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English as a medium of instruction in East Asia's higher education sector: a critical realist Cultural Political Economy analysis of underlying logics

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ABSTRACT

As discourses of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy become increasingly influential in both policy-making and in public debates about education, employability and national competitiveness – the choice of language in the classroom takes on a strategic importance. The paper employs a critical realist Cultural Political Economy lens to explore the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) at tertiary level in the East Asian context. The discussion builds on existing theoretical framings and on empirical research into the language–globalisation nexus, as well as on language-in-education policy and practice. By doing so, the paper seeks to develop a 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 here 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.

KEYWORDS

English-medium instruction;
Cultural Political Economy;
East Asia; globalisation;
critical realism

Introduction

Weinstock (2014) suggests that language policy consists in the

range of measures, coercive and incentival, that states enact in order to modify the linguistic repertoires and linguistic patterns of behaviour of individuals so as to make them reflective of what is considered to be the optimal value or set of values operative in the area of language. (318)

What is of interest in this paper is, first, *why, how* and *by whom* such measures are conceived and implemented – in relation to the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) on a growing number of degree programmes at East Asian higher education institutions (HEIs); and second, what types of discourses and material practices are taken to index the purported 'value' of the linguistic resources that EMI is expected to produce. I attempt this by exploring a constellation of logics – social, economic, political and

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pseudo-scientific – that appear implicit in language education policy-making, and which in a dialectical manner simultaneously reflect and further accrue value to proficiency in English in this context. Cognisant of a large body of research on EMI policy and practice, my analysis seeks to contribute to the on-going debates by making two theoretical moves. First, by adopting a Critical Cultural Political Economy of Education (CCPEE) approach (Robertson and Dale 2015), I view the issue at hand as playing out within specific ‘education ensembles’ – understood as particular kinds of social world composed of layers of structures and generative mechanisms, each conceptualised as ‘a unity of multiple determinations’ (Robertson and Dale 2015, 150). On this account, the logics underlying the implementation of EMI and the practice itself need to be analysed as part of the education ensemble, which is not reducible to the most prominent forms of education activity (schools, universities, learners and teachers) but acknowledges the crucial role of an array of actors and institutions whose logics, interests and forms of authority generate tensions and contradictions within the ensemble (Robertson and Dale 2015, 155).

Thus, in what follows, I attempt to bring *together* the different elements of the education ensemble – culture, politics and economy – to investigate their relation to EMI policy and practice. In this context, the ‘cultural’ is understood as ‘meaning-making’ and as ‘cultural forms’ – but viewed not as an epiphenomenon but rather as present at all levels of the causal chain. Similarly, the ‘political’ moves beyond government/governance and attends to all relations of power between social actors; while the ‘economic’ is concerned with ‘value’ not just within specific economic regimes, but more broadly, in social relations of exchange.

My second theoretical – and methodological – move is to explore the logics underpinning the introduction of English as a teaching medium in a growing number of HEIs in East Asia by investigating them both across observable events and across generative structures (after Steinmetz 2004). Reflecting the critical realist thesis of a stratified ontology of the social world, my analysis acknowledges that not everything that occurs in an education ensemble manifests itself at the level of the empirical. Consequently, I argue that any account of logics behind the semiotic and material practices within particular education ensembles ought to move beyond a mere description of observable phenomena and consider also those mechanisms and processes that – although not observable – are believed to have real cultural-political-economic effects. I conclude the paper with a call for critical realist research into this problematic that combines empirical investigations of concrete manifestations of EMI policy and practice together with questions about the necessary nature of underlying structures and causal mechanisms for these observable phenomena. First, however, I believe it is useful to start our discussion by reminding ourselves of the broader sociolinguistic context within which the semiotic and materials practices under investigation in this paper are taking place.

