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# Opening up spaces for researching multilingually in higher education

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper considers the experiences of a PhD student researcher grappling with a highly complex project. We examine a number of issues relating to teaching in the multilingual university and question the powerful role of English in the PhD journey. We focus on the implications of relying on English academic resources, the problem of the predominance of English in research and publications, and the supervisee–supervisor relationships (including the development of academic voice). We have chosen to present our paper in the form of a conversation (supervisee–supervisor) to help highlight the issues which came to light not only in the student's experience but also how these were seen or understood by both people in this academic relationship. Following the exploration of these issues, we shall challenge readers to consider the relevance of the issues for the higher education context, and consider opportunities for 'doing things differently'.

ملخص ورقة البحث

تتناول ورقة البحث هذه تجارب باحثة من طلبة الدكتوراه وهي تواجه مشروع على درجة عالية من التعقيد. ننظر من خلال هذا البحث في عدد من القضايا المتعلقة بالتدريس في الجامعة المتعددة اللغات، ونتساءل عن الدور القوي للغة الإنجليزية في رحلة الدكتوراه. نحن نركز على الآثار المترتبة على الاعتماد على الموارد الأكاديمية الإنجليزية، ومشكلة هيمنة اللغة الإنجليزية في البحوث والمنشورات، والعلاقات بين طلاب الدراسات العليا والمشرف (بما في ذلك تنمية موهبة الطالب في ابراز شخصيته في الكتابة وطريقة عرضه لآرائه وأفكاره). لقد اخترنا تقديم ورقة البحث على هيئة محادثة بين (المشرف والطالب)، وذلك للمساعدة في تسليط الضوء على القضايا التي ظهرت ليس فقط من خلال تجربة الطالبة، ولكن أيضاً في كيفية رؤيتها أو فهمها من قبل كلا الشخصين في هذه العلاقة الأكاديمية. عقب الانتهاء من استعراض هذه القضايا، سوف نناشد القراء النظر في مدى ملاءمة هذه القضايا بالنسبة لسياق التعليم العالي، والنظر في الفرص المتاحة "للقيام بالأمور على نحو مختلف ".

## Introduction

The question of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (HE) at its most fundamental is about values (our guiding beliefs) and purposes (why we engage in learning and

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teaching). Whatever our roles, how we spend our time developing and/or delivering learning will depend on what we believe in as educators (Barnett 1999, 294). A crude distinction could be drawn between education with a purely instrumental purpose (e.g. skills for employment) or education with a transformative aim, to develop critical citizens with students acting as agents of change in society (Barnett 1999; Byram 2019; Castro, Lundgren, and Woodin 2022). This binary can help shed light on the values and purposes of any educational activity. For example, the increasing use of English in university contexts across the world could be seen as an efficient way to impart knowledge and prepare students for the international job market. From a transformative and critical perspective, such action requires us to interrogate and question this often taken-for-granted phenomenon and ask ourselves: Who is benefitting from this situation? With the current and pressing challenge to decolonise westernised practices and decentre from western colonial perspectives (Menon et al. 2021), it is clear that English – as the dominant colonial language, the main medium for communication in many higher educational contexts and the power-holder in the world of peer-reviewed research – cannot be seen as a neutral participant in higher education teaching. It is recognised that English-medium education is growing in what Dafouz calls EMEMUS (English-Medium Education in Multilingual University Settings) most notably in European countries and in China (Dafouz 2022); we argue here however, that 'monolingual' universities in English-speaking nations are also multilingual through their students and staff, and that this 'hidden' aspect needs to be interrogated.

In this POD, we shall consider the experiences of Nahed, a PhD postgraduate researcher, in the process of grappling with the challenges arising from researching in multiple languages, and whose experiences raise issues of multilingualism relevant to all in HE which we feel need urgent attention.

