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# Whither epistemic (in)justice? English medium instruction in conflict-affected contexts

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## ABSTRACT

Higher education has become increasingly diverse in recent years as patterns of migration expand and grow. However, while different linguistic communities are brought together, English is often conceived as the de facto lingua franca for research, teaching and learning. This is perhaps especially so in ethnically diverse conflict-affected settings where English is perceived to be a neutral and unifying language. This study directs attention to two English medium instruction (EMI) universities in two conflict-affected contexts, Afghanistan and Somaliland. Four research questions related to language, conflict and education are proposed. Data for the study was collected through document analysis, interviews and artifacts with 12 university educators and analyzed through a critical cultural political economy and decolonial framework. Findings suggest that while English is strongly desired by various members of the universities, it is also deeply implicated in multiple sources of conflict, calling for a more sensitive approach to teaching.

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## Introduction

The global expansion of English medium instruction (EMI) has attracted much research attention in recent years. The choice of using English, specifically, is often conceived as an inevitable response to the increasing multilingual reality in higher education. While English may not be the first language of many students and faculty, it is usually considered the language that is most commonly shared among them, albeit individual proficiency levels may vary significantly. Closely tied to processes of internationalization, EMI could present opportunities for capacity building, collaboration, and exchange. However, if uncritically implemented, it could also open up different forms of exploitation, such as becoming a threat to the intellectualization of indigenous languages or the expression of local values, knowledge and thought. As rightly articulated by Wee (2021), the fast-developing trend of EMI calls for a deeper exploration of ‘the often complex and at times contentious relationships between language, education, culture, politics and the economy’ (1).

To be clear, in the past decade, EMI in higher education has been examined across many parts of the world (Macaro et al. 2018). Yet, although EMI in East Asia, Europe, and the Gulf region has garnered much research interest, similar phenomena in newer universities emerging in conflict-affected contexts have not been sufficiently investigated. To fill this gap, this study directs attention to two universities in Afghanistan and Somaliland that operate primarily in English. Like other universities adopting EMI policies, the universities are highly multilingual and experiencing a number of changes resulting from the recent intensification of cross-border movements due to the dual pressures of conflict and globalization. To make sense of the constraints and affordances that EMI offers in these contexts, we investigate through a qualitative comparative case study design the intersections between education, conflict, and language; or more precisely, how choosing English as the medium of instruction facilitates or restricts linguistic, cultural, and episodic diversity in fragile higher education settings.

As an overview, this study addresses the following research questions: How is multilingualism manifested in universities in conflict-affected contexts? Why do university policymakers and classroom educators adopt EMI policies in such contexts? What are the limits and possibilities of EMI in conflict zones? How might EMI curriculum and pedagogy serve to ameliorate or exacerbate conflict? The contribution of this study is twofold: first, we wish to broaden the scope of existing EMI research by turning our gaze to geopolitical areas that are less examined in discussions of EMI; and second, we seek to bring language issues to the fore in debates that explore the entangled relationships between teaching, research, and development work. We now turn to review the literature before explaining the critical cultural political economy of education (CCPEE) decolonial framework that we use to examine data.

## Literature review

### *Education in conflict-affected contexts*

Over two decades ago, Bush and Saltarelli (2000) declared that there are ‘two faces of education’: on the one hand, the capacity for education to contribute to peace, and, on the other, the possibility for education to perpetuate war and violence. They argued that the former position is the one that is commonly held by policymakers, researchers, and the general public, yet it is evident that education often contributes to breeding intolerance, hostility and outright violence. Here, they provide examples including: the denial of certain communities from access to educational resources that are key for participating in the social, political, economic, and cultural life of the country; targeting, destroying, and closing schools to punish specific ethnic groups; propagandizing partisan politics and military victories through history education; and perpetuating harmful stereotypes through curricula and segregated education. In discussing these points, they illustrate with cases from Kosovo, Nazi Germany, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, and South Africa.

For the positive face of education, Bush and Saltarelli (2000) provide examples of inclusive and ethnically tolerant schools; bilingual education programs that support intergroup understanding; linguistically tolerant teaching; character-building education that promotes pro-social behaviors; inclusive citizenship education; disarming history and explicit peace education programs in schools and universities. Bush and Saltarelli

share positive instances from the US, Northern Ireland, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Burundi, the Republic of Congo, and El Salvador, among many others.

