

VERNACULAR AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION AS DRIVING TOOLS FOR INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

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Abstract

The paper explores the current state of affairs in the area of higher education at the age of multilingual societies development and globalization. The authors acknowledge that English has become the major medium of instruction. The paper analyzes internationally oriented universities' strategies and practices regarding the language policy issues.

The paper argues that it is necessary to carefully combine mother tongue-based, bilingual and multilingual approaches to university-based instruction, research and management to enhance education quality and HEI international profile, thus fostering university academic excellence.

The research methodology was based on qualitative analysis and included relevant literature review, study of international universities experience, data on Russian Universities that have been selected for the nationwide academic excellence project.

The research findings and discussion section of the paper explores the above mentioned universities' educational policies, areas and tools of their implementation, and further attempts to outline the research findings with regard to the prior research contexts with the view to map the above findings within current international landscape of higher education.

The paper ends up with drafting recommendations on language policies of a multilingual higher education in the 21st century.

Keywords: Higher education, academic excellence, multilingual education, language policy.

1 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The use of vernacular languages in education has always been a challenging issue regarding the societal needs and policies (UNESCO 1953, UNESCO 2003, etc.). Nonetheless, there is an international trend to shift from linguistics diversity to plurilingual education (Beacco, Byram 2003).

Nonetheless, currently, countries admit that English operates as lingua franca in many areas of internationally oriented human activities, including industry, services provision, education and research.

The above affects modern universities strategies and policies as the higher education institutions (further HEI) strive to go up in the international ranking league tables; English as a medium of instruction turns out to be a tool for increasing international students' intake, enhancing faculty's research and academic achievements visibility, etc.

Meanwhile, there are ongoing discussions in various national educational systems about the benefits of English as a medium of instruction in higher education institutions (Bolton 2008, Sian, Martin 2010, Guangwei, Jun 2014, Jeongyeon, Bradley, Jinsook 2014, Wächter, Maiworm, 2014).

Some researchers underline that English medium instruction reduces students' capacity to gain specialized knowledge due to their lack of proficiency in English.

Moreover, scholars point out that within the national education framework the use of English as a medium of instruction might contribute to social divide and might lead to the limited access of national student body to the quality education that encompasses best international practices and developments (see, for instance (Bromber, Smieja 2004, Doğançay-Aktuna, S. 1998, Mutumba 1999, Tung, Raymond, Tsang 1997).

1.1 Research statement

The present research statement argues that it is necessary to carefully combine mother tongue-based, bilingual and multilingual approaches to university-based instruction, research and management to enhance education quality and HEI international profile, thus fostering university academic excellence.

1.2 Literature analysis

There is a steady assumption among some researchers that English will become a second language for many global citizens by 2050 (Graddol, 2005). Nonetheless, the present research statement explores the language policies of higher education institutions from a different angle and tries to leverage vernacular and foreign languages in higher education institutions policies.

The above statement goes in line with experiences shared by a number of research groups (see, for instance: Doiz, Lasagabaster, Sierra 2011, the Multilingual University on-line source, etc.).

The English-based higher education is viewed and analyzed from various angles the cover social aspects, knowledge transfer quality, issues related to special knowledge, marketization of higher education, etc.

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Some scholars stress that the curricula based on English as a medium of instruction might be affected by a number of challenges, including the incongruity of knowledge concepts in mother tongue and English that in turn might lead to lower quality of knowledge processing in a foreign language (Heugh, 2000).

Other researchers promote the CLIL-based approach with regard to English as a medium of instruction in higher education (Wolf, 2006).

In terms of commercial sense, the English-based higher education in non-English speaking countries contributes to the universities' profit (Bolsman, Miller, 2008, Coleman, 2006).

1.3 Research methodology

The research methodology was based on qualitative analysis and included relevant literature review, the analysis of current language policies at international universities, and data on Russian Universities that have been selected for the 5-top-100 Russian academic excellence project.

The empirical evidence was gathered from a number of European universities with a particular focus on non

native-English- speaking countries.

2 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It seems obvious that North American, UK and Australian universities benefit a lot from English-based internationalization of higher education agenda in general, and its curricula, in particular.

The British Council's specialists provide the data confirming that in ten years the number of English-taught Master's programs increased tenfold: "60 Masters programs delivered in English in 19 EU countries in 2002, excluding the UK and Ireland, and 6,800 Master's programs delivered in English in 11 EU countries by 2012, excluding the UK and Ireland" (Wiseman, Odell 2014).

Nonetheless the study of European universities' perceptions in case of non-English speaking countries reveals that the situation with language policy development within the internationalization context requires careful approach (Altbach 2016).

The present research looked through European universities language policy issues in various countries. Below some general trends are characterized with links to concrete institutions or research projects.

The University of the Basque Country (further UBC) is officially bilingual (Basque/Spanish). Due to increasing globalization, starting from in 2009/10 the university launched 125 subjects (i.e. 5% of all courses on offer) in English, with the exception of 12 subjects which were taught in French.

The research over UBC students and teachers perceptions on English/ Basque-Spanish instruction revealed that new multilingual context requires that bilingual universities should maintain the indigenous languages and cultures "while at the same time implementing language policies to reap the benefits of the use of English as the main language of communication" (Doiz, Lasagabaster, Sierra 2011).

Similar thoughts can be found in some Italian scholars' research. They agree that today academic prestige in Europe is associated with the internationalization that relies on "English-only police... these claims can fall short when English-taught programs are addressed to quasi-monolingual audiences, a common trait of Italian international universities...in these contexts the adoption of English as a medium of instruction risks being a cosmetic label used to obfuscate dubious political choices under the false pretences of internationalization (Campagna, Pulcini, 2014 :173).

With regard to a major Sweden university experience, Dr. M.Kuteeva acknowledges that due to internationalization, many universities in northern Europe have adopted English as a medium of instruction. At the same time, recent language policies have reinforced the importance of the national language(s) in the academic domain "...to ensure students' right to receive education in their native language". The scholar uses empirical research findings to prove that "...the development of academic literacy in Englishrequires both more and less than a native/native-like competence" (Kuteeva 2014:332).

The academic community beliefs regarding the importance of interaction and even in some cases synergetic use of English and local national languages in higher education can be found in empirical evidence-based research papers whose authors come from Spain (Llurda, Cots, Armengol 2014), Lithuania (Bulajeva, Hogan-Brun 2014), Catalonia and Wales (Garret, Gallego Balsa 2014), Denmark (Mortensen 2014), etc.

As for the Russian Federation landscape, several years ago a Russia-wide project for major universities academic excellence was launched to enhance the competitiveness of leading Russian universities in the global research and education market (Project 5-100).

One of the project paramount priorities is associated with integrated language policy that aims to develop English academic environment in major Russian research universities and to foster the Russian language-based programs for international students, their special pre-university training in Russian at their home countries, etc (Global Universities Association). Moreover, regarding the Academic studies the universities should take into account the importance of developing drafting and editing skills within the multilingual education (Stepanova, 2015).

3 CONCLUSION

The above material leads to the assumption that national universities while striving to go up the world university rankings should carefully balance their English-focused and national language-based courses and research due to a number of reasons, including students' language rights, cultural values and beliefs preservation, the development and maintenance of comparative perspective both in instruction and research activities, etc.

National research communities and higher education systems should be protected and preserved both legally and administratively as they provide valuable sources for advances in research, academic instruction, and their linkage with industry.

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