

EMI (English-medium instruction) in South Korean elite universities

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[Correction added on 14th April 2023, after first online publication: Another affiliation 'Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines' added to Kingsley Bolton.]

Abstract

This article provides an extensive review of previous research on English-medium instruction (EMI) in South Korean higher education. It then goes on to discuss the findings of a 2017 survey at four elite universities in South Korea, which were Seoul National University, Korea University, Yonsei University, and Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST). While some of the results could be regarded as predictable, there were a number of findings which extended previous research. Despite the extensive complaint tradition about English in South Korea, many of the students in our sample rated their proficiency rather highly. Notwithstanding the extensive critiques of EMI in much of the previous literature, students typically displayed pragmatic and sometimes positive attitudes to dealing with EMI in their institutions.

1 | INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, one of the most controversial issues in South Korean (alternatively, 'Korean') higher education has been the implementation of English-medium instruction (EMI). In recent years, the government has promoted EMI in higher education in an effort to 'internationalize' the country's higher education system, and much of the commentary on English-medium instruction in Korean higher education has focused on the pushback against this policy, from teachers, students, and the general public. This current study set out to collect and analyse original empirical

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data on EMI in Korean universities, by conducting surveys with students at four leading universities: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University, and Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST). Specific research questions investigated students' proficiency in the English language, perceived difficulties studying EMI courses, and their use of English and Korean in EMI classes. It is hoped that this study will provide a body of useful data and findings of direct relevance to the frontline of research in this area.

2 | SOCIETAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Here, we set out to contextualize our study with reference to historical influences, the societal context, the 'traumas' of war and a divided nation, and recent government policies utilizing the discourses of globalization and internationalization to promote English in contemporary Korean society.

2.1 | Societal background

South Korea (or more formally, the Republic of Korea), was established in 1948, and constitutes the southern part of the Korean peninsula, divided politically and militarily from its close neighbour North Korea. The population of South Korea is currently just over 51 million, with over 25 million people living in the Seoul Capital Area (Kostat, 2020). Before the United States and the Soviet Union divided Korea in 1945, the country had been a Japanese colony from 1910, and which, as noted by Hwang (2016) resulted in a strong sense of anticolonial nationalism among Koreans. Technically, the country is still at war with North Korea, as only an armistice, not a peace treaty, was signed between North and South Korea in the final stages of the Korean War in 1953. In recent decades South Korea has become known as one of the Asian tigers, due to its status as an economic powerhouse with one of largest GDPs in Asia (currently estimated at around US\$ 43,000 per capita). In the contemporary era, the country has also become very successful in promoting its popular culture, its music (notably K-pop), as well as cinema, television dramas, and fashion.

Although no official data on ethnicity is collected by the South Korean government, the vast majority of the population is ethnically Korean, and the Korean language is the official and national language of South Korea, spoken as a first language by the vast majority of the population. The dominance of the Korean language is affirmed with the deeply entrenched ideology that South Korea is a 'monolingual' society (Bolton & Bacon-Shone, 2020). However, and despite no exact statistics regarding how many English speakers there are in the country, Bolton and Bacon-Shone (2020) estimate, rather conservatively, that approximately 10% of the population could be said to have a working knowledge of English, with the figure for younger people in the society predicted to be much higher. Despite this, it is noteworthy that Korea has had a rather long history of English language learning, as described in a recent article by Paik (2018), who notes that English language education first began after a maritime treaty was signed between the US and Korea. This led to the setting up of a number of government schools for interpreters and translators in the 1880s and 1890s, as well as private institutes set up by foreign, mainly American, missionaries. Such efforts, however, largely ceased during the era of Japanese colonialism from 1910 to 1945.

2.2 | Historical influences until World War Two

As noted above, today South Korea is best known globally for its high-quality electronic goods and motor cars, as well as its vibrant pop music and associated pop culture. Probably, few consumers of Korean products overseas are aware of Korea's dramatically troubled, and often brutal, history. Historically, Korea's sovereignty as an independent society was always threatened by the ambitions and claims of its neighbours. Although Korean history may be traced back to the fourth century BCE, Korea did not establish its present boundaries until the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392), which

gave rise to the name 'Korea', and its boundaries were further confirmed during the following Choson Dynasty (1392–1910). For much of this period, Korea was linked to China through the tributary system, from which it derived much of its culture, including the use of Chinese characters, the adoption of Neo-Confucianism philosophy, and Buddhism, which spread from India to China, and from China to Korea. After invasions by both the Japanese and the Manchus in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Korea began a policy of isolation, and, by the nineteenth century was regarded as 'the hermit kingdom' by many western commentators. After defeating both China and Russia in the two wars of 1895 and 1905, Japan's influence over Korea increased, and in 1910 Japan annexed Korea as a colony. Over the following 35 years, the Japanese influence over the country, both culturally and linguistically, was profound, and the Japanese occupiers engineered the industrialization of Korean society, with the establishment of heavy industries including chemicals and steel. During World War Two, many Koreans worked in industries supporting the war effort, while around 240,000 joined the Japanese army. An estimated 22,000 servicemen and 60,000 civilians died in the war. Towards the end of World War Two, Russian troops entered the country in the far north, and, after the surrender of Japan in August 1945, American troops arrived in southern Korea to counter-balance the Russian influence presence. It was then agreed that the Soviet Union would occupy Korea north of the 38th parallel and America would occupy the country south of this line (Asia Society, 2021).

2.3 | From World War Two to the present

In 1948, the US helped establish a civilian government, led by the US-educated former missionary and anti-communist political activist Dr Syngman Rhee. Rhee's influence would later dominate Korean politics until his death in 1960. In 1950, the Korean war broke out, and lasted, at great cost to the Korean people, until 1953. The scale of death and destruction during the war was enormous, and it has been calculated that between 2 million and 3 million civilians died in the war, with appalling atrocities on both sides of the conflict. After the war, Rhee became increasingly dictatorial and amended the constitution to allow him to extend his presidency beyond the previously-statutory two terms of office. In 1960, however, large-scale student-led protests forced Rhee to resign, and he was airlifted out of the country by a US aircraft, which took him and members of his family to Hawaii, where he would remain in exile for the rest of his life. Following this, Yun Bo Seon was elected President on August 1960, but his political reign was short-lived, and in May 1961, General Park Chung Hee took power at the head of a military junta. Park Chung Hee would then serve as President of South Korea from 1963 until 1979, introducing policies that promoted economic growth and industrialization. In October 1979, Park was assassinated by the head of his intelligence service, Kim Jea-gyu, in highly mysterious circumstances (Hwang, 2017).