Following Bush and Saltarelli's (2000) seminal work, several scholars have investigated these 'two faces of education' in-depth in a number of international contexts. For example, in Afghanistan, Burde (2014) details how a US-funded *jihadi* curriculum from the 1980s, which taught explicit violence against Russian soldiers, was adapted to the War on Terror and continues to contribute to cycles of violence in the country today. In Rwanda, King (2013) showcases how the Ministry of Education (MoE) made an intentional (and controversial) choice to not teach about the genocide after 1994. The Rwandan MoE explained they did not want teaching about the conflict to reignite animosities in the classroom. This is a specific case of a government making an explicit decision to try to mitigate education's role in conflict, albeit the approach has received mixed reviews as it does not prepare young people with the skills to manage conflict nonviolently through dialogue (Davies 2010). Rather, it avoids discussion of conflict altogether.

In Sierra Leone, Novelli (2011) empirically shows that lack of access to education can also be a driver of conflict; and Kirk (2007) similarly indicates in her review of global education policy in fragile contexts, 'that where educational opportunities are denied to the population – or to certain sections of the population, the risks of instability are high' (188). She continues to explain that if inaccessible education can contribute to instability, then it is critically important to ensure greater educational provision in fragile contexts. Kirk provides examples from Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan, where she argues radical armed groups, such as Boko Haram and the Taliban, fill the 'vacuum' to 'create allegiances with poor, marginalized young people' (188). Such heterogeneous impacts that education might have on peace- and state-building may also be found on the tertiary level (Millican 2017; Milton 2018). All in all, what this scholarship indicates is the potential for education to be both a positive or negative force in cultivating peace and justice in diverse settings. Yet one thing is largely missing: a focus on the critical role of language in conflict-affected contexts as the vessel that mediates the meaning and possibilities for education to contribute to peace *or* conflict. We turn to this issue in the next section.

### ***Bringing language to the fore in thinking about conflict, peace, and education***

In this section, we examine how language intersects with education, conflict and peace. Building on literature that explores what the 'two faces of education' mean, we highlight that English operates in a similar manner in universities in emergency settings, acting as a double-edged sword as it could contribute to or hinder processes of peace. Additionally, we also acknowledge that conflict – as well as its aftermath – may influence the way English is perceived and taught on the ground. To understand the role of English in education would therefore demand careful consideration of the political, cultural, and economic settings in which English is used (e.g. as a curricular subject, a medium of instruction, or institutional language policy). While much discussion on this topic may be found in postcolonial literature, our attention is directed to the politics of English implicated in conflict, war, and militarization, bringing to the spotlight issues related to language, identity, knowledge, and power (Edge 2003; Jackson 2018; Karmani 2005; Kramsch 2005; Nelson and Appleby 2015).

A key message identified in studies that look into the implications of English in conflict zones is that English is not neutral. As highlighted by Karmani (2005), there seems to be a pattern that what comes after devastating military confrontation is political compliance, economic liberalization, modernization agendas, and finally, the aggressive promotion of English language education. Offering a provocative analogy, Edge (2003) raises the concern that English language educators in postwar contexts could be seen as a ‘second wave of imperial troopers’, moving in to pacify and enable ‘the consent that hegemony requires’ (703). Nelson and Appleby (2015) also draw attention to the multiple involvements and entanglements of English language teaching in conflict and peacebuilding processes. Through an extensive review that covers a diverse range of regions – including, but not limited to, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and parts of Eastern Africa that have been affected by the aftermath of conflicts in Somalia and Sudan – they explain how English facilitates both military and development work, which are ‘two arenas that are historically linked and often co-located’ (314). In other words, on the one hand, English could be brought in by foreign invading powers to incite certain ideologies that favor one group over another (e.g. invoking sentiments of Islamic radicalism to maintain and strengthen US supremacy); on the other hand, English could also be a language that is sought after by the locals as it increases access to international aid and provides opportunities for reconciliation, reconstruction, and modernization (Appleby 2010; Roth 2019). As aptly articulated by Kramsch (2005), the historical development of foreign language teaching and research has been closely tied to discourses of economic competitiveness and national security that operate within a Cold War framework. Such views of language education unveil a dark reality that may seem difficult to change.

Returning to EMI in higher education settings, while much research on this fast-developing phenomenon has been conducted around the world (Dearden 2014; Macaro et al. 2018), little is known about EMI in conflict-affected contexts. For instance, there is a lack of understanding of how the politics of English in these contexts influence the way EMI is envisioned and enacted at the university level. Additionally, it is unclear how EMI stands face-to-face with the types of multilingual reality in places that have recently experienced – or are still experiencing – different forms of conflict, war or militarization. These types of multilingualism, in particular, are often characterized by low literacy rates in the L1, student bodies with incomplete schooling backgrounds prior to attending university and the students’ complex language learning trajectories that have resulted from forced migration (Nelson and Appleby 2015).

