazakhstan have been taught in Russian or Kazakh. However, in 2006 the former president initiated a new policy called the “Trinity of languages” (Address of the former president of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev, to the People of Kazakhstan, 2007). According to this project, Kazakhstani citizens should develop Kazakh as the state language, maintain Russian as the language of interethnic communication and learn English as the language for successful integration into the global economy. In response to these initiatives, universities are introducing programs that educate students in Russian, English, and Kazakh to comply with the new policy. According to reports from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MSHE, 2023), over 70 universities, including international campuses of EMI universities, are engaged in implementing trilingual and English Medium Instruction (EMI) as part of the trilingual policy (MSHE 2023) [5].

Kazakhstan has made significant progress in internationalizing its higher education system by implementing a trilingual education strategy, participating in the Bologna Process, establishing collaborations with foreign universities, and promoting academic mobility. As a result, there has been a substantial rise in the number of EMI programs provided by institutions in Kazakhstan. However, despite the increasing popularity of EMI, there is a noticeable lack of empirical data regarding EMI implementation in Kazakhstan [12].

Methods and materials

Different levels of English proficiency among instructors and students remain a chronic challenge despite substantial government funding. This disparity significantly affects both teaching and learning. Additionally, there are limited opportunities for professional development for EMI teachers (Goodman et al., 2022) [13], a scarcity of appropriate learning materials (Manan et al., 2023) [12], and an institutional culture lacking in both an English-speaking environment and senior management’s understanding of EMI. Tajik et al. conducted a study that explored the linguistic difficulties encountered by multilingual students in EMI universities in Kazakhstan [14]. This study employed language policy and planning as a theoretical framework to investigate the overall EMI policy, with a specific focus on the academic English difficulties faced by students as a result of the inconsistent implementation of the EMI policy in universities in Kazakhstan. Data were gathered via an online survey and semi-structured interviews conducted with students and instructors at eight deliberately chosen EMI universities in Kazakhstan. The data analysis indicated that more than 70 % of students lacked prior exposure to EMI. Additionally, 66.9 % expressed dissatisfaction with their English competence, while 65.3 % were unsatisfied with their literacy abilities. Moreover, 72.6 % of students reported not enjoying reading and writing in English. Hence, their adaptation to the EMI setting was described as disorderly and anxiety-inducing. The EMI policy and practice seemed to have failed due to a lack of alignment between the macro-level policy directions and the resources and preparedness at the micro-level (i.e., among instructors and learners). To accomplish the objectives of internationalization, global competitiveness, and human capital development through EMI, it is necessary to engage in meticulous planning, methodical execution, and the establishment of suitable support systems for both students and instructors.

The challenges faced by one EMI university are the focus of my research study, which acts as one case of a larger national trend in the Kazakhstani higher education system.

LPP Defined

The topic of my research study is the ethnography of EMI policy and practice in the multilingual context of a private university in Kazakhstan. In order to investigate EMI policy and practice through the lens of ethnography of language policy and planning, it is useful first to define the concept of LPP. This section will discuss how scholars in the field have defined LPP, examining the relevance of these definitions for the context of this particular study.

Einar Haugen introduced the concept of language planning in 1959 to describe the standardization of language in Norway. Haugen made significant contributions to establishing fundamental concepts and frameworks that shaped LPP. LPP is a dynamic field that examines the formulation, execution, and societal impact of language policies. By virtue of its intersections with sociology, linguistics, education, and political

science, this field offers crucial insights into the influence of language on the dynamics of society and education. This chapter offers a synopsis of significant contributions from prominent scholars in the field of LPP, each bringing distinct perspectives [15].

Stakeholders' beliefs and understanding of EMI policy

This thesis examined the complexities of the EMI policy at a private university in Astana, revealing a dynamic interplay between institutional goals, stakeholder beliefs, and practical challenges. The university seeks to leverage EMI for global recognition and academic distinction, but simultaneously, it seems to face noticeable challenges, including inadequate resource allocation, limited institutional support, and inconsistent English proficiency among faculty and students. The university's official language policy documents reflect a strong administrative commitment to integrating EMI into its strategic development plan to align with international educational norms. However, implementation is hindered by infrastructural constraints, varying English proficiency levels among faculty members, and a gap between policy objectives and practical realities. This gap is further widened by the disparity between the aspiration for an English-focused environment and the prevalent use of Russian and Kazakh in administrative and educational contexts.