English as a hegemon in a globalising world

According to a recent British Council report on the global significance of English, some 1.75 billion people worldwide are now able to speak the language at a useful level; and the popularity of what Mark Robson, Director of English and Exams at the British Council, calls the ‘operating system of [a] global conversation’ (British Council 2013, 2), is forecast to register further growth, with about two billion people expected to be

using English – or learning to use it – by 2020. So how have we arrived at this state of affairs? The widespread use of English as the language of government and education in postcolonial contexts is well attested (Mair 2003; Rassool 2007) – and by the end of the twentieth century, English was employed as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries, and held a prominent position in further twenty (Crystal 1987). As Jenkins (2003, 34) observes, although English was well-placed to become an important international language by virtue of its colonial past, its hegemonic status in the twenty-first century owes much to the postcolonial period – and particularly to the economic, military and cultural dominance of the United States in the post-Second World War period (see also Phillipson 1992). Crucially, the second half of the twentieth century saw a large-scale uptake of English as an international language across many parts of the world with no colonial links to Britain or the United States (Graddol 2006; Guilherme 2007; MacKenzie 2009). During this time, education policy reforms around the world have led to what Brutt-Griffler (2002) calls ‘macro-acquisition of English’, making it the most widely taught foreign language in schools around the world (Crystal 2003; Cha and Ham 2008). Consequently, proficiency in English is now increasingly being accepted as a ‘global norm’ – a basic skill alongside literacy, numeracy, and computer skills – essential for access to and success in the modern labour market (British Council 2006; see also Park and Wee 2012).

Detailed accounts of the social, economic and political history of the spread of English, as well as of the social and linguistic consequences of its currently hegemonic status as a global *lingua franca*, have been proposed and widely debated in the literature – see for example Crystal (2003), Graddol (1997), Phillipson (1992), Holborow (1999), Brutt-Griffler (2002) and Saxena and Omoniyi (2010). The arguments sketched out in this paper build on these debates but look also to more recent socio-economic and technological developments that have helped create the necessary conditions for the present-day dominance of English as *the* working language of choice for much of international business, for many key international and regional institutions (World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Asian Development Bank, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), as well as for scientific research, academic publishing, and for much of the global entertainment industry, to name just some of the domains English has successfully ‘colonised’ (Curry and Lillis 2004; Kirkpatrick 2012; Neeley 2012).

Amongst the most significant developments relevant to this discussion have been the various structural and semiotic processes associated with the wide range of political, cultural and economic transformations collectively referred to as ‘globalisation’. They have been enabled in important ways by a series of technological advances – the most notable of which have been the rapid growth, since the 1990s, of the Internet and the reduction in the cost of international travel and of electronic communication (Harvey 1989; Massey 1994; Castells 2004). The resultant compression of time-space has had a profound impact on the restructuring and rescaling of social relations (Giddens 1990; Appadurai 1996; Held and McGrew 2003), which has also noticeably altered the linguistic needs of large numbers of people around the globe, as exemplified by, for instance, both novel and more frequent opportunities for interaction across linguistic lines. This, in turn, is increasingly necessitating greater reliance on ‘global’ languages as bridging languages, or *lingua francas*, such as English, to mediate communication under these emergent and contingent conditions (Coupland 2010; Kirkpatrick 2010; Seidlhofer 2011).

Globally organised capitalism needs a shared linguistic code

These large-scale social and technological transformations have been accompanied by shifts in the global geographies of power (Herod and Wright 2002) and by the emergence, promotion and adoption, in many parts of the world, of the discourse of competitiveness (see Sum and Jessop 2013), an associated focus on ‘knowledge’ and ‘technological progress’ (as exemplified by New Growth Theory – see e.g. Romer 1990), and a new regulatory and ideological regime – neoliberalism (Harvey 2005). The most recognisable consequences of the latter are the foregrounding of the logic of rational self-interest, free unregulated markets, increased movement and deregulation of labour, offshore outsourcing and the rise of transnational corporations. Crucially for our discussion, language and linguistic activity have been intimately implicated in these processes, and as Grin (2001, 66) points out, they are commonly analysed in terms of:

- (1) the relevance of language as a defining element of economic processes such as production, distribution or consumption;
- (2) the relevance of language as an element of human capital, in the acquisition of which individual actors may have a good reason to invest;
- (3) language teaching as a social investment, yielding net benefits (market-related or not);
- (4) the economic implications (costs and benefits) of language policies, whether these costs and benefits are market-related or not;
- (5) language-based income inequality, particularly through wage discrimination against groups of people defined by their language attributes; and
- (6) language-related work (translation, interpretation, teaching, etc.) as an economic sector.

