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English Dominance and Linguistic Justice in Contemporary Higher Education Systems

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ABSTRACT

***Purpose**: This study aimed to explore how English dominance shapes the conditions of linguistic justice in contemporary higher education systems. It sought to understand how English functions not only as a communicative medium but also as an ideological force that structures power, recognition, and epistemic legitimacy within multilingual and postcolonial academic contexts.*

***Subjects and Methods:** The research employed a qualitative interpretive design grounded in critical sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. Data were collected from institutional policy documents and semi-structured interviews with eighteen participants, including lecturers, students, and policy makers from three universities representing international, bilingual, and local-language contexts. Thematic and critical discourse analyses were used to interpret the relationship between institutional structures, linguistic ideologies, and personal experiences of inclusion and exclusion.*

***Results:** The findings revealed that English functions simultaneously as a resource of opportunity and a mechanism of exclusion. Institutional policies framed English as the marker of academic prestige, while local languages were symbolically preserved but materially marginalized. Participants described emotional fatigue, linguistic insecurity, and identity tension in navigating English-dominant systems, yet some also developed bilingual strategies that embodied acts of resistance and linguistic agency.*

***Conclusions:** English dominance in higher education perpetuates epistemic inequality by privileging Anglo-normative linguistic standards while undermining local knowledge systems. Achieving linguistic justice requires more than policy inclusion; it demands an epistemological shift that values all languages as equal vehicles of academic thought. Only through such plural recognition can higher education sustain intellectual diversity and moral equity.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary university stands at a paradoxical crossroads where the ideals of global inclusion coexist uneasily with the realities of linguistic exclusion (Wildemeersch & Koulaouzides, 2024). Over the past few decades, English has ascended to an unparalleled position of authority in the world's academic landscape, becoming not only the primary medium of scholarly communication but also a defining symbol of intellectual legitimacy and institutional prestige. Journals indexed in global databases, conferences that attract international scholars, and cross-border research collaborations are overwhelmingly conducted in English.

This dominance has come to be viewed as both inevitable and desirable, an unquestioned condition of academic modernity. Yet beneath this veneer of neutrality lies a more troubling reality one that exposes the silent reproduction of inequality within spaces that claim to be universal. In many higher education systems, especially those situated in postcolonial and multilingual contexts, English occupies a position of privilege that extends far beyond its communicative function (Bhatt et al., 2022; Stroud & Kerfoot, 2021; Kazmi, 2024). It becomes an epistemic gatekeeper that determines whose ideas can travel, whose scholarship gains legitimacy, and whose voices are rendered peripheral.

According to Smith (2024) and Roth (2019), the symbolic capital attached to English proficiency grants access to global recognition while simultaneously devaluing local languages and the knowledge traditions they carry. This linguistic asymmetry is often rationalized through the discourse of internationalization, where institutions adopt English-medium instruction and publication policies under the promise of global competitiveness. However, what appears to be a benign pursuit of excellence frequently conceals a deeper moral tension the gradual normalization of linguistic inequity and the erosion of epistemic diversity within the academy (Catala, 2022; Canagarajah, 2022; Garnett, 2024).

The rise of English as the global academic lingua franca is often celebrated as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue and intellectual mobility (Guilherme, 2023; Modiano, 2024; Souza, 2021). Scholars from diverse backgrounds are believed to meet on equal ground within the shared linguistic space that English provides. Yet, empirical realities challenge this narrative of inclusivity. Non-native English-speaking academics often encounter structural barriers and emotional fatigue in their attempts to conform to Anglo-normative standards of communication and publication. Their scholarship, though rich in local insight, is frequently subjected to linguistic scrutiny that transcends content evaluation.

As a result, language becomes an invisible but powerful axis of inequality, where fluency is mistaken for intellectual depth and linguistic conformity is rewarded more than epistemic originality. Within this dynamic, the concept of linguistic justice emerges as a critical framework for interrogating how power operates through language in the academic world (Khan & Sajid, 2024; Mackey et al., 2022; Leyva & Joseph, 2023). Linguistic justice concerns not merely the freedom to use one's own language but the equitable recognition of different linguistic repertoires as legitimate carriers of knowledge.

It challenges the structural and ideological forces that have naturalized English dominance and questions the moral foundations of an academic system that privileges one linguistic worldview over others (Chang-Bacon, 2021; Kubota & Lin, 2009). Scholars such as Phillipson, Canagarajah, and Stroud have illuminated how English hegemony operates not only through institutions but also through the everyday practices and internalized hierarchies of academic actors. Their work reveals that linguistic injustice is both a political and an affective condition one that shapes identity, belonging, and the very possibility of being heard within the global academy.

