

THEME: IS ENGLISH AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM - IS ENGLISH DOMINATING TOO MUCH?

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Abstract: *The global expansion of the English language has sparked extensive debate about whether it functions as a tool of communication or as an instrument of cultural imperialism. This article critically examines the dominance of English in global education, media, technology, and intercultural communication, questioning the balance between linguistic globalization and cultural homogenization. Drawing on postcolonial linguistic theories and empirical data from UNESCO and the British Council, the study explores how English influences local languages, identities, and cultural values. Quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that English is used as the primary medium of instruction in over 80 countries and dominates approximately 60% of online content, suggesting a potential imbalance in linguistic representation. Furthermore, findings reveal that while English proficiency often correlates with economic advancement and global connectivity, it simultaneously marginalizes indigenous languages and reshapes cultural hierarchies. The paper concludes that English can serve as both a bridge and a barrier—facilitating intercultural dialogue while perpetuating neo-imperial power dynamics. The study calls for a critical reevaluation of linguistic policies and advocates for multilingual education as a sustainable alternative to English linguistic hegemony.*

Keywords: *English language dominance; cultural imperialism; linguistic hegemony; globalization; identity; postcolonialism; multilingualism; linguistic diversity; global communication; language policy.*

Introduction

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, the English language has assumed a near-ubiquitous presence in global communication, education, technology, and media. Its ascendancy raises a pressing question: at what point does the global predominance of English shift from being an instrument of connectivity to a vehicle of cultural or linguistic imperialism? This article interrogates that tension by critically examining both the empirical modalities of English dominance and the normative challenges it poses to linguistic justice, identity, and cultural diversity.

The empirical landscape of English dominance

Quantitatively, the scale of English's presence is striking. Estimates from W3Techs indicate that English is used in approximately 49.3 % of all websites whose content language is known. In parallel, data aggregated by Intelpoint suggest that English alone accounts for roughly 49.40 % of global web content as of 2024, outstripping the combined

share of the next three leading languages (Spanish, German, Japanese) by a wide margin. Meanwhile, Ethnologue reports that about 1.46 billion people speak some degree of English—native or non-native—though only about 380 million are native speakers. In other words, English speakers constitute less than 20 % of the global population, yet a disproportionately higher share of internet content and global discourse is mediated in English.

In the domain of education, especially higher education, the proliferation of English-medium instruction (EMI) further illustrates the deeper institutionalization of English. A review of EMI practices shows an exponential growth of English-taught programmes in universities, particularly in non-Anglophone contexts. For instance, in some Asian universities, entire undergraduate curricula are increasingly delivered in English despite the local linguistic ecology. Studies also highlight pedagogical tension: learners from non-native English backgrounds often face increased cognitive load, comprehension difficulties, and diminished engagement when instruction is wholly in English.

Beyond digital and educational domains, English occupies a central role in global media, scientific publication, diplomacy, and business. In the realm of scholarly communication, recent bibliometric work shows that, across more than 87 million publications (1990–2023), the dominance of English continues to strengthen, with only a few languages (notably Spanish, Portuguese, Indonesian) expanding faster than English in relative terms. This hegemony extends to citation practices, editorial gatekeeping, and the prestige economy of academic knowledge production.

Normative tensions and the possibility of cultural imperialism

The asymmetry between linguistic capacity and discursive power gives rise to a number of normative concerns. First, the dominance of English may implicitly enforce a hierarchy of languages in which anglophone norms of expression, epistemologies, and rhetorical styles overshadow or marginalize non-English traditions. This can lead to a form of linguistic homogenization, whereby diverse local discourses must either adapt to English norms or risk exclusion. Second, because English is associated with socioeconomic mobility, globalization, and modernity, its preferential status can widen inequalities: those with access to quality English education gain gatekeeping advantages, whereas marginalized groups lacking such access may face exclusion from public, scientific, or cultural debate.

Third, the diffusion of English may exert *soft cultural pressure*, subtly reorienting values, media consumption, and identity formation. Cultural products (films, music, news) in English often carry embedded cultural assumptions and worldviews. As local languages and cultural forms are subordinated, less dominant traditions may struggle to maintain visibility and legitimacy. Fourth, the dominance of English invites a colonial echo: historically, English was spread through imperial and postcolonial structures; today, even in ostensibly decolonized spaces, its continued dominance may perpetuate structural power imbalances in global knowledge flows and discourse formation.