The need to bring issues of language – and thus of language-in-education policy – into discussions of knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism reflects the growing significance of semiotic production in late modernity, which has produced new value systems and brought about a new attitude towards language (Cameron 2005; Coupland 2010).

It is widely recognised that globally organised capitalism has both necessitated, and been fuelled by, new technologies facilitating instant communication between individuals, which in turn has allowed for new ways of conceptualising and managing operations, and which can under the right conditions lead to profit maximisation. This, however, is only possible insofar as the actors (individuals, corporations, governments), who are engaged in increasingly supranational business activity, share a linguistic code, or are able to rely on a third party for translation – although the latter option may prove impractical and too costly. In this context, the development of new linguistic skills becomes a process of ‘investment’, or to put it in Bourdieu’s (1991) terms, a process of acquiring ‘linguistic capital’ that can, under certain circumstances, be exchanged for other forms of capital on the labour market.

However, the extent to which this can be successfully achieved is contingent on the ‘use’, ‘exchange’ and ‘sign’ values (Marx 1887; Baudrillard 1981) that other actors in society attach to the particular linguistic resources. It is exactly because (foreign) language skills are not equally distributed, and because they are differentially valorised in society, that they can be viewed as economically relevant (Irvine 1989). This argument is also

put forward by Heller (2005, 2010b), who suggests that in late modernity certain linguistic resources are viewed as having ‘added value’ in terms of their potentiality of generating profit for their speakers. This conceptualisation of the relationship between language and economic activity can be particularly productive in the analysis of motivations – explicit and implicit – for the adoption of English as a teaching medium within the East Asian context. In their book-length account of policy decision-making that addresses the language–globalisation nexus, Tan and Rubdy (2008, 3) suggest that the ‘complexity of today’s world and the changing needs of societies mean that individuals, communities, Ministries of Education and government are making decisions about the *merits* of learning, promoting or insisting on particular languages’ (emphasis added). Such decisions invariably reflect the economic and political imaginaries of the dominant sections of society, and are ‘construed’ and ‘constructed’ (after Fairclough 2010) on the basis of variably well informed assumptions about how, when and by whom the favoured linguistic codes should be taught and learnt. These *strategically selective* (Jessop 2005) logics then feed into language-in-education policies and affect the allocation of targeted funding, the training and recruitment of teachers, and the production of teaching materials, amongst others. Since they are rarely accepted by all members of the community, and since they often reinforce inequitable economic and social relations and structures within society, such policy decisions are also often subjected to contestation and critique. In what follows, I propose an account of observable ‘events’ and their underlying logics, which I argue have in various ways and to varying degrees influenced the EMI policies in HEIs across East Asia. Given the complexity of open systems, such as societies, and the principle of multiple determination adopted by CCPEE, this account does not aim to be exhaustive or definitive.

English as a resource in East Asia’s knowledge economy

An important upshot of the transition in many parts of the globe to neoliberal governance – underpinned by, for example, the ideas constituting New Growth Theory and discourses of competitiveness – has been the *crystallisation* of a shift in educational philosophy – a shift from pedagogical to market values. By placing economic imperatives at the centre of education policy, including language-in-education policy, this reasoning reflects an understanding of education as human capital formation (Connell 2013) and emphasises the need for flexibility, mobility, creativity, enterprise, and a global orientation among school leavers and graduates (see also Dale and Robertson 2009; Block, Gray, and Holborow 2012). Crucially for our discussion, it also sees (foreign/second) language study in a largely instrumentalist way. In fact, Heller (2010a, 2010b) and Duchêne and Heller (2012) have argued that in many contexts, under late modernity, language has moved beyond its traditional role as a social practice and has been turned into a commodity (packaged, marketed and sold in shadow education markets) – resulting in the displacement of traditional ideologies in which languages were primarily symbols of ethnic and national identity (see Block and Cameron 2002, 5). To some extent, this is also reflected in the partial decoupling, in the global context, of the English language from its traditional native-speaking communities in Britain or the United States – prompting some researchers to herald the emergence of new varieties of English: ‘English as an International Language’ (EIL) and ‘English as a Lingua Franca’ (ELF) (see e.g. Jenkins 2006; Sharifian 2009; Seidlhofer

2011). This could perhaps go some way towards explaining the widespread – and on the face of it unproblematised – appropriation of this ‘stripped back’ linguistic code by, amongst others, policy-makers in East Asia, whose articulations of the value of English as an instrument for the knowledge economy and internationalisation efforts are reimagining ‘English’ as something of a floating signifier, or what Phillipson (2014) has evocatively called ‘lingua nullius’ – highlighting the perception of ‘English’ by some as a *neutral* linguistic resource.