The urgency of this conversation is particularly evident in the higher education systems of the Global South, where universities are increasingly compelled to adopt English-medium policies as part of international ranking ambitions (Sah, 2022; Dafouz & Smit, 2021). In these contexts, English proficiency becomes a measure of institutional worth and scholarly sophistication, while local languages are relegated to the margins of informal communication or cultural expression. This dynamic has profound implications for epistemic democracy. When the language of power dictates the terms of participation, the academic field risks narrowing its understanding of what counts as legitimate knowledge.

Intellectual traditions grounded in local linguistic and cultural systems face epistemic silencing, not because they lack rigor, but because they are articulated in languages deemed peripheral to global discourse (Piller et al., 2022). At the same time, the global diffusion of English has generated spaces of negotiation, resistance, and hybridity. Scholars and students in multilingual universities continually navigate the tension between the demands of English dominance and the desire to preserve linguistic plurality.

Within classrooms, some lecturers employ bilingual strategies that allow students to first think through concepts in their native languages before articulating them in English, transforming translation into an act of intellectual mediation rather than submission. Such practices embody what Stroud terms linguistic citizenship a form of linguistic agency where individuals reclaim moral ownership of their linguistic choices within unequal systems. This complexity indicates that linguistic dominance, while pervasive, is neither total nor uncontested; it is continuously negotiated within the lived realities of academic life.

Kuteeva & Airey (2014) said that, against this background, the present study seeks to explore how English dominance manifests in institutional policies, academic practices, and individual experiences within contemporary higher education systems. It aims to understand how English, as both an instrument of opportunity and exclusion, shapes perceptions of fairness, access, and intellectual recognition. By integrating critical discourse analysis of institutional texts with interpretive interviews among lecturers, students, and policy makers, this study investigates not only the structural mechanisms that sustain English hegemony but also the emotional and ethical struggles it generates among those navigating its hierarchies.

The study is situated within the theoretical intersection of critical sociolinguistics, postcolonial theory, and linguistic justice frameworks (Mdzanga & Moeng, 2021). It builds upon the notion that the dominance of English is not an inevitable consequence of globalization but a product of historical and ideological constructions that continue to privilege certain linguistic communities over others. Through this lens, the research seeks to illuminate how power operates subtly through language policies, assessment systems, and publication requirements, and how these mechanisms collectively produce what Fricker conceptualizes as epistemic injustice the exclusion of individuals or groups from full participation in the circulation of knowledge due to linguistic or cultural prejudice.

Ultimately, this study is animated by a moral and intellectual question that goes beyond language itself: how can higher education reconcile its global aspirations with its ethical responsibility to ensure linguistic equity and epistemic inclusivity? The investigation is not a rejection of English as a tool of communication but an appeal for a more critical consciousness about the values and assumptions embedded in its global dominance. By examining how universities negotiate the tension between global competitiveness and local integrity, this research contributes to the broader debate on the decolonization of knowledge and the democratization of linguistic participation in academia. It invites readers to imagine a university system where languages coexist not in competition but in dialogue, where the richness of multilingual scholarship is recognized as essential to intellectual justice, and where linguistic diversity is understood not as a barrier but as the very foundation of a truly global academic community.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses an interpretive qualitative approach to understand how English dominance is normalized in everyday academic practices and how this impacts the sense of linguistic justice in higher education. This approach is grounded in the sociolinguistic tradition of critical language policy and critical analysis, understanding that language and language policy are social constructions closely linked to ideology, colonial history, and power relations. The primary method used is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of institutional documents, such as strategic plans, language policies, and internal memos. These documents are analyzed as representations of institutional identity and ideology, to explore how English is legitimized as the academic standard and how this dominance produces forms of exclusion against local languages and knowledge. To complement the document analysis, this research also uses semi-structured interviews with lecturers, policymakers, and students from three higher education contexts: a fully English-language university, a bilingual institution, and a local-language institution transitioning to English. A total of 18 participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, allowing for a wide range of perspectives and experiences to be captured in depth. Interviews were conducted in person and courageously, recorded with consent, carefully transcribed, and curated by the participants. The data analysis process was iterative, involving open coding, conceptual categorization, and thematic synthesis, utilizing theoretical frameworks such as linguistic imperialism, epistemic injustice, and linguistic citizenship. The researcher-