Furthermore, there is also insufficient discussion on whose knowledge is represented in these EMI universities, and how such knowledge is constructed, taught, and/or challenged by the lecturers and the students within the classroom space. These issues are surely relevant to EMI universities affected by conflict; importantly, they may be microcosms of wider concerns of EMI in general as linguistic, epistemic, and pedagogic tensions are not unique to EMI in conflict zones, nor should the debates on EMI omit the questions of coloniality and imperialism that are brought to the fore in conflict-affected contexts. This review indicates that EMI in multilingual universities in conflict-affected settings is an area under-researched in the existing literature. As such, we aim to contribute to the literature on education in conflict-affected contexts from the perspective of CCPEE. Next, we turn to overview our theoretical framework.

## A CCPEE decolonial perspective in conflict-affected contexts

Widening the lens outward to peace and conflict theories and de/postcolonial literature reveals the broader social, political, and economic contexts in which EMI takes place. Here, the literature indicates that peace and conflict must be studied not only behaviorally but also culturally and structurally (Bajaj 2019; Cremin, Echavarria, and Kester 2018; Galtung 1969, 1990; Paulson 2019), and within the cultural political economic realms in which it is nested (Novelli et al. 2014; Robertson and Dale 2015). We also merge this perspective with another critical strand in education research today: the decolonial turn (Kester et al. 2021; Zembylas 2018), which we posit helps us further understand distinct hues in the data.

Higgins and Novelli (2020) write about the importance of contextualizing education programs. They write from a CCPEE perspective about a peace education (PE) intervention in Sierra Leone, where they explain that applying a critical political economy analysis to the study of PE curriculum helps problematize taken-for-granted beliefs that PE could be a panacea for social ills in conflict-affected contexts. They state that the specific PE curriculum they study ‘mediates the geopolitical priorities and institutionalized assumptions about conflict-affected states’ that reproduce ‘unequal power relationships sanctioned within transnational circuits of knowledge’ (17). Specifically, they explain that the omission of local contributions to PE curricula, by international consultants and aid agencies, serves to reinforce power asymmetries in knowledge production. In the end, they critique external interventionist education programs that operate within a broader global cultural political economy that ‘serve[s] to regulate and control conflict-affected populations’ (17). For Higgins and Novelli, contextualizing programs within the local CCPEE, and calling attention to power inequities, is fundamental to good practice in education for peacebuilding.

Robertson and Dale (2015), too, argue for a comprehensive approach to the analysis of education policy and practice that involves integrating cultural critique with political economy analysis; yet they point out that what is understood by culture, politics, and economy is ontologically and epistemically rooted, that is, defined by the particular social positions of actors. Hence, it is not so much the factual culture, politics or economy that is of concern but the ontological and epistemological assumptions that are made about these domains. Kirk (2007), for instance, explains that certain discourses (i.e. ontological positioning) ‘can serve to justify and rationalize security and other questionable measures adopted under the ongoing “war on terrorism”’ (182). However, while events in fragile states may appear seemingly distant, they are in reality very much connected to those in North America and Europe. Key here is the foreign gaze (i.e. ontology) that views fragile states in such a paternalistic way, and the forms of knowledge production (i.e. epistemology) that serve to (re)produce such paternalistic worldviews.

This brings us to the critical cultural contributions of CCPEE, drawing on decolonial theory. Mignolo (2007) writes – in relation to Kirk’s (2007) critiques of Northern dominance of theory and practice – ‘we must consider how to decolonize the “mind” (Thiongo) and the “imaginary” (Gruzinski), that is, knowledge and being’ (450). In relation to CCPEE, decolonization of the mind relates to adopting alternative epistemologies, while decolonization of being refers to alternative ontologies, as Robertson and Dale (2015) indicate above. Here, it becomes clearer for us how the academy, as a site for epistemic (re)production, fits within these broader calls for decolonization and epistemic justice, where we

understand epistemic justice to be ‘equity between different ways of knowing and different forms of knowledge’ (Santos 2014, 237). The struggle for epistemic justice, then, is the struggle for equity between different ways of knowing and being. This emphasizes at least three analytical moves for educational researchers, a critique of: western modernity/coloniality/epistemology (i.e. the cultural); unequal governance and power (i.e. the political); and the multiple violences of neoliberalism (i.e. the economic) (Andreotti 2014; Kedzierski 2016; Kester et al. 2021). We will engage further in these critiques in our discussion. We now link this to our research design.