The question we must ask at this point is: How do these strategies fit into the ‘bigger picture’? It has been suggested that the turn to competitiveness and the economic imperative within education policy was taken earlier in East Asia than in many other parts of the world (Sum and Jessop 2013, 33). The major consequences of this move included: (1) the establishment in the social imaginary of a direct link between education and economic performance at all stages – from kindergarten through to higher education; (2) the devolution of the responsibility for developing ‘marketable’ skills and becoming ‘employable’ in national and global labour markets to individual members of the labour force; (3) and the elevation of competitiveness and competition to a core value of both individuals and the state (see also Piller and Cho 2013).

The rapid industrialisation of much of the region, witnessed over the past several decades, has produced a rise in living standards of many – albeit not all – sections of society and demonstrated that, as Beeson (2004, 29) puts it, ‘not only was rapid economic development possible outside the established “core” economies, but that such processes might ultimately take on a regional and self-sustaining quality’, allowing what in the 1960s and 1970s were seen as ‘peripheral’ parts of an increasingly interconnected global economy to ‘escape the predations and exploitation of the established industrial heartlands of Western Europe and North America’ (Beeson 2004, 29). Admittedly, Asia’s resurgence in the so-called ‘Asian Century’ has been the outcome of a wide range of complex and highly contingent geopolitical and macroeconomic transformations, which cannot be explored here in sufficient detail (see Shambaugh 2004; Asian Development Bank 2011; Beeson 2014). What is key for our discussion, however, is that in the minds of local policy-makers, this success leaves no place for complacency, and so, the future-proofing of the economy and of the geopolitical standing of the respective countries remains critical – particularly, given the sobering long-term effects of the Asian financial crisis of the 1997/1998. In this context, education is seen as being central to achieving further growth and avoiding the middle-income trap (Farrell and Grant 2005; Irawati and Rutten 2014).

The pinning of hopes on education – or rather, on the ‘right’ kind of education – is exemplified by, for instance, the increasingly frequent articulations of the ‘knowledge economy’ discourse in the process of agenda-setting across and beyond East Asia. The basic premise of an emerging regional strategy in this area can be gleaned from a recent report by the Asian Development Bank (2014, x):

Asia has enjoyed such spectacular economic growth over the past three decades that we expect most of our developing member countries to have attained middle-income status by 2020. However, this means their development challenges will be more complex. First, they need to avoid becoming stuck in the middle-income trap. Second, they need to engineer a shift from mainly agricultural output and jobs to manufacturing and high-productivity services at a time when resources are becoming strained and skills

of the workforce are reaching their limits. Building knowledge-based economies is therefore the most sustainable way of ensuring strong, long-term growth.

However, to be successful, this new economic imaginary will require new types of skills, including *also* proficiency in those languages that can facilitate access to cutting-edge technologies, help build international expert networks, enable individual and knowledge mobility, and support R&D efforts, amongst others. Currently, English appears to be best suited to this role. In fact, a survey of 26,000 people from 3500 companies across 152 countries conducted in 2011 by the Pearson-owned GlobalEnglish™ concluded that the ‘... “flattening” of global business increasingly mandates English competency as a crucial skill for the workplace’ (GlobalEnglish 2011), with over 90% of the respondents describing proficiency in English as critical for their current job and for career advancement. In some (extreme) cases, English has been adopted as the working or official language of Asian corporations as an attempt to facilitate their global expansion agendas. Among them are the automaker Nissan (Burgess 2015); Rakuten¹ – Japan’s largest online marketplace (Neeley 2011); China’s computer hardware manufacturer Lenovo Group, and Japan’s Fast Retailing, which operates the Uniqlo fashion chain (The Economist 2014). Meanwhile, Japan’s automaker Honda has announced plans to make English the official language for all inter-regional communications at the corporation by 2020 (Greimel 2015).