Park was succeeded by another military strongman Chun Doo Hwan, who then ruled as President from 1980 until 1988. Chun then handed over power to another former military general, Roh Tae Woo. Roh's period of tenure was noteworthy for hosting the Seoul Olympics in 1988, as well as promoting economic growth and democratic reforms domestically. Roh's presidency ended in 1993, and he was succeeded by Kim Young Sam, the first civilian President in three decades, who would stay in power until 1998. Shortly after taking office Kim, started a major anti-corruption campaign, and promptly arrested his two predecessors Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo. Kim was succeeded by another reformist President Roh Moo Hyun, who would hold office from 2003 until 2008. Roh later committed suicide in May 2009, after being accused of corruption. In 2008, Roh was succeeded by Lee Myung Bak, previously the CEO of Hyundai and the mayor of Seoul, and Roh's tenure as President lasted from 2008 until 2013. Five years after leaving office, Lee was convicted of bribery and embezzlement and sentenced to 17 years in prison, where he currently resides. The following President was the first woman to hold office, Park Geun Hye, the daughter of Park Chung Hee, who remained in office from 2013 to 2017. In April 2018, she too was sentenced to a lengthy imprisonment for abuse of power and corruption, and is still in prison at the time of writing. The current President is a former human rights lawyer Moon Jae In, who succeeded Park Geun Hye in May 2017 (Seth, 2020).

2.4 | The traumas of Korean history

If one were to summarize Korean history throughout the twentieth century, at the risk of reductivism, one might describe its arc in terms of repeated and unremitting trauma: Japanese colonialism, followed by World War Two, followed by the devastation of the Korean War, followed by a peace-time politics characterized by a succession of vicious military dictators and hopelessly corrupt civilian politicians. Meanwhile the peninsula stays divided, with the North Korean communists as proxies for their Chinese communist big brothers, while south of the border the US military presence includes around 15 military bases, 28,500 servicemen, and significant numbers of US aircraft and missiles. From 1958 to 1991, the US placed nuclear weapons on South Korean soil, and although these were withdrawn in 1991, the US continues to protect South Korea under its 'nuclear umbrella'. In the post-Korean War era, the American influence was also felt in many areas of consumer consumption and mass culture, including baseball, Coca Cola, Hollywood, McDonaldization, popular music, and much else. From the 1950s to the 1980s, America in South Korea, as in so many other places worldwide, served as a source of modernity and innovation, although, by the 2000s, Korean manufacturers and entertainers were beginning to market their own versions of modernity, which included automobiles, fashion design, pop groups, smartphones, and TV soap operas (enormously popular throughout Asia). Domestically, the industrialization and technological innovation that had been promoted by successive governments between the 1960s and 1990s served to create a society dominated by corporate capitalism, where its citizens strived to succeed, or at least to survive, in a highly competitive and socially stratified society. In this context, part of the stratification was educational, with parents going to extreme lengths in order to secure the best educational opportunities for their children, including the opportunity to learn English.

2.5 | English, internationalization, and social class

At a policy level, the era of Chun Doo-hwan during the 1980s, provided a turning point in official attitudes to English. At this time, the Korean government decided to open up the country to the world, particularly through the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Olympic Games, which were both held in the capital city of Seoul. Simultaneously, and for the very first time, ordinary Korean citizens were allowed to travel abroad without hindrance. The government then attempted to improve the teaching of English, including special courses for workers in the tourism sector, as well as radio and television programmes for the general public. The interest in English accelerated during the 1990s, and, in 1995, President Kim Young-sam set up the 'Presidential Globalization Promotional Committee', and, in the following year, South Korea joined the OECD. Various educational policies from the Kim administration in the 1990s, including the introduction of English in primary schools, stoked what then came to be called the 'English fever', began to rage throughout the whole country. One effect of this was to promote private tutorial schools which specialized in the teaching of English, which often placed a heavy financial burden on parents hoping to assist their children gain entry to the best universities. In 1991, South Korea joined the World Trade Organization, which further promoted internationalization, although the nation's economy suffered greatly in the financial crisis of 1998. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, large numbers of students went abroad to study, often to US universities, although some parents even sent very young children overseas to such destinations as Singapore to study English.¹ Government policies promoting English continued under the era of President Lee Myung-bak. English became increasingly important for entry into university, as well as gaining employment after graduation.

Choi (2021), in an extensive discussion of English fever over the last two decades, notes that, in addition to their regular schooling, most Korean secondary school students now attend *hagwon* ('cramming schools'), that typically run from 4pm until 9pm. The cramming school system typically advantages children from high-income families, who can afford the rather high fees for extra tuition in such school subjects as math, science and English. Choi further argues that English has in part been promoted by forces linked to 'neoliberalism', which promotes 'competition' and 'economic

efficiency' as well as celebrating 'those who bear the responsibility and capability to be autonomous and to take control of their own lives and choices' (Choi, 2021, p. 3). In recent years, Presidents Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in have both introduced policies aimed at containing if not decreasing the fever for English learning, though apparently with 'minimal impact' given the wide belief that 'English is an indispensable tool for gaining social mobility in adult society in a globalised Korea as well as being an index of social status' (Choi, 2021, p. 15).

2.6 | English, internationalization, and South Korean higher education

Since the 1990s, the English language has become widely taught in almost all elementary and high schools, and is included in the crucially-important national college entrance examination, the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). As noted by Jo (2018), some 69% of high school graduates possess some form of higher education from the country's 200 universities and 137 vocational institutes. Central to higher education is the South Korean government's aim of internationalization of its higher education system, where the English language can be seen as playing an important role in this endeavor (Byun & Kim, 2011). Government initiatives such as the 'Brain Korea 21 Project' (1999) and the 'World Class University Project' (2008) were introduced to promote global competitiveness among the country's universities, and that English Medium Instruction (EMI) programmes and policies have been included in such initiatives. As a result of such internationalization initiatives, university rankings have become a much-discussed topic in the country's media, and higher education institutions have increasingly incorporated EMI courses, citing such reasons as internationalization, competitiveness, and globalization (Bolton & Botha, 2020). International students who did not study through the medium of English in their home countries, and who wish to study at Korean universities need a recognized English proficiency test score in order to be admitted, such as IELTS or TOEFL, with the minimum requirement usually a score of TOEFL 80 (Internet-based) or IELTS 5.5. However, slightly higher scores are required for some universities such as KAIST (TOEFL 83, IELTS 6.5) and Yonsei University (TOEFL 80, IELTS 6.5).