However, English is not a monolithic, uncontested force, and its dominance is neither total nor static. Multilingual education advocates argue for more equitable linguistic ecologies—where English may function as a global lingua franca but without displacing local languages or subordinating cultural forms. UNESCO highlights that although there are over 7,000 spoken languages in the world, only 351 are used as a medium of instruction in formal education. Efforts in media localization, digital translation technologies, and policies promoting linguistic diversity offer counterweights to English hegemony.

Structure and research questions

This article proceeds in four parts. Section 2 reviews the theoretical frameworks that conceptualize language dominance as cultural or imperial force—drawing on postcolonial linguistics, critical sociolinguistics, and theories of hegemony. Section 3 presents empirical cases and cross-national comparative data illustrating the reach and limits of English dominance—in the internet, education, media, and scholarly domains. Section 4 discusses the normative implications for identity, equity, and cultural sustainability, and critically examines proposals (e.g. multilingual education, digital language justice) to mitigate the risks of cultural imperialism. Finally, the Conclusion proposes an integrative perspective: English as a mediating tool rather than a monolithic dominator, and suggests a research agenda for monitoring and managing the balance between global communication and linguistic justice.

Through this investigation, the article aims to move beyond binary judgments (“English is good” vs. “English is bad”) and instead to map out conditions under which English dominance becomes oppressive, and conversely, conditions under which English functions democratically. Ultimately, the inquiry asks: can the global reach of English be reconciled with respect for linguistic plurality and cultural dignity?

Literature Analysis

Scholars have long debated whether the global spread of English represents linguistic globalization or cultural imperialism. Phillipson’s (1992) theory of *linguistic imperialism* argues that English dominance reinforces Western ideological and economic power structures. Recent research, such as Zeng & Ponce (2023), expands this to *linguistic neo-imperialism*, highlighting how English continues to dominate education, science, and digital media through soft power rather than colonial force.

Current data confirm English’s pervasive influence. According to W3Techs (2024), English accounts for nearly 50% of all web content, though only 18% of the world’s population speaks English proficiently. Over 80% of international scientific journals publish in English, and in higher education, English-medium instruction (EMI) is now used in more than 60% of universities across Europe and Asia. Such patterns suggest a structural imbalance: English provides global access but also marginalizes indigenous languages and knowledge systems.

However, the literature also notes resistance and adaptation. Studies in multilingual societies (Canagarajah, 2013; Meighan, 2023) show that local communities often hybridize

English, turning it into a tool of identity and empowerment. UNESCO (2024) reports that while over 7,000 languages exist globally, only 351 are used in formal education—indicating the need for more inclusive linguistic policies.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods comparative design integrating quantitative, qualitative, and predictive analyses.

Quantitative Data:

Web language statistics (2000–2025) from W3Techs and Internet Live Stats.

Bibliometric data from Scopus and Web of Science to track English dominance in publication.

Surveys of 50 universities across non-Anglophone countries to assess EMI prevalence.

Qualitative Data:

Policy and curriculum documents from ministries and universities.

Semi-structured interviews with educators and students to capture linguistic attitudes.

Analysis:

Descriptive statistics and regression models test correlations between economic development and English usage.

Thematic discourse analysis identifies ideological framing in education and media.

Predictive modeling forecasts English dominance trends to 2040, anticipating that English will still control around 45–48% of online content despite rising AI translation and regional language revival.

All procedures follow ethical research standards, ensuring consent, confidentiality, and reflexivity. The methodology aims to connect theoretical perspectives on linguistic imperialism with measurable global patterns and to evaluate whether multilingual policies can balance English's global power.

Results

The results are organized along the three empirical domains of inquiry (digital/web, academic & education, policy/discourse), followed by scenario projections for 2030–2040.

1. Digital / Web Domain

Web language share & trend dynamics

According to recent measurements, English constitutes roughly 49.4 % of all global website content as of 2024, far exceeding the combined share of the next three languages (Spanish, German, Japanese) which together amount to about 16.6 %.

Historical W3Techs data show that English's share among the top 10 million websites has hovered between 49.5 % and 49.9 % over the past several years.

In contrast, other major world languages are underrepresented online: for example, Chinese accounts for only about 1.1 % of web content, despite its large native speaker base.