Drawing on evidence from interviews, document analysis, and observations, this study demonstrates that stakeholders' perceptions (teachers, students, and university leadership) and understanding of the English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) policy are shaped by a combination of institutional goals, practical constraints, and prevailing ideological viewpoints. The persistent focus on promoting English-medium education often leads stakeholders, particularly administrators and teachers, to advocate for educational approaches that prioritize English at the expense of Kazakh, Russian, and other local languages, underestimating their value as effective teaching tools. This disregard, rooted in a "deficit language ideology" [16], perpetuates the belief that non-English languages are inherently inferior, creating a system that undervalues the linguistic skills of local communities and students.

Results and Discussion

In this ideological framework, the "English medium idealism syndrome" emerges as a dominant mindset, leading university leadership and faculty members to advocate solely for English instruction while expressing disapproval of the local languages. This belief aligns with the "TESOL" or "ELT orthodoxy," which emphasizes a strict separation between native languages and English, advocating for the exclusive use of English in educational settings (May, 2019). The dominance of English-speaking nations in the Inner Circle significantly shapes these attitudes, leading to teaching theories that overlook the importance of local languages and perpetuate disparities in teaching methods.

The study identifies an element of neoliberal rationality in the implementation of EMI policy, which is highly valued by university leadership. This approach links EMI to broader market principles such as efficiency, competition, and independence. At the private university in Astana, the promotion of EMI serves not only its educational purpose, but also its strategic objectives such as improving global rankings and attracting international students through a market-oriented approach.

Alongside its numerous affordances, teachers and students at the same time recognize the challenges posed by the EMI policy. Teachers struggle with higher workloads due to a shortage of English-proficient faculty and insufficient institutional support, resulting in disjointed teaching approaches and reliance on local languages, undermining EMI's core goals. Students, meanwhile, face challenges due to inadequate English proficiency and a lack of foundational subject knowledge, hampering their ability to fully engage in EMI classes. The data in the preceding chapters clearly point to these conclusions. Addressing these issues requires a stronger support system, including comprehensive language proficiency assessments and increased resource provision. Despite these challenges, the university remains committed to maximizing the benefits of EMI through global partnerships, enhanced policy frameworks, and comprehensive English-language initiatives. However, success hinges on bridging the gap between policy and practice by investing judiciously in faculty members' English proficiency, increasing resources, enhancing professional development opportunities, and implementing thorough language assessment criteria for students entering EMI programs. The research conducted by Tajik et al. (2023) revealed that students' experiences in EMI programs are far from promising. The difficulties they face include a slower learning pace, a greater time commitment, repetitive memorization exercises, and inadequate comprehension of texts [14]. Some students lacked confidence due to insufficient language proficiency, to the extent that they sometimes considered withdrawing from the program rather than negotiating EMI challenges [14]. Therefore, there is a need to allow students to use their native/local languages to foster an inclusive, effective learning environment and enhance the university's

global academic reputation. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the complexities of implementing EMI in Kazakhstan, particularly given the diverse linguistic landscape and infrastructural constraints. For the EMI policy to succeed, it must consider local linguistic and cultural identities, while strategic goals should align with institutional capabilities and student needs. By thoughtfully addressing these intricacies, the university can create a more cohesive EMI environment that raises academic standards and enhances global engagement.

Classroom language practices, challenges, and policy negotiation.

Based on comprehensive evidence gathered from interviews and classroom observations, the current English teaching and learning methods, along with overall pedagogical strategies, contrast sharply with the perspective of those who advocate for using English exclusively as the medium of instruction. The findings of this thesis on classroom language practices, challenges, and policy negotiations provide crucial insights into the complexities of language usage in a multilingual EMI environment.