English-medium instruction in higher education grew rapidly in the early 2000s, and by 2011 it was estimated that around 30% of university classes in Seoul, and 10% across the country, were being taught in English (Kim, Kweon, & Kim et al., 2017). EMI was particularly promoted by engineering schools, and, in 2006, the prestigious Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) adopted a policy that English would henceforth be the major medium of instruction. By 2010, Pohang University of Science and Technology (POSTECH) was delivering 88% of undergraduate classes and 95% of graduate classes in English, and Gwangju Institute of Science and Technology (GIST) and Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology (UNIST), were delivering all their programmes in English (Kim, 2017, pp. 56–57). However, despite the clarion calls of 'internationalization' coming from these universities, in practice, the need for English appears far less internationally rather than domestically-motivated:

It is less about using the language in daily life, but rather about gaining a competitive edge against peers in securing tertiary education and prestigious jobs. By the early twenty-first century, assessments at each stage of the education process had English embedded so heavily that learning or studying about English was no longer a choice. The different life chances between those proficient in English and those who lack proficiency mean that the pressure to perform is immense. That is, English affects learning opportunities within schooling, entering higher education and employment. Scholars also speak of an 'English divide' where students from affluent family backgrounds are more successful in being admitted to competitive foreign-language schools, and subsequently to prestigious universities due to special admission for their English competence. (Choi, 2021, pp. 1–2)

Whatever the sociolinguistic realities at the local level, the implementation of EMI in higher education has often been justified with reference to 'internationalization' as a motivation, as is apparent is one scrutinizes recent research in the field.

3 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Judging from the literature, the issue of EMI in South Korean higher education has mainly come into focus only over the last ten years, and since 2010 a substantial body of research has appeared. In the necessarily selective review presented here, we focus on four sets of discussions, which speak to: (i) the motivation for EMI in South Korea; (ii) EMI and its discontents; (iii) EMI and neoliberalism; and (iv) research on the realities of EMI in South Korea.

3.1 | The motivation for EMI in South Korea

Many of the studies of Korean EMI hitherto published cite forces linked to the 'internationalization' of higher education as a leading motivation, which is also linked to 'globalization' and 'global competitiveness' in articles from Byun et al., Jon and Kim (2011), Joe and Lee (2013), Kim, Tartar and Choi (2014), Chang, Kim and Lee (2017), Chun et al. (2017), Kim and Tartar (2017), Kang (2018), and Kim and Yoon (2018). In overlapping fashion, other studies specifically mention 'university rankings' as an important factor, as in articles by Cho (2012), Kym and Kym (2014), Williams (2015), and Kim, Kweon and Kim (2017). Other studies explain motivation by reference to multiple factors, including the need to attract international students, to improve students' English proficiency, to facilitate international research collaboration and publications, as well as internationalization and rankings, as in Lee and Lee (2018), Kim and Tartar (2018), and Park (2019).

3.2 | EMI and its discontents in South Korea

Over the last ten years, a considerable number of empirical studies have studied the implementation of EMI at various universities across the country. Some studies of student responses reported somewhat positively on student attitudes. Byun et al. (2011) analysed a large dataset from Korea University (KU) and found that students generally rated EMI courses as 'satisfactory' and also expressed the belief that EMI led to increased proficiency in English, despite finding it easier to understand courses taught through the medium of Korean. Kym and Kym (2014) reported on EMI at 'H University', where EMI courses were voluntary. At this institution, there was a high level of satisfaction with the EMI programmes, with the vast majority of students stating that English was essential for their academic and career success. More recently, Kim, Park and Baldwin (2020) report on a study conducted at KAIST, where a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach to EMI was adopted with evidently positive results. Such affirmative studies are in a small minority, however, as much of the Korean EMI literature is dominated by a 'complaint tradition' that focuses on the ills rather than the benefits of EMI.

Cho (2012) investigated the implementation of EMI at a science and engineering university, where an EMI policy had been implemented in top-down fashion, without consultation with faculty and students. Although not explicitly stated, the university in question appears to be Pohang University for Science and Technology (POSTECH), where, by 2010, 88% of undergraduate courses and 95% of graduate (or 'postgraduate') courses were being taught through English. Cho's findings highlighted a number of difficulties with EMI, including: (i) that professors and students agreed that classes taught in English were not as effective as those in Korean; (ii) that the forced implementation of the EMI policy had attracted opposition from many professors; and (iii) that the limited English proficiency of faculty and students was seen as a main cause of poor teaching and learning outcomes. At Yonsei University, Joe and Lee (2013) found that that the students understood English-medium lectures rather well, but nevertheless, expressed dislike for English-medium lectures and courses. Kim, Tartar and Choi (2014) investigated EMI with reference to the experiences of 'a large research-oriented university', where Korean students had contact with overseas students from Central Asia, Turkey, Vietnam and elsewhere. In this context, it was apparent that Korean students 'showed a lack of confidence in

EMI activities and interaction with international students in EMI classrooms' and that 'many of them were very conscious of their linguistic competence' (Kim et al., 2014, p. 454). Chun et al.'s (2017) study at the business school of 'a major South Korean university' suggested that EMI contributed to heightened levels of language anxiety and language confidence among students.

In contrast, other studies found rather mixed results, that typically highlighted student difficulties in coping with EMI programmes, but simultaneously reported students' desire to retain such courses. For example, Kim and Yoon (2018) investigated engineering and science students at KAIST, presenting results that indicated students' strong preference for Korean-medium instruction, and also reporting that, at the same time, around 64% wished to retain EMI programmes.

3.3 | EMI and neoliberalism in South Korea

Piller and Cho's (2013) article, drawing on newspaper articles and a range of secondary sources, set out to describe how 'an economic ideology—neoliberalism—serves as a covert language policy mechanism pushing the global spread of English. In South Korea, they note, the state has reduced funding for education, and heightened various mechanisms of competition:

has been institutionalized as one of the terrains where individuals and institutions must compete to be deemed meritorious. [...] As regards mass-mediated university rankings, English Mol is a highly cost-effective way to improve institutional standing because 'English' is again used as a quantifiable index of 'globalization'. (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 39)

In addition, they argue, the so-called 'benefits' of EMI in Korean education may well be outweighed by the costs:

While the benefits of English proficiency to some individuals in South Korea are obviously substantial, the costs of English to the common good are potentially much larger. No one has, to the best of our knowledge, calculated the financial cost of the spread of English in South Korea. However, given that most observers agree that Koreans buy into English at comparatively high levels, [...] and the] long-term costs incurred by the excessive focus on short-term competitive advantages also remain to be calculated. (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 39)

Finally, Piller and Cho argue that globally neoliberalism has been associated with a swathe of injustices including 'the suppression of free speech', in some cases through 'severe human rights abuses', although it must be said that the links they make to English here seem tenuous at best.