Nahed has worked for over 10 years as a transcultural mental health and wellbeing professional, using her experience as a translator and interpreter to support people accessing mental health and social care services. This experience motivated her to undertake a PhD, focusing specifically on language and cultural influences on the expression of emotions and spiritual beliefs in therapeutic encounters amongst Pakistani, Somali and Yemeni people (Arafat 2018). This focus raised many challenges and complex questions of a multilingual and intercultural nature. The therapeutic context is founded on understanding others' perspectives and guiding clients towards understanding themselves, a process in which language and culture are central. For example, clients' explanations of their distress are bound up in and communicated through their worldview, this process is mediated by their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Certain terminology or references to concepts can be rich in significance for clients, and yet may not be easily understood by therapists. While the topic of Nahed's research is not the central focus of this POD, it helps highlight some important and often unaddressed roles of language and culture postgraduate research process.

In this paper, we examine three main issues from Nahed's experience, namely: the implications of relying on English academic resources; the problem of the predominance of English in research and publications; and the supervisee–supervisor relationships (including the development of academic voice). We have presented these in the form of a conversation (supervisee–supervisor) to help highlight how these were seen and/or understood by both people in this important academic relationship. We shall advocate

a process of 'opening up the spaces' in all of these cases, to allow for the exposition and critique of underlying assumptions. We shall challenge readers to consider the relevance of these issues for their context, and consider opportunities for 'doing things differently' in the higher education context.

## The implications of relying on English academic resources

**NAHED:** English is often conceptualised as the language of academia (Hultgren 2019, 1), shaping language policy within Higher Education and leading to the perception of literature in other languages as being less credible (Mar-Molinero 2020, 10–14). Drawing on my experience as a PhD student, it did not occur to me to search for articles published in languages other than English because most non-native English authors from the Black and Ethnic Minority population I was studying reported and published their work in English. Additionally, the context of my research was UK-based, and I needed to clarify in my mind the meaning of concepts in English before interrogating their cultural-boundedness. There is no doubt that reading academic work in other languages can offer new shades of understanding and interpretations (McGrath 2014, 6), and relying solely on English can affect knowledge production (Lillis and Curry 2010, 1). Therefore, the inclusion of sources in other languages can add value and strengthen research outcomes. University guidelines seldom offer guidance on searching for non-English studies or promote the inclusion of articles in other languages and how to access such resources in the relevant subject areas. Relevant articles in other languages did not appear in the standard search engines. Possibly, articles in other languages were seen as 'less credible' (Rasmussen and Montgomery 2018, 2–3), and less likely to appear in systematic reviews (Walpole 2019, 127). This can severely limit students' access to, and engagement with, a wealth of multilingual resources. A better understanding of students' explanations for not including research in other languages may help supervisors consider ways to address these issues.

**JANE:** Our postgraduate induction programmes recommend that students read widely, and in all languages that are available to them. We offer guidance on how to include non-English publications in reference lists. When Nahed began her research, library search engines may not have been able to cope with multilingual publications as well as they currently can.

It is clear from Nahed's story that regardless of what we felt we were doing as tutors to promote the use of publications in other languages, she was not sufficiently encouraged to work with references in languages other than English from the outset. If we are to address this issue with a serious attempt at linguistic decolonisation, we are going to need to make explicit efforts to develop deeper engagement with multilingual resources (including complex terminology) right from the outset at the undergraduate level.

## The predominance of English in research and publication

**NAHED:** The use of English as a global academic 'Lingua Franca' (Lillis and Curry 2010, 1) in researching multilingually has consequences at all stages of the PhD process. This includes decisions relating to which language to approach participants, writing of

questionnaires, participant information and consent forms, conducting interviews, analysis of results and writing up of the findings and the thesis as a whole. The predominance of English in all these stages also has ethical implications; by minimising the presence of minority languages, participants' voices and/or their intended meanings are devalued, and dissemination of knowledge back to participants is limited. For these reasons, and in recognition of the value of the languages spoken by my participants, I decided to present their words in their own languages (whether I could speak that language or not) and summarise their words with an English translation. This was mainly because finding equivalent words or translating emotional concepts into other languages can be a difficult task and participants' articulation of their emotions cannot be easily translated into English. In this way, participants' voices can be recognised as equally important and more visible.