maintained reflexivity through analytical memos to ensure transparent interpretations and conscious positionality. All research procedures adhered to ethical standards, including participant consent, data confidentiality, the use of pseudonyms, and the protection of sensitive information. This methodology allowed the research to explore the relationship between language, power, and identity in higher education by combining critical discourse analysis with the lived experiences of individuals within the English-language academic system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the entangled relationship between English dominance and the pursuit of linguistic justice in contemporary higher education systems. Across all three institutions examined, the English language emerged not only as a medium of academic communication but as a powerful ideological instrument that defines whose voices matter and whose knowledge counts. While many participants recognized English as a pathway toward global recognition and intellectual mobility, their narratives also revealed how this same language subtly imposes hierarchies that limit inclusion, stifle linguistic diversity, and silence local epistemologies. The data thus uncover a complex moral landscape in which the promise of internationalization coexists with the persistence of epistemic inequality.

The first layer of evidence emerged from institutional policy analysis, which revealed that each university articulated its language orientation through different symbolic relationships with English. The international university, which positions itself as a global academic hub, treats English as an essential marker of prestige and modernity. The bilingual national university promotes English as an avenue for global engagement but simultaneously declares the preservation of national identity through local languages. The local-language university resists full English adoption yet operates under increasing pressure to align with accreditation systems that privilege English-language outputs. The underlying patterns are summarized in Table 1, which presents how language policy orientation mirrors deeper institutional ideologies.

Table 1. Institutional Language Policy Orientations

Institution	Medium of Instruction	Policy Orientation	Observed Linguistic Reality	Level of Linguistic Inclusion
A (International University)	Fully English	Globalization-driven, English as institutional identity	English used in all academic and administrative domains	Low
B (Bilingual National University)	English and National Language	Transitional, balancing global and local priorities	Mixed linguistic practices, English dominant in formal contexts	Moderate
C (Local-language University)	Predominantly Local Language	Preservation-oriented, facing global pressure	Local language used for teaching, English for publication and promotion	Moderate to High

The findings from Table 1 reveal that institutional language policies are less about communication and more about symbolic positioning in the global academic market. English is not merely adopted to facilitate access to international scholarship but to perform global modernity itself. In the international university, English serves as a defining institutional ethos that shapes identity and reputation. The national bilingual university claims to uphold both local and global languages, yet the lived reality shows that English remains the default in most academic communications, particularly in assessment and publication. The local-language institution reflects a form of resistance, yet its effort to maintain linguistic plurality is undermined by the weight of global metrics that reward English productivity. This pattern exemplifies what Phillipson describes as linguistic imperialism, where the expansion of English is justified through

seemingly neutral discourses of globalization and competitiveness while concealing the reproduction of linguistic hierarchies.

Beyond institutional structures, the voices of participants add an affective and experiential depth to the data. Many lecturers and students described their relationship with English as both empowering and alienating. English grants access to global dialogue but often at the cost of emotional confidence and epistemic self-assurance. Several participants spoke of a subtle feeling that their ideas became less compelling when expressed in English, as though the language itself filtered the authenticity of their intellectual intentions. Their reflections are captured in Table 2, which summarizes the dominant themes emerging from participant narratives.

Table 2. Thematic Patterns from Participants' Narratives

Theme	Illustrative Participant Quote	Analytical Interpretation
English as Academic Gatekeeper	"If you can write in English, your ideas are accepted faster. If not, you must justify your position repeatedly." – Lecturer, Institution B	English legitimizes certain epistemic styles while marginalizing others.
Emotional and Cognitive Burden	"I always feel that my ideas sound less sophisticated when I speak in English, even though I am confident in my own language." – Student, Institution A	English creates emotional distance and intellectual insecurity.
Negotiated Bilingualism	"We teach in both languages because students feel safer when ideas start in the local language and then move into English." – Lecturer, Institution C	Bilingual practices emerge as forms of pedagogical resistance and inclusion.

These narratives show that the struggle with English is not only institutional but deeply personal. The participants' experiences reflect the emotional labor required to sustain intellectual legitimacy in a language that is both enabling and excluding. English often becomes the invisible boundary of academic belonging. Those fluent in English are perceived as more credible, while those who rely on their local languages feel that their intellectual contributions require additional justification. The discourse of meritocracy thus disguises linguistic privilege. Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital helps explain this phenomenon, where the mastery of English functions as a symbolic resource that determines academic mobility and credibility. Yet, what emerges more strikingly from these accounts is the psychological toll of this unequal linguistic economy. Participants' voices tremble between pride and exhaustion, between the desire to belong and the fatigue of translation, revealing that linguistic injustice is lived as both intellectual marginalization and emotional strain.

