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English Medium Instruction or Exploitative Models of Income? International students' experiences of EMI *by default* at an Australian university

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Abstract: International education is Australia's largest services export, and third largest export altogether, generating between \$22 billion and \$40 billion per year over the last few years. Higher education represents half of this 'market' with over 25 % of students being from overseas. Despite the important role that international students play in the fabric of Australian society and specifically in higher education, the findings from our linguistic ethnographic study of international students at an Australian university showed that the English language learning needs of these students were frequently unmet. Using James Scott's theory of official and hidden transcripts, we reveal that students reported feeling that their "English is not good enough" and assumed personal '(ir)responsibility' for this outcome. In this broad English Medium Instruction (EMI) context, where English is not the first language, but it is used as the language of instruction and as the lingua franca amongst international students, English-dominant perspectives acted to marginalise international students, impacting their academic performance and confidence for social networking. In this paper, we describe the shifts in higher educational policy in Australia over the last few decades to provide context to the current neoliberal educational climate for international students. We draw on principles of social justice to examine the present-day system and argue that Australian universities need to shift from an EMI *by default* model to a genuine EMI offering.

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Sažetak: Međunarodno obrazovanje u Australiji je najveći izvoz usluga i uopćeno treći najveći državni izvoz, pridonoseći između 22 i 40 milijardi dolara godišnje u posljednjih nekoliko godina. Visoko obrazovanje predstavlja polovinu ovog 'tržišta', pri čemu preko 25 % studenata dolazi iz inostranstva. Uprkos važnoj ulozi međunarodnih studenata u australijskom društvu, a naročito u visokom obrazovanju, rezultati našeg lingvističkog etnografskog istraživanja međunarodnih studenata na australijskom univerzitetu otkrili su da su potrebe učenja engleskog jezika ovih studenata često bile neispunjene. Koristeći Scottovu teoriju službenih i skrivenih transkripta, otkrivamo da su studenti izvještavali da osjećaju da im „engleski nije dovoljno dobar“ i preuzimali su ličnu '(ne)odgovornost' za taj rezultat. U kontekstu engleskog kao medijuma instrukcije (EMI) gdje engleski nije prvi jezik, ali se koristi kao jezik instrukcije i kao 'lingua franca' među međunarodnim studentima, perspektive engleskog kao dominantnog jezika djelovale su na marginalizaciju međunarodnih studenata, utičući na njihovu akademsku uspješnost i samopouzdanje u društvenom kontekstu. U ovom radu opisujemo promjene u politici visokog obrazovanja u Australiji u toku posljednjih nekoliko decenija kako bismo pružili kontekst sadašnjem neoliberalnom obrazovnom okruženju za međunarodne studente. Koristimo principe društvene pravde kako bismo ispitali današnji sistem i tvrdimo da australijski univerziteti trebaju preći sa modela EMI koji prati standardni obrazac na EMI model koji će uzeti u obzir prave potrebe međunarodnih studenata.

Ključne riječi: australijsko visoko obrazovanje; društvena pravda; engleski kao medijum instrukcije (EMI); lingvistička etnografija; međunarodni studenti; učenje engleskog jezika

1 Introduction

In this study, we critically interrogate the provision of English Medium Instruction (EMI) *by default* en masse to international students in the Australian university system. We provide an historical account of educational reform in Australian higher education before examining the internationalisation of education within the present-day neoliberal university to ground our argument that in this context, EMI *by default* is exploitative. Neoliberalism is characterised by a shift from publicly funded social goods, such as education, to the privatisation, marketisation and commodification of these social goods. With a focus on producing efficiencies, profit is sought. In this context, universities profit from the commodification of English

(Heller 2010) upheld by standard language ideologies (Silverstein 1996, 2003), native-speakerism (Dovchin and Wang 2024; Holliday 2015; Piller and Bodis 2022; Tavares 2022) and different forms of linguistic discrimination (Dovchin et al. 2024; Tankosić et al. 2021). Hence the title provocation: **English Medium Instruction or Exploitative Models of Income?** To explore this angle, we borrowed Scott's (1990) theory of 'official and hidden transcripts' to conceptualise the dominant discourses surrounding international education, and to unveil the 'hidden transcripts' of international students' educational experiences using linguistic ethnography. The research question posed was:

- What are international students' experiences of learning through EMI at one Australian university?

In our discussion of the findings, we highlight the ways in which English dominant perspectives are reinforced through the neoliberalisation of learning, acting to marginalise international students. We conclude by drawing on principles of social justice to suggest university-level EMI courses must be intentionally constructed as such to meet the English language learning needs of international students in culturally and linguistically inclusive ways.

2 Literature review

In this section, we describe the historical context for the modern-day neoliberal Australian university before presenting the key themes of globalisation, international education, and the neoliberal university to explain how each have contributed to the development of EMI *by default*; a key concept that we offer in this paper.

