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A multi-level policy analysis of English medium instructional practices, management, and ideologies in Bangladeshi (private) higher education

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Abstract

Neoliberal forces have increased the use of English as a medium of instruction (MOI) in higher education globally. The status of English has shifted from being a curricular subject to the primary language of instruction, particularly in private higher education institutions. Drawing on Baldauf (2006), Kaplan and Baldauf (2003), and Spolsky (2009), and conducting a multi-level policy document analysis, this study set out to investigate the use of English as an MOI in Bangladeshi higher education. At the macro level, we analysed language-related policy documents, such as the National Education Policy (NEP), the Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework (BNQF), and University Grant Commission (UGC) policies. At the meso level, we examined various publicly available policy documents of a private university, including MOI statements, purpose and vision statements, admission requirements, curriculum, assessment, textbook recommendations, and advertisements for faculty positions. The findings revealed that while macro-level MOI policies are left open for meso-level interpretation, private universities have adopted an MOI policy that shifted from a nationalist Bangla-only ideology to a neoliberal English-only one, as evidenced in their practices and management initiatives. This shift has essentially served a covert colonial agenda under the guise of internationalisation and adoption of the American higher education model.

Introduction

The past 20 years have seen English becoming increasingly popular as the medium of instruction in higher education (HE) settings where English is not the native language – a phenomenon that Macaro (2018, 7) describes as ‘an unstoppable train’. Aided by English as a lingua franca across domains of language use (e.g., academia, business, communication, science and technology), the Englishization of HE (Philipson 2008) is a consequence of the increasing internationalisation/globalisation of HE (Macaro et al. 2018) and dominant neoliberal ideologies (De Costa et al. 2022). According to Macaro et al. (2018), English medium instruction (EMI) refers to the practice of utilising the English language for the purpose of teaching and studying academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the primary language spoken by the majority of the population is not English. While the growing trend of EMI has intrigued policymakers globally, the philosophy and implementation of EMI prioritise teaching in English only, inhibiting the use of other languages in HE classrooms, particularly those in Asian countries (Aizawa and Rose 2019; Hu and Lei 2014; Rahman et al. 2024). Thus, the uncritical acceptance of English as the dominant MOI has resulted in the neglect of other languages and linguistic resources in knowledge construction and acquisition, making EMI become a major source of inequality (Rahman and Singh 2022). In this study, we documented the use of English as an MOI in Bangladeshi HE, where a similar dominance of English at the expense of other languages has emerged. To sustain their competitiveness and meet the significant demands for skilled personnel in global markets, countries like Bangladesh must produce graduates with a high level of English proficiency (Rahman and Singh 2020). As a result, the role of English in the country has shifted from being

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a compulsory subject taught in schools to being used as the primary language for teaching and learning, particularly in private HE (Karim et al. 2023; Rahman et al. 2020b).

Conceptual framework

Kaplan and Baldauf (2003) and Baldauf (2006) have developed a multi-level (i.e., macro, meso, and micro) model of language policy and planning (LPP) processes and identified relevant actors and agents at different LPP levels. Macro-level actors are national- or governmental-level organisations, whereas micro-level actors refer to grassroots units, such as a classroom. Meso-level actors comprise organisations falling in between, for example, a school district or an institution. Individuals such as school and university patrons and administrators are considered educational policymakers at the meso or institutional level. This is because they have the authority to interpret or change policy decisions to achieve specific goals within their institutions, for example, private universities. Agents such as teachers and students are micro-level implementors of macro- and meso-level policies or users of language and educational policy.

Spolsky (2004, 9) defines language policy as encompassing 'all the language beliefs, practices, and management decisions of a community or society'. According to Spolsky (2009), three aspects of language policy can be distinguished conceptually: language ideology or belief, language management, and language practice within a community or polity. However, these aspects are interconnected. Language ideology encompasses gradually developed perspectives of speakers regarding a language and its usage, language management involves intentional actions by actors, and language practice is embodied by the observable language behaviours of speakers.

