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Equity and Epistemic Justice of English-Medium Instruction in the Middle East and North Africa: A Critical Realism Perspective

Berrington Xolani Siphosakhe Ntombela
ORCID No: 0000-0002-8099-402X
University of Limpopo
Berrington.Ntombela@ul.ac.za

Abstract

Higher institutions of learning are dominated by the English language. This paper interrogates equity and epistemic justice posed by the dominance of English-medium instruction in educational institutions. It argues that the processes of internationalisation and globalisation work in complicity with neocolonialism, perpetuating the subjugation of local languages and barring access to knowledge for the majority. The underpinning arguments are based on the realities of six Middle Eastern institutions of higher learning and six in Africa. The study is contextualised in the educational policy transformation imperatives that adopt English-medium instruction. The paper has adopted critical realism in order to highlight the epistemic injustice and linguistic inequality resulting from the hegemony of the English language. Uncritical adoption of the English language perpetuates injustices suffered by the users of other languages. The paper highlights epistemic access challenges in the context of knowledge economies. The main argument is that English-medium instruction is responsible for the troubles of epistemic access because it serves the aspirations of the minority elite at the expense of the majority.

Keywords: English-medium instruction, globalisation, internationalisation, critical realism, epistemic access

Introduction

There are no people or society on earth without language. In fact, language is the distinguishing feature of Homo sapiens from every other creature (Aitchison, 2008). Thus, every society has a particular worldview based on its inherent language. Not only do people interact with the world and make sense of everything around them through language but, through language, they interact with each other and are able to accomplish all sorts of things that are unique to Homo sapiens. This language facility has caused linguists such as Chomsky to theorise that fundamentally, human beings must have had a common language on which all the languages of the world are based; that is, a universal grammar (Aitchison, 2008; Crystal, 2012; Schmid, 2012). This idea is in fact, reminiscent of the biblical concept of Babel (Ntombela, 2022). Theoretically, therefore, this places every human being on an equal linguistic footing. However, as Spolsky (1998) argued, the local language landscape has been altered by the spread of languages through political and military conquest. The cases of such spread include Aramaic, Greek, Arabic, Mayan, Manding, and Latin in ancient world, Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa, Central America, West Africa, and Western Europe, respectively (Spolsky, 1998).

The dominance of English on a global scale has caught the attention of sociolinguists such as Spolsky (1998, p. 77) who asserted: "This growing linguistic hegemony of English is dangerous and harmful . . . by threatening to take over important functions from other major languages." In this article, the sociolinguistic problems of English-medium of instruction in the Middle East and North Africa are interrogated through the lens of critical realism. Critical realism is appropriate in the article's drive to interrogate the tenets of globalisation and internationalisation. These two concepts are argued to be working along the same aspirations of neocolonialism and neoliberalism.

A Critical Realism Approach

Critical realism as conceived by Bhaskar has three domains: "the real consisting of mechanisms; the actual, consisting of events; and the empirical, consisting of experiences" (Scott & Morrison, 2007, p. 46). According to Molinari (2022), to account for the social reality of a phenomenon, critical realism appeals to both relativism and foundationalism where the former represents subjectivity and the latter, objectivity. Experiences are obviously located in the past and therefore include histories, whilst everyday life constitutes the actual—what we know (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). The real is the conflation of the actual and empirical events through the mechanisms that underlie the manifest actual and empirical (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

In the context of this article, it means that the experiences of those who are affected by the hegemony of the English language are driven by established mechanisms in the form of ideological systems. These ideologies manifest themselves in the policies and constraints that drive behaviour in a predictable complex direction. In other words, the beliefs about the supremacy of the English language and the currency of the Western culture drive the adoption and enforcement of English-oriented education. It also means that teachers of English, for instance, who often consider English language teaching an instrumental exercise that is apolitical and only serves to promote educational ends, must reflect on the impact that the English language has on the learners who must often abandon their own languages (and culture) in order to immerse themselves in that target language. Furthermore, there must be an open dialogue between those in the centre and those in the periphery because in most cases, those at the centre, considered to be the owners of the English language, only see learners in the periphery in terms of revenue they bring as they enrol for various English language courses. These are the underlying mechanisms that remain intact and drive practice, notwithstanding that such mechanisms have serious implications for epistemic access.