Exploring the (il-)logics of EMI policies and their manifestations

Given the widespread recognition of the hegemony of English as the most important *lingua franca* for business, research and membership of the global community, education policy-makers – as well as parents, students and employers – have been voicing their concerns about the current levels of access to and the quality of English-language education (Bolton 2008). Among the mechanisms that have been increasingly promoted as a solution to this problem has been the introduction of English as a teaching medium in a growing number of schools and HEIs across the region. One set of logics driving this innovation reflects, to varying extents, Phillipson’s (1992) five English Language Teaching tenets – or fallacies – that underlie many methodological principles in the language classroom and reflect popular assumptions among non-experts about the nature of language learning and teaching. The five fallacies are:

- (1) the monolingual fallacy – English is best taught monolingually;
- (2) the native speaker fallacy – the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker;
- (3) the early start fallacy – the earlier English is taught, the better the results;
- (4) the maximum exposure fallacy – the more English is taught, the better the results; and finally,
- (5) the subtractive fallacy – if other languages are used much, standards of English will drop. (Phillipson 1992, 185–215)

Although there is now an extensive body of empirical research into second language acquisition (SLA) that questions the validity of these assumptions,² their influence on the beliefs about what constitutes the most effective approach to developing proficiency in EFL continues largely unabated. Instead, EMI is commonly perceived as a shortcut to a high level of competency in English and, in the long run, a more cost-effective alternative to private EFL classes. Meanwhile, little or no consideration is often given in policy

discourse to the potentially detrimental effects of EMI on the psychological wellbeing of local students and academic staff – especially those less proficient in English (Cho 2012a; Piller and Cho 2013), or to equally important questions of linguistic ecology, linguistic identity, and the politics of access to EMI education. There are numerous examples of national language-in-education policies, and of initiatives undertaken by individual education institutions, that attest the emergence in East Asia of an ideology that sanctions the widespread use of EMI. In what follows, I do not seek to provide an exhaustive account of such ‘examples’; but rather, I offer several event-level *manifestations* of underlying structural and agential selectivities, which can provide us with an entry point for further discussion of the logics underpinning the growing interest in EMI in the region.

In mainland China, for example, the EMI phenomenon has been gathering momentum over the past few years, and is now a widely recognised feature of the country’s higher education landscape. Hu (2009, 48) reports that the common perception of EMI programmes among both policy-makers and regular members of society is that they constitute:

The vanguard of educational reform, a cornerstone of quality education, a vital means for China to interface with the rest of the world, and an indispensable resource for the country’s endeavour to achieve national development and modernisation in the era of globalisation.

The origins of this policy can be traced to around the time of China’s accession to the WTO in 2001, when the Higher Education Department of the Chinese Ministry of Education launched a set of 12 policy initiatives aimed at improving the quality of university provision in the country (Jiazhen 2007). Among them was a push for better English-language skills among university staff and graduates – reflecting Beijing’s *modernisation* discourse which links national development to proficiency in English, which in turn is believed to facilitate China’s access to ‘cutting-edge knowledge in the West’ (Hu, Li, and Lei 2014, 29). Implicitly drawing on what Phillipson (1992) calls the maximum exposure fallacy, local universities are now expected to deliver between 5% and 10% of their provision in English, while the number of EMI courses offered by individual institutions has become an important criterion for quality evaluation. Over the next few years, the number of EMI courses available at Chinese universities increased exponentially: a survey of 135 Chinese HEIs showed that by 2006 as many as 132 universities offered a substantial amount of provision through English, with an average of 44 courses per university (Wu et al. 2010, cited in Hu et al 2014).