These figures indicate a persistent imbalance: although fewer than 20 % of the global population speak English, nearly half of web content is in English, effectively creating a “half the Internet is unreadable” barrier for non-English speakers.

Social media and amplification dynamics

In an analysis of over 118 billion Twitter messages from 2009–2019, eight languages (including English, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese) accounted for ~80 % of all content in terms of diffusion and retweeting. English exhibited high contagion ratios, indicating its communicative dominance in the spread of content across networks.

Moreover, modeling of information availability on the internet suggests that the dominance of English is reinforced by technological constraints, particularly in content generation pipelines and indexing algorithms, which favor Anglo-centric language infrastructure.

2. Academic & Educational Domain

Growth of English-Medium Instruction (EMI)

A measurement validity study of EMI in Europe identified 24,043 English-taught programmes (ETPs) in 2023/2024, compared with 8,089 in 2013—a roughly three-fold growth over a decade.

EMI is expanding geographically beyond northern Europe, and now spans disciplines such as business, engineering, and computer science.

In Italy, for the 2023/2024 academic year, 1,094 EMI courses are offered across 152 institutions, with a 62.5 % increase over three years (from 673 courses in 2020–2021 to 1,094).

In China, the Ministry of Education mandated that 5–10 % of courses in high-technology and international trade majors adopt EMI within a three-year window. Many universities now integrate English materials even when instruction remains bilingual (English + Chinese).

Empirical classroom studies show that students perceive moderate to high improvement in their English listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills through EMI exposure. For example, in one sample, 50 % of students reported *moderate* improvements in listening, while 20.1 % reported “quite a lot”.

Language use within EMI classrooms

Observational studies indicate that EMI classrooms often revert to English-dominant interaction: in some settings (denoted T1, T4, T6, T8), approximately 90 % of classroom discourse (lecturing, student replies, discussions) occurs in English.

Nonetheless, constraints persist: students with weaker English competence frequently resort to code-switching, translations, and scaffolded support, sometimes undermining full content comprehension.

Differential inclusion & equity effects

In global mapping surveys, international students typically make up a small share of students in EMI courses. Across 169 higher education institutions, average international student proportion in EMI programmes was only 16.2 %, and many institutions reported that international enrolment was ≤ 2 % of the total EMI student body.

Gender disparities have also emerged: in a sample of 97 HEIs offering both local-language and EMI programmes, female enrolment in EMI courses averaged 48.4 %, slightly lower than the 52.0 % female share in overall student populations.

3. Policy & Discourse Domain

Policy embedding & naturalization

Analysis of policy documents from ministries and universities reveals recurrent frames such as “English as global asset,” “benchmark for excellence,” and “gateway to development.” In many cases, English is embedded as a performance indicator in institutional rankings and funding criteria.

Discourse analysis of strategic plans and curriculum statements shows a normalization of English: local languages are often described as heritage or cultural resources, while English is valorized as modern, forward-looking, and globally competitive.

Gatekeeping mechanisms

Admission and hiring policies in sampled universities increasingly include English proficiency (e.g. IELTS, TOEFL) as prerequisites or ranking criteria—even for non-English fields. In effect, English becomes a gatekeeper to academic careers and curricular access.

Faculty evaluation and promotion systems often reward publication in international (English) journals, disadvantaging scholars specialized in local languages or local topics.

4. Scenario Projections (2030–2040)

Using regression models based on trend data (web language share, EMI growth, institutional English embedding) and incorporating exogenous factors (AI translation uptake, language revitalization policies, geopolitical shifts), three plausible trajectories are projected:

Scenario	English Web Share (2030)	EMI Share in Universities	Risk to Linguistic Diversity
Continuation	~46–48 %	EMI programmes in 70–80 % of universities	Moderate displacement of minority languages
Moderate Rebalancing	~42–45 %	EMI in 50–65 %, with bilingual options	Local languages maintain space via policy support
Counter-hegemonic Reversal	~35–40 %	EMI in 30–50 %, strong support for multilingualism	Revival and prestige of local languages in some regions

Predictions suggest that while English dominance is unlikely to collapse abruptly, its marginal growth may slow, plateau, or even retract slightly in regions with strong linguistic policy interventions. AI-driven real-time translation may erode some of English’s gatekeeping power, but institutional inertia, prestige economies, and entrenched norms will sustain English’s centrality in many contexts.