Epistemic Access

"Epistemology refers to how educational researchers can know the reality that they wish to describe. This needs to be distinguished from ontology, which refers to the nature of this reality" (Scott & Morrison, 2007, p. 85). Keeping the two terms apart is essential as Molinari (2022) rightly argued. For example, that there is education, economy, politics, neocolonialism, and so forth, is ontological according to Molinari (2022), but the manner in which we access, study, and seek to understand education, economy, politics, neocolonialism, etcetera is epistemological.

To illustrate further, Saussure (as cited in Holdcroft, 1991; Ntombela, 2008) made a distinction between *langage* (natural language) and *langue* (a particular language). This means langage corresponds to ontology in that it represents the reality of the existence of language as a natural phenomenon. On the other hand, langue corresponds to epistemology in that it is the means by which an individual is able to access langage. Put differently, our knowledge and proof of the existence of langage is based on the attainment of a particular language (langue). Langue, therefore, consists of all natural languages, living or dead, such as English, French, Portuguese, and forth. These natural languages should not be conflated with langage as a general phenomenon. When such conflation occurs, the result is that langue, which is a particular language such as English, is taken to represent langage to the extent that the natural language phenomenon is taken to mean just one particular language.

In other words, ontology represents the world in its objective sense whether understood or not, but epistemology represents the subjective entry into the ontological world in order to make sense of what it entails. Thus, various epistemological tools are available in order to gain entry into the world of knowledge. The crucial epistemological tool is language. This means that access to knowledge is facilitated by language. It can therefore be said that language facilitates epistemic access; that is, language is an epistemological tool but not knowledge itself, which is ontological.

Conflating ontology with epistemology has undesirable outcomes. For example, if language, which is epistemological when used to access knowledge, is regarded as ontological, then language becomes knowledge. In fact, the wrapping up of knowledge with the English language has resulted in such a conflation to the extent that the English language is equated to knowledge whilst other languages are not. This explains why any education accessed through any other epistemological tool (language) other than the English language is regarded inferior. To know has come to mean speaking English fluently, for no one is believed to possess knowledge if it is not expressed through the English language.

The result of this conflation, furthermore, is that instead of facilitating access to knowledge, the English language has become a barrier for many who have not developed proficiency in it, and are denied access to the same knowledge through their language(s). Adopting a critical realism approach is therefore essential in unmasking epistemic access as implied in the dire situation of English-medium instruction (EMI) in Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

EMI in MENA

The Middle East in the context of this article will be limited to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which consists of six countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. It need not be emphasised that these countries are bound together by the common Arabic language. There are interesting commonalities among GCC countries in how they have responded to various challenges around education, economy, and politics. Barnawi (2018) in his assessment observed that these countries have sought to diversify their economies and gradually shift from oil-based economy to knowledge-based economy. A knowledge-based economy for the GCC entails internationalisation of education. The common factor in the internationalisation of education is the adoption of EMI and the marginalisation of Arabic as an academic medium of instruction.

The encroachment of Western ideology in the GCC has arguably been facilitated by the adoption of EMI. Whilst the adoption of EMI was presented as the only alternative to safeguard future economic growth through educational transformation, the consequences were contradictory, especially on the part of other educational stakeholders such as parents and students. Instead of being incorporated into the economy, many citizens found themselves excluded as a new class with access to the English language had been created. Unfortunately, the Western ideology came packaged with "neoliberal capitalist ideologies that constantly call for individuality, self-interest, free markets, endless competition and privatisation" at the expense of "Islamic values that promote collectivity, solidarity, and socially coherent elements that form the basis of GCC structures" (Barnawi, 2018, p. 172). Paradoxically, these economic and educational reforms were brought to the GCC by giant organisations such as World Trade Organisation, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund located in the West (Barnawi, 2018).

As expected, the adoption of EMI brought cultural shift in many aspects of life in the GCC. The youth of Saudi Arabia, for instance, are reported to have tried all means to assimilate American culture including dress code and mannerisms so that they could expedite acquisition of English (Barnawi, 2018). Young Emirati children are increasingly becoming monolingual in the English language (Hopkyns, 2014). All this means that in the foreseeable future, the next generation will have crossed over into the Western cultural orientation. This, therefore, explains resistance mounted by political and religious enthusiasts locally.