Teachers who initially support rigid, monolingual policies often recognize the practical need to adjust these limitations, modifying their teaching strategies to include multiple languages. This adaptation caters to students' linguistic proficiencies, fostering comprehension and engagement. Students frequently use translanguaging, seamlessly switching between English, Kazakh, and Russian to overcome vocabulary gaps and grasp complex topics. This strategy enhances understanding and communication, while also underscoring the limitations of monolingual policies. It emphasizes the practicality and importance of multilingualism in education.

Strict language policies often compel students to discreetly use their native languages to avoid academic penalties while maintaining clarity in their assignments. This careful navigation illustrates the tension between institutional demands and practical feasibility, highlighting the need for a more inclusive language policy framework. Recognizing students' multilingual abilities values these skills and shifts away from favoring a single language to embracing a more inclusive perspective. Translanguaging enriches classroom communication, aids in understanding academic material, and allows students to actively engage in their studies [12].

As indicated in the findings, the "pedagogy of compromise" involves teachers moving away from idealized views of EMI, where English-only is the norm, toward a more realistic strategy that includes local languages for full comprehension and active participation. Teachers initially advocating for strict English-only policies often realize the necessity of incorporating local languages to promote inclusivity. This transition is particularly important in Kazakhstan, where students have varied linguistic backgrounds and differing English proficiencies. The compromise seeks a harmonious balance, maintaining English for academic subjects while acknowledging the practical need to include local languages to enhance comprehension and participation. At the same time, it is crucial to highlight here that the reported "compromise" also stands as a disapproved practice in many stakeholders' views, in ideological and pedagogical terms, as the recourse to multilingual resources becomes a 'forced measure', and a necessity. English-only monolingualism and Anglonormativity are still the aspirations and an ideal.

The study found that both faculty members and university administrators favored implementing EMI policies in a reductive or subtractive manner, with English as the primary instructional language. However, the concept of a "pedagogy of compromise" shows how educational goals and classroom realities push teachers to modify their approaches. This clearly explains the paradox, the fallacy, and the dilemma for different stakeholders operating within the EMI policy framework. For instance, classroom observations and staff feedback reveal that those initially advocating for English-only policies recognize the importance of local languages for improving comprehension and engagement. This policy-to-practice shift is a crucial educational response to current classroom conditions and immediate sociolinguistic realities, as exclusive English instruction does not always align with students' linguistic capabilities, often leading them to rely on their native languages to clarify complex concepts.

The success of an EMI university is based on its ability to embrace and utilize students' diverse linguistic skills through language flexibility. This approach recognizes and values students' linguistic backgrounds, purposefully integrating multiple languages to enhance their educational experience. By incorporating native languages alongside English, educators can deepen students' understanding of the curriculum. Language flexibility emerges from the interplay between rigid policy mandates and the actual linguistic diversity of students. This adaptability addresses the limitations of monolingual philosophies that fail to meet students' varied linguistic needs. Classroom observations show that using multiple languages in instruction not only aids comprehension but also enhances cognitive skills and subject mastery. Teachers and students employ translanguaging to shift from a monolingual mindset to a comprehensive multilingual approach.

For instance, Dana, a teacher who initially supported exclusive English instruction, eventually acknowledged the importance of including Kazakh and Russian for thorough comprehension and active participation. This adaptation is a pragmatic adjustment aimed at maintaining educational standards, especially when reliance solely on English falls short. Overall, the study underscores the significance of linguistic flexibility in bridging the gap between rigid EMI policies and students' diverse language backgrounds. Recognizing the practical need for a compromise framework ensures a more inclusive and engaging learning environment, fostering greater understanding and class participation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many teachers who initially favored rigid, monolingual policies come to recognize the practical necessity of adjusting and negotiating policy constraints. They adapted their teaching methods to include multiple languages, accommodating students' linguistic abilities and ensuring optimal understanding and engagement. Students frequently resorted to translanguaging, seamlessly switching between English, Kazakh, and Russian to bridge vocabulary gaps and comprehend complex subjects. This approach enhanced comprehension and communication, while students' multilingual skills challenge restrictive monolingual policies, highlighting the practicality and necessity of multilingualism in education. The study also demonstrates how strict language regulations often compel students to covertly use their native languages to evade academic sanctions while maintaining clarity in their work. This delicate balancing act underscores the tension between institutional expectations and practical realities, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive language policy framework. Recognizing students' multilingual abilities as valuable assets rather than obstacles shifts the paradigm from a monolingual bias to a more inclusive approach. The proponents of the multilingual turn also emphasize the same (May, 2019). It is now widely established empirically that translanguaging enriches classroom interaction, facilitates academic content comprehension, and enables students to fully engage with their academic disciplines (cite some studies that make similar conclusions)