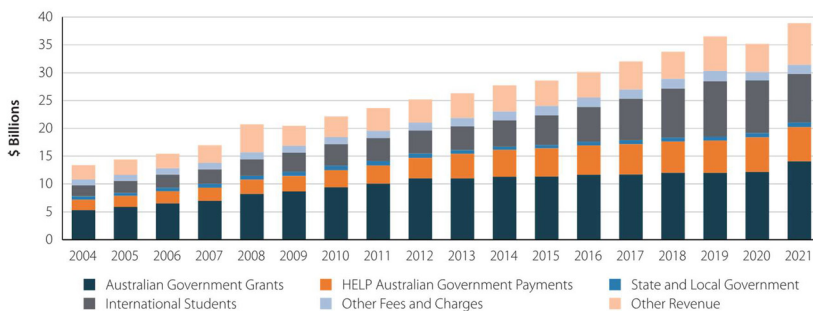
2.1 Historical context

Australia's first international student arrived from Wuhan, China, in 1923 to study at the University of Sydney (Horne 2022: 104). From then, there were a small number of international students who were admitted to Australian universities, despite the racialized government policies (e.g., White Australia Policy) of the time (Horne 2022: 105). During the postwar period there was an exponential increase in the number of international students, which mirrored that of domestic enrolments, and by 1979, international students represented 9 % of total enrolments (Horne 2022: 108–110). In 1973 the Whitlam Labor government introduced free university education in an effort to expand university participation (Horne 2020b: 678). At this time, there were no tuition fees for overseas students and universities were almost entirely

government funded (Horne 2020b: 678). However, with the Dawkins Reforms of the late 1980s, the Australian educational landscape was shaped into the current neoliberal system seen today.

The Dawkins Reforms were a comprehensive suite of reforms introduced across all sectors of education. In the tertiary sector, the Higher Education Funding Act (1988) heralded a new era of mass education (Horne 2020b). In line with the prevailing economic rationalism, the previously diversified higher education system was reduced to a single ‘unified system’ of 38 amalgamated institutions designed to house greater student numbers (Horne 2020b: 673–674). In the three decades that followed, there was an increase in student numbers of approximately 300 % (Horne 2020b: 674). To fund this greatly expanded system, the government introduced student tuition fees for domestic students under the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) funding scheme (which forms part of the Higher Education Loan Program [HELP] that also includes other loan types), and international students were now required to pay full fees (Horne 2020b: 683–686). At the same time, due to the dramatic increase in institutional sizes, managerialism proliferated (Horne 2020b: 682). Yet, under this new model, the government no longer funded the full costs of university operations, with the goal to force further efficiencies within the university sector (Horne 2020b: 685–686).

In 1989, public funding for universities represented more than 80 % of revenue sources; now that figure is closer to 40 % (Horne 2020a). Since these changes, universities have relied on fees from international students to fill this gap in revenue. International students now represent approximately 25 % of enrolments in higher education (Ferguson and Spinks 2021) after doubling in the five years from 2014 to 2019 (Australian Government 2023: 91). Collectively, funding from international student fees account for approximately \$8.7 billion of university revenue; the second largest source of funding for universities (Australian Government 2023: 141). Figure 1



Source: Department of Education internal analysis based on Department of Education, *Finance Publications* [data set], 2004–2021, accessed 8 June 2023.

Figure 1: Categories of university revenue, Australia, 2004 to 2021. Note. Reprinted from Australian Government (2023: 141).

shows the growth of international student fees as a proportion of university funding from 2004 to 2021. This has led some academics to argue that “international student fees have become an unofficial part of the funding policy of consecutive federal governments” (Horne 2020a). This important structural shift has profoundly shaped university operations.

2.2 Globalisation, international education, and the neoliberal university

Although the shift to mass university education has significantly increased access to education, it has been accompanied by the widespread adoption of neoliberal policies that have greatly changed the nature of the education provided (Horne 2020b; Smyth 2017). Neoliberalism involves the introduction of corporatised modes of governance and operations, as seen in the rise of managerialism across the university sector (Horne 2020b: 682). Under this model, previously publicly funded social sectors for example, education, are becoming increasingly privatised (i.e., Australian universities are now over 60 % privately funded, see Horne 2020a), promoting the marketisation and commodification of these social goods. The process of globalisation has been crucial to the expansion of the neoliberal university by leading to the emergence of new consumer markets for university education. Consequently, ‘international education’ has become Australia’s largest services export and third largest export altogether, generating between \$22 billion and \$40 billion per year over the last few years (ABS 2023).

Under this global neoliberal regime, international education is perceived as an ‘industry’ and ‘export commodity’ (Australian Government 2023; Horne 2022). Higher education is a ‘product’ to be bought and sold, with students positioned as the ‘consumers’, or rather ‘investors’ in their future economic prospects (Smyth 2017). Newly emerging economies and their populations are imagined as ‘markets’ to be captured, fuelling further expansion. The political and economic benefits of ‘market diversification’ are espoused, noting Australia’s overreliance on China in the international education market, prompting calls for greater expansion into the growing Indian market (Australian Government 2023: 95; Freeman et al. 2022: 8).