Such criticism by local scholars and Muslims is more pronounced in Qatar where the replacement of Arabic by English is seen as a symbol of outside interference aimed at undermining Arabic culture and Muslim identity (Abdel-Moneim, 2016). This criticism is warranted given the fact that the adoption of EMI in Qatar has not helped students perform better or closed the widening gap between education and the job market (Ntombela, 2022). What seems to have been achieved, as reported by Barnawi (2018), is the creation of another class of elites who, because of access to the English language, are sent to prestigious Ivy League institutions and come back to occupy top jobs.

Holi et al. (2022, p. 51) contended that Omanis have no misgivings about English having become an intrinsic part of Omani life partly because "English has never been a colonial imposition on them." However, most countries that retained English, and continue to call for more English, were colonised and had English imposed upon them. Nevertheless, Holi et al. (2022, p. 51) were on point in observing that English in Oman is prominent because of the dominance of the "non-Omani and non-Arabic-speaking labour force." This ties the adoption of EMI to the job market. Paradoxically, another reason for the adoption of EMI in Oman was to facilitate Omanisation, "the government's ambitious plan to gradually replace the expatriate labour force with Omani nationals" (Holi et al., 2022, p. 51). Omani nationals already have Arabic that can be used to achieve Omanisation, but it might seem that the job market has been sold to the English such that to access it, one needs to have competence in the English language.

After the oil boom in Kuwait, Mahfouz (2022) reported that literacy levels climbed because of heavy investment into education. However, it soon became apparent that literacy had to shift from Arabic to the English language because Kuwait, like other Gulf countries, adopted "the American model of higher education where English-medium instruction is the norm" (Mahfouz, 2022, p. 69). There are signs that point to the decline of Arabic due to heavy investment directed to the English language. For instance, one of Mahfouz's (2022, p. 80) participants admitted that "although holding on to Arabic seems to be harder nowadays, I think the more we work on loving it, the more we can go back to it." This clearly shows that Arabic is gradually slipping from the grasp of many Kuwaiti youth. If such a trend continues unabated, the next generation Kuwaitis will be non-English monolingual speakers of the English language—a sociolinguistic concern.

Bahrain has not only adopted EMI but has also imported the whole Western pedagogy and practice (Ntombela, 2022). The reason for such a move is reminiscent of what is happening across the GCC where the marathon to internationalise means the adoption of EMI in the education sector. This is usually sold as solution for the disparity between the education system and the job market. However, instead of facilitating access to the job market (and epistemic access), a lot of youth is left in the lurch because the Arabic they should be using to enter the world of work and to access knowledge has been delinked and reduced to a religious object.

Like the GCC, countries in North Africa, that is, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan are commonly bound by the Arabic language. However, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria also share a common heritage of being colonised by France. This means that for the three countries, French has an official status as the language of learning and teaching, especially in higher education. This is a common trend for most former colonies. For those three countries, nonetheless, EMI is largely aspirational because there seems to be dwindling support for French largely due to its colonial association and the association of English with global communication and the international job market (Troudi, 2022).

On the contrary, Libya's colonisation by Italy was short-lived and it did not seem to have had an impact in shifting the status of Arabic as the language of all academic transactions. Although the Arabic language reigns supreme in all academic transactions in Libya, there are views that would favour an Arabic-English bilingual programme. Such views, as reported by Troudi (2022), are excavated from participants who use EMI and from those who use Arabic-medium instruction (AMI) in two science and engineering departments. This arrangement is meant to give students access to the global job market through EMI whilst giving them access to knowledge through AMI.

In Algeria, the issue of language is sensitively divided between the proponents of Francophone and advocates of Arabic (Troudi, 2022, p. 137), where the latter is advocated "as a symbol of social, linguistic and religious identity." However, there is also a general decline of French in society and education as a result of English being "seen as a solution to the educational, technological and economic problems of the country" (Troudi, 2022, p. 137). How English came to be viewed this way is probably based on the marketisation of the English world and the English language. This marketisation is in sync with a neoliberal ethos of capitalism, which only achieves the accumulation of revenue from those who buy the English language product without any significant alleviation of the economic, educational, and technological plight experienced by non-English countries, especially in the South (Gayton, 2020; Holi et al., 2022).