Similar discourses linking EMI with modernisation and *internationalisation* have emerged also in other parts of East Asia. Writing about the situation in Japan, Hashimoto (2013) states that over the past two decades, both the state and private education sectors in the country have recognised the potential benefits of, what is locally termed, ‘English-only’ education – even though at this point in time their focus appears to be mainly on offering EMI courses to international students, rather than on employing English to deliver course content to Japanese students. One recent initiative employing EMI as a mechanism for driving forward the internationalisation efforts of the Japanese higher education sector, has been the launch in 2009 of the flagship ‘Global 30’ Project. The project aimed to recruit, by 2020, 300,000 foreign students, who would enrol in English-language programmes at Japan’s 13 leading institutions. Following disappointing results, the programme was discontinued and replaced by the more ambitious and better resources

'Super Global' project in 2013, under which 30 Japanese institutions have been included. The new initiative aims to launch degree programmes taught entirely in English, joint or dual-degree programmes with strategic international partners, and spur the full institutionalisation of non-Japanese academic staff (Taylor 2014). Crucially, the programme is being supported through the '1500 Faculty Plan', which paves the way for the recruitment of 1500 leading researchers from around the world to stimulate educational mobility, foreign-student recruitment and research linkages (Rappleye 2013), and ultimately, to transform 10 Japanese universities into 'super global universities' ranked within the world's top 100 (Burgess 2015). All this has been playing out against the backdrop of local debates about, on the one hand, the detrimental impact of Japan's inward-looking orientation (or *uchimuki shikō*) – particularly in relation to the apparent reluctance of young Japanese people to study and work abroad – and on the other hand, about the recently intensifying 'war for talent', which reflects the urgent need to attract 'global human resources' into the country (Burgess 2015, 494). In both cases, low English proficiency among the Japanese has been described as a major obstacle, and EMI at tertiary level has been promoted as a solution.

Meanwhile, in South Korea, the implementation of EMI has been described as 'one of the most substantive developments in Korean higher education', and a major instrument for greater internationalisation and *competitiveness* of the country's HEIs in an 'increasingly global higher education market' (Byun et al. 2011, 432). In 2007, a 'Strategic Plan of Internationalisation of Korean Higher Education', produced by the Korean Ministry of Education, identified a set of four logics that would form the rationale for the project:

- (1) EMI will facilitate the production of a bilingual (Korean–English) domestic labour force with internationally oriented skills;
- (2) EMI will allow HEIs to internationalise their academic and student populations;
- (3) EMI will generate an additional income by attracting students from abroad, whose fees will help compensate for a declining population of Korean university-aged students;
- (4) EMI will boost the language skills and confidence among local lecturers and researchers, leading to greater academic staff mobility and knowledge transfer. (MoEHRD 2007; reported in Byun et al. 2011)

Locally produced university rankings are another important reason for the large-scale adoption of EMI by Korean HEIs. Cho (2012b) reports that one of the key evaluation criteria used to compile the rankings is the degree of internationalisation of individual institutions, which is based on the percentage of EMI courses and the proportion of international faculty and students at the institution. Since boosting performance under the 'internationalisation' criterion could be achieved more easily than, for example, improving the quality of research outputs, the introduction of EMI has become an attractive proposition for many local HEIs. In 2006, the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) was the first Korean HEI to announce that *all* of its programmes would be delivered in English, while since 2010, Pohang University of Science and Technology (POSTECH) has offered EMI on 88% of its undergraduate and 95% of postgraduate programmes (Cho 2012b, 137). National figures suggest that up to 40% of all courses at most Korean universities are now taught in English (Sharma 2011).

Byun et al. (2011) argue that so far the EMI strategy in Korea has been largely successful and the widening of EMI provision at tertiary level is likely to continue well into the future. The real question for local HEIs is not whether to adopt EMI but rather, how to best implement it.³ The figures recently released by the Korean Ministry of Education demonstrate that Korea's internationalisation strategy does indeed appear to be working: between 2001 and 2012, the number of foreign students enrolled in Korean HEIs grew from just over 11,000 to nearly 90,000 – with Chinese students accounting for 76% of foreign enrolment. By 2023, the sector plans to increase this number to 200,000 by permitting universities to open departments and programmes exclusively for foreign students and by further expanding the use of English as a teaching medium – particularly in STEM (science, technology, engineering, maths) subjects (ICEF Monitor 2015).