The commodification, or rather, exploitation of international students within higher education has had a dehumanising impact on students (Freeman et al. 2022). The widely used term “cash cows” when referring to international students is just one example (Arkoudis et al. 2019; Robertson 2011; Wedesweiler 2023). Another is the statement from then Prime Minister Scott Morrison on 3 April 2020, that, “If you are a visitor in this country, it is time [...] to make your way home” (Freeman et al. 2022: 10). During the COVID pandemic, international students were no longer viewed as an

economic asset to the country, but rather a liability, and the government was quick to make this clear. This perspective was reflective of the increasingly negative public attitudes and perceptions towards international students that were heightened by the racial tensions witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia (Bodis 2021; Freeman et al. 2022). Through the commodification of international education, international students are ascribed economic value only, and their social and cultural contributions to Australian society remain unrecognised, despite the enormous evidence to the contrary (Horne 2022). In this way, current neoliberal approaches to international education are not just unfair, they are exploitative, as our title suggests.

2.3 EMI *by default*

The role of English as a global lingua franca is crucial to the international demand for Australian higher education (de Wit 2019). The international tertiary education market is dominated by ‘native’ English-speaking countries, with Australia ranked third most popular behind the United Kingdom and Canada (Australian Government 2023). The countries with the greatest demand for Australia’s tertiary education are China, India, Nepal, Vietnam, and Indonesia (Australian Government 2023). The pattern that emerges aligns with Kachru’s (1985) notion of the inner, outer, and expanding circles of English. Global demand for education in the ‘inner’ circles or Anglosphere of English are fuelled by standard language ideologies (Silverstein 1996, 2003) and ‘native speakerism’ (Holliday 2015; Piller and Bodis 2022; Tavares 2022). The commodification of English (Heller 2010) has automatically and unfairly established all ‘inner-circle’/‘native-speaker’ English countries as idealised markets for English language learning, and in doing so, acts to perpetuate and re-produce the pre-existing inequalities that have emerged from the dominance of English as a global lingua franca (Pennycook 2017).

In this regard, Australian higher education is positioned as an English Medium Instruction product. However, the use of this term for this context is debated. Traditionally, EMI refers to “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English” (Macaro 2020: 19). Therefore, ironically, excluding those countries where demand for English-instructed higher education is the greatest. Like Baker and Hüttner (2016), we believe there is value in exploring current EMI practices in these contexts where English is not the first language, but it is used as the language of instruction and as the lingua franca amongst international students. However, at the same time, we acknowledge that the system is not explicitly designed as an EMI product, but rather it operates as EMI *by*

default. This default position reflects what Piller and Cho (2013) refer to as “neoliberalism as language policy” where neoliberalism as an economic ideology “serves as a covert language policy mechanism pushing the global spread of English” (Piller and Cho 2013: 23). Thus, in taking a broad view of EMI to explore the issues of social and linguistic justice surrounding the provision of academic subjects in English, we argue the university system must intentionally design its courses to account for English language learners.

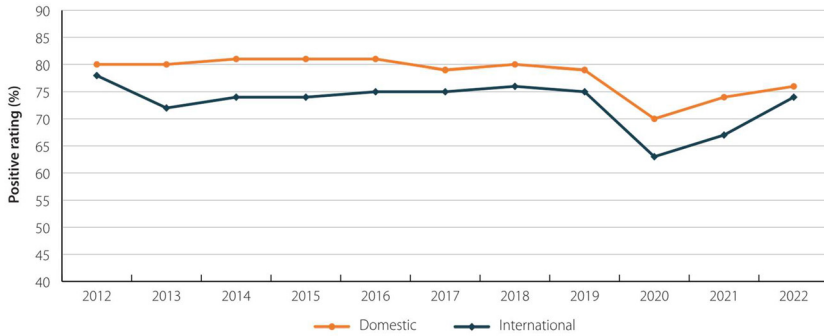
Instead of EMI *by default*, we argue for the adoption of EMI as an explicit and inclusive policy in higher education. For example, English as a lingua franca (ELF) in academia (ELFA). ELFA is broader in scope, and more inclusive in nature, than other previous approaches such as English for academic purposes, owing to its focus on the realities of ELF communicative practices in academic settings (Mauranen et al. 2010). Thus, as argued by Alhasnawi (2021), ELFA actively counters standard language ideologies and notion of native speakerism within EMI. In this way, ELFA is connected to ‘social justice’ (Piller 2016) principles that value students’ diverse knowledges, ideas, cultures, and languages. Additionally, social justice perspectives focus on how to create a just and equitable society where the diversity that exists related to race, gender, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation and so on, does not unfairly impact access to resources and opportunities in life (Piller 2016: 5). Nancy Fraser’s body of work theorising the different forms of social justice offers a useful framework for analysis (Keddie 2012; Power 2012). Fraser (2001) argues that social justice can be promoted through the redistribution of wealth, and through cultural recognition. Her later works also include ensuring representation in political structures/governance (Keddie 2012; Power 2012). These forms of social justice represent the economic, cultural, and political domains of society. In this tripartite model, each cannot operate in isolation and should be implemented together.

