



Unraveling Epistemological Supremacy in the Teaching of English: A Decolonial Stance

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Received 15/12/2025 Received in revised form 27/06/2026 Accepted 05/07/2026	ABSTRACT The teaching of English in a world replete with inequalities requires sensitivity to social, cultural, political, and pedagogical dimensions. Through the lenses of critical applied linguistics and decolonial thinking, this conceptual paper discusses how English language education can be instrumental in defying the status quo. It particularly aims to unveil the hegemony of English language teaching and present fundamental ideas about how it perpetuates unequal power structures in society. This article argues that English language teaching is not apolitical, in that it constitutes an epistemological supremacy adhering to a long-standing coloniality of power that constructs asymmetrical power hierarchies and brings about unjust phenomena across society. Finally, it points to a decolonial future for English language teaching that challenges, problematizes, and dismantles uneven power relations. Keywords: epistemological supremacy, the teaching of English, decolonial thinking, critical applied linguistics, power relations

Introduction

Neoliberal marketization and globalization underpin the current dissemination of English in the global era as they have driven international trade systems, fostered economic growth, and enhanced global mobility (Bacalja, 2026; Kubota, 2016; Martin & Strom, 2015; Pennycook, 2022; Yeung & Gray, 2025). This international arena reinforces the demand for English as a global language, for English becomes a great asset in boosting competitiveness in the labor market and facilitating greater financial outcomes (Kubota, 2016; M. Smith, 2021). Consequently, English education is widely regarded as a gateway to success in economic opportunities (Karki, 2024; Kubota, 2011). Under global capitalism, individuals who possess English literacy skills are privileged, for English is regarded as a passport that gives people access to advanced knowledge, better job opportunities, scientific and technological advancements, and mass culture (Karki, 2024; Pechapan-Hammond, 2020; Pennycook, 2007). English language education is perceived to assure accomplishment in people's lives; therefore, a better future and life are seemingly fastened with English language teaching and learning (Meighan, 2025). In actuality, this view completely neglects the historical fact that English served as a language of power spread by colonialism. Although the ongoing spread of English does not result from the expansion of the British Empire, the power hierarchy attached to it has been perpetuated (Pennycook, 2007). While English paves the way for new opportunities for some, it probably becomes a hindrance to education, growth, and career prospects for others (Macedo, 2000; Pennycook, 2010; Phillipson, 1998). Ultimately, individuals who lack English literacy skills are assigned a subordinate status. Hardly are the teaching and learning of English deemed to be natural, neutral, apolitical, and ahistorical accordingly.

Historically speaking, the power of English has permeated and dominated the world through White settler colonialism that produced not only the teaching and learning of English but also many ways of thinking that conformed to Western cultures (Pennycook, 1998). It divided people and societies into two groups comprising the powerful colonizers and the powerless colonized (Lin & Motha, 2021; Pennycook, 2016). This classification portrays uneven hierarchical structures of domination and subordination that represent the superior power of the West. Despite the cessation of colonialism, English is still deemed an influential language of the world. This fact reflects the successful intentions of the British colonizers who formerly insisted on diffusing civilization throughout the world through English (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Motha, 2014; Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992).

In the postcolonial era, English remains a language of dominant power. Its overt effects on a globalized and neoliberal society are far-reaching. It is undeniable that the teaching of English partially reinforces this power. Nonetheless, ideological underpinnings of its hegemony are worth considering. This conceptual paper aims to present some fundamental ideas about how English language teaching exercises hegemonic control over others. Framed through the lenses of critical applied linguistics and decolonial thinking, this paper strives to uncover facets of English language teaching from a critical stance toward social and political power structures. Its intention is not to defame the teaching of English. However, it provides alternative views of English language teaching in order to gain deeper insights and foster transformation.

Theoretical Orientations

To discuss the political orientation of English language teaching, it is imperative to review the theoretical underpinnings that guide this line of thinking. In this section, the basic tenets of critical applied linguistics, decolonial thinking, and power in connection with English language teaching will be canvassed.