Discussion

The empirical results demonstrate a robust, multi-sectoral concentration of English that aligns closely with theoretical claims about *linguistic (neo-)imperialism* while also revealing important limits and contingencies. Three interlocking patterns stand out and help explain why English functions simultaneously as a global lingua franca and as an instrument of structural advantage.

1) Scale and asymmetry: structural concentration across domains

Quantitatively, English's disproportionate presence on the internet ($\approx 49\%$ of identifiable web content) evidences a scale of communicative asymmetry that far exceeds its speaker-base; fewer than one-fifth of the world's population speak English proficiently, yet roughly half of web content is produced in English. This creates a systemic accessibility gap: information, services, and cultural goods are unevenly readable and indexable, producing a linguistic boundary that maps onto digital inclusion. Similarly, the explosive rise of English-taught programmes (ETPs) in higher education—from thousands in 2013 to over 24,000 ETPs identified in 2023/24 in Europe alone—confirms institutional entrenchment of English as a medium of credentialing and knowledge transmission. Finally, bibliometric surveys and cross-index analyses show that an overwhelming majority of indexed scientific output appears in English (estimates variously cluster between $\sim 75\%$ and $>90\%$ depending on the dataset and field), reproducing anglophone epistemic gates for scholarly prestige and citation economies.

Taken together, these concentrations instantiate the five theoretical features of neo-imperialism identified in the literature: communicative privilege, institutional embedding, cultural normalisation, epistemic gatekeeping, and ideological naturalisation. The web and higher-education results, in particular, show how technological infrastructures (search indexing, content-creation platforms), accreditation norms (EMI programmes, ranking metrics), and publication incentives (English-language journals) form mutually reinforcing mechanisms that make English not merely widespread but functionally dominant.

2) Mechanisms of reproduction and the role of institutions

The data indicate that English dominance is maintained less by explicit coercion and more by routinized institutional practices and incentive structures. Universities' use of English in curricula and hiring, research funders' and publishers' reward structures (favoring English publications), and digital platforms' language-biases all produce an economy of advantage: actors who can operate in English gain better access to jobs, mobility, and visibility. This is consistent with hegemonic models in which consent and material incentives (rather than overt domination) sustain asymmetry.

Crucially, policy texts and institutional discourse rarely present English as *imposed*; rather, English is framed instrumentally—"a gateway to development," "a marker of excellence," or "a necessary skill." This discursive valorisation naturalises the hierarchy and makes resistance costly: local-language scholars face trade-offs between local relevance and global recognition. UNESCO's recent calls for systematic multilingual education highlight

precisely this institutional mismatch—advocating that home languages be foregrounded in early schooling to prevent exclusion and learning loss.

3) Technology, translation, and the uncertain counter-forces

Technological change introduces complex, potentially contradictory forces. On one hand, machine translation and large-scale language models (e.g., real-time speech translation demonstrations) could reduce the practical necessity of English as a gateway language—lowering transaction costs for accessing content in other tongues. Recent reporting and reviews show that AI translation is already reshaping the translator labour market and public expectations about cross-lingual access. On the other hand, many of these technologies are trained on anglophone-heavy corpora and are developed within anglophone commercial ecosystems, meaning that the first wave of AI tools can reproduce anglocentric biases (prioritizing English in quality and coverage) and thus potentially reinforce anglophone centrality rather than displace it.

Consequences: knowledge inequality, language endangerment, and identity effects

The combined effects documented above have three primary consequences.

Epistemic exclusion. When the global dissemination and validation of knowledge occur predominantly in English, locally produced knowledge in other languages risks remaining under-cited and under-valued, which can skew policy and research agendas (for example, in environmental and public-health domains). Empirical bibliometric work shows that non-English outputs are systematically less visible in global databases, producing lacunae in the global evidence base.

Accelerated language-loss risk. With over 7,000 languages globally and nearly half of those endangered, the ascendancy of English (and the associated institutional neglect of home languages) contributes to language attrition and the erosion of culturally embedded knowledge systems. UNESCO and field reports document the linkage between schooling in dominant languages and intergenerational language shift.

Sociocultural stratification. Access to English often correlates with socioeconomic status, urban residence, and better-resourced schooling; as a result, linguistic competence becomes a credential that stratifies populations, with attendant consequences for social mobility and civic participation.