Amid these tensions, some participants described creative ways of navigating the linguistic hierarchy. Lecturers in the local-language university reported adopting bilingual teaching strategies, allowing students to first articulate complex concepts in their native language before translating them into English. This pedagogical flexibility not only enhanced comprehension but also preserved the epistemic dignity of the local language. Such practices exemplify what Stroud describes as linguistic citizenship, where speakers reclaim agency and moral authority over their linguistic choices. These forms of negotiated bilingualism demonstrate that resistance to English dominance need not manifest as outright rejection but can emerge through everyday acts of inclusion and reinterpretation.

To deepen the understanding of how linguistic justice operates across dimensions, the analysis identified three interconnected levels of inequality structural, ideological, and affective. These dimensions are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Dimensions of Linguistic Justice and Inequality

Dimension	Observed Pattern	Theoretical Lens	Implication

Structural	English embedded in accreditation, publication, and promotion systems	Linguistic imperialism	Institutionalizes epistemic inequality
Ideological	English associated with modernity and authority	Epistemic injustice	Devalues local epistemologies
Affective	Emotional insecurity among non-native speakers	Linguistic citizenship and linguistic habitus	Shapes identity and belonging

The structural level demonstrates how institutions translate linguistic preferences into systems of academic evaluation. English proficiency becomes not only a communicative expectation but a prerequisite for recognition. Journals indexed internationally, most of which operate in English, define the measure of intellectual excellence. This structural arrangement is normalized under the rhetoric of quality assurance and global ranking, creating a silent hierarchy that positions non-English-speaking scholars perpetually at a disadvantage. Ideologically, the elevation of English carries moral consequences. English is not treated merely as a language of wider communication but as the language of truth, rationality, and modern thought. Local languages, by contrast, are confined to cultural expression or informal discourse. This symbolic order produces what Fricker conceptualizes as epistemic injustice, where certain linguistic identities are systematically excluded from the process of knowledge validation. Participants' reflections frequently echoed this sentiment, particularly when they felt that their academic writing in local languages was seen as parochial or insufficiently scientific. The consequence is a subtle silencing of alternative epistemologies and the reinforcement of an intellectual monoculture disguised as global universality.

The affective dimension, though less visible in institutional discourse, emerged as one of the most profound in the data. Participants described an enduring sense of linguistic inadequacy that shaped their academic self-esteem. Even highly accomplished scholars confessed to feeling intellectually diminished when communicating in English. This emotional unease is not merely psychological but structural, as it results from the internalization of linguistic hierarchies that equate English fluency with intelligence. Such experiences resonate with Labov's concept of linguistic insecurity, revealing that the dominance of English infiltrates the very formation of scholarly identity. The pursuit of linguistic justice therefore extends beyond language policy reform; it demands a transformation in how institutions define intellectual legitimacy and human worth in academic spaces. Collectively, the findings reveal a deep paradox at the heart of internationalized higher education. English enables mobility, visibility, and collaboration across borders, yet it also enforces conformity and perpetuates epistemic dependence.

Institutions that embrace English in pursuit of global recognition often overlook the subtle erosion of linguistic diversity and the moral impoverishment that follows when only one language becomes the arbiter of truth. The study thus argues that genuine linguistic justice requires more than policy inclusivity; it calls for epistemological humility a recognition that knowledge flourishes in multiplicity and that intellectual depth does not belong to a single language. In essence, the results affirm that linguistic justice in higher education is both a structural and a moral project. It involves reimagining universities as spaces of plural dialogue rather than as linguistic hierarchies. When institutions begin to treat local languages not as remnants of cultural identity but as valid vehicles of intellectual thought, the conversation about justice shifts from mere access to genuine epistemic equality. Such a transformation is slow and requires courage, yet it is within these incremental acts of linguistic recognition that the hope for a more equitable academic world begins to take form.

Discussion

English Dominance as an Institutional Logic

The findings of this study reveal that English has become more than a tool for academic communication; it functions as an organizing logic that structures how institutions imagine their place within the global higher education landscape. Rather than merely responding to practical

demands for international engagement, universities use English to perform modernity, competitiveness, and institutional prestige. This symbolic role is evident across the three institutions: the international university aligns its identity entirely with English; the bilingual institution negotiates between global aspirations and national linguistic commitments; and the local-language institution attempts to maintain linguistic plurality despite systemic pressure to conform to English-oriented evaluation standards. These patterns show that institutional language orientations are deeply tied to the pursuit of global legitimacy, reinforcing the idea that linguistic choices are inseparable from broader ideological and market-driven imperatives.