Critical Perspectives in Applied Linguistics

Emanating from the Marxist-inspired Frankfurt School of critical theory that interrogates, analyses, and addresses power relations and unjust phenomena in society (Morrell, 2008), critical applied linguistics brings up and tackles issues involving power structures tied to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, cultural disparity, ideology, inequality, identity, and subjectivity within the scope of language use, language teaching, and language learning (Pennycook, 1997). It was mediated especially by Foucauldian poststructuralism, which shares critical theory's primary concern with unmasking how power frames social reality by accentuating the construction of meanings and subjectivities in discourses and in connection with power (Kubota & Miller, 2017).

While critical thinking is an apolitical orientation and underscores logical reasoning, rigorous problem-solving, and the ability to evaluate arguments, critical work is inherently political, for it problematizes power structures and attempts to analyze and address questions of injustice across society (Pennycook, 1999). More precisely, critical here refers to an attempt to take account of language and education in response to an uneven world by highlighting their relationship with issues of politics, power, and inequality.

In summary, critical applied linguistics is an approach that addresses critical language-related questions emerging from the fact that people reside in an unequal world, and that language is an integral part of producing and potentially alleviating injustice, not to mention transforming it (Pennycook, 1990).

Decolonial Thinking

Where power is exercised, resistance emerges (Foucault, 1980). Similarly, where colonization existed, decolonization appeared as a response. Decolonization has been interpreted differently across scholarly perspectives. For instance, Mignolo and Walsh (2018) define decolonization as “the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality, and thought, structures that are clearly intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity” (p. 17). In terms of language education, Pennycook and Makoni (2019) explain that decolonization emphasizes “challenging colonial ideologies that emphasize the superiority of, and privilege ascribed to, Western/Northern thought and approaches” (p. 86). In particular, decolonial ways of thinking challenge the coloniality of English and Eurocentric knowledge (Kubota, 2023). These scholars converge in their perspectives owing to their shared endeavor to disrupt the power relations caused by colonialism.

However, some scholars interpret decolonization more broadly. For example, Tuck and Yang (2012) regard decolonizing the mind as fostering critical consciousness, while Motha (2014) frames it as “the psychological shift to independence” (p. 30). Besides, L. Smith (2021) conceptualizes it as a language of possibility that guides our thinking toward recognizing uneven social practices across the globe and seeking new ways of thinking. All in all, these critical mindsets support decolonial thinking by drawing attention to injustice, disrupting the coloniality of power in the field of English language teaching, and exploring transformative possibilities.

Foucault’s Approach to Power

Through the lens of critical applied linguistics, the global diffusion of English is inextricably entwined with political agendas because its percolation initially driven by the power of colonialism has ideologically affected people’s thoughts, cultures, and behaviors (Pennycook, 2000). The teaching of English is also political in that it is dominated by political authorities who determine what should be taught, to whom, how, when, and where (Pennycook, 1989).

Therefore, discussions about the concepts of power and politics are indispensable.

In alignment with Foucauldian poststructuralism shaping critical applied linguistics, it is vital to discuss Foucault's approach to power in order to discern the fundamental concept of power. Pursuant to Foucault (1980), power is everywhere. It is not linear; rather, it is relational and dynamic. It is not only produced by a powerful authority. Nonetheless, dominant power structures emerge from and influence people's daily practices. Power also produces knowledge through discursive practices. That is to say, power plays a role in determining which forms of discourse are considered more acceptable and influential, and thereby legitimizing certain types of knowledge. For example, a certain language may be used to distribute propaganda to serve political, religious, and commercial purposes. This example demonstrates the essential role of a language and its power assigned by its agents comprising its promoters and users (Kachru, 1986). As well, the spread of a powerful language like English works toward a political goal of exerting control over subordinate peoples. Ergo, knowledge is inseparable from power and should not be viewed as objective, apolitical, and value-free (Chen & Lin, 2023).

Additionally, people take part in upholding uneven power dynamics and unequal social hierarchies by valorizing some positions over others even though they strive to resist oppressive power. Thus, power permeates society. It is intertwined with other social relations, which in turn both shape and are shaped by power. In language education, power is embedded in classrooms and institutional practices and policies, which both affect and are affected by social and political hierarchies (Pennycook, 1989). For instance, the roles of teachers and students, educational policies, and institutional practices involve power dynamics. The sections that follow provide an overview of how power operates through the teaching of English.