Similarly, in Macau, English is widely used in local HEIs, either as an official medium of instruction, or is an important additional language – including in its most prestigious HEI, the University of Macau (Botha 2013). EMI also dominates the higher education landscape in Hong Kong, where even the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) – which was founded specifically to offer a Chinese medium university education – has recently opted to increase the number of EMI programmes in order to improve its international standing. The move even prompted a legal challenge by a CUHK student on the grounds that the university's charter obliged it to have Chinese as its primary Mol but the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal ultimately ruled in CUHK's favour (Kirkpatrick 2014). As in the case of some South Korean and Japanese HEIs, the strong support for EMI among Hong Kong universities reflects their internationalisation agenda, and more specifically, Hong Kong's ongoing efforts to establish itself as a global education hub and as Asia's 'world city' (see Education Commission Hong Kong 2011). So, how can we explain these event-level phenomena and what conclusions can we draw from them?

Making sense of the EMI phenomenon in East Asian HEIs

The account of event-level phenomena, offered above, highlights – perhaps unsurprisingly – a great amount of interest in EMI in the region. Crucially, these phenomena are by no means purely discursive – they are accompanied by significant material developments within the respective education ensembles. These observable manifestations appear to reflect a shared set of underlying logics, which work on the assumption that English-language skills are crucial for economic growth and internationalisation efforts, and which draw on pseudo-scientific beliefs about a necessary relationship between maximum exposure to the target language and proficiency gains. However, to maximise the explanatory power of our analysis, we need a more nuanced causal-structural⁴ account of these developments – one that acknowledges the stratified ontology of the social world and attends to strategic actions within strategically selective contexts (after Hay 2002; Jessop 2005). This compels us to ask: 'What underlying structures or mechanisms would, if they existed, explain these event-level phenomena?'

Let us thus start by exploring the strategically selective context of the rise of EMI in the region. As I have argued earlier, EMI policies and practices play out within education ensembles, which are complex, social and relational, and which are sensitive to spatio-temporal dynamics. Like all strategies, EMI-related strategies too are forged in contexts that favour certain ways of acting over others for achieving specific aims – and they do

so as a result of a complex interplay of cultural, political and economic motivations. The analysis thus turns to the broader context of the strategies that emerge as EMI policies at the level of the event.

In spatio-temporal terms, the 'shrinking world' described by Allen and Hamnett (1995) does indeed feel smaller in the twenty-first century. Social relations have been stretched, international travel has become cheaper, and access to information has never been easier. The resultant reduction in the friction of distance has shaped the ways we imagine and experience geographical distance and social difference. But we have also been experiencing the more disruptive consequences of economic, political and cultural globalisation. A widening income gap, mass migrations, armed conflicts and terrorism are just some of them. These disruptions notwithstanding, there has been a broadening and re-scaling of horizons of action. In much of the world, there is now a largely naturalised – common sense – belief that national and regional prosperity is contingent on the ability of local actors to play an active role in shaping and profiting from regional and global circuits of capital production, circulation and consumption. This capacity is variably enabled or constrained by sets of historical, geopolitical and socio-economic factors, as well as by our ability to engage with other actors through shared linguistic codes. In East Asia, and in many other contexts described in this Special Issue, the preeminent linguistic code for interlanguage and intercommunity communication is now 'global' English, and education systems around the world are having to address its significance. In other words, the global linguistic landscape is also strategically selective, and at present, for socio-historical reasons, it appears to be selecting in favour of English over other linguistic resources.

In addition to and in amplification of the above, the technological advances and innovation witnessed over the past several decades have transformed production methods, consumption patterns and distribution channels of goods and services, altering in significant ways the structure of national and regional economies. Taken together, these changes have had a significant impact also on the relationship between language activity and work activity – increasingly necessitating the development within the modern workforce of those kinds of communicative repertoires and types of literacy that can feed into the production of the new competencies required for the knowledge economy. This broader context has thus favoured certain strategies as means to realise specific intentions. Among them has been the placing of new demands on education systems, leading to concrete changes in policy, curricular reforms, and in some contexts also to the introduction of EMI in schools and universities in otherwise non-English-speaking countries.