Park's (2017) critique of Korean EMI also focuses on EMI, with an immediate focus on the 'subjectivity' of the Korean English language learner and user, identifying a cluster of mental attributes and ideologies, including the 'deep anxiety' and 'incompetence of Korean speakers,' so that:

[T]he Korean speaker of English is imagined as a helplessly incompetent speaker of the language, with particular behavioral and affective characteristics, such as being nervous about speaking English, avoiding situations in which English should be spoken and so on [...] Such figures of personhood, widely circulated through Korean discourses about English, are powerful ways through which subjectivities of English are forged in Korean society. (Park, 2017, p. 85)

According to Park, the main reasons why Korean universities were so enthusiastic about introducing EMI education was that this was 'motivated by the belief that English is a key indicator of competitiveness in the market' and 'part

of the drastic neoliberalization of Korean higher education, in which universities, once seen as bastions of academic authority, are now under pressure to adhere to the logic of the market and strategize their goals to more actively meet the demands of capital' (Park, 2017, p. 88). As a result, English-medium instruction became 'an important way through which universities were preparing their graduates as neoliberal subjects', where 'immersing the students into an English-speaking classroom context was expected to break their inability to communicate in English and to push them into playing a more active role in their own English language learning' (Park, 2017). Like Piller and Cho (2013), Park draws on newspaper accounts as well as other sources, and not on first-hand empirical research, in contrast much of the other research literature, including those studies that set out to investigate the realities of EMI at various universities in South Korea.

3.4 | The realities of EMI in South Korea

Kim and Tartar (2017) focused on the experiences of Korean professors involved with EMI courses, and their attitudes to the use of Korean within such programmes. They also discussed such programmes from an ELF (English as a lingua franca) perspective. The two researchers are both from UNIST, although they state that their research was carried out at a university located in 'a southern, metropolitan city' which was built in 2009 (UNIST). In their study, they surveyed 91 teachers, of whom 71 were male and 20 female. The results indicated that the professors favoured flexibility in the implementation of the EMI policy, and with the use of Korean. Several professors reported favouring code-switching in the classroom where relevant and useful, with one professor noting that '[in] my class, I typically use 70% English and 30% Korean' (Kim & Tartar, 2017, p. 166).

Lee and Lee (2018), two researchers from Korea University, conducted a study of EMI in relation to graduate education. This study surveyed 110 graduate students, and included questions on self-perceptions of English proficiency, language learning strategies, and motivation. Overall, their findings showed 'moderate but limited benefits of EMI for graduate students'. Respondents rated their English skills as low to moderate in ability. The researchers suggested a number of improvements in the teaching of academic English skills.

Kim, Kim and Kweon (2018), three researchers from UNIST, KAIST and POSTECH, investigated the perspectives of humanities and social science professors teaching engineering students. They investigated: (i) how HSS professors teaching science and engineering majors regard EMI; (ii) what the roles of English and Korean are pedagogically; and (iii) what support is necessary to improve HSS subjects in EMI. The results indicated that about a third of the teachers reported that their English was 'unsatisfactory' for the purpose of EMI. In addition, many teachers criticized the 'top-down' implementation of EMI policy.

Kim and Tartar (2018), two researchers from UNIST, examined international instructors' experiences of EMI. The specific research questions in this study are: (i) challenges teaching subjects in EMI; and (ii) the strategies used by instructors. In their study, one international instructor mentioned allowing code-switching in the classroom, in order to facilitate students transitioning from Korean into English:

I always encourage my students to participate in all the class activities. I know Korean students are afraid of speaking English. So, sometimes, I even tell those who can't speak English well to ask questions in Korean. Then, I ask another student to translate them into English. So, in my classroom, they can use Korean, if necessary. Of course, at some point later on, they should try it in English. I mean, I ask them to do that. (Kim & Tartar, 2018, p. 410)

Park (2019) provides an overview of current trends relating to EMI. Interestingly, the study identifies two different types of EMI courses: (i) those run by elite universities and taught by proficient English-speaking Korean and international faculty; and (ii) those taught by lesser universities deploying teachers with lower levels of proficiency in English. After surveying various studies, Park argues that the undemocratic implementation of EMI has

TABLE 1 International student and faculty ratio scores for the Korean universities in the study

	International student score	International faculty score
Seoul National University	10.3	12.2
Korea University	32.9	14.7
Yonsei University	51.3	19.4
KAIST	12.3	23.1

Source: Quacquarelli Symonds (2022).

caused major problems, as have the insufficient English abilities of professors and students, together with low levels of confidence among both the teachers and the taught. Those problems being most keenly felt at the lower-rank universities.

4 | METHODOLOGY

In this section of the article, we report on the research context, data collection, research issues and sample characteristics.

4.1 | Research context and data collection

The context for our research was a visit to the South Korean capital, Seoul, by the researchers in April and May 2017. This context was chosen because of the fact that the capital city is home to a number of the nation's leading universities, including the trio of 'SKY' universities, Seoul National University, Korea University and Yonsei University. Given the accessibility of the prestigious Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) from Seoul, it was also decided to include this institution as the fourth university in our study.

Seoul National University is the first national university of Korea and currently has 15 colleges, one graduate school and 11 professional graduate schools. As of April 2019, it had a total of 27,784 students of which 16,556 were undergraduate students and 11,228 were graduate students, while it only had 203 international exchange students (Seoul National University, 2020). Korea University is one of the oldest and most comprehensive private universities in South Korea. It has 81 departments in 19 colleges and divisions as well as 18 graduate schools. In 2019, it had a total of 36,676 students, of which 27,209 were undergraduate students and 9,467 were graduate students, and 1,885 were international students (Korea University, 2020). Yonsei University is also one of the most prestigious and comprehensive private universities in South Korea, which, in 2019, had 23 colleges, 20 graduate schools, and two divisions, with 36,683 students, of which 24,672 were undergraduate students and 12,011 were graduate students, while 3,312 were international degree seeking students (Yonsei University, 2020). Yonsei University also had the largest international student population of all the universities in our study. The fourth university investigated was KAIST. It is the nation's first research-oriented graduate school in science and technology and consists of five colleges, seven schools, 13 graduate schools and 27 departments. In 2019, it had 10,504 students, of which 3,766 were undergraduates and 6,738 were graduate students, while 817 were international students (KAIST, 2020). As indicated in Table 1, there are relatively small proportions of international students and international faculty at the Korean Universities in our study, compared with other leading Asian universities. For instance, The University of Hong Kong (HKU) and The National University of Singapore (NUS) both receive very high international student and international faculty scores, with HKU getting 98.7 points in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) rankings for its international student ratio and 100 points for its international faculty ratio, while NUS gets 73.5 and 100 points respectively for its international student and fac-

ulty ratios (QS, 2022). Universities that are more comparable include The University of Tokyo, which scores 27.8 for its international student ratio and 10.4 for its international faculty ratio, and Peking University, with scores of 36.9 and 57.1 respectively for its international student and faculty ratios (QS, 2022). As shown in Table 1, only the private Yonsei University seems to recruit a relatively large number of international students.

