Monolingual or multilingual: The language policy of academic institutions in Israel

Smadar Donitsa-Schmidt1, Ofra Inbar-Lourie2

1Kibbutzim College of Education, Israel
2Tel-Aviv university, Israel

The language of instruction in academic institutions worldwide is usually the local language(s). In the last decade, however, an overwhelmingly growing number of academic courses are being taught in English as the medium of instruction (MOI) in non-English speaking environments, instead of the local tongue. This raises the question of MOI language use in academic institutions and in particular, the extent to which English dominates the scene.

The context of this study is academic institutions in Israel, a multi-linguistic society with two official languages: Hebrew and Arabic, with Hebrew serving as the dominant academic MOI. Little research is available on the current purpose, scope, nature and impact of using languages other than Hebrew in this setting as the MOI and on the role of English within this context. The reported study set out to provide a comprehensive picture of the current situation via the lens of different stakeholders. In this presentation we will report on the study’s first phase which focused on four universities (out of seven) chosen on the basis of geographical location and student population. Within each university data was collected from faculty members, students and administrative staff via semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. The issues probed related to the language policy of the institutions regarding the MOI with specific emphasis on the use of English.

Not surprisingly results point at the dominance of English amongst the languages used in the academic setting with three main motives underlying this phenomena: instrumental economic motives which include globalization and internationalization; identity and ideology driven motives which include transnational student mobility; and, naïve-illusionary motives which include “Native-Speaker” aspirations. Major diversification was found in the spread and use of the languages as well as in the attitudes and perceptions of the different stakeholders towards the issues concerned within the four institutions.

Keywords: academic institutions, English, Globalization.