Tunisia is also marked by a competitive interplay of Arabic language and French. French dominates in higher education because of the colonial legacy that benefited the elites who continued to strengthen the ties with the French government and Francophone policies after independence (Troudi, 2022). Arabic is also deeply rooted as a national and official language but its academic utility is limited to primary and secondary education, however, there is growing talk among Tunisian academics who argue for educational policy shift in favour of English as a medium of instruction in order to catch up with economic development, modernisation, and global positioning (Troudi, 2022). There is no doubt that the influence of English on a global scale is affecting academics who tend to conflate linguistic matters with issues of the economy and modernisation.

There is obviously a keen interest by some academics in North Africa to establish EMI as demonstrated in Morocco by Belhiah (2022, p. 165) who recommended that EMI be established by developing policy that must be "undertaken by a committee composed of local linguists and language policy experts who have an intimate and acute understanding of the sociolinguistic situation in the country." Moreover, Belhiah (2022, p. 165) seemed to subscribe to the notion that education is apolitical when he advised that the "committee should steer clear of ideological and political motivations by focusing primordially on how EMI can be integrated into the Moroccan education system." From a critical

standpoint, knowledge is never value-free but is ideological, which means that "the institutionalised forms of knowledge embody assumptions and perspectives of the dominant social groups, which introduce other communities to the same value system in order to legitimise the dominance of the elite group" (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 16). Similarly, learning is never simply instrumental but is political, which means schooling is not only "implicated in the exercise of power and domination in society," but teachers are expected to ethically negotiate "the hidden values and interests behind knowledge, and are expected to help students to adopt a critical orientation to learning" (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 17). In other words, any movement towards the adoption of EMI in Morocco is a political move and those responsible for advocating such a move have a moral responsibility to expose all the possible ramifications.

On the other hand, Egypt is a former British colony and therefore has a visible presence of EMI. Higher education in Egypt is dominated by EMI and, as Troudi (2022) reported, preparation for transition to EMI at tertiary level is done at primary and secondary school levels. Egypt sees English as a conduit to economic development. However, it is noted that EMI represents inequality given that most low-income parents are unable to afford private tuition for their children. The result is that the society is further divided into those who have access to English and can proceed to higher education against those who do not have such access and can never make it to higher education.

Similarly, in Sudan there is a keenness to have EMI strongly established. Like Egypt, Sudan was a British colony, which explains the presence of EMI. Even though English was used as a medium of instruction in higher education institutions in Sudan, the 1990s policies of Arabisation replaced English with Arabic (Alhassan, 2022). This move has not been without contestation given that those who argue for AMI assert that Arabic in higher education "would ensure easy learning and understanding since it is the students' first language" whilst those in favour of EMI contend that "Arabic and not English would undermine the employability and mobility of Sudanese graduates in both national and international labour markets (Alhassan, 2022, pp. 169–170). Alhassan has gone to the extent of recommending the adoption of English-only policy by Sudanese higher education institutions. Paradoxically, that author went on to recommend the use of mother tongue. This sounds contradictory because you cannot have an English-only policy and still allow other languages to be utilised. Such a recommendation is based on the monolingual fallacy that English is better taught and learnt at the exclusion of a mother tongue (Canagarajah, 1999). Alhassan was probably aware that research has confirmed the need for children to be schooled in their mother tongue (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2016; Ntombela, 2020).

Eastern and Southern African Experience

The linguistic landscape in Eastern and Southern Africa is rich and dynamic. It consists of major languages spoken as a mother tongue by millions of Africans. These African languages include Amharic, Chichewa, isiZulu, Kikuyu, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, kiSwahili, Luyanda, Malagasy, Oromo, and Somali (Trudell, 2016). However, "the international languages have gained a strong foothold in the national institutions of Eastern and Southern Africa" (Trudell, 2016, p. vii). Moreover, "the more recent influence of globalisation has heightened the role and prestige of international languages (particularly English) in education," which are seen as the gateway to global citizenship, economic progress, and enhanced social standing (Trudell, 2016, p. vii).

In Angola, for instance, Portuguese is the official language and is the medium of instruction. Nevertheless, "English is gradually usurping the privileged position of Portuguese due to the role English has in achieving economic opportunity that has emerged in Angola" (Trudell, 2016, p. 26). This is despite the fact that neither Portuguese nor English is the mother tongue for the majority of learners. The consequence is that for the majority of learners, the rate of learning is slowed down and the quality of teaching is affected (Diarra, 2003).