What is also important to note is that the proportion of English-medium versus Korean-medium courses varies greatly throughout South Korea, and there were major differences concerning the degree of EMI delivery across the four elite universities that were the focus of our study. Kang (2018) provides data on the proportion of EMI classes at Seoul National University, Korea University and Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST). She reports that, at SNU, in 2014, approximately 10% of major courses were delivered in EMI. The latest percentage figures available for Korea University date from 2011 and indicate that 36% of courses were delivered in English in that year. In the case of KAIST, Kang reports that 70% of courses were taught through the medium of English in 2009. Kang does not provide any estimates for Yonsei University, but, an examination of the YU website reveals that approximately 24% of undergraduate courses and 17% of graduate courses are taught through the medium of English.

The major methodology used in this study was an online questionnaire survey, which was launched during a visit of the visit of the research team to Seoul in late April and early May 2017. The method used in collecting data was that of a 'snowball survey', where students at various universities in or near the capital city, Seoul, were asked to complete the questionnaire and to recruit other students to participate in the survey. The Qualtrics-based questionnaire for the survey was written in both English and Korean and posted online on a specially designated website, with a detailed questionnaire containing 68 questions featuring both closed and open questions, partly drawn from earlier surveys in Hong Kong, Sweden and Singapore (Bolton, Botha, & Bacon-Shone, 2017). The online survey continued collecting data from late May until August 2017, after which the data was checked for consistency, and the results collated and analysed. Respondents to the survey were spread across the four institutions, with around 30% of them coming from Yonsei University, 26% from KAIST, 24% from Seoul National University, and around 20% from Korea University, with varying proportions of undergraduate versus graduate students. One reason for the success of this survey method was the fact that most students in the survey answered the questionnaire using social media applications such as KaKaoTalk, Facebook or WhatsApp. In addition to the questionnaire survey, the researchers also took the opportunity to interview students at each of the universities they visited.

4.2 | Research issues

The broad research issue we set out to investigate was the experiences of students participating in EMI courses in South Korea. Specific research questions included investigating: (i) the language backgrounds and abilities of students; (ii) the use of English by students at university and in their personal lives; and (iii) the attitudes of students towards English-medium policies at their universities.

4.3 | Sample characteristics

A total of 1,333 students successfully completed the questionnaire, of which 879 were undergraduates and 454 were graduates, with males accounting for 53% of respondents compared to 47% for females. The overwhelming majority of students had been born in Korea (96.7%) and were of Korean nationality (97.6%). Even though the total number of responses reached 1,333, it is obvious that any claims that one might make concerning the 'generalizability' of these survey results need to be heavily qualified. This is especially true when the characteristics of the wider student population at the four universities are considered. The participating students were drawn from four universities including Korea University (KU) (19.7%), Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) (26.3%), Seoul National

TABLE 2 Students and survey sample by university

University	N	%age
Seoul National University	318	23.9%
Korea University	263	19.7%
Yonsei University	402	30.2%
KAIST	350	26.3%
Total	1333	

TABLE 3 Most proficient language

	SNU	KU	YU	KAIST
Korean	99.5%	93.8%	97.6%	96.0%
Other	0.5%	6.2%	2.5%	4.0%

N = 878.

TABLE 4 Self-reported proficiency in the English language

	SNU	KU	KAIST	YU
Not at all	0.5%	0.6%	1.0%	0.7%
A few sentences/A little	26.3%	30.3%	30.7%	31.7%
Quite well/Well/Very well	73.2%	69.1%	68.3%	67.6%

N = 878.

University (SNU) (23.9%), and Yonsei University (YU) (30.2%) (see Table 2 for details). It is to be noted that this article only presents the results of undergraduate students across the four universities.

5 | SURVEY RESULTS

The results section is organized in five sections dealing with English proficiency and bilingualism; perceived difficulties; language use; language mixing; and the perceived needs of students.

5.1 | Reports of English proficiency and bilingualism

First, students were asked to identify their 'most proficient' language. As indicated in Table 3, an overwhelming majority in each university indicated that it was Korean, while there were only small percentages for other languages.

There were only small differences in the self-reported proficiency in English across the four universities, the results for which are set out in Table 4. While the highest percentage of students who rated their proficiency at 'Quite well', 'Well' or 'Very well' came from Seoul National University at 73.2%, the lowest percentage of students who rated their own proficiency in these categories was from Yonsei University at 67.6%. Overall, it was quite evident that the majority of students across the four universities were quite confident about their own English proficiency.

Students were also asked whether they regarded themselves as 'bilingual', and the results for this question are set out in Table 5. Here, it can be seen that 31.6% of students from Seoul National University and 31.4% of students from

TABLE 5 Self-reported bilingualism

	SNU	KU	YU	KAIST
Completely/Very	31.6%	25.8%	31.4%	24.7%
Somewhat	34.0%	36.5%	28.9%	37.6%
A little/Not at all	34.5%	37.6%	39.7%	37.7%

Note: N = 878.

TABLE 6 Perceived communication abilities of professors

	Speaking			Writing		
	Very good/ Good	Acceptable	Poor/Very poor	Very good/ Good	Acceptable	Poor/Very poor
SNU	64%	26%	10%	76%	22%	2%
KU	57%	35%	8%	69%	26%	5%
YU	64%	28%	8%	76%	19%	5%
KAIST	52%	41%	7%	69%	27%	4%

Note: N = 849.

Yonsei University considered themselves as either 'Completely bilingual' or 'Very bilingual', compared to the lower figures of 25.8% from Korea University and 24.7% from KAIST who placed themselves in these categories.

5.2 | Reported proficiency of professors

Other results revealed students' perceptions of the written and spoken communication abilities of their professors as well as their fellow students. These results are summarized in Table 6. From this table, it is clear that students typically evaluated their professors' English communication ability highly, particularly their written ability. Students at Seoul National University and Yonsei University notably reported that the written communication of their professors was 'Very good' or 'Good' at 76%. Slightly lower figures were reported by students from KAIST and Korea University at 69%. Speaking ability showed similar results to that of written communication skills. A large number of students, 64%, from both Seoul National University and Yonsei University also evaluated their professors' spoken communication as 'Very good' or 'Good', whereas there were lower figures from Korea University students and KAIST students at 57% and 52% respectively who reported their professors' spoken communication in English as 'Very good' or 'Good'. It thus seems clear that the general perception among students was that their professors both spoke and wrote English to a high standard.

5.3 | Difficulties in EMI reported by students

Students were asked to report how difficult they found certain reading materials at university level, that is, which text types they found to be most difficult to read. The results for this question by university are set out in Table 7. The results show broadly similar patterns across universities, where there was a high level of agreement that the most difficult text types included academic articles and full-length books.

Table 8 sets out the results for perceived difficulty in writing tasks. Again, there was a high level of agreement, where academic essays and reports were reported as causing the greatest difficulty across all universities.