The framework outlined above allows us to uncover the complex relationships of macro- (national) and meso-level (institutional) EMI policies in HE through language management interventions to the interpretation and implementation of such policies by micro-level stakeholders (students and teachers) through their language practices. Such a multidimensional approach in the analysis of multilevel LPP has become increasingly important. Policies developed at one level (e.g., macro) to pursue a set of goals and intentions can, however, be interpreted differently at other levels (e.g., meso or micro), resulting in a series of modifications.

Aim of the study and methodology

Utilising the LPP frameworks presented earlier and based on policy document analysis, the aim of this study is to explore the use of English as an MOI in Bangladeshi HE. Due to the nature of the policy documents we analysed and presented in this study, we will focus on language practices, management and ideologies at the macro and meso levels. Using the same frameworks, future research can explore micro-level English as MOI practices, management and ideologies in relation to macro- and meso-level policies in private universities in Bangladesh.

The policy document analysis was carried out based on a systematic search to investigate macro- and meso-level

language practices, ideologies and management initiatives. The methodology for collecting and analysing the relevant policy documents consisted of two phases. In the first phase, we searched for official press releases and language-related directives in language-in-education policy documents such as the National Education Policy (NEP), Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework (BNQF), and University Grant Commission (UGC) acts, directives, and policies (e.g., outcome-based curriculum). In the second phase, we used purposive sampling to select a private university (henceforth, the focal university) to investigate institutional players' MOI practices, management and ideologies at the meso-level. This university can be considered a bounded case in the MOI policy context of Bangladeshi private HE and shares similar MOI features with other universities. Therefore, it can be regarded as a common case that helps to further our understanding of the LPP circumstances, processes, relationships or issues that it represents (Yin 2018). Since its foundation in 1992, the focal university has used English as an MOI, a primary criterion for selecting the university for this study. Currently, it boasts 22,106 students and 616 faculty members. Four schools and 16 departments of the university have adopted English as their MOI in their programs. The focal university is very active in its internationalisation efforts and has established academic collaborations with several universities in North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific. These efforts and collaborations have fueled its adoption of English as the MOI. Thus, the purposive sampling allowed us to choose a potentially information-rich case for an in-depth inquiry (Patton 2014). To collect relevant institutional documents, we conducted web searches for publicly available university policy directives, such as MOI statements, purpose and vision statements, admission standards, curriculum, assessment, and textbook recommendations, as well as faculty member recruitment policies.

Macro-level language practices, ideologies and management

According to Spolsky (2009), language ideology is derived from and influences language practice in a context. Although language practices immediately after the independence of Bangladesh were driven by nationalistic language ideologies (Hamid and Baldauf 2014), there was a renewed focus on English in recent decades due to its international status and widespread use in different domains, including HE (Hamid and Al Amin 2022). The National Education Policy (NEP) promulgated in 2010 by the Ministry of Education (2010) underscored the significance of developing English language skills for continuous national development. For example, the NEP announced:

[The] curricula and syllabi of higher education will be updated to meet international standards. In order to expand tertiary level education, it is essential to translate standard books of modern knowledge and science into Bangla. Recognizing the national importance of such a program, urgent steps will be taken. English will remain as a medium of instruction in higher education along with Bangla.

(National Education Policy 2010, 32)

The University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh initiated the Strategic Plan for Higher Education (SPHE) in Bangladesh: 2018–2030 (University Grants Commission 2018b). This initiative aligns well with the explicit policy directive outlined in the NEP 2010 and has played a critical part in redefining the role of internationalisation and English in Bangladeshi HE. One of the key agendas of SPHE is to update HE curricula and syllabi to meet international standards.

The emphasis on English-language communication has been placed within the framework of the SPHE to promote internationalisation. The policy document clearly outlines the mission of Bangladeshi universities to cultivate students with requisite expertise, knowledge, communication proficiency, and leadership attributes by year 2030.