3 Methodology

To understand international students’ experiences of EMI in an Australian university context, we use Scott’s (1990) concepts of official and hidden transcripts as the theoretical framework. Heralding from the field of political anthropology, Scott (1990) in his ethnographic study of power relations and social class in a Malay village coined the terms ‘official transcript’ and ‘hidden transcript’ to refer to the discourses that are reflective of the visible power structures and the subtle or invisible acts of resistance that the powerless use to speak back. Official transcripts, also referred to as ‘public’ transcripts, are generated by those in power, and are publicly upheld by those who hold marginalised positions in

society. The power differentials contribute to this complicity, but do not fully account for the phenomenon. Adherence to official transcripts is in the best interests of both parties (Scott 1990: 2). Most obviously these interests are economic, but can also be social, for example, to maintain social harmony, or maintain a sense of dignity in the face of significant power imbalances (Smyth 2017). In this way, official transcripts are akin to public performances and do not necessarily represent the true perspectives of the powerless or reveal ‘what is really going on’ (Greenhouse 2005; Smyth 2017). Hidden or ‘private’ transcripts do. According to Scott, they represent “a critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant” (Scott 1990: xii). Thus, as argued by Greenhouse, “a hidden transcript is inevitably difficult to locate and read” (Greenhouse 2005: 357). Therefore, working from this theoretical framework, ethnographic methodological approaches using insider perspectives are required to make the opaque clear.

Scott’s (1990) theory has been applied across a range of educational contexts (see Choi 2017; Smyth 2017; Sonu 2012) and is highly applicable to international students’ experiences in studying, through EMI, at Australian universities. In this context where global rankings are integral to university marketing strategies, official transcripts centre the social, professional and economic benefits of tertiary education (de Wit 2019). This is designed to inform international students, who will, through a careful cost-benefits analysis, decide which university to ‘invest’ in through their subsequent enrolment (de Wit 2019; Smyth 2017). From this point onwards, in a metrics-driven system, their future economic value and employability is tied to the reputation of their chosen university. Therefore, both the university and its students stand to gain economically and socially for their adherence to the public transcript. However, although both parties are invested in, and derive value from, this public performance, the unequal power dynamics should not be overlooked. Acknowledging their marginalised position in Australian society, international students are reluctant to voice their opinions, often fearing negative consequences such as their visa being revoked, for example (Arkoudis et al. 2019). In keeping with Scott’s (1990) theory, therefore, it is not only difficult to locate international student perspectives, but a truthful account can prove elusive. For example, Joseph and Hartwig (2020: 4127) reported that an Australian Government survey from 2016 showed very high levels of international student satisfaction (i.e., adherence to the official transcript). However, only 25 % of students responded (Joseph and Hartwig 2020). This in itself is an act of resistance, a hidden transcript. Other surveys show that the educational experiences of international students are consistently poorer than those of domestic students (see Figure 2).



Source: QILT, [Student Experience Survey](#) [data set], 2012-2022, accessed 26 June 2023.

Figure 2: Quality of entire educational experience by domestic and international students, 2012 to 2022. Note. Reprinted from Australian Government (2023: 135).

3.1 Methods

We explored Scott’s (1990) hidden transcripts through Linguistic Ethnography (LE), a methodological framework that investigates how linguistic practices highlight historical, cultural, and political trajectories of real people (Heller 2008). By “linking micro to the macro, the small to large, the varied to the routine, the individual to the social, the creative to the constraining, and the historical to the present and to the future” (Copland and Creese 2015: 26), we engaged in storytelling with our participants and gathered authentic data in safe environments.

Interview and observation data was collected by Author 2 and Author 3, as part of a larger ethnographic study “Empowering vulnerable youth groups in Australia and beyond by combatting linguistic racism”¹ that investigated the experiences of more than 100 culturally and linguistically diverse adult (18+) migrants in Australia. In this paper, we focus on the experiences of seven participants who were university students. These students were mostly postgraduate students, but not all. They were enrolled in a range of degree programs and came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds as detailed in the findings. Whilst the original interviews

¹ This research project, funded by the Australian Research Council’s (ARC) Discovery Early Career Research Award (DECRA), aimed to investigate how culturally and linguistically diverse young Australians experience discrimination in their daily lives because of how they speak and ran from 2018 until 2023. The DECRA was awarded to Author 3, and Author 2 completed her PhD as part of this project. We draw on several research publications from this research project in this article, including Dovchin et al. (2024), Dovchin and Wang (2024), Dryden et al. (2021), and Tankosić et al. (2021).

focused on their experiences of linguistic racism generally, these seven students spoke specifically of their experiences in university settings.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English and transcribed using Trint software. Data was analysed thematically by following Braun and Clarke's (2013) set of six steps, namely familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Author 2 extracted all relevant data from the original data set, which was then independently analysed by Authors 1 and 2 to account for their differing interpretations before establishing the final themes together. Author 3 offered additional insight and acted as a 'critical friend' throughout the process.

The second and third authors' positionality as former international students in Australia allowed them to build rapport with participants and helped create a safe and supportive translingual space (see Dryden et al. 2021) where international students felt comfortable to share their hidden transcripts. The first author is of Anglo Australian background and their insights into the Australian education system and policies proved invaluable to the study.