TABLE 7 Texts that cause the greatest reading difficulty

Text type	SNU	KU	YU	KAIST
Academic articles	70%	70%	81%	75%
Full-length books	42%	44%	40%	48%
Textbooks	14%	15%	12%	23%
Case studies	13%	19%	13%	16%
Book chapters	10%	12%	10%	11%

Note: N = 857.

TABLE 8 Texts that cause the greatest writing difficulty

Text type	SNU	KU	YU	KAIST
Academic essays	58%	61%	61%	61%
Reports (e.g., in engineering, science, business)	46%	42%	42%	44%
Case studies	14%	17%	20%	17%
Proposals	12%	16%	12%	26%
Emails to professors	6%	8%	7%	15%
Presentation slides	5%	13%	10%	14%

Note: N = 849.

TABLE 9 Tasks that cause the greatest speaking difficulty

Task	SNU	KU	YU	KAIST
Speaking to professors/lecturers/tutors	50%	45%	48%	49%
Giving presentations	43%	50%	46%	47%
Speaking to students of different nationalities	24%	38%	26%	44%
Speaking to peers/classmates	18%	15%	12%	18%
Speaking to visitors	9%	5%	4%	12%

Note: N = 850.

The results for speaking difficulty are set out in Table 9, where again there was a high level of agreement across universities in reporting that 'speaking to professors' and 'giving presentations' were the most difficult speaking tasks for students. Interestingly, in spite of the fact that many students at these universities reported relatively little difficulty in using English as the medium of education, sizeable proportions of students nevertheless reported difficulties in speaking English in their English-medium courses, with 60.4% of KAIST students indicating difficulties, and slightly lower totals for other universities. In a separate question, sizeable numbers of students also reported difficulty in listening to lectures (51% of KU students, 53% of KAIST students, 43% of SNU students, and 45% of YU students).

5.4 | Similarities and differences across universities

Although the results for many questions were similar across universities, there were also differences between institutions. For example, students were asked how frequently they engaged in various types of spoken communication in English, the results for which are set out in Table 10. Otherwise, among the universities, rather similar totals were

TABLE 10 Differences in the use of English across universities (Very often/about half the time)

	SNU	KU	YU	KAIST
In class				
With professors	41%	45%	45%	44%
With classmates	25%	42%	32%	20%
Outside of class				
With professors	26%	25%	28%	19%
With classmates	8%	12%	10%	5%

Note: N = 876.

TABLE 11 Language mixing by other students

	SNU	KU	YU	KAIST
With each other				
Always/very often	23%	32%	25%	19%
About half the time/sometimes	29%	38%	37%	40%
Rarely/never	44%	28%	35%	37%
NA	4%	2%	3%	4%
With the professors				
Always/very often	22%	31%	32%	34%
About half the time/sometimes	40%	40%	38%	45%
Rarely/never	36%	28%	29%	20%
NA	2%	1%	1%	1%

Note: With each other, N = 872; With the professors, N = 871.

reported for the use of English with professors inside and outside of class, with typically less English used with professors outside of class. The exception here is with KAIST, with the least amount of English used with professors outside of class. However, much more variability can be noted among students' classmates, with students at Korea University indicating a higher reported use of English with classmates than at the other three universities. Very little English is reportedly used among students outside of class, with KAIST and SNU students evidently using the least amount of English with their classmates outside of class.

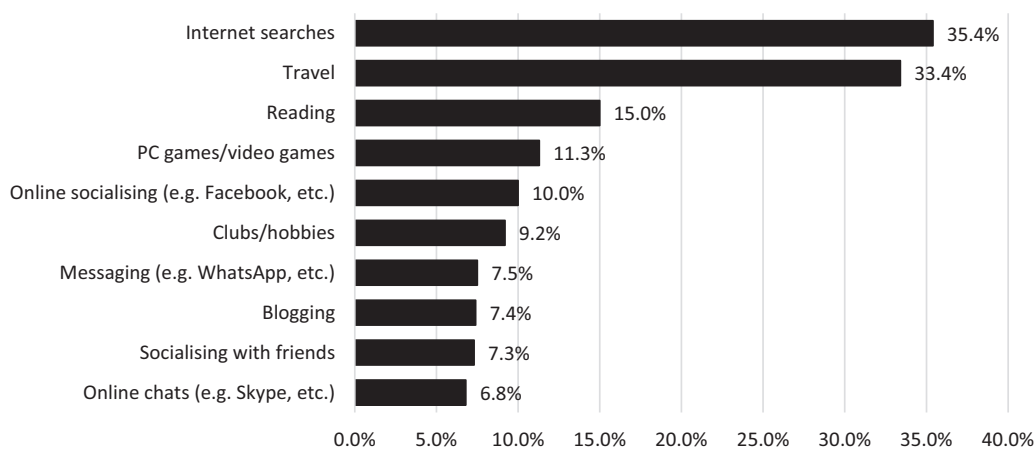
5.5 | Language mixing at universities

Students were asked about the extent to which other students mixed languages with each other and with their professors in their English-medium courses. The results are set out in Table 11 and indicate that language mixing commonly occurs among undergraduate students in these universities, with somewhat less frequent mixing at SNU, compared with the other universities. Students were also asked to report on their own language mixing practices, that is, whether they mixed languages when speaking with their classmates or with their professors. The results are set out in Table 12. Once again, broadly similar patterns were observed across the universities. Students mixed languages more frequently when speaking with their professors than with their peers. This is particularly evident in the results for KAIST. More than half of KAIST students, 56%, reported mixing languages with their friends 'Always', 'Very often', 'About half the time' and 'Sometimes', compared to the much higher figure of 71% for students mixing with their professors in these

TABLE 12 Self-reported language mixing

	SNU	KU	YU	KAIST
With other students				
Always/very often	17%	27%	22%	18%
About half the time/sometimes	28%	34%	31%	38%
Rarely/never	51%	37%	44%	41%
NA	4%	2%	3%	3%
With the professors				
Always/very often	17%	25%	26%	27%
About half the time/sometimes	35%	35%	34%	44%
Rarely/never	45%	38%	37%	27%
NA	3%	2%	3%	2%

Note: With other students, N = 872; With the professors, N = 871.

**FIGURE 1** The use of English in students' spare time (N = 870)

frequencies. Again, students from Seoul National University reported the lowest frequency of language mixing with 45% of respondents claiming that they 'Never' mixed languages when talking to their professors.

The results set out in Table 11 and Table 12 are noteworthy in highlighting very high levels of language mixing across all four universities, with around 60%–80% of students reporting language switching between other students and professors, between 52% and 70% reporting switching by themselves when talking to their teachers.