For raising the standard of our higher education to a globally competitive level we must have a policy to make our learners proficient in English. To that end the universities will prepare appropriate courses and course materials for imparting the necessary skills in communicative English among the students.

(Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh 2018b, 35)

The status and use of English in Bangladesh experienced a notable increase as a result of the establishment of private universities in 1992 under the Private University Act. The English language was adopted as the MOI in private HE. According to the University Grant Commission Report of 2021, there are presently 109 private universities in operation in Bangladesh, catering to a student population of 310,107. All the universities have, on paper, adopted English as the MOI (Rahman et al. 2020a).

Hossain and Tollefson (2007) identified three major ideological camps of policy makers in relation to MOI in Bangladesh: advocates of Bangla as the MOI, proponents of English as the MOI, and supporters of both Bangla and English as MOIs (Bengali-medium education in primary school, with a gradual shift to English, culminating in EMI in tertiary institutions). It is apparent that the ideology of the third camp has dominated the HE sector. As Kabir (2012) argued, the current HE policies in Bangladesh reflect a market-oriented ideology focusing on the skills that students need to secure employment and succeed in society, and the adoption of English as an MOI is a natural progression of such neoliberal ideologies.

Spolsky (2009) posits that language management encompasses intentional efforts aimed at manipulating language behaviour in a community. Driven by the shift in prevalent macro-level language ideology, in recent years, several policies have been initiated by national-level actors and agencies, such as the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the University Grants Commission (UGC), to increase the role of English in HE. One such example is the Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework (BNQF). The framework views advanced English language proficiency as an essential skill for graduates and a key component of the outcome-based education (OBE) curriculum. The following excerpts from the BNQF stipulate the levels of English and Bangla proficiency that students should reach upon graduation:

- ❖ Bachelor: Convey ideas in written and oral forms using appropriate and different presentation techniques, reliably, accurately and to a range of audience in Bangla and English
- ❖ Masters: Produce clear, well structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices in advanced proficiency level of Bangla and English.
- ❖ PhD: Communicate effectively research findings to peers, scholarly community and society at large in the relevant field of expertise in Bangla and advanced English. (Ministry of Education 2021)

In addition to these initiatives, the University Grants Commission has mandated standardised undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. For example, to ensure adherence to international standards in curriculum design, an American-based curriculum has been implemented, as stipulated by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), an organisation headquartered in the United States (University Grant Commission of Bangladesh 2018a). These recommendations overtly promote the American model of education and covertly elevate English through instruction, materials, and assessment in the name of communication.

Meso-level language practices, ideologies and management

We conducted a close examination of the focal university's MOI-related policy documents located in our thorough search of its website to ascertain to what extent English has been incorporated and appropriated in its programmes. The focal university has adopted English as the sole MOI, which is not in line with the language practice stipulated in the language policy and curriculum guidelines at the macro level. As declared on its website, '[the focal university] has been a hub for international exposure. [The focal university] follows an American curriculum, and the medium of instruction is entirely in the English language.' Such a statement assumes that students can easily experience an American education in a non-American place since the focal university adheres to the values, curriculum, syllabus, and assessment of the American standard, and adopts English as the sole MOI. Furthermore, its mission of producing students 'more proficient in oral, written and electronic communication' has made it clear that an advanced level of English proficiency is required for graduates. These and similar MOI-related statements from the focal university are reflective of monolingual EMI practices in private Bangladeshi universities.

A range of EMI-related language management initiatives have been adopted at the focal university. These initiatives include university student admission requirements, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses offered to improve students' academic English proficiency and facilitate content learning, and teacher recruitment circulars distributed through newspapers, job portals, and the career section of the focal university's website.

Admission test waiver policy

The Admission test is waived for eligible candidates with:

1. SAT score 1150 (1600 scale) or 1700 (2400 scale) or
2. IELTS 7.0 or
3. TOEFL scores: Paper-Based Test (PBT) 563 or Computer-Based Test (CBT) 223 or

Figure 1. Admission test requirements.