Unequal Power Relations in the Teaching of English

A Dichotomy of the Colonized and the Colonizers

After the imperial power of Great Britain diminished, the rise of the United States as a neocolonial power resulted in a proliferation of English as a second/foreign language speakers around the world in the twentieth century (Schneider, 2007). The rapid escalation of the global use of English has further reinforced the status of English as a global dominant language. In light of this circumstance, English language teaching industries have expanded worldwide. The teaching of English is instrumental in serving industrial sectors linked to globalization. While English privileges certain

groups of people as a language of possibilities and opportunities, it is liable to disempower others (Pennycook, 2016). To clarify, English has the potential to become a major hindrance to those who have no knowledge of it. Individuals without English literacy skills can become subaltern. Hence, a division between Superior individuals who know English and Inferior people who do not know English exists when English becomes a substantial criterion for including people in or excluding people from further education, employment, or social positions (Pennycook, 1994). English language education turns out to be a key distributor of social prestige and prosperity. In comparison with English, other local languages are undermined. This situation reproduces the coloniality of power established during the colonial period when the ability to speak the colonizer's language fluently appeared to be one of the main criteria for judging one's intelligence. This colonial ideology overcelebrates the dominant language while belittling other native languages (Macedo, 2000). This situation portrays the images of Us and Them of colonizing languages and cultures and colonized languages and cultures (Pennycook, 1998). While the colonizer's language is upheld, the colonized native languages are systematically disenfranchised (Macedo, 2019). Simply put, the expansion of English comes at the expense of other languages (Phillipson, 2018). In other words, the superiority of English and the Western-centric dominance and values could depreciate native languages and cultures (Macedo, 2019).

Reconsidering Asymmetrical Power Structures of TE and SOL

Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), which is viewed through the lens of laissez-faire liberalism, largely disregards ideological/political implications of the global dissemination of English (Pennycook, 2000). Hence, the apolitical orientation of TESOL celebrates the impact of English as a global language with little concern for its relationship with power and knowledge. Through a critical approach to applied linguistics, English is placed in a colonial-celebratory position since it is highly regarded as a valorized language that brings about a multitude of benefits, knowledge, affluence, and contentment (Pennycook, 2000). The excessive glorification of English and its teaching and learning that reproduce its hegemony depicts a hierarchical rank structure. While English gains prominence, other languages and cultures are likely to be marginalized. Also, they are prone to endangerment. This polarization is far more obvious when considering the term TESOL perceived to carry unequal power structures (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Pennycook, 2016; Shin, 2006). To further explain, TESOL conveys the construction of Superior Self and Inferior Other of the TE (the Teaching of English) and SOL (the Speakers of Other Languages). Furthermore, it assigns

dichotomous Self-Other subject positions to teachers and learners (Pennycook, 1998). To further explain, the teachers of English are given a Superior status as opposed to their learners who are the speakers of other languages perceived as Inferior Others (Motha, 2006; Shin, 2006). This situation also reflects the center-periphery relationship (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). While English is accorded a central position, other languages and cultures are rendered peripheral. These images divide English and its learners into the cultural construct of Orientalism, in which English learners are viewed as exotic, static, and devalued, and the culture construct of Occidentalism, which glorifies the English language as a language of civilization and the finest and greatest medium for politics, trade, art, religion, and the like (Pennycook, 2007).