In Tanzania, kiSwahili is spoken by 95 per cent of the population, and in the island of Zanzibar, it is spoken by the whole population; yet, the education policy promotes the use of English as the language of instruction in mathematics and ICT (Brock-Utne, 2017). This has not helped in improving the quality of education or the learning experience. In fact, the promotion of English as the language of instruction in mathematics and ICT makes these learning fields available to only those who have access to English education, thus labelling the majority learners, and by extension the general Tanzanian population, as incapable of mastering mathematics and ICT.

In Malawi, only 0.18 per cent use English for household communication and over 70 per cent use Chichewa as a language of household communication; yet, English is being used as a medium instruction throughout schooling as per the new policy (Brock-Utne, 2017). This elevation of English is neocolonial because Malawi was colonised by Britain. Those who benefited from the establishments of the colonial system could not think past the system but were caught up in its intricacies, and perpetuated the cycle of dependence on the colonial master. Unfortunately, the neglect of learners' languages of household communication in education means that they do not have access to knowledge offered in English.

In Rwanda, Kinyarwanda is spoken by 99.4 per cent of the population, and could have been used as a medium of instruction; instead French was opted for, which is now being replaced by English (Brock-Utne, 2017). This was unfortunately implemented despite counter-recommendations by Global Education Monitoring Report and the African Union. This demonstrates an obsession with dependence on Western powers for education and economy. Participation in the international economy and global markets is often cited as the reason for adopting English-medium instruction; instead of assisting the majority to realise their educational dream, only the minority elite that has access to the language chosen for education benefits.

It is puzzling why African states run away from using their own languages for educational purposes. Luke (2005, p. xvii) suggested that even though the colonial master may have departed, the master still holds "a significant place in the political and educational imaginary." Most European countries use their own language as medium of instruction both at school level and at university level. It is a misconception that English is learnt best when it is a medium of instruction (Brock-Utne, 2017). This misconception is promoted by donors, former colonial powers, the publishing industry in the West, and the African elite (Brock-Utne, 2017). It is also too common for African states to cite globalisation and internationalisation imperatives as forces behind opting for a European language as a medium of instruction.

Globalisation

The advent of globalisation was brought about by the collapse of rigid boundaries in market trade. This means that nations opened themselves up for global trade. However, it immediately becomes noticeable that the global movement is unequally distributed. The influx is usually from poorer nations to rich ones where the poor are in search of greener pastures whilst the hosts are in search of cheap labour (de Wit et al., 2017). The most sought after cheap labour would be the one that will not pose any communication challenges. In other words, the most preferred labourer is the one who speaks the language of the host. The result is that the labourers are forced to learn the language of the host in order to reap the benefits, or so that their labour will be bought. It so happens that in this global movement, the destinations are predominantly the English-speaking countries (de Wit et al., 2017). The cycle seems to have come full circle where at first, the movement was from the English-speaking country to establish a colony in order to acquire cheap labour that would support the economy of the coloniser (Pakenham, 2014)—now, movement is from the former colony to the former coloniser.

From an educational perspective, this means that initially, the coloniser came to educate locals so that they could become civil servants and contribute to the economy of the coloniser (Brock-Utne, 2017; Trudell, 2016). This process was accompanied by the dismantling of the established education systems,

and establishment of those of the coloniser—thus creating dependency on the coloniser. For instance in Madagascar, the medium of instruction prior to French colonisation in 1897 was Malagasy, after which all schools that did not use French as a medium of instruction were shut down (Trudell, 2016). The result was that over time, the locals were made to forget their own educational heritage and remained with the education system of the coloniser as point of reference. This new education system was tied to the economy and the coloniser presided over the means of production. It therefore became impossible to dissociate the education system from the economy. The education system of the coloniser was packaged with the language of the coloniser, which became the only means of accessing the economy. Even when the coloniser seemed to have left, access to the economy still relied on the language of the coloniser; in that way, the coloniser retained the economic power in a neocolonial system (Luke, 2005). This therefore explains why in the globalisation agenda, the language that gives access to the economy of the former coloniser, becomes an economic capital. Interestingly, the globe seems to converge on an English-speaking world, which is regarded as the economic hub of the world (Hyatt, 2013).