5.6 | Use of English by undergraduates in their spare time

The questionnaire included a number of items related to the use of English in students' spare time. Students were asked how frequently they used English for different activities in their spare time on a scale of five: 'Always', '75% of their time', '50% of their time', '25% of less' and 'Never'. The results indicated that, although Korean was mainly used during leisure time, a sizable number of students reported using English more than 75% of their time for the activities as shown in Figure 1. In such activities, approximately 35% of the students reported that they used English more than 75% of their time for conducting internet searches and when travelling. A smaller number of students, approximately

TABLE 13 Attitudes of students towards English-medium instruction

	Percentage
Strongly agree	16.2%
Agree	38.8%
Neither agree nor disagree	21.3%
Disagree	17.4%
Strongly disagree	6.3%

Note: N = 853

10%, also reported using English more than 75% of their time for activities such as reading, gaming and socialising online. Some students indicated that they 'rarely' used English in their spare time, but nevertheless, reported using the language extensively for listening to music, watching films, and on social media, as in this rather contradictory report:

In my spare time I rarely use English. I usually listen to English song, songs in English and I sometimes watch films which is in English with English subtitles. I have uh some friends in Japan and when I talk with Japanese friends, with SMS or messenger, messenger, I use English. That's all. (Undergraduate, male, 3rd year)

Thus, although students like these claimed that they 'rarely' used English in their spare time, their own reports of actual behaviour indicated otherwise. Students were also asked about the last time they used English outside the classroom. Many students reported using English when meeting non-Korean friends or acquaintances, travelling overseas, chatting online, and playing online games, all of which suggested that English at least had some kind of presence in Korean youth culture.

5.7 | Undergraduate students' attitudes towards English-medium instruction

Students were asked to what extent they agreed that English should be used as a medium of instruction at university. The results set out in Table 13 indicated that 55% of students either strongly agreed or agreed with the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI), while 23.7% of students, either disagreed or strongly disagreed with EMI. Many of the students who agreed with English as a medium of instruction stated that EMI allowed them to be prepared for international communication, and that it gave them better access to academia and a wider range of academic materials. Other frequently stated reasons included EMI offering more opportunities for the future and helping them to improve their English skills. A not untypical response of this kind included the one below:

English is a fundamental part of science. Not only do we have to know the words for the terms, but we also need to know which verbs are used so that we can read other scientific books and papers easily and so that I can write them. Especially, it is important to follow trends in scientific research and to know the latest science, so I often read foreign papers. Therefore, I think it is important to learn English used in science through English class. (Undergraduate student)

However, there were also a large number of negative responses from some students, who commented that EMI did not help them to improve their English skills, and that some of their professors were not proficient enough to deliver good lectures in English. Others argued that there was a need for better study materials in the Korean language. Responses of this kind included this:

I am studying difficult academic subjects, but when the university only teaches these subjects in English, I feel hopeless as I am not good at English. [...] I got selected to be admitted to this university with my excellent math skills. Now so many interesting core courses, which are mandatory, are only offered in English and I have to attend these courses but I do not understand what is being explained in English. I am physically there as I have to be. It is a total waste of my time. (Undergraduate student)

One obvious conclusion here, based on both the quantitative data and on the open-ended responses sampled above, is that students' attitudes towards English-medium education were very mixed, if not conflicted. Many students expressed very negative comments towards the use of English in their university, but were nevertheless wished to retain some kind of EMI system, confirming Kim and Yoon's (2018) very similar findings (see above).

6 | INTERVIEWS

In addition to the questionnaire data, insights into the student experience were also gained from face-to-face interviews at three of the four universities. At Seoul National University, in many departments, students reported that a small number of courses were obligatory, while other English-medium courses were optional. Some students reported rather positive attitudes towards EMI, suggesting that such courses helped them improve their English skills, as in EJ's response (from a psychology student) below:

I'm taking English courses is to uh keep using English and not forget, because in Korea, English is really important things to get a job, to be a good student here, so I'm continually taking it. [...] The grading system of foreign professors, I like that, um compared to Korean professors, because I think they're more reasonable. And that's the reason I'm taking English classes, to get more reasonable grading and reasonable um assessment. (EJ, female, 3rd year, SNU, psychology)

At the same time, however, EJ reported, that although she herself enjoyed the EMI programme, many of her classmates had difficulty in listening to lectures delivered in English, and instead relied on powerpoint for their lecture notes:

And the ones that uh take English courses and Korean students, they seems not actually take ... actually listening to the lecture. I mean their, on the table they have notebooks I mean laptop, laptop computers but they're searching for what, searching other things or like watching videos or surfing internet, and they're not really concentrating on the lecture, lecture contents and I think the reason is they think that it is enough to study by their self um looking at PPTs and the books, not listening to the lecture. (EJ, female, 3rd year, SNU, psychology)

GJL, a male, SNU industrial engineering student, also commented positively on the delivery of EMI courses at the university:

My opinion, the use of English in SNU is, is quite good because in my experiences professors teaches in English with Korean or really skill to and very talented to speak in English so it was in lecture it was easy to understand the professor, so learning through English is quite ... good to cover the lecture. (GJL, male, 3rd year, SNU, industrial engineering)

GJL also pointed out that, although his reading and writing skills had improved, there was little opportunity to speak English in the courses he attended:

Basically I took two English classes. [These] two English classes are manufacturing process design and physics, physics, and I learn from these classes to write and read English, but I think I rarely have a chance to speak in English in all of other English classes and in campus life I rarely use, rarely use English communicate with other friends or communicate with professors. [...] I had four kind of English classes to learn English. I basically learnt quite deep about reading and writing like this, but I had comparing that I had small chances to speak in English. (GJL, male, 3rd year, SNU, industrial engineering)

At Korea University (KU), EMI education is more widespread than at SNU, and some of the students we interviewed there expressed quite positive attitudes to the implementation of EMI. SA, a fourth year student of literature and psychology reported that most of her courses were English-medium, and that she enjoyed taking these:

Most of the classes I took were English-medium courses because my major is English literature and also psychology [...] I think uh that it's better to study psychology in English because some terms in psychology is, is better for students to learn in English because if it is...changed in Korean, sometimes the terms become even more difficult to uh understand. (SA, female, 4th year, KU, English literature and psychology)

Despite her own positive experiences, however, SA also believed that there was 'enough' EMI at KU already:

Uh sometimes it feels too much for students, because their major is not relevant to English but they have to speak English and that's what bothers the students but I think for school, for the university, I kind of understand why they do that because they, they want to be more international, well-known university, and they want the students to be more international, more well, speaking English well. So I understand them but sometimes it's too much. (SA, female, 4th year, KU, English literature and psychology)

At Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), where there is a large concentration of EMI programmes, the responses of students were again somewhat mixed. SS (below) reported having become more 'comfortable' with EMI courses, while YW was far more critical in his views.