Raciolinguistic Essentialism

English language education has been interwoven with racism since its inception. The supreme status of English resulted from the power of White colonizers. Hence, English was perceived as a language of White people. In other words, Whiteness signifies proprietorship of English (Motha, 2014). It shapes the ways English is taught and learned because standardized varieties of English and its native speakers are perceived to be tied to White English speakers (Kubota, 2021). It is apparent that certain speakers are granted privilege through the ideologies of native-speakerism and Whiteness (Kubota, 2023). Native speakerism places native speakers in a superior position while the non-native speaker subalterns are treated as peripheral (Holliday, 2015). As mentioned earlier, native speakerism is bound up with race. When certain racialized groups are privileged, others are subordinated (Kubota, 2016; Tupas, 2022). Whiteness obviously upholds a racial hierarchy of power. This division between the superior White West and the inferior non-White Rest is likewise reflected in the terms TE and SOL (Lin & Motha, 2021). Additionally, the belief that legitimate English necessarily conforms to the White settler's language perpetuates asymmetrical power relations that divide people based on racial disparities (Kubota, 2020). A longing for White English speakers denotes raciolinguistic essentialism which refers to "a fixed idea indicating which racial group is deemed legitimate speakers of a language" (Kubota, 2023, p. 2). Besides, it is linked to epistemological racism when White Western culture, knowledge, language, and systems are regarded as superior to non-White-Western others (Kubota, 2020; Stinson & Migliarini, 2023).

Misleading Assumptions that Legitimize Linguistic Hierarchization

This section expounds on the overt attributes of the supreme power of English language teaching. Some English language teaching practices that uphold power imbalances will be discussed through two interrelated frameworks including linguistic imperialism and coloniallingualism.

Linguistic Imperialism

Phillipson (1992) takes cognizance of the impact of imperialism as a form of political and military domination over peoples and territories. He critically examines how and why one language comes to be regarded as superior to others through the framework of linguistic imperialism, which entails the dominance of one language over others to the extent of perpetuating unequal power relations. Linguistic imperialism is associated with exploitation, injustice, inequality, and hierarchy that give speakers of minority languages unequal rights. Conversely, individuals who are proficient in a dominant language are afforded greater privilege.

As English becomes a dominant global language, Phillipson situates it within the framework of linguistic imperialism to account for its underlying power dynamics. English linguistic imperialism is defined as the perpetuation of English supremacy, which is maintained through the reproduction of structural inequalities between English and other languages (Phillipson, 1992). The fallacies that perpetuate the hegemony of English are characterized as follows. Firstly, the monolingual fallacy reflects the belief that English is best taught monolingually. Secondly, the native speaker fallacy is the assumption that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker. Thirdly, the early-start fallacy is based on the belief that the earlier English is taught, the better the results. Fourthly, the maximum exposure fallacy denotes the view that the more English is taught, the better the results. Lastly, the subtractive fallacy is grounded in the assumption that if other languages are used extensively, standards of English will drop.

Each of these fallacies reflects unequal entitlements among speakers of other languages in that English and its speakers are central and superior. Also, they reinforce epistemological inequalities, for each of them underscores the unequal structures of Superior Self and Inferior Others. On the one hand, the above tenets are believed to enhance the proficiency of English, but on the other hand, they function as ideological fallacies that maintain the supreme power of English that engenders inequitable practices.

Coloniallingualism

Meighan (2023) draws attention to the enduring colonial heritage, imperial mindset, and discriminatory practices that have a profound effect on English language education. He conceptualizes the term “coloniallingualism” which can be defined as the entrenchment of colonial power within English language education through the dissemination of colonial perspectives, knowledge systems, and belief structures in the teaching and learning of English. The ensuing practices demonstrate how colonial ideologies and pedagogies are institutionalized in the teaching of English. These include:

- the creation of monolingual and monocultural classroom environments such as implementing the English-only classroom policy and relying on materials produced by White native speakers,
- the assignment of decontextualized, disembodied language-as-resource or language-as-code tasks such as acultural and ahistorical activities,
- the privileging of Western print canons and standardized forms of language,
- from the marginalization of land- or place-based education, local communities, vernacular forms of language,
- the privileging of extractive Western research paradigms and methods such as positivist, objective research,
- and the imposition of physical and/or psychological punishment for using a heritage and/or Indigenous languages in a classroom

These practices maintain dominant Western epistemologies and uphold the role of English as a dominant colonial language that bears a colonial legacy and advocates for White supremacy. Apparently, epistemological standpoints adhering to the above practices are human-centered, as humans are regarded as a superiority over nature and others. In this view, Western people are perceived to have the capacity to exploit and control the Earth, nature, humans, non-humans, and non-Western others. Western imperialistic mindsets ignore structural inequalities between majority and minority languages, cultures, and knowledge system, not to mention legitimizing monolingual ideologies in contexts that are inherently multilingualism.