In globalisation, people migrate to the host country from different language backgrounds. In order to facilitate communication among themselves, the language that gives access to the economy becomes their lingua franca (Ntombela, 2022). What is observable about the lingua franca is that it takes the contextual shape of its interlocutors. In the case of English, there is accommodation for a plethora of expressions as shaped by the background of each interlocutor. This has given rise to a pluralisation of the English language into World Englishes (Harmer, 2006).

In the context of higher education, students migrate from different countries to an English-speaking institution and bring with them the influence of their languages into English expressions. This is accommodated in the system of globalisation because what is important is achieving communication. The theory of communicative competence finds a fertile ground in globalisation (Cele-Sangweni, 2021; Hymes, 1972; Ntombela, 2008). Communicative competence implies a degree of competence where it is normal that even one word could achieve a communicative end. For instance, by simply uttering “toilet,” a person could be pointed to the right direction where toilets are located, or by simply uttering, “stop” whilst riding in a crowded bus, the passenger would have achieved the desired goal of getting off the bus at the correct station. This means, interlocutors are able to negotiate communication goals through their various linguistic expressions of the English language and, over time, these expressions become part of the linguistic repertoire in the lingua franca. For instance, in an interview that Sartor (2014) conducted with one student participant, a Buriat girl from Ulan Ude in Mongolia, the student, when asked about the circumstances for communicating in English, reported to have friends from Africa, outer Mongolia, India, and the United Kingdom with whom she communicates in English; even though she admits that her English is not good, they speak English and understand each other. In a nutshell, English lingua franca mirrors a globalisation agenda.

Internationalisation

Internationalisation might seem to suggest liquid borders where everyone becomes an international citizen. Again, the international seems to be limited to an English-speaking world to the extent that the desire to tap to the world economy simply means having access to amenities offered through the English language (de Wit et al., 2017). In the context of higher education, or education in general, internationalisation simply means offering programmes in the English language (Ntombela, 2017). The paradox should be obvious, but because of the subtleties of neocolonial and neoliberal systems, a new doctrine is crafted, which sells an ideology that unless the English language embodies every aspect of knowledge, that knowledge remains in the fringes and cannot be of world standard. Therefore, through internationalisation, education is organised through the English language, which is sold as a panacea for all educational (and economic) woes. Unlike English lingua franca, which is tolerated in the globalisation

agenda, the standardised form of English is promoted in the internationalisation arrangement (Ntombela, 2022). This is the type of English that is dubbed academic English and is expected in all academic transactions, including academic publications and the general publication industry (Molinari, 2022).

Through internationalisation, non-English-speaking countries adopt English-medium instruction in their educational programmes from school level to tertiary level, arguing that if they do not do so, they will be left out of the international world (Trudell, 2016). This is sometimes because the economy of those countries is either presided over by the English language or the English language has an interest in their economy. In cases where the economy is presided over by the English language, parents want to safeguard the future of their children by making sure that they have access to the English language, which holds the key to the world of work. In the case where the English language has an interest in the economy, the English-speaking "international" bodies sell themselves as expert economic advisers. Their advice is usually along the lines of diversifying the economy by making sure that the education system adopts the English language in order to attract the international labour—meaning the English labour.

The result is that in internationalisation, the competition becomes too stiff for many who must acquire the nuances of a standardised form of English. Needless to say, that competition in its various forms is a fundamental ethos of a neoliberal system (Barnawi, 2018). That is why a plethora of programmes is marketed, promising to hone academic English skills, which translates into lucrative revenue for the English language industry. This revenue is put to good use because it goes into developing the English language. As a result, the English language is forever in demand because it poses itself to be presiding over all forms of knowledge.

Discussion

The object of this article is clearly laid out as that of interrogating the dominance of EMI in MENA. In order to achieve such a project, a critical realism approach needed to be adopted. A critical realism approach is essential in underscoring the underlying mechanisms that shape the adoption, imposition of, and reliance on English language, which has become a sociolinguistic nightmare.

The main sociolinguistic problem of the expansion of EMI, especially in MENA, is that there are established languages that serve better the educational objectives of the majority of students. Perhaps the adoption of EMI could have been morally justified if the languages in these countries were incapable of handling academic content. Such a situation exists in Comoros where even though Comorian is spoken by 95 per cent of the population, and is classified as the official language alongside French and Arabic, it is only used as a medium of instruction at pre-school level because of the lack of development of a stable written form of the language (Trudell, 2016). In Comoros, therefore, French is used as the medium of instruction. But even in that situation, there is no absolute moral justification for not developing a stable orthography for the language spoken by 95 per cent of the population, which would serve them much better educationally.