When I was a freshman in undergraduate students, at first I was shocked by the English courses because it was the first time to take courses through the English except learning English classes. So there were so many difficulties to follow the classes. [...] So it was very hard to follow that courses. But now I'm graduate student now, I'm getting used to that environment using English, so now I feel familiar much more familiar much more comfortable to take that courses in English. (SS, female, graduate student, KAIST, materials science)

When I was undergraduate student, at the first time I was not quite like uh shocked about teaching in English because I knew it before that KAIST is teaching from giving lectures in English. [...] For the English classes, there are no questions at all, but in Korean classes, we have a lot of questions there, so yeah it's very different. So as I as I am a Korean student, I think that we have to get knowledge in Korean language, [...] English is very important because like as I uh I'm a graduate student so I have to read a lot of international journals and attend a lot of the conferences so I have to learn English a lot. But in case of getting knowledge, as the medium of getting knowledge, I think Korean is much better. (YW, male, graduate student, KAIST, electrical engineering)

Interestingly, the two KAIST students noted that even in their Korean-language courses, a somewhat hybrid translanguaging approach was the norm rather than exception. According to YW,

So yeah they they use like in grammar perspective they use all Korean language but in case of some words and yeah words related to the electrical engineering, they use all English words. [...] And funny thing is, this learning the terminologies in English is better for us because we even don't know the Korean version of that terminology, 'cus we're learning that terminology from the undergraduate as English, so I think a mixture [...] is very nice. And I also the terminology in English they pronounce it Korean versions. I think it is not a English word in mixed language like they just like think it as a Korean terminology. (YW, male, graduate student, KAIST, electrical engineering)

Thus, according to YW, even the Korean-medium courses were not delivered solely in the Korean language, but typically involved the widespread code-mixing of English technical terms, rendered through as phonological loans in Korean.

7 | CONCLUSION

This study reports on empirical research carried out at four of South Korea's most prestigious universities. The research issues include investigating: (i) the language backgrounds and abilities of students; (ii) the use of English by students at university and in their personal lives; and (iii) the attitudes of students towards English-medium policies at their universities. Many of the results were predictable on the basis of previous research, but there were nevertheless some interesting findings. Despite the extensive complaint tradition about English in Korea, many of the students in our sample rated their proficiency rather high, identifying themselves as 'Somewhat', 'Very', or 'Completely' bilingual in English and Korean. With reference to language use at university, students across the four universities expressed similar difficulties in reading particular types of material (such as academic articles and books); with writing tasks (including academic essays and reports); speaking (to teachers, giving presentations, talking to foreign students); and with listening to lectures. They also reported very high levels of language mixing between themselves and their professors, which was evidently utilized as a flexible and useful strategy for dealing with the realities of the system. In addition, as noted above, although Korean was the default language of choice in their leisure time, many students also reported using English for a range of personal activities, including surfing the Internet, travel, and reading. The results for the third research question on attitudes to EMI were somewhat conflicted. In response to an open-ended question on this topic many students expressed their dislike of the present system, but nevertheless only a minority (23.7%) stated that they 'Disagreed' or 'Strongly disagreed' with the policy of using EMI at their institution.

The critiques of EMI in the South Korean context have been many and powerful over the last two decades, not least in the detailed analysis of Park (2017), whose dissection of the topic in the context of neoliberalism is insightful yet also reductive, in that the major ills of EMI are laid at the door of 'neoliberalism', which evidently refers to contemporary capitalism in its most competitive forms. For Park, neoliberalism also involved the embedding ideologies of incompetence and anxiety in the subjectivities of students:

[T]he policy of English MOI was not simply an issue of status planning, assigning English to the domain of higher education; it was about how to transform Koreans into competent speakers of English, competent enough to compete globally in the field of knowledge production and academic research. As such, logic presumed the figure of the Korean as an incompetent speaker of English; it had the effect of reifying and circulating that image further, thereby reinforcing the anxieties and insecurities of English that constitute the subjective grounding of self-deprecation. (Park, 2017, p. 90)

However compelling Park's analysis and meta-commentary on South Korean EMI, one notes that his data in the study was limited to newspaper texts, whereas this current study was strongly empirical in its methodology. Indeed, our own experiences interviewing students provided a somewhat more nuanced picture of students' lived experiences. Once comfortable in the interview situation, these students spoke rather freely and insightfully about the difficulties and benefits of studying through English. Many of the students stressed the need for a flexible approach to EMI, as well as the utility of language mixing and translanguaging in the university context.

SA from KU, for example, commented that the EMI courses they had were working rather well, and that, in her opinion, there were 'enough' courses at present:

Honestly I think English is gonna be used more and more at university but not in the courses. I think there are enough courses using English, so I don't think people want the courses to be, to use more English. But there are gonna be more and more exchange students and international students, I think, and I heard in this semester, there are a large number of foreign students here now, so I think it's the using of English is gonna be huge in our university. (SA, female, 4th year, KU, English literature and psychology)

SA also went on to add that 'the foreign students I met in psychology classes said that they were amazed at how students are good at speaking English and dealing with the courses in English'. Other students commented on how much English had already become part of their lives, as was the case with HR from KAIST:

I have a lot of foreign students I mean foreign friends on Facebook, so I get in touch with a lot of them, so I have to use English to communicate with them and also I do, I don't really watch Korean movies. All the movies that I watch are in English and I don't like subtitles, so I just use English when I in watching movie or TV shows. And also I have a lot of international students also here at KAIST, I mean friends [...] um international friends at KAIST, so I use English with them. And I usually read newspaper articles in like foreign newspaper outlets such as like CNN and BBC. (HR, female, 3rd year, KAIST, chemical and biomolecular engineering)

Given the fact that these students were attending four of the most prestigious universities in the country, it is likely that their opinions are not typical of all students in higher education. Indeed, most tertiary students attend lower-ranked institutions with, one assumes, less capability in delivering well-designed EMI programmes. For that reason, we would not claim that the results of our research are representative of all universities in South Korea. Notwithstanding this, one lasting impression from these interviews was that the students themselves, in spite of difficulties, had very pragmatic and sensible attitudes to EMI, as, by all accounts, had their teachers, with both groups faced with the necessity of negotiating the realities of EMI in their institutions. However unrepresentative these young people may have been, their confidence and fluency in the language directly challenges the Park (2017) imaginary of the anxious and incompetent South Korean stereotype. Indeed, their experiences may point towards a future for language learning where, as in so many other global contexts, English is seen as a rather mundane, albeit useful, aspect of education, rather than the site of real or imaginary psychological and social trauma.

NOTE

¹In 2014, it was estimated that around 200,000 families had sent their children (often accompanied by their mothers) overseas for education (Lee, 2014). In 2020–2021, there were 39,491 Korean students enrolled at US colleges and universities according to official figures (OpenDoors, 2022).

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