4 Findings and discussion

In our findings, we present the three main themes we identified from the students' private transcripts: English as a commodity; the outsourcing of English language support; and hegemonic learning and teaching practices. The first, 'English as a commodity', reflects the viewpoint that English language proficiency is the most prized and valuable possession in university settings, social settings, and for the future (i.e., employment prospects). These three elements are discussed in turn before detailing the themes that follow.

4.1 English as a commodity

In the current English-dominant globalised world, English language learning is a sought-after commodity; one that can be bought and sold through education. It is not only an educational commodity, but English language proficiency also impacts social interactions and access to employment opportunities, as will be explored in the following sections. The English as a commodity perspective is upheld by standard language ideologies (Silverstein 1996, 2003), native-speakerism (Holliday 2015; Piller and Bodis 2022; Tavares 2022) and different forms of linguistic discrimination (Dovchin et al. 2024; Tankosić et al. 2021). Yet, at the same time, it allows for 'English-as-a-problem' perspectives (Bodis 2021) to flourish as international students fail to

attain the holy grail of English language proficiency, blaming themselves for this failure without realising that English language proficiency may not necessarily translate into the social or professional benefits that they had hoped for (Dobinson et al. 2024). As argued by Soler and Morales-Gálvez (2022), knowing English, unfortunately, “does not translate into having equality of opportunities to use the language and to be seen as a legitimate user of it in all societal contexts” (Soler and Morales-Gálvez 2022: 7) (see also Canagarajah’s 2013 ‘illegitimate users’).

4.1.1 English as a commodity in university settings

English language proficiency represents a commodity in Australian higher education (Heller 2010). Moreover, the university system and its teaching staff reinforce the notion of English as a highly valued commodity through their policies, processes and practices that act to preserve the ‘ideal native speaker’ (Holliday 2015; Piller and Bodis 2022; Tavares 2022) and standard language ideologies (Silverstein 1996, 2003) in higher education. Upholding native speaker ideals and standard language ideologies are essential to the maintenance of English as a commodity, and consequently, Australian universities as the EMI *by default* provider of choice.

Chen (27), a Chinese background student in Australia, talks about inequity in the Australian education system where lecturers ‘impose’ English proficiency as the norm at Australian universities, which also reveals a lack of recognition for students’ diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. He says,

The tutor will tell the international student you must improve your English level and catch up with local students. [...] Because in their views, it’s very normal because they always teach a class like this and in the uni you must have the ability with English.

The interview extract shows that Chen’s tutors project a standard language ideology from the space of power onto local and international students. This act, in turn, plays an important role in the normalisation of language expectations, while inter-connecting language proficiency with the learning content (Piller and Bodis 2022). In other words, Chen’s tutors possibly hold him responsible for their potential inadequacy in translating the subject matter into content that undergraduate students (including international students) can understand (Bodis 2021).

English as a commodity in university settings is not only upheld by teaching staff, but international students also reported negative experiences with their native-English speaking Australian peers, who are linguistically privileged in the EMI *by default* context of Australian universities. Chen explains how these classmates did not show interest in social activities with international students – “*maybe they think that international students’ language not good enough*” (Interview). This is also

supported by Alina's (38) experience, where 'native-English speaking' Australian students did not want to do group work with her because, as she says, "*They think because I'm not Australian, they think that I'm not educated. [...] This is what they always when they see me, they have this like look. [...] Like she's not Australian. What will we do? How can she write? How can she do? How can she present?*" Her perception is based on a real experience when her tutor put her in a group assignment with all native-English speaking Australian students, who ended up excluding her from group work – "*I end up being not included. They've been just talking to each other*". Authors 2 and 3 (Dovchin et al. 2024; Tankosić et al. 2021) write about social exclusion as a form of covert linguistic racism which acts like silent abuse and can have serious psychological consequences. Alina started avoiding the class where she was excluded, because English was seen as a "measure of intelligence" (Thiong'o 1994: 438), which translated into anxieties as well as linguistic and social insecurities for her, as described further in the next section.

4.1.2 English as a commodity in social settings

Language proficiency is closely connected to participation in the society, as even the most successful multilinguals can face complete isolation (Piller 2016). The social isolation experienced by Chen and Alina in the previous section is mirrored in the experiences of Valentina (34), who also experienced social isolation due to her perception that her English is not "good enough". However, unlike some of the other participants who reported struggles with academic English, Valentina, a former doctoral student from Columbia, felt competent and capable in the academic English context. But, despite this, she still reported failing socially on a daily basis. She felt that her English "*is not good enough*"; she is "*not making sense*"; she is "*making mistakes [...] getting the tenses wrong or the grammar wrong*" (Interview).