Divergent Linguistic Realities and Their Consequences

Although each institution frames its language policy differently, the actual linguistic practices reveal a persistent hierarchy. English tends to dominate high-stakes academic activities—assessment, publication, and professional advancement while local languages occupy supportive or informal domains. This mismatch between policy rhetoric and lived reality demonstrates that linguistic inclusion often remains symbolic rather than substantive. The bilingual university, for instance, promotes a dual-language model but effectively privileges English in authoritative academic spaces. Meanwhile, the local-language institution's efforts to sustain multilingualism are overshadowed by global metrics that reward English-language productivity. These contradictions illustrate how institutional commitments to inclusivity are constrained by external structures that normalize English as the primary language of academic legitimacy.

Lived Experiences of Linguistic Inequality

The participants' narratives provide insight into the emotional and cognitive tensions that accompany the prominence of English in academic settings. Many lecturers and students reported feeling intellectually restricted when expressing themselves in English, describing experiences of insecurity, hesitation, and diminished confidence. These sentiments indicate that the impact of English dominance extends beyond institutional structures into the personal realm of scholarly identity. While English proficiency opens access to wider academic networks, it simultaneously creates psychological burdens that disproportionately affect non-native speakers. This sense of linguistic inadequacy demonstrates how linguistic hierarchies are internalized, shaping how individuals perceive their competence and value within the academic community.

Navigating Linguistic Hierarchies Through Everyday Pedagogical Practices

Despite pervasive linguistic inequalities, participants also described adaptive strategies that challenge the dominance of English. In particular, the use of bilingual or translanguaging practices in the classroom allows learners to develop complex ideas in their local languages before transitioning into English. These pedagogical approaches reflect subtle yet meaningful forms of resistance that redistribute linguistic agency. By foregrounding linguistic flexibility, educators reclaim space for local languages and challenge the notion that English is the sole legitimate medium for scientific inquiry. These practices illustrate that linguistic justice can emerge from everyday acts of negotiation rather than from sweeping institutional reforms alone.

Structural, Ideological, and Emotional Dimensions of Linguistic Injustice

A synthesis of the findings suggests that linguistic inequality manifests across interconnected layers. Structurally, English is entrenched in systems of accreditation, publishing, and academic promotion, making it a prerequisite for scholarly visibility. Ideologically, English is linked with assumptions of rationality and intellectual authority, positioning local languages as less scientific or globally relevant. Affectively, these structural and ideological pressures generate emotional strain for scholars who must constantly translate, adapt, and perform within a linguistic system that favors others. The interplay of these dimensions highlights that linguistic injustice is not merely a policy issue but a multifaceted phenomenon that shapes both institutional culture and personal experience.

Reimagining Linguistic Justice in Higher Education

Taken together, the findings show that the pursuit of linguistic justice requires more than expanding access to English or adopting multilingual policies at a superficial level. Genuine justice involves reframing the epistemological assumptions that underpin academic evaluation

and redefining the role of local languages in the production of scholarly knowledge. Rather than treating linguistic diversity as a cultural accessory, institutions must recognize it as a foundation of epistemic plurality. Such a shift involves cultivating an academic environment where multiple languages are seen as legitimate sources of insight, not obstacles to global relevance. This vision of justice calls for structural change as well as moral commitment an acknowledgment that intellectual merit is not bound to a single linguistic tradition.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the dominance of English in higher education is not simply a linguistic preference, but rather an ideological structure that shapes how universities assess knowledge, define academic legitimacy, and construct institutional identity. While lauded as a global language that opens international access and visibility, English also creates epistemic inequalities that marginalize non-English speakers—both structurally and emotionally. Institutional policies emphasizing internationalization often conceal forms of exclusion that devalue the role of local languages as mediums of knowledge. The experiences of lecturers and students demonstrate that linguistic injustice creates psychological burdens and feelings of inadequacy, indicating that language hegemony operates in the affective realm. However, bilingual practices and efforts to maintain space for local languages demonstrate forms of resistance and agency that enable the creation of more inclusive academic spaces. Therefore, achieving linguistic justice is not simply an administrative task, but an ethical commitment to decolonize the way we produce, assess, and disseminate knowledge. Universities need to shift English from the center of dominance to one of many languages with equal epistemic value in order to build a more just, pluralistic, and democratic academic ecosystem that aligns with the ideals of knowledge democracy.

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