## Research methods

### *Comparative case study*

To address the research questions, the first author designed a comparative case study with university educators in two universities in Afghanistan and Somaliland (Yin 2003). The first author has previously published other findings from the larger project that this study derives from (Kester 2021). Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, document analysis and digital artifacts. The interviews were semi-structured to be adaptable for the discussions to go into depth or focus on particular topics as needed. He interviewed 12 faculty at the universities. Interviews were 60–75 minutes each and were audio-recorded. Participants were chosen through snowball sampling and qualified if they were faculty working in the university for more than one year (at the time of the study) in order to support thoughtful reflection on conflict-sensitive practices (notably many of the faculty had worked in multiple conflict-affected contexts other than Afghanistan and Somaliland, including Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Yemen). There were seven female participants and five male participants (see Table 1 for details).

Following interviews, data was transcribed, member-checked, and analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis and constant comparative method to generate substantive themes (Cresswell and Poth 2017; Merriam 2009). The corresponding author participated in the data analysis process to support inter-coder reliability, and to examine data through a multilingual lens, with the results showing a complex reality behind the adoption of EMI in conflict-affected contexts. The analysis included three rounds: the first round involved reading all the transcriptions carefully and extracting sections that were related to language, knowledge, pedagogy or conflict. The themes that emerged were then named; most themes had sections on both Afghanistan and Somaliland. In the second round of analysis the extracted sections were then re-read within each theme. Some minor revisions were made, and the themes were then categorized and ordered into three parts: unequal multilingualisms, unequal knowledges, and critical perspectives on EMI in conflict-affected contexts. The third round involved analyzing the data through the CCPEE decolonial framework. We followed the ethical protocols of the first author’s home institution from which the study received ethical clearance.<sup>1</sup>

### *Contexts of the study*

Case University A in Kabul, Afghanistan, was established in the mid-2000s after the US started its campaign against terrorism in 2001. It was established to contribute to the



**Table 1.** Participants.

| Interviewee                    | Gender | Ethnicity/<br>Region    | Level of<br>education | Discipline                                       | Domestic or<br>international faculty |
|--------------------------------|--------|-------------------------|-----------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| Participant 1<br>(Afghanistan) | Female | White<br>European       | PhD                   | Political science and<br>international relations | International                        |
| Participant 2<br>(Afghanistan) | Female | White North<br>American | MA                    | English language and<br>literature               | International                        |
| Participant 3<br>(Afghanistan) | Female | White North<br>American | MA                    | Business studies                                 | International                        |
| Participant 4<br>(Afghanistan) | Female | White<br>European       | PhD<br>candidate      | Geography and general<br>education               | International                        |
| Participant 5<br>(Afghanistan) | Female | Black North<br>American | MA                    | Counselling and general<br>education             | International                        |
| Participant 6<br>(Afghanistan) | Male   | White<br>European       | PhD<br>candidate      | English language and<br>literature               | International                        |
| Participant 7<br>(Somaliland)  | Male   | Black African           | PhD                   | Political science and<br>international relations | Domestic                             |
| Participant 8<br>(Somaliland)  | Female | Black African           | MA                    | Economics  | Domestic                             |
| Participant 9<br>(Somaliland)  | Male   | Black African           | PhD                   | Business studies                                 | Domestic                             |
| Participant 10<br>(Somaliland) | Female | White North<br>American | PhD                   | Anthropology                                     | International                        |
| Participant 11<br>(Somaliland) | Male   | Black African           | PhD<br>candidate      | Education  | Domestic                             |
| Participant 12<br>(Somaliland) | Male   | White<br>European       | PhD<br>candidate      | Political science and<br>international relations | International                        |

Note: Adapted from Kester (2021).

postwar cultural, economic and political development of the country. It is a comprehensive university offering majors across different disciplines with about 1700 students, of which approximately one-third are women. The university has experienced several terrorist attacks. A notable attack was in August 2016 when the Taliban entered the university with car bombs and executed 13 members of the university, including students and staff. The university, in response, built a further fortification around the campus and erected sniper towers for defense. University management additionally implemented emergency evacuation plans for rapid exits in the future, if required.

Sadly, the evacuation plans at Case University A were necessary for August 2021 when the Taliban wrestled the state away from the Western-backed government. Immediately the university, which is associated with Western 'liberal' values, was evacuated and has since closed its physical campus; yet, somewhat fortuitously, the institution had already established strong digital teaching capacities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the faculty and students continue to maintain its operations virtually with hopes that one day they may return to campus. Any remaining faculty and students in-country are living directly under threats of violence by the Taliban.