The experiences of Valentina indicate that English language knowledge alone is not enough to confidently participate in Australian social settings, and the cultural aspects of students' linguistic performance cannot be overlooked. Piller (2016) suggests that international students have been repeatedly failed socially because of the standardised admission requirements and insufficient preparation for the highly localised ways of using language in Australian cultural context. First, standardised English exams do not reflect conversational skills that are necessary for understanding and participating in lectures in Australia (Piller and Bodis 2022). Second, neoliberal universities do not prepare the international student cohort for the cultural context of the Australian classroom with student-centred approaches, nor do they promote transcultural pedagogies which entail that teaching staff are transculturally competent (Joseph and Hartwig 2020), as will be described in the section about hegemonic learning and teaching practices.

4.1.3 English as a commodity for future employment prospects

International students experience multiple iterations of the ‘English leads to success’ discourse. From the moment they apply for a student visa in Australia, they are assured that “learning English” helps migrants “participate more fully in Australian life” and sold that they can “work and make friends in Australia” (Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs 2022). Continuous language evaluation from standardised testing, through social encounters, to university assessments, as well as migration mobility and global language requirements often lead to international students’ perceiving English as a passport for professional and education vigour (Gomes 2020; cf. Steele et al. 2022). Yet, this does not represent the realities of many international students.

Lin (31), a Chinese background doctoral student explains how she thinks that her “English is not that good” to find an academic position at the university, because, as she explains,

You need to accommodate yourself in this kind of an atmosphere. You need to understand what everyone says and you also need to make your voice heard. So, I think it’s kind of a big challenge for person like me. So, I mean, that if your English is not very good, you can be excluded from some opportunities.

In this example, the interaction between linguistic proficiency and cultural expectations are at play. Lin identifies ‘making your voice heard’ as the expected cultural characteristics associated with English and ergo, the powerful tools that she does not possess. Spaces, such as the workplace, are heavily influenced by western performative expectations and are designed to propagate their success (Frenkel and Shenhav 2006; cf. Razzante and Orbe 2018). Not possessing these cultural features of English, combined with English that is “not very good” holds the power to exclude. Whilst Lin focuses on her future employment prospects based on her English language ability, the argument could be made that English is also a commodity for the ‘future’ that not only influences but can extend beyond economic domains.

4.2 Outsourcing English language support

To produce economic efficiencies in the neoliberal university, English language support is increasingly being outsourced, with technology being the most cost-efficient option available. This not only shifts the locus of responsibility for language learning to rest entirely with students, but also reinforces standard language ideologies and raises important ethical considerations. A significant number of Australian universities have partnered with businesses producing Artificial

Intelligence (AI) driven technologies such as Grammarly and/or Studiosity to provide language support for students to ensure the morphosyntactic accuracy of their written assessments (i.e., to ‘correct’ students’ English language spelling and grammar). Such technologies align with the neoliberal endeavours of Australian universities by providing efficient (but not always effective) language help and feedback for student cohorts whilst also making the marking process more productive (i.e., easier and faster) for teaching staff.

In this vein, Richard (31), a former doctoral student from China, recalls his supervisor’s demand to use Grammarly or Studiosity:

She [Richard’s supervisor] said, “as a supervisor I should not spend too much time on your language. You should figure out yourself. You can ask the *** [the librarian] or learn how to use software like Grammarly or Studiosity”. And so OK, I said I’ll ask my friends to help me and she said, “no you can’t”. I think a real person who can help me is much better than a software. But she said, “no, because I’m your supervisor, I’m telling you to ask the librarian”. But the librarian just give you half an hour for face to face conversations. It’s useful. But I’ve got my friends I could always ask them. It takes longer than half an hour. And she said, “oh, you can ask the librarian how to use Grammarly”. I told her Grammarly is just the software, it’s not that useful. And she said, “but maybe you don’t know how to use it. So, ask *** [the librarian]”. And I said I got proofreading by my friends. I’m confident enough to send through this chapter to you because two of my friends has already read it and proofread it. I think it’s good enough. She said, “no, you can’t. You need to make appointment with *** [the librarian] and ask her how to use the software first”. [...] I feel that this is not fair. I read the list about the supervisor responsibility and one of the responsibilities is helping students improve their language.

The Grammarly browser trains students to use ‘proper English’ in all of their interactions online, which plays into ideological understandings of English as a superior language and acts to reinforce notions of the ‘ideal native speaker’ (Holliday 2015; Tavares 2022). Hotson and Bell (2022) explain that surveillance and intervention of Grammarly and Studiosity into students’ languaging practices have the power to shape their skills and identities, as well as put their data privacy at risk. In Richard’s case we notice an act of power play (or power misuse), where his supervisor consciously removes his right to privacy by forcing him to use Grammarly before reading his work. In this example, the neoliberal university attempts to remove human-led instruction and guidance, instead relying on automatised and computerised support to students and with it produce greater efficiencies in terms of the allocation of resources, through outsourcing, to maximise profits.