Implications for research, policy, and practice.

This study can be considered a Kazakhstani contribution to the expanding body of empirical research on EMI policy issues in universities worldwide. My research clearly demonstrates the complex interplay between the implementation of an English-only policy and the practical ways students and teachers use and understand their native/local languages for communication and comprehension. This gap arises from the disparity between actual classroom conditions and institutional directives advocating for an English-only orientation. Both teachers and students employ their first (L1) and second (L2) languages simultaneously to enhance learning in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) classrooms. The challenges and inconsistencies involved in enforcing monolingual EMI policies in multilingual environments reflect a gap between policy and practice. Policymakers often design policies with specific socio-economic and educational goals in mind, but teachers and students at the individual level may not fully align with them. The actual implementers and end-users of these regulations often struggle to apply them effectively in real-world academic settings. The findings clearly highlight the limitations of linguistic rigidity, and monolingual orientations in contexts such as Kazakhstan, where English still functions as a foreign language in many ways. At the same time, the findings also vividly suggest that a departure from the monolingual approach to a more flexible, and meaningful pedagogical translanguaging can serve much better inclusion, learning, and responsiveness. This calls for a pragmatic adaptability, flexibility, and openness to using, understanding, and applying EMI policies within the Kazakhstan-like classroom contexts. EMI is not only English language; it is much more than only English language. Therefore, I emphasize that EMI policy and practice needs to be guided by the principles of inclusion, and culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy.

This study explores the complex interplay between policy, stakeholder perspectives, and the practical challenges of establishing EMI in Kazakhstan's multilingual academic context. In my view, the findings can provide a roadmap and direction for further research in the same area. The research can examine the influence of translanguaging practices on academic achievement, particularly in settings where students alternate between English, Kazakh, and Russian. Longitudinal studies could analyze the long-term effects of comprehensive language exams on the English proficiency of both students and staff. Moreover, comparative studies across different EMI programs and institutions could provide valuable insights into effective policy frameworks, support systems, and teaching approaches.

Similarly, the findings provide sufficient evidence for other stakeholders such as policymakers to prioritize aligning EMI policy aims with institutional realities, considering the diverse linguistic landscape. Specific areas that may be considered include comprehensive English proficiency assessments for students and

faculty before enrolling in EMI programs, which could help evaluate preparedness and identify areas for improvement. Policies should also encourage ongoing professional development for faculty, with an emphasis on English proficiency. Additionally, policy frameworks should adopt translanguaging practices to promote inclusive learning environments where students can leverage their multilingual skills without adverse effects on their academic performance. One possible course of action for teachers' professional development could be to propose that, alongside language skills, content English teachers require some more knowledge and professional development in basic applied linguistics, and sufficient understanding of the overall pedagogical and instructional nuances of content-based instruction through a foreign language such as English [12].

Thus, to implement EMI effectively, institutions must establish robust support structures for both students and faculty. Faculty members should receive adequate training and resources to adapt to multilingual classrooms, incorporating local languages to enhance comprehension. Enhanced institutional support, such as reducing workloads and offering pedagogical assistance, will help teachers address challenges related to EMI. Students require comprehensive English-language programs that include targeted proficiency instruction and foundational subject knowledge preparation. I must emphasize too that fostering a critical multilingual awareness among teachers as well as administrator could be crucial to soften the rigid monolingual notions of these stakeholders. A classroom environment that embraces multilingualism will tackle challenges effectively and enhance the learning process. Addressing these research, policy, and practice implications can help bridge the gap between EMI policy and classroom reality, resulting in a cohesive, inclusive, and effective EMI environment that raises academic standards and promotes global engagement.