Case University B in Hargeisa, Somaliland, similarly has experienced conflict and is also walled-in. The university was built in postwar Somalia after the fall of the Siad Barre regime in 1991 to contribute to the development of local professionals to support state-building and economic development. Today, the university is prioritizing STEM-related degrees, in addition to earlier strengths in the humanities and social sciences, to further support the development of healthcare, science, and technology sectors. There are more than 7000 students at the institution. In both Somaliland and Afghanistan, organized violence remains a concern with ongoing threats from Al



Qaeda, Al Shabaab and the Taliban, despite Somaliland holding successful democratic elections frequently.

Both universities offer a deep reflection on the potential for university teaching and learning in conflict-affected contexts to contribute to peacebuilding and/or epistemic (in)justice. Although there are notable distinctions between the intensity of violence in the two contexts, particularly since the Taliban retook control of Afghanistan in August 2021, we find there are many continuities (and discontinuities) concerning language policy and practice between the two contexts. We will highlight these differences and similarities throughout the findings.

## Findings

From our data, we find that the faculty members faced a number of challenges teaching in conflict-affected settings. Major concerns that were repeatedly raised were the physical (e.g. frequent sounds of sirens; constantly being in lockdown; unstable supply of resources) and mental (e.g. sense of precariousness; anxiety; trauma) disruptions that conflict imposed on the two universities and on those who worked and studied there. According to the participants, conflict has long-term negative effects on the wider higher education system in both Afghanistan and Somaliland, leading to a complex interplay between research, teaching, and development work to support weak, fragile systems. In this study, we specifically focus on aspects of conflict that are closely related to language, which help to bring out varied perspectives and discourses on the practice of EMI in conflict-affected contexts. In particular, the findings draw attention to the privileged status of English in these settings, its impact on curriculum and pedagogy, and the ways in which faculty members creatively and critically responded to linguistic and epistemic power imbalances in their classrooms.

### *Unequal multilingualisms: the status of English in the multilingual university*

The two universities in this study are characterized by their highly dynamic multilingual composition. In terms of the student body, most students in Case University A and Case University B were Afghans and Somalis, respectively. However, behind the national label, the students' linguistic repertoires varied significantly because of their ethnic backgrounds and education histories. While Dari or Pashto are the two major languages in Afghanistan, the students may also speak Uzbek, Hazara or Turkmen. As for the situation in Case University B, the majority of the students were Somali L1 speakers; ethnically, they were primarily black Muslims, with some students coming from Yemen and hence speaking Yemeni Arabic. Due to conflict and war, many students in both universities had fled the country with their family in the past. For the Afghan students, the hosting countries at that time were primarily Pakistan, Iran or Saudi Arabia; for the Somali students, these could be Ethiopia, Kenya, or Uganda. Forced migration meant that the students usually attended schools that were not in their L1. Depending on the students' financial background, some had the chance to go to English medium schools, which allowed them to be more linguistically prepared for EMI at the university level. The two extracts below document observations made by faculty members from Case University A and B.

There's a lot of English medium [schools in Pakistan], but the quality really varies. Obviously the rich end up doing Cambridge International O levels and things like that. When they come back they do very well in this university because they've already been acculturated to the Western style of education and the language involved. (P6)

A person from a public school in Hargeisa and a person from a private school will never be the same. Because everything in the institution is English. Higher education is English, and every other thing is English. If [a student] hasn't even dealt with any English, will he have a problem? There would be a huge gap. [...] That's not because of the education. It's because of the language. (P8)

The two extracts are juxtaposed to highlight the similar situation in both contexts. While the students were clearly multilingual, those who were more proficient in English had a more positive experience in university. Indeed, there were other universities in Afghanistan and Somaliland that were less heavily mediated by English, but as English was commonly conceived as a gateway to educational and career opportunities (e.g. working with international organizations that offered better salaries), its status was considered much higher than other local and regional languages. In other words, for students who have experienced – or are still experiencing – conflict, the perceived prestige and economic gains afforded by English were amplified, as the power attached to English could potentially open up possibilities to break away from the effects of poverty and war. This does not suggest that the linguistic state of affairs was unproblematic; in fact, although the use of other languages on the ground was not prohibited, faculty members had different opinions on what standards of English were necessary. Such debates were especially prominent in Case University A.