**JANE:** Some key (English) terms relating to Nahed's research were difficult to translate into Arabic and at the start of her studies, she found it necessary to clarify her thinking largely in English. I witnessed her struggle with representing the experiences of her participants solely through English, however. At this point in her thesis, she was confident that it was absolutely necessary to present the words of her participants in their original language, for the reasons she notes above. In any case, the use of English alone cannot convey the multiple ways in which emotions can be understood across languages and cultures, for example, as well-documented by Wierzbicka (1999, 273).

**NAHED:** On the subject of publishing and presenting my research findings in other languages, I felt the pressure to submit my journal articles in English, in order to gain readership (Lillis and Curry 2010, 1; McGrath 2014, 5; Salager-Meyer 2008, 79) and the ensuing academic recognition through citations (Liddicoat 2016, 232). Since the primary purpose of the publication is to share knowledge, researchers may want to publish in international language(s) to spread knowledge wider than to English speakers. Therefore, universities need to develop and implement policies or practices that foster the complementary coexistence of different languages and recognise them as important resources for knowledge production (Kuteeva, Kaufhold, and Hynninen 2020, 6–11).

**JANE:** The global spread of English as the academic Lingua Franca in the world is a particularly difficult one to counteract. When I publish work with non-English mother tongue colleagues, they almost always want to publish in English for the reasons Nahed gives; it is also sometimes a requirement from their university to publish (both articles and theses) in English (Dafouz 2022).

## Supervisee–supervisor relationship

**NAHED:** Supervisee–supervisor's interactions in higher education are crucial and can negatively impact academic performance or indeed enhance and support supervisee's learning, research and communication at a higher level. Cultural differences in learning and teaching styles can lead to different expectations and understandings about the meaning and consequences of PhD milestones (e.g. confirmation review, definition of fail, responding to feedback). For example, in my case, the process of the 'confirmation

review', where PhD students at UK universities submit a chapter for review to confirm the students and their research project have the potential for successful completion, was not clear to me and I had not been fully aware that I could possibly fail if I did not fulfil the requirements of the programme. Although my supervisors discussed the process and drew my attention to university guidance for preparing for the confirmation review, I still did not understand what it is, or how it works. I also discovered through the review how much my Arabic writing style was still influencing my work, even after a number of years of working and studying in the UK.

Graduate students' writing processes are designed to develop their expertise in 'reasoning and persuasion, their knowledge of subject matter, and their ability to construct an argument using conventions common to their field' (Hyland 2013, 241). The additional challenge of English as a second language (ESL) can, however, pose some difficulty for multilingual doctoral students like myself in mastering the use of English to create an authorial voice. This is because voice is manifested in academic writing through linguistic choices such as 'hedging language, self-reference, reiteration of central points and attitude markers' (Zhao and Llosa 2008, 160; Guerin and Picard 2012, 36). Through the process of feedback, supervisors can help students with these academic writing skills by providing detailed guidance on lexical and grammatical dimensions as well as comments relating to voice. While the thesis content is of central importance, it is also essential for supervisors to encourage doctoral students to develop their authorial voice in writing throughout the research process. Universities could develop dedicated sessions aimed at explaining UK pedagogical approaches such as PhD milestones and developing authorial voice in English.