A closer look at the discursive and material practices implicated in various, and at times contradictory, ways in the promotion or imposition of EMI policies at local, regional and national scales, reveals a fascinating picture of a region where the dialectic of strategically selective structural constraints and structurally attuned strategic action appears to have established in popular imagination a chain of equivalence between economic prosperity, modernisation, social mobility and proficiency in English. Governments, education policy-makers and individual HEIs are recognising the insatiable thirst for English in East Asia and are changing the content of their curricula to reflect it. The move to introduce EMI into a growing number of local HEIs is one such change, which it is hoped will address several emergent challenges: (1) production of a workforce for the knowledge economy; (2) recruitment of international students to deal with the issue of overcapacity in local HEIs;

(3) the stemming of the flow of local students to universities in the English-speaking world; (4) improvements in teaching standards and quality of academic research; and (5) promotion of academic mobility and knowledge transfer. The logics underpinning these strategic decisions remain highly controversial. Among them, perhaps the easiest to defend is the facilitating role of EMI in the advancement of the internationalisation agenda, although that logic necessarily raises questions about the defensibility of the internationalisation agenda itself. In the remaining cases, EMI seems an unlikely strategy for addressing these challenges with any degree of success.

Yet, despite empirical evidence that favours mother tongue instruction – as evidenced in, for instance, the oft-cited UNESCO studies (1953, 2003) – there appears to persist the lay assumption that EMI affords the necessary exposure to the target language to facilitate bilingualism without a detrimental effect on teaching quality, levels of comprehension, or rates of knowledge production. This betrays a widespread misunderstanding of the nature of second language learning – which conflates it with L1 acquisition – and points to a misattribution of causality.

Conclusion

The juggernaut of EMI in non-English-speaking countries appears to be accelerating despite the many dangers of pursuing this policy. The individual cases discussed in this paper seem to index a fetishisation of EFL skills in the region – first, as an important means of facilitating economic growth, and second, as a form of social distinction. The former has had the effect of inflating the ‘exchange’ value of EFL skills – often above their real ‘use’ value, while the latter requires us to think of proficiency in English also as an important positional good, in that its value, at least in part, is a function of its ranking in desirability by other social actors. Hence, in problematising EMI policies, we need to go beyond questioning their capacity to produce a bilingual workforce or stimulate internationalisation efforts, and need to take account of also the ‘sign’ value of the English language as a major structuring factor that has significant implications for social imaginaries. It therefore follows that our discussion must acknowledge the broader social effects of the valorisation of English and of the EMI policies in particular. In East Asia, as in many other contexts, proficiency in English has already become a powerful means of social stratification – by virtue of its scarcity and differential access to high-quality English-language education. Now in the twenty-first century, competence in this global *lingua franca* is emerging also as a powerful determinant of one’s opportunities to participate in, and reap the benefits of, the global economy.

Consequently, it is crucial that given the growing popularity of EMI in the region, the long-term effects of the policy on social stratification, the quality of provision, participation rates and attainment levels, are closely monitored through critical research within and across individual contexts. This is key, for a strategy can only be viewed as a valid way of responding to the emergent needs if it resonates with the actual experiences of local actors – be they individuals or institutions. In other words, because the context in which we operate is always an unevenly contoured terrain that selects for and against particular ideas and narratives – and thus favours certain outcomes while militating against others – the future of the EMI strategy is contingent and sensitive to feedback from the context. To maximise the explanatory potential of such research, our questions need to

attend not only to observable manifestations – through ‘actualist’ comparisons (see Steinmetz 2004) – but should seek to investigate also the underlying causal mechanisms that shape, at a deeper level, the events we ultimately experience. Such retroductive reasoning has the potential to add another layer of explanation, and the epistemic gain that it affords could advance our understanding of both the strategic selectivity of underlying logics and of how this manifests itself in everyday EMI policy and practice.

Notes

1. At Rakuten, since 2012 management positions require TOEIC 700 or above (Asahi Business Club 2011 reported in Burgess 2015, 499)
2. See, for example, Krashen (1981, 1985), Long (1996), Schmidt (1990, 2001) and Swain (1985).
3. For a more critical view of the role of English in Korean society, see Piller and Cho (2013).
4. For a book-length introduction to a critical realist view of method in social science, see for example Sayer (1992).

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