A recurring fight in faculty-wide meetings is the expectation with regards to language and quality. Some feel they should not hold the same standards in terms of English language proficiency, the same standards that they would apply in the UK or the US. [...] I'm trying to explain to them that we owe it to our student body to make them as competitive on the job market as other students from Pakistan or those who are more successful. And then they come back to me and say, 'Yes, but those students haven't had the same access to quality education in the past. And therefore, why should we push them too much?' (P1)

As unveiled in the extract, the debate on standards shows that both camps had strengths and weaknesses in their well-intentioned arguments: on the one hand, setting standards could be interpreted as having high expectations for the students while adjusting standards may appear condescending; on the other hand, the former could also be viewed as imposing unrealistic, nativized forms of English on the Afghans whereas the latter may be seen as coming from a place of empathy or compassion. Altogether, it seemed that language standards and quality of education were frequently conflated in such debates. Importantly, the faculty's different perspectives on the standards of English had an impact not only on the students' learning but also – perhaps indirectly – on how the students understood and approached the English language and who they considered legitimate users of the language. It was, as such, not entirely surprising that students treated faculty members who looked like speakers of 'standard' English and those who did not differently.

Right now we are finding outright racist comments against faculty that are non-White and non-Western. [...] Basically they're saying, 'Stop hiring Arabs. We can't understand this

professor's accent. We don't like this professor'. Turns out the majority of our student complaints now are about black professors, and they're basically more and more blatantly being racist in their appreciation or evaluation of faculty members because our physical bubble that was opened before Covid is no longer there, and therefore they are no longer interacting from a diversity and inclusion perspective, no longer interacting between themselves as Afghans, between different ethnic groups and with our international faculty. (P1)

The comments from P1 reveal some students' perceptions of black faculty members at Case University A. It brings to the fore issues related to accents and race, and how the lack of physical interaction during the pandemic worsened the situation. According to the interviews from this study, the faculty composition at Case University A consisted of both Afghans and international educators who came from Cambodia, Costa Rica, France, Iceland, India, Iraq, Mexico, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda, UK, US, and Yemen. Among them, faculty members from non-European or non-US backgrounds were constantly targets of complaints, reflecting an uncomfortable reality that makes one wonder whether EMI universities could easily be sites that reinforce racial divisions because of the elevated status enjoyed by (certain types of) English. These tensions, however, were not reported in Case University B, as most faculty members there were locals or diaspora who returned to Somaliland. Ethnic issues, therefore, did not emerge as a major concern.

### ***Unequal knowledges: English, the 'West', and particular worldviews***

Unequal multilingualisms led to unequal knowledges in the two conflict-affected contexts. In Case University A, for example, liberal education was promoted, although it is unclear what 'liberal' means exactly and whether it could connote a sense of 'illiberalness' in other Afghan universities. Based on the history of the institution, Case University A is tightly connected to the 'West': some faculty members previously worked with Fulbright, and a few served as IELTS examiners on the side. The scholarships offered to the students are also primarily from the US or the UK. These resources play an important role in shaping how Case University A is presented to the public, and it is not uncommon for the university to be branded as 'a prop of the American government' (P2), which brought both opportunities and danger to the students who are enrolled.

Turning to Somaliland, universities there are in many ways under foreign influences, too. Earlier when the country was recovering from the civil war, UN institutions such as UNICEF and UNESCO were heavily involved in helping the Ministry of Education overcome the challenge of limited resources and building capacity. Over the years, these responsibilities have gradually transitioned to the locals. Nevertheless, as the government does not have enough resources to meet the multiple needs of its higher education system, universities continue to rely on foreign support, which frequently determines what developmental priorities get chosen.

The very first issue we raise is with the educational infrastructure. It's just still in development. [...] The only projects that end up happening are those where they're collaborating with some international entity that has set the research agenda usually. Yeah. Anyway, poor universities in Hargeisa. (P10)

As indicated by P10, transnational partnerships may not necessarily suggest that local agendas are valued or selected for implementation. In other words, it seems that whoever

the funders are/were they have the ultimate say in deciding the direction of development. This reality is not only an issue in research but also in curriculum planning and teaching. In the following extract, a faculty member from Case University B shares her personal education history and observation to illustrate the impact of externally-controlled and funded curricula.

Somaliland curriculum is actually a hundred percent copied from somewhere else. Some schools copied from Kenya, others from British, and Islamic Arabic schools copied from Saudi Arabia. [...] I remember when I was young the school took the curriculum from Kenya. [...] I was shaped like a Kenyan when I was young. Then after that, when I went to high school I was in a school whose curriculum and everything was from the UK. When I came to university I realized that I'm Somali. I think there's a huge problem in the Somaliland curriculum, especially in the lower schools. Higher education doesn't have a strict curriculum. They can adjust. They can change. They can make it as they want. [...] I'm giving you myself as an example. I was a Kenyan. Then I was British. And then I became Somali. After what? 12 years of teaching and studying. (P8)

The developmental trajectory outlined by P8 is interesting, yet it seems that this experience is likely not entirely unfamiliar to others. The local curriculum – especially the curriculum in the lower schools – is controlled and colonized by different international providers, each offering packages of knowledge with particular ways of being, thinking, and acting that could be anything but Somali. It was not until entering university that P8 realized who she was. While the university she attended was most likely EMI (as indicated earlier, EMI in higher education in Somaliland was the norm), the university had more autonomy in designing the curriculum, allowing Somali elements to shine through. Still, the fact that courses were taught in English could imply that specific worldviews were made more available than others, coupled with the contextual history of Somaliland as a former British colony. The notes expressed below are insightful reflections on the relationship between language and perceptions of reality.