Admission test

The recommended admission test for the focal university comprises 40 MCQ questions on vocabulary and grammar, 20 MCQ questions on reading comprehension, and one writing task (a timed essay). The test can be waived if the following requirements are met (Figure 1):

Related EAP and ESP courses

The focal university offers four remedial courses to students to equip them with the academic English skills required to function in the university: ENG102 (focusing on the mechanics of the writing process and the study of grammar with an emphasis on syntax); ENG103 (focusing on academic reading and writing); ENG105 (an advanced composition course focusing on written communication and the writing of technical reports); ENG111 (focusing on fundamental principles and practices of rhetoric and art in public speaking). These courses are mandatory and must be passed before the deadline stipulated in the policy document:

All students must fulfil English requirement i.e. a student must pass ENG105 by the fourth semester after admission. Failing this, the student will not be allowed to register into other courses until the English requirement is fulfilled. (Academic Information and Policies, Focal University)

Undergraduate students can obtain a waiver for one or more EAP/ESP courses based on their admission test performance and/or proof of language proficiency as advanced English proficiency is presumed to be necessary for students to take academic courses via EMI.

Faculty recruitment

English proficiency is deemed important when faculty are recruited at the focal university. Degrees from English-speaking countries, especially the USA and the UK, are

considered superior, as evidenced by the following anonymised job advertisement (Figure 2).

As a matter of pride, the vice-chancellor claims that the focal university's 'faculty members, with degrees from foreign universities, over 80% from North America, are collectively the most qualified cluster of teachers in any university in Bangladesh.' This claim not only reflects a colonial mindset but smacks of an ideology of English native-speakerism. An English-speaking country's degree has become synonymous with excellence.

Language-related ideologies can be clearly detected in the policy discourse of the focal university (Spolsky 2009). Two prominent phrases that are repeatedly mentioned in its policy documents, in addition to English being used as the MOI, are the internationalisation of HE and the adoption of an American curriculum. The internationalisation of HE is a buzzword that permeates the focal university's website and provides an unmistakable signal of the university's pro-internationalisation attitude. The rationale for this ideology is voiced by the vice-chancellor when he says that 'student and faculty exchange with reputable overseas universities is of vital [focal university] interest, to keep updated curriculum and teaching methodology in place and learn the latest techniques from institutions of higher learning abroad.' Similarly, the implementation of an American curriculum is to serve the key objective of 'provid[ing] the training and opportunity to students and graduates for higher study abroad, either with a recognised degree or with transfer credits from [the Focal University Website].' The vice-chancellor states proudly that thanks to this curriculum policy, the focal university's 'graduates and students have obtained admission, often with financial aid, at renowned foreign universities, such as Harvard, UPenn, Cornell, University of Texas-Austin, Syracuse University, University of Virginia, York University (Canada), University of British Columbia, Windsor University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, University of Wyoming, and other institutions of higher learning in the US, Canada, UK, Holland and Australia' [Focal

Candidates MUST have:

- Master's degrees in law from a reputed foreign university, preferably North American/British universities for the post of lecturer
- Bachelor's, Master's and PhD degrees in Law from a reputed foreign University, preferably North American/British university for the posts of Assistant Professor and above

Figure 2. Job advertisement.

University Website]. This listing of mostly American universities epitomises the equation of internationalisation with Americanisation.