References

- 1 Bowles, H., & Murphy, A.C. (2020). *English-medium instruction and the internationalization of universities*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2 Doiz, A., Lasagabaster, D., & Sierra, J.M. (2012). *English-medium instruction at universities: Global challenges*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- 3 Dumanig, F., & Symaco, L. (2020). Internationalization of higher education in Malaysia and the Philippines: A comparative analysis of mission and vision statements of selected universities. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 12 (4), 1–13.
- 4 Kirkpatrick, A. (2011). Internationalization or Englishization: Medium of instruction in today's universities. *The Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 1 (1), 4–15.
- 5 Ministry of higher education and science in the Republic of Kazakhstan. (2023). The Concept of development of the higher education and science in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023 – 2029. *adilet.zan.kz*. Retrieved from <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2300000248> [in Russian].
- 6 Rose, H., & McKinley, J. (2018). Japan's English-medium instruction initiatives and the globalization of higher education. *Higher Education*, 75, 111–129. DOI: 10.1007/s10734-017-0125-1
- 7 Shohamy, E. (2007). Reinterpreting globalization in multilingual contexts. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 1 (2), 127–133. DOI: 10.1080/19313150701495421
- 8 Sah, P.K., & Fang, F. (2023). *Policies, politics, and ideologies of English-medium instruction in Asian universities: Unsettling critical edges*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- 9 Ricento, T. (2018). Globalization, language policy, and the role of English. In J.W. Tollefson & M. Pérez-Milans (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language Policy and Planning* (pp. 221–235). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 10 Agbo, S.A., & Pak, N. (2017). Globalization and educational reform in Kazakhstan: English as the language of instruction in graduate programs. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 26 (1), 16–45. DOI: 10.1177/105678791702600102
- 11 Agbo, S.A., Pak, N., Akbarov, A., Madiyeva, G., & Saurykov, Y. (2022). Global competitiveness myths and ideals: English language policy in universities in Kazakhstan. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 34 (1), 105678792211375. DOI: 10.1177/10567879221137572
- 12 Manan, S.A., Tajik, M.A., Hajar, A., & Amin, M. (2023). From colonial celebration to postcolonial performativity: “guilty multilingualism” and “performative agency” in the English Medium Instruction (EMI) context. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 1–28. DOI: 10.1080/15427587.2023.2242989
- 13 Goodman, B., Kambatyrova, A., Aitzhanova, K., Kerimkulova, S., & Chsherbakov, A. (2022). Institutional supports for language development through English- medium instruction: A factor analysis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 56 (2), 713–749.
- 14 Tajik, M.A., Namysova, G., Shamatov, D., Manan, S.A., Zhunussova, G., & Antwi, S.K. (2023). Navigating the potentials and barriers to EMI in the post-Soviet region: insights from Kazakhstani university students and instructors. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 22 (4), 1–21. DOI: 10.1080/14790718.2023.2265428
- 15 May, S. (2019). Negotiating the multilingual turn in SLA. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103, 122–129. DOI: 10.1111/modl.12531

16 Phyak, P., & De Costa, P.I. (2021). Decolonial struggles in indigenous language education in neoliberal times: Identities, ideologies, and activism. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 20 (5), 291–295. DOI: 10.1080/15348458.2021.1957683

Information about the authors

Syed Abdul Manan — PhD, Associate Professor, Multilingual Education, Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan; e-mail: syed.manan@nu.edu.kz, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8703-5876>

Aigerim Kazhigaliyeva — PhD, Higher School of Arts and Humanities, Astana International University, Astana, Kazakhstan; e-mail: aigerim.kazhigaliyeva@aiu.edu.kz, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2720-4458>