If some other language became dominant, what kind of reality would we live in? If we're all speaking Chinese now, would we have a different world? [...] And so when we talk about peace, for example, there's a very limited and narrow way of expressing it through our language [...] It creates a reality. [...] For example, in Somaliland, if we spoke Somali or even the more local dialect that was there, what would actually happen at the end of those classes? If we could wave a magic wand and do one class in English, and then reset everything by doing the same class again but in the Somali language, what would we have at the end? We'll never know. And unfortunately, that's what the problem is when you have any one language. It reduces the options that would have been available for others. (P12)

The kind of reality highlighted in the extract is understood as something that is constructed – something that could change based on the language people use and communicate with. Because of this, P12 challenges us to consider what could possibly happen if classes were taught in a different language than English. As any single language selected for meaning-making could open up certain types of knowledge and close down others, it seems that it is very likely that EMI will generate a unique reality on its own in the long run.

### ***Critical perspectives on EMI in conflict-affected contexts***

In the final part of the findings, we turn to present some insights on EMI teaching – perspectives that are linguistically, pedagogically, and culturally responsive – shared by

faculty from the two universities in Afghanistan and Somaliland. As the findings have indicated so far, the dynamic multilingualism manifested in these contexts generate questions that are not just linguistic but also social (e.g. accents and race), economic (e.g. English and access to educational or career opportunities) and political (e.g. foreign funders setting development agendas). Such questions show that teaching in multilingual universities affected by conflict is not at all a simple undertaking. It requires critical awareness about the causes of unequal multilingualisms and their consequences.

For example, two broad themes that emerged concerning sensitive EMI teaching include respecting students' autonomy and encouraging students' engagement with differences. In terms of respecting intellectual autonomy, strategies ranged from valuing experiences that students brought into the classroom, giving students agency to discuss what mattered to them, and allowing students to communicate in whichever way they felt most comfortable. It was clear that both Case University A and Case University B were primarily mediated in English; nonetheless, faculty members in general recognized how an overemphasis on English restricted the expression of thought, and therefore tried to be as linguistically inclusive as possible to enhance students' participation in learning. P12 provides a glimpse of what this might look like.

I always say to people, if you want to communicate to me in any other form that you want, I'm open to that. That should also mean not just verbal, for some people maybe that means I don't have words for it. [...] Someone in the class might, if it's a verbal thing, might be able to say, 'Oh, actually, I have a translation for that.' [...] Translations are not perfect, but being able to have the option of communicating in whatever ways of expression they want, I think, does help. (P12)

As brought to attention by P12, meaningful communication is not necessarily facilitated in one single language. Messages could be collectively expressed, through a combination of verbal and non-verbal modes, and also through processes of peer scaffolding. Later in the interview, P12 spoke about the danger of being judgmental: academics and practitioners too often jump to decide what is 'good' for their students (e.g. the choice of the language used, particular standards or how to express oneself). This does not mean, however, that nothing should be done. Quite the opposite: it requires one to be constantly reflexive of the tensions that arise, acknowledging where students' perspectives come from while keeping options open for them.

A related theme that surfaced in the faculty's comments on conflict-sensitive pedagogy was engaging with difference. Examples that were shared include: facilitating collaboration, organizing groups for in-depth discussion, encouraging students not to always sit in the same place so that they might meet new students with different ideas, arranging pen pals from other universities and hosting controversial speakers to support a diversity of perspectives. For instance, Case University A hosted a number of events with speakers from various backgrounds as a means to foster peaceful learning of difference. Among the speakers was a member of the Taliban, which unsurprisingly triggered widespread student and faculty protests. For some, the response was to turn away.

Extending from this particular event, while having the Taliban show up at the university attracted both support and attack, P2 highlighted that it is important for educators on multiple levels to be explicit about why such events are organized, how to engage with differences and what to do if such differences emerge from past or ongoing conflict,

discrimination, and trauma. If such situations are not tackled thoughtfully, forcing students to accept differences could also further ethnic, gender, religious or political divides. According to P2, the key is to ‘follow up’ or ‘follow through’ on events.