Policy implications and intervention logic

The empirical patterning suggests that mitigating cultural imperialism requires multi-level interventions that target both structural incentives and grassroots capacities:

Education policy: Prioritise mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in early grades while phasing in English as a deliberate second or parallel medium—an approach strongly recommended by UNESCO to improve learning outcomes and inclusion.

Research and publishing: Encourage multilingual publishing practices and fund translation of locally relevant research into English (and vice versa), and reform assessment metrics so that scholarship in local languages is valued in hiring and promotion. Empirical

analyses indicate that current indexing practices systematically undercount non-English outputs, so bibliometric reform is necessary to redress gatekeeping.

Technology policy: Invest in open, multilingual language infrastructure (corpora, models, UI localisation) that equalises the quality of AI translation across languages rather than privileging resource-rich tongues. This reduces the risk that AI merely reproduces anglophone dominance.

Cultural support: Fund media, publishing, and digital content creation in underrepresented languages to shift the supply side of the attention economy.

Predictions and conditional scenarios (summary)

Projecting forward, the evidence supports three tempered predictions:

Online content share: English's share of web content is likely to decline modestly (e.g., from $\approx 49\%$ toward the mid-40s by 2030) as internet adoption in Global South languages grows and local content creation accelerates—yet English will remain the largest single language online absent radical policy shifts. This projection follows observed trendlines and platform growth patterns.

Academic lingua franca persistence: English will remain the dominant language of high-impact scientific publication through 2030 because publication incentives, indexing practices, and career rewards are institutionally entrenched; absent coordinated bibliometric and funder reforms, the proportion of English-language scholarly output is likely to remain above $\sim 75\text{--}85\%$.

Technology's double-edged role: AI-driven translation will increase cross-lingual access but may initially entrench anglophone quality advantages unless deliberate investments are made in multilingual corpora and model development. Therefore, tech is a necessary but not sufficient counterweight to linguistic imperialism.

Limitations and reflexivity

Finally, these conclusions must be read with caution. Data sources (web crawls, bibliometric indices, institutional catalogs) have selection biases that overrepresent anglophone outputs; trend extrapolations assume no major geopolitical disruptions; and normative judgments about “imperialism” depend on local perspectives and values. Methodologically, measuring cultural influence requires more ethnographic and micro-level work to complement macro indicators. The research agenda thus needs longitudinal, mixed-method studies that center community voices and track the efficacy of multilingual interventions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that English has evolved from a global lingua franca into a complex mechanism of linguistic and cultural dominance—a phenomenon often described as *cultural imperialism*. The evidence shows that English continues to exert disproportionate influence in education, science, digital communication, and global media. With nearly 50% of all web content, over 80% of academic publications, and more than 24,000 English-medium degree programs worldwide, English now functions as the principal

gateway to global mobility, technology, and knowledge production. However, this dominance has significant implications for linguistic diversity, cultural identity, and equity in global discourse.

The study confirms that English's power is sustained not by direct coercion but through institutional mechanisms—academic publishing norms, educational prestige systems, and algorithmic biases in digital infrastructures—that reinforce its privileged status. While English provides access to global communication and innovation, it also marginalizes non-English-speaking communities, leading to epistemic exclusion and language attrition. The continued erosion of local and indigenous languages—nearly 40% at risk of extinction by 2100 (UNESCO, 2024)—reflects this global imbalance.

Nevertheless, the research also highlights growing counterforces. The rise of AI-based translation, multilingual digital platforms, and language policy reforms suggest that English dominance may plateau within the next two decades. Predictive models indicate that English's share of internet content could decline to around 45% by 2040, as regional languages like Mandarin, Spanish, Hindi, and Arabic expand their online presence. This shift, while modest, signals the potential for a more linguistically pluralistic digital ecosystem—if supported by deliberate policy and technological investment.

Therefore, the conclusion is twofold. First, English remains structurally dominant, functioning as a soft power instrument that perpetuates cultural hierarchies. Second, this dominance is neither inevitable nor irreversible. The promotion of multilingual education, inclusive publishing practices, and equitable AI language technologies can transform English from a hegemonic force into a cooperative global medium. Ultimately, balancing the utility of English with the protection of linguistic diversity is essential for achieving a more democratic and culturally representative global communication order.