

A Theoretical Conceptualization of e-Learning Hegemonies Within the Context of Language Teaching

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Abstract

While offering global learning opportunities, e-learning and computer assisted language learning (CALL) also have the potential to perpetuate digital colonialism, particularly in the Global South. This study provides a theoretical conceptualization of existing e-learning hegemonies within the context of language teaching, exploring the pervasive influence of linguistic, technological, economic, educational, sociocultural, and sociopolitical hegemonies that create effective barriers to inclusive CALL. In my presentation, I will attempt to reveal how these hegemonies silently yet effectively lead to the marginalization of certain groups, especially in underrepresented and/or misrepresented countries like Iran. I further claim that the existence of “inclusivity gatekeepers” can often defy the very attempts to decolonize digital learning spaces. I will end my presentation by providing tentative solutions to facilitating inclusiveness in digital education.

Nowadays, there are innumerable studies extolling learning via digital technologies, indicating it can be emancipatory, and can encourage autonomous learning. And, true though it may be, it is crucial for educators to recognize that digital learning environments are equally capable of oppressing as empowering. Rather than being intrinsically empowering or even neutral, the use of digital technologies can and does often result in the (re)production of inequities and reinforcement of systemic injustices, frequently labelled “electronic imperialism” (Marandi, 2023b), “digital (neo)colonialism” (Zembylas, 2023), or even “algorithmic coloniality” (Mohamed et al., 2020). Unfortunately, the studies attempting to document such forms of digital supremacy and how they manifest in e-learning are usually very restricted in scope. There appears

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to be very few attempts to conceptualize and represent the various forms that *e-learning hegemonies* can take, notwithstanding the importance of gaining a comprehensive understanding of this matter, particularly with regard to language education. As Traxler (2023) rightly points out, “colonialization is present in most aspects of using digital technology to learn language” (p. 20).

In an attempt to elucidate this issue, Marandi et al. (2015) propose the existence of six e-learning hegemonies, each of which can have an adverse effect on CALL practices. These six hegemonies are: linguistic, technological, economic, educational, sociocultural, and sociopolitical hegemonies.

Briefly, *linguistic hegemony* refers to the dominance of a certain language, script, or discourse in online education (e.g., Anglophone), thus marginalizing other languages and scripts, as well as privileging specific epistemologies rooted in dominant traditions. Meital and Jason (2022) note, for example, that there are fewer than 30 languages with digital vitality, and that approximately 82% of online content is represented by only 10 languages, with English heading this short list.

Technological hegemony captures how the design, development, or manner of use of educational technologies can negatively impact stakeholders. As an instance, Edwards (2022) points out that educational technologies authorized by universities can unintentionally lead to the exclusion of students with disabilities.

Economic hegemony largely foregrounds the notorious “digital divide,” indicating that disparities in financial access to hardware, software, and training can perpetuate unequal participation in e-learning contexts. Ortega (2017) divulges that such disparities have been steadily on the increase over the years, and calls upon CALL and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers to pay closer attention to this issue.

Educational hegemonies emerge when prevailing pedagogical or institutional norms or policies unjustifiably impact online educational practices. Khosravi et al. (2024) describe how the teachers of a popular Iranian language institute felt that inadequate institutional policies were partly to blame for the difficulties they had encountered with their online courses during the pandemic.

Sociocultural hegemony denotes the dominance of a specific set of social norms, aesthetics, and values within digital platforms and content, resulting in cultural misrepresentation or erasure. For example, in a study aimed at assessing ChatGPT’s intercultural competence with regard to Chinese as a Foreign Language, Wang (2024) demonstrated that having been trained based on the values of its creators, ChatGPT is not always successful in recognizing nuances unique to Chinese culture.

Finally, *sociopolitical hegemony* signifies the manner in which political structures or figures manipulate or jeopardize e-learning opportunities through, for example, creating or financing biased e-learning materials; or through restricting access, visibility, and digital citizenship for learners and educators in marginalized regions. Multiple examples of the latter can be found with regard to Palestine in Traxler (2023), and concerning Iran in Marandi (2023a). An example of the former can be found in Soleimanifard et al. (2021), where the authors reveal that the state-funded *Voice of America (VoA) Learning English* employs in-group favoritism and out-group derogation to subtly promote North American values through presenting “world news.” Similarly, Karimi Alavijeh’s (2014) doctoral dissertation explores four popular online English learning platforms (i.e., VoA, EnglishCentral, Englishtips, and BBC Learning English), and illustrates how they promote electronic colonialism by misrepresenting Iran under the guise of teaching English.

To conclude, decolonizing technology assisted language learning is an important issue which has so far received very little attention. I would argue that this is, in part, due to discourses around educational justice being often hijacked—colonized if you will, by very specific, popularized, and sanitized narratives. Perhaps one can say that all forms of educational justice are equal, but some forms are more equal than others. But that is a story for another day.

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