Pedagogical Pathways for Decolonial English Language Teaching

A proposal to destabilize hegemonic-subaltern power structures in English language education requires decolonial pedagogical practices that question, problematize, and challenge normative assumptions embedded in dominant beliefs, ideologies, and practices such as native-speakerism,

English-only policies, and Standard English (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Meighan, 2020; Pennycook, 2010; Pennycook & Makoni, 2019). Central to this orientation is a commitment to addressing disenfranchisement produced through inequitable linguistic relations, discriminatory texts, unfair assessments, exclusionary policies, and other forms of systemic inequity (Pennycook, 2021).

One promising pedagogical response is postmethod pedagogy, which challenges Western-centric instructional paradigms and advances a culturally, linguistically, and sociopolitically responsive orientation to language teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). It positions English language teachers as critical practitioners who engage with situated sociopolitical contexts, foreground issues of social justice, and cultivate more inclusive and equitable learning ecologies (Boonsuk, 2026; Kubota, 2021; Motha, 2020). In this respect, decolonial pedagogy is further strengthened through the amalgamation of anti-colonial, antiracist, translingual, and plurilingual pedagogies, which collectively disrupt epistemic hierarchies and legitimize subaltern ways of knowing and being in English language classrooms (Kubota, 2021; Motha, 2020; Satienchayakorn & Grant, 2023; Suraweera, 2022).

In practical terms, decolonizing English language teaching involves the ongoing decentering of dominant Western epistemologies and the reconfiguration of pedagogical priorities based on locally situated knowledge systems, identities, and sociocultural realities (Kubota, 2021; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Rodrigues et al., 2019). This entails challenging native-speaker norms and dismantling colonial legacies embedded in curricula and instructional materials. Furthermore, it requires expanding learners' awareness of linguistic diversity through Global Englishes perspectives that acknowledge linguistic plurality and affirm local cultural and linguistic resources as legitimate knowledge systems within English language education (Boonsuk, 2026; Pennycook & Makoni, 2019; Sameephet, 2025). Moreover, incorporating translanguaging pedagogy into English language classrooms provides an alternative approach that enables learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires for meaning-making and negotiation without being constrained by the dominance of any particular language (García, 2019). Besides, mobilizing place-based education helps establish meaningful connections between learners and their local communities, languages, cultures, contexts, beliefs, traditions, ideologies, and various social issues (Comber, 2016). Collectively, these orientations reposition English language teaching as a site of epistemological negotiation and transformative possibility rather than a mechanism of reproducing dominant norms.

Conclusion

There is a broad consensus that the English language is of cardinal importance to people across the world. It is often recognized as a neutral, indispensable, and invaluable commodity within neoliberal and globalized discourse. The English language and its teaching and learning have been glorified under the tenets of civilization, advancement, and prestige. This ideology suggests that English is apt to provide substantial benefits to many people. While English appears to represent opportunity and advancement, seldom is the teaching of English implemented with due consideration for the subalterns' sociopolitical struggles. At a classroom level, speakers of other languages may be subjugated by colonial mentality. They are likely to be positioned on the periphery through the deficit lens of Western epistemology and Whiteness ideology. More precisely, their languages, cultures, and identities may be minoritized by dominant Eurocentric ideologies, although this is not always the case.

This paper acknowledges the prominence of English as a global language and does not intend to undermine its value. However, it seeks to highlight the countervailing perspectives that are often overlooked. Specifically, structural forces of power and domination, as well as the exclusion of local languages and cultures reflect unequal power relations in English language education that produce inequitable conditions. The foregoing discussion endeavors to foster critical awareness of the entanglement between English language education and social justice. It argues that English language teaching may produce epistemological inequalities that lead to social, linguistic, epistemic, and environmental injustices, not to mention the eradication of indigenous peoples' knowledge systems, histories, cultures, and languages. Such an understanding underscores that power and politics are omnipresent in language education. Notwithstanding that, disruption and transformation remain possible through decolonial and more sustainable visions for the future of English language teaching and learning.

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