The MENA situation is both sociolinguistically puzzling and disappointing. All these vast territories are bound together by the Arabic language, which has all the sophisticated amenities to handle any academic content and has done so over centuries. It remains to be answered why it is so easy for MENA to yield to the English world's soft power (or remain bound to the colonial language such as French). Whilst the justification for the adoption of EMI across the length and breadth of MENA is prefixed with a modernisation discourse and economic diversification imperatives, reality seems to point to the suffering of local youths who are burdened with deciphering the English language and accessing knowledge through the language they barely understand.

There is no doubt that all the benefits of EMI go to the English-speaking world. However, academics and scholars in general, who represent the minority, seem to gravitate towards the adoption of EMI. Most academics and scholars have benefited from education offered through a foreign language and mistake their individual experiences to be representative of the vast majority. In any given country, only a very small number of the population go beyond the borders of the country. Therefore, citing international travel and communication, and access to the global world, obfuscates the local needs. In fact, those

(especially from Europe and non-English-speaking countries) do not need to be taught in the medium of English in order to travel and communicate with the global world. They can simply learn the language of their destination, either as a subject in formal education or use any available self-teaching mechanism. That the whole population must abandon its language that is used for epistemological access and be taught in a foreign language in order to be part of a global village is fallacious and unjust.

Another sociolinguistic problem about the expansion of EMI is the threat it poses to other languages. The concern about the relegation of Arabic to the periphery is genuine, and should be taken seriously. Not only does EMI threaten to replace Arabic's important transactions, it threatens to confuse people's identities and sense of worth. When children grow up and can no longer speak Arabic, the sense of who they are will certainly be affected. Whilst they will never be wholly accepted in the English world because they are not English, they will equally have no place in the Arab world because they would have lost the essence of being Arab.

Most importantly, knowledge should be divorced from language at ontological level. In that respect, every language at epistemological level is capable of accessing knowledge. And every human being is endowed with language capability so that access to knowledge is open to everyone. When that capability is removed because the language with which knowledge could be accessed is denied, it tramples on the linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2008). The implication therefore in the Middle East, especially in GCC, where EMI is being radically adopted at visible linguistic suffering of many students, is that those students' linguistic human rights are being violated. The same could be said about nations in North Africa that are either relying on French as a medium of instruction or anticipating a shift to EMI. In fact, the adoption of EMI by some Eastern and Southern African nations indicates that things have not gone too well for ordinary citizens. The adoption of EMI in the experience of Eastern and Southern African nations, cited in this article, seems to benefit a few elites because access to better English tuition is linked to a financial capacity to which the majority falls short.

Conclusion

Without doubt, globalisation and internationalisation make significant contributions to the expansion of EMI in MENA and elsewhere. Both these phenomena are used to justify the adoption of EMI. Whilst there is nothing wrong with learning English as an additional language, there is certainly a lot wrong with replacing a viable language with English. In other words, it is possible to meet the imperatives of globalisation without having to adopt EMI.

There is evidence that local languages are affected by the adoption of EMI as part of internationalisation. The sociolinguistic problem of internationalisation is that it packages knowledge with the English language to the extent that it becomes difficult to dissociate knowledge from the English language. In fact, in many higher education contexts, academic literacy is being equated with English proficiency. Thus, students who are proficient in English are easily passed as being highly literate academically, which means that proficiency in any other language does not count as academic literacy in the internationalisation arrangement.

The big question that underlies the principal object of this article is whether there is anything that can or must be done. Certainly, if there is concern for the majority of ordinary citizens who are negatively affected by the adoption of EMI or being educated in a foreign language whilst there is an option for a local language, something needs to be done. The contention of this article is that there are better ways of strengthening English language teaching and learning without affecting access to knowledge. The adoption of EMI is not a better option because it delays students' access to knowledge. Furthermore, the adoption of EMI is a threat to the survival and development of local languages as intellectual languages, which brings linguistic imbalance. Investing in local languages for epistemic access would go a long way towards improving the acquisition of the English language.

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