Conversely, having a collegial relationship with my supervisors through valuing my opinion and my expertise in my subject area had an immense impact on my learning and achieving my objectives. In my experience, my supervisors followed a non-directive supervisory approach where they encouraged me to take decisions to identify and solve any learning through my own findings. I had access to my supervisors for open doctoral discussion, which was unlike my previous academic experience that had been influenced by the hierarchical relationship with supervisors (Elliot and Kobayashi 2019, 913; Kiley and Liljegren 1999, 64). Moreover, moving away from the hierarchical relationship and adopting a different cultural perspective and approaches to interaction norms (e.g. disagreement, addressing supervisors, gender relations) enhanced the quality of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee; it also allowed more space for the crucial role of supervisors in helping students to adjust to the differing conventional characteristics of higher education settings, for example by valuing my professional specialism and allowing me to take full responsibility for my decisions (Elliot and Kobayashi 2019, 914–915; Kiley and Liljegren 1999, 65).

JANE: I find the supervisor–supervisee relationship a fascinating challenge. On the one hand, it is important that your supervisee knows you are confident and knowledgeable in your subject matter, and on the other, it is important to develop their own confidence and knowledge in their own terms – as worked through by themselves, challenged and supported by the supervisor. In addition to healthy – at times heated-intellectual discussion, part of this process relates to unpicking the unspoken rules of academia, how to get your voice heard and accepted, what lines cannot be crossed if you are to be accepted into

academia and your work approved. The concepts of 'academic rigour', 'criticality', and 'originality', for example, are not the same across the world. While they can be taught to some extent through explanation, example and discussion, they cannot always be learned without the experience of feedback. Greater clarity for Nahed from her perspective probably means over-explanation from my perspective; if the message was not received and understood about the meaning of a confirmation review, for example, (regardless of context), then my task has not been successfully completed.

On the issue of her authorial voice, as supervisors, we focused less on learning key phrases and linguistic strategies than on the academic content. I (quite possibly erroneously) see the whole process of feedback, commentary, discussion as less of a question of linguistic development and more of a question of confidence, and Nahed's development as a doctoral researcher has given her a far stronger voice than when she began the process. Nahed's experience points to a need for systemic change to address the broader question of making processes and requirements explicit; in my view, a few 'quick-fix' sessions will not sufficiently address this issue.

## The multilingual university: opening up the spaces

In this final section, we 'open the spaces' to discuss the issues discussed above, coming from our joint experience. We have challenged ourselves to consider some of the multilingual complexities of the research process through the eyes of both a PhD scholar and her academic supervisor.

On the one hand, Nahed's reliance on English references and English terms in her research process led her to feeling that part of who she was being silenced; on the other hand, in order to understand and articulate this, she needed to engage with concepts in English – through the expansion of her understanding she grew more aware of the limitations she felt were imposed on her. Reflecting back on this process in this paper has offered her the opportunity to voice this experience.

There is no room for complacency, and we propose some actions. We all need to ask ourselves what a university such as Nahed's and Jane's (UK-based, using English in all of its teaching and research activities unless specifically focusing on 'foreign languages') can actually do to challenge the ever-increasing emphasis on publications in English to the detriment of publications in other languages. Returning to the purposes of education described in the Introduction of this piece, an instrumental approach might be to state there is no need to change anything. A critical transformational approach, however, will recognise the need to challenge the issues raised in this conversation, particularly in the current imperative to decolonise the curriculum (which includes a doctoral 'curriculum'). As Dafouz (2022) notes, changes and developments often happen less at the level of university policy than they do at the educator level. We all need to encourage access to a multilingual curriculum at all stages of higher education. We all need to recognise that explaining guidance is not the same as ensuring understanding of them. A healthy critique of our current systems, processes and policies in the spirit of decolonisation of our curricula (and their support systems) at all levels of study is a good place to start.

Undertaking a PhD in a UK university brings with it an (often unspoken) expectation that research work (the majority at least) will be undertaken in English. Given the global dominance as noted by Nahed, perhaps it is time for us to re-think this assumption? As

researchers, we make the choices of who, why, how and what to present. The issue is quite complex and may not have a direct answer, but we need to acknowledge that by including a wider range of multilingual research perspectives, we are still broadening our intellectual vision and providing unique insights.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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