Discussion and implications

With respect to the MOI policy intentions in Bangladeshi HE, our policy analysis of the envisioned language practices, adopted management initiatives, and underlying ideologies reveals not only differences and gaps between actors at the macro and meso levels (Baldauf 2006; Kaplan and Baldauf 2003) but also how complex and multifaceted the relationship between these policy levels is. Despite the NEP recommendation to adopt bilingual or parallel MOIs in HE, the Private University Act of 1992 made no mention of MOIs for universities, leaving the macro-level MOI policy open to interpretation. As a result, private universities have taken advantage of this policy ambiguity to implement a monolingual English-only policy. Therefore, the spread of English as an MOI in universities, particularly in private universities in Bangladesh, has not been the outcome of a top-down policy imposition. A parallel case can be seen in Malaysia's macro-level MOI policy. Because there is no written directive explicitly prescribing the use of English as an MOI in Malaysian HE (Rahman et al. 2024), policy on MOIs is 'open to interpretation by academic staff at the university level' (Ali 2013, 73). In this sense, MOI adoption in Malaysian HE or by Bangladeshi private universities is a local, subnational or meso-level initiative that takes the form of 'macroization' of lower-level policy (Hamid and Baldauf 2014). Such MOI policy approaches are typical of contexts where overarching macro-level policies are lacking (e.g., Bangladesh), leaving many LPP decisions to be made at the subnational level. Thus, although the MOI policy at the macro-level includes English as an MOI alongside Bangla and promotes English through a variety of initiatives, the spread of English-only language provision in universities, particularly in private universities in Bangladesh, cannot be attributed mainly to macro-level policymaking but is largely a meso-level endeavor.

From the nationalist Bangla-only mantra to the EMI policy, the actors' ideology has shifted, as reflected in their language practices and management initiatives. Nonetheless, the MOI policy in Bangladeshi HE can be seen as a covert policy strategy (Shohamy 2006), with buzzwords such as *internationalisation* paving the way for EMI. Internationalisation is equated with Americanisation or Englishisation (Phillipson 2008). Such a conceptual turn is not unique to Bangladesh but can also be found elsewhere, for example, the 'Top Global University Project' (TGUP) in Japan. Although EMI, which was prominent in policy documents regarding the preceding Global 30 Project, is not explicitly listed as a TGUP goal (Aizawa and Rose 2019), there is a greater emphasis on the internationalisation of Japanese HE, sending an implicit signal for the adoption and implementation of EMI at TGUP universities (Aizawa and Rose 2019).

Coupled with the discourse of native-speakerism, the English-only ideologies and practices have produced multiple forms of inequity. Since the majority of students

attended Bangla-medium schools, using English as an MOI creates educational inequalities and cultural divisions between Bangla- and English-medium students at the tertiary level, and gives rise to serious concerns about the transmission and learning of content knowledge in HE (Rahman and Singh 2022; Sultana 2023). Furthermore, Roshid et al. (2023) argue that English-medium university admission tests prioritise language skills over subject knowledge, resulting in epistemic inequalities. As shown in this study and by Rahman et al. (2020a), without an adequate evaluation mechanism, private universities use study or work experience in an English-speaking country as a surrogate for teachers' EMI competence. Such colonial legacies and practices must be confronted because of their complicity in creating inequalities (e.g., the divide between native and nonnative English speakers and among holders of different employment qualifications) and in perpetuating unequal human relationships by prioritising English over other languages, including indigenous or national languages (Tupas 2022).

The adoption of the American educational model and the spread of EMI in Bangladesh are the result of neoliberal ideologies and agendas (Hamid and Baldauf 2014), which prevail in the current global HE landscapes and drive efforts to reform educational systems (De Costa et al. 2022). EMI, as a form of LPP, is adopted as a strategy for internationalising Bangladeshi HE, in the belief that English can provide higher-quality education in the neoliberal context of HE privatisation and the global sweep of English. Such a language hierarchy positions English at the pinnacle as the language of global opportunities while relegating Bangla to the bottom of regional languages with little practical value, leading to the distinction between what Lin and Martin (2005) refer to as 'linguistic global' and 'linguistic local'. Only dire outcomes can be expected if universities are primarily run as profit-making enterprises operating on neoliberal ideologies (Hamid and Al Amin 2022) and ignoring their responsibilities to uphold local languages and cultures (Rahman et al. 2020b).

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