What’s the follow up? This could be a very triggering or traumatic event for our students. [...] There has to be a follow-through and some kind of guidance to help them process. To talk about it. To empower them. To embolden them with talking about their feelings, because that’s also something that bubbles to the surface. (P2)

As could be expected, getting all students and faculty on board for critical and controversial discussion is not an easy task, as sometimes this brings up unpleasant memories and challenges one’s identity or deep-seated beliefs. Yet this work is crucial for conflict-sensitive education, which brings us to our discussion.

## Discussion

In this section, we examine the findings through the lens of the CCPEE decolonial framework to offer some implications for educators. First, from a CCPEE perspective, as Robertson and Dale (2015) indicate, particular educational policies and practices are not factually independent of the ontologies and epistemologies of the educational actors involved – be it students, faculty, administrators or policymakers. Hence, as the participants have eruditely shown, the linguistic modes of education in conflict-affected contexts greatly mold the identities of students, limitations of faculty, and the power of donors, all the while those linguistic forms are highly influenced by the funders – be it a foreign government, UN agency or NGO. For example, as P10 stated, transnational partnerships with funding agencies often foster a situation in which local priorities are undervalued or not selected at all. Higgins and Novelli (2020) suggest this when they write that funding agencies often omit local interests from curricula in lieu of their own agenda.

Second, in line with a number of language scholars who research multilingual education through a critical lens (De Costa 2019; Flores 2013; Kubota 2016), our data has highlighted issues of elite multilingualism and the neoliberal impulses that underpin mixed desires for (particular kinds of) English in conflict zones. In addition to unveiling how such asymmetrical power relations are constructed in and through language, the CCPEE framework draws attention to the intersections of language and knowledge (Edge 2003; Kramsch 2005; Nelson and Appleby 2015), especially how certain resources, epistemic networks, and worldviews are emphasized more than others when English is placed at the center (e.g. accents or knowledge from specific countries associated with advanced capitalism). This is perhaps sadly not surprising, as language is deeply implicated in the construction and communication of knowledge. At the same time, we acknowledge that while challenging unequal multilingualisms and unequal knowledge through subversive actions and pedagogies may be difficult, it is not impossible (Macedo 2019). Drawing attention to questions of epistemic (in)justice that EMI could bring may be a starting point for mitigating potential epistemic inequalities in conflict-affected settings.

Third, in terms of a CCPEE decolonial analysis, the faculty have shared small ways that educators could consider to facilitate intercultural learning and conflict awareness



in their everyday classroom practice. For instance, as P12 indicated, he attempts to teach through multilingual and non-verbal modalities that sensitively support the communicative needs of students in diverse contexts. Here, Phipps (2019) stresses that even while efforts toward decolonizing education are driven by a radical agenda, micro-practices in the classroom can support the broader objectives of social, cultural, political and economic change. These micro-practices may be most efficacious as they help to establish trust. Yet it is critical too that such practices are explicitly linked with an approach that examines the interchange between education and cultural political economy to ensure that teaching does not remain detached from the broader forces that (in)form it. A comprehensive analysis that examines the intersections between education, culture, politics, and economics is thus critical.

## Conclusion

In summary, what the data indicates for us is that while English seems to be strongly desired by various members of the universities in Afghanistan and Somaliland, it is also deeply implicated in sources of conflict. On the one hand, English is highlighted as a language of ‘power’, ‘neutrality’, and even ‘hope’ for ‘peace’. On the other hand, it is tied to a range of uncomfortable issues related to race and coloniality, such as students resisting black EMI faculty whose speech does not align with Anglophonic linguistic norms. Additionally, issues of epistemic injustice in the English-mediated curriculum shone through, with Western research and systems of knowledge dominating the epistemic landscape in such settings (Connell 2007; Mignolo 2012; De Santos 2014). Hence, epistemic (in)justice is a continual struggle that faculty in conflict-affected contexts – and beyond – must attend to if they wish to promote critical perspectives and new possibilities to undo unequal multilingualisms and unequal knowledges.

In the end, this study has provided a nuanced understanding of education and language in conflict-affected contexts, showing how education may contribute to conflict or peace and how language is instrumental in this process. Education’s potential for peacebuilding, then, is nested within global and local layers of culture, politics, economics, and languages that afford and constrain its possibilities. By detailing how EMI exposes (un)just relations between people, knowledge systems, and the broader social world, this study has made explicit the importance of studying language in the contemporary higher education landscape, particularly in conflict zones, and has further offered some insights into how current higher education EMI research could learn from academics working in conflict-affected contexts.

## Note

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