Richard’s experience also brings into question the responsibilities of a supervisor. The University of Melbourne, for instance, outlined (among others) that the supervisor ought to provide detailed and constructive feedback on written work (including thesis drafts) and oral presentations as well as help students “identify appropriate skills training and professional development opportunities, such as

academic skills” (The University of Melbourne 2023). Similarly, the Curtin University Higher Degree by Research (HDR) Supervision Procedures state that the supervisor needs to “provide academic support, including constructive and timely feedback, guidance and evaluate progress” (Curtin University 2022). Neither university explicitly mentions language support as an important factor in academic guidance, which leaves it up to the supervisor to decide what ‘academic support’ entails and how it should be administered, leaving international students in precarious states, as also described by Chahal (2023). Thus, making it truly an EMI *by default* context.

4.3 Hegemonic learning and teaching practices

As previously argued, learning in university settings is often constituted as a one-way flow of information that fails to recognise international students’ knowledges, ideas, cultures, and languages and their diverse ways of knowing, being and doing. Instead, with the implementation of neoliberal economic efficiencies, students are positioned as ‘consumers’ in a one-way transfer of knowledge. Closely tied to sustaining prescriptive English requirements at Australian universities, there is the issue of inadequate support and a lack of guidelines for *culturally responsive personalised learning* (CRPL) that responds to international students’ social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds for learning (Ober et al. 2023). Personalised learning ought to shift the role of students from ‘consumer’ of education to a ‘co-producer and collaborator’ in their learning process (Bates 2014).

Lin (31) shares some of cultural differences between her supervisor’s advice and expectations in China and Australia. She describes Chinese supervisors as being more explicit and direct (i.e., “you know exactly what you need to do for every step”) when providing guidance for writing academic papers:

help [her] to, you know, they have some structures, they can tell you how to organise your papers from the beginning. They will tell you that you need to divide it into sections and so in each section what you can talk about, you know, they know how to write academic papers and they can convey it in a systematic way.

In contrast, she found her Australian supervisor and Australian ways of learning to be “not very clear or practical”:

It was very vague or confusing when my supervisor tried to help me with content or my ideas. My supervisor and I co-authored a paper and he said, “we need some ideas to add there”. He said, “oh, you have everything there, but we need to have something to add in there”.

According to Lin, the differing communicative approaches used impacted her ability to engage with, and benefit from, the instruction (see Ober et al. 2023). Consequently, an opportunity for reciprocal learning between Lin and her supervisor was missed.

Learning and teaching are increasingly reflective of a neoliberal culture where humanistic values become transformed into measurable units “in ultimately economic terms imposing a new auditable disciplining, and quickening pace, of learning, thinking and working” (Troiani and Dutson 2021: 5). Class sizes are one such measurable unit that can quickly produce improved economies of scale in the delivery of learning and teaching. Chen (27) explains how this shift away from more intimate and personalised learning and teaching styles has impacted his educational experience:

in the lecture, the room is very big, so the tutor is not very clear. So, some part of the lecture I cannot understand. And they speak very fast because the time is limited and they don't let you ask a question. [...] They say they don't have to slow their voice down or, make the knowledge easier for the international student. [...] So, most time I don't want to go there because I think watching on the Internet is better, more suitable for me.

Like Chen, Mia (22) feels like a number in the system, not a person. She moved to Australia from Vietnam when she was 14 years old and despite English not being her first language, she feels that she is expected to perform equally well as native Australian English-speaking students but cannot meet this expectation. She does not receive any further support from teaching staff even when she requests it. Mia explains,

Even I got the discrimination from the tutor in this uni. [...] So, they didn't care you, they, they don't want to come into your place and ask how you go in with your learning. And when you stay back to ask the question, the way they um [...] This person answer the questions that I, 'oh you are trying to stop me from going to my break'. I can feel that, so people can, you know, you can feel if others don't like you.

Mia's experiences reflect the current constraints of many teaching staff who report unsustainable workloads and the lack of time to adequately cater for students' English language learning needs (Australian Government 2023: 93; Joseph and Hartwig 2020). In the neoliberal university where everyone and everything is “countable”, teaching staff can be allocated as little as 6 min per student for consultation. Consequently, both students and teaching staff acutely feel the squeeze of neoliberal economic efficiencies as they try to achieve more with less.

5 Conclusions

In our findings, we presented what Scott (1990) calls a ‘hidden transcript’ – a “discourse that takes place offstage” (Scott 1990: 4), away from direct scrutiny of

powerholders. As our international student participants recounted their experiences of EMI contexts at one Australian university, they drew attention to the ways in which the tensions between neoliberal efficiencies and this EMI *by default* offering were acutely felt in their daily interactions with both staff and fellow students. We put forward that, as our title suggests, this EMI *by default* model is exploitative in the ways that it profits, unfairly, from western English-dominant perspectives enacted through neoliberal policies.

Australia's system of EMI *by default* is built upon the implicit assumption of monolingualism that not only denies linguistic diversity, but privileges standardised English and upholds native-speaker ideals in university settings (Holliday 2015; Piller and Bodis 2022; Silverstein 1996, 2003; Tavares 2022). This position is actively maintained and reinforced through the university system by both human and non-human actors (for example, through technologies i.e., Grammarly, Studiosity). The hidden transcripts shared by Chen, Richard and Lin describe how they felt judged by tutors, PhD supervisors, as well as peers, based on their levels of standard English proficiency, devaluing their cultural and linguistic identities and leading to feelings of exclusion and marginalisation. At times, the students blamed themselves, assuming personal (ir)responsibility for this outcome (see also Bodis 2021; Dryden and Dovchin 2022), but they also questioned the fairness of the system. Examples such as these point to a lack of cultural and linguistic recognition for international students (Fraser 2001), highlighting their invisibility (Dobinson and Mercieca 2020). Further, the economic rationalism and neoliberal commodification of English (Heller 2010) are manifested in these interactions. In the example that Chen provides, she perceives that domestic students have no incentive to invest in a relationship with her, and due to her assumed (lower) level of English language proficiency her input is not valued. Whilst Richard's story reveals the extent to which English language learning is being 'outsourced' to technologies or the library services, reflecting Chahal's (2023) analysis of the contestations and contradictions in provision of Academic Language and Learning (ALL) services under the current neoliberal system.

In response, we advocate for social justice approaches to be adopted (Piller 2016). This requires a shift from EMI *by default* to EMI as an explicit and inclusive policy. ELFA is one such example (see Alhasnawi 2021; Mauranen et al. 2010). This approach takes linguistic diversity and diverse Englishes as a normal and expected phenomena in the highly globalised world and especially within international education, thus deviating from the monolingual assumptions inherent within the current Australian university context. Based on this premise, professional learning programs can be designed for teaching staff to interrogate their own cultural and linguistic assumptions and in doing so, develop their language awareness. From this stance, teaching staff can learn about how to develop students' literacies and EFL awareness of

English in a reciprocal manner for *all* students. To achieve this, several features of Australian universities' current EMI *by default* model need addressing.

Currently funds from international student fees are directed away from international students rather than towards them. As previously discussed, Australia's university system has become reliant on fees from international students to fund its operations. Under the current system of cross-subsidisation, there is little transparency or accountability for how fees from international students are spent (Australian Government 2023: 142). Despite this intentional obfuscation, it is reported that a sizeable proportion of income derived from international students is spent on funding research (Australian Government 2023; Horne 2020a), and presumably on the increased level of managerialism within universities (Horne 2020b: 682). This gives rise to the EMI *by default* positioning of Australian universities.

Under neoliberal university governance and the implementation of EMI *by default*, significant tensions have emerged in the Australian higher education sector. Many teaching staff report unsustainable workloads and profess that they do not have knowledge, skills or time to adequately cater for international students' English language learning needs (Australian Government 2023: 93; Joseph and Hartwig 2020). University educators do not receive targeted professional development in this area, and moreover, many staff do not view English language teaching as part of their 'jobs' (Arkoudis et al. 2019; Bodis 2021: 44; Joseph and Hartwig 2020). Instead, supports for English language learning are often housed in separate units that service students across the university. Chahal (2023) describes the ways in which language support practitioners must "negotiate the competing demands of diverse neoliberal policies and discourse in Australian universities" (Chahal 2023: 3), highlighting the discord between the promises of ongoing writing support and the realities of the limits to this support. Or the tensions that emerge when supervisors advise students to "fix" their grammar, but no such services exist (Chahal 2023: 3). Funding needs to be allocated to the provision of linguistically inclusive and responsive learning and teaching approaches in university settings with appropriate time assigned to undertake professional learning.

Lastly, the lack of value ascribed to international students in Australian universities leaves implementing anything other than an EMI *by default* model, an unwanted, undesirable outcome. There are very few mechanisms for the voices of international students to be heard and they are often placed in a tenuous position as 'visitors' to the country. International students' linguistic identities and language backgrounds remain mostly invisible in university settings (Dobinson and Mercieca 2020). When international students' language backgrounds are recognised, they are mostly represented as a 'problem' (Bodis 2021). The 'English-as-a-problem' perspective, as argued by Bodis (2021), is a widely held belief that students' levels of English language proficiency are not only a problem, but they are also a 'threat' to the

university system through falling standards. This perspective is actively perpetuated by the Australian media in their representations of international students and, consequently, blame is ascribed to the students rather than the system itself (Bodis 2021; Piller and Bodis 2022). In many cases, international students assume personal (ir)responsibility for their perceived ‘failing’ when it comes to the English language (Dovchin et al. 2024). English-as-a-problem discourses mask the complexities inherent to both language learning and the context of learning language in university settings. Moreover, they disguise the need to adopt culturally and linguistically inclusive and responsive approaches to learning and teaching. Instead, learning in university courses is often constituted as a one-way flow of information embodying dominant western perspectives that fail to recognise international students’ knowledges, ideas, cultures, and languages and their diverse ways of knowing, being and doing. As a result, cross-cultural learning opportunities based on principles of reciprocity are missed for both students and university staff. This needs to change.

To attend to the issues identified, we believe that Australian universities need to shift from an EMI *by default* model to a genuine EMI offering, which requires a significant investment in terms of time and money to build staff and student capacity. In line with social justice principles (Piller 2016) and following Fraser’s model, this will require the redistribution of resources, recognition for international students’ diverse language backgrounds and their representation in decision-making processes.

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