

Colonial Echoes in Digital Spaces: A Critical Discourse Analysis of English Teaching on Instagram

Afidatul Husniyah^{1*}, Titien Indrianti²

¹Department of English for Business and Professional Communication, Politeknik Negeri Malang, Indonesia

²Department of Business Administration, Politeknik Negeri Malang, Indonesia

Email: ¹⁾ afidatul@polinema.ac.id, ²⁾ titienindrianti@gmail.com

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Abstract

The global spread of English has long been entangled with colonialism, imperialism, and unequal power relations. Although English is now spoken predominantly by multilingual users outside traditionally Anglophone nations, dominant norms continue to privilege so-called “native” speakers from the Global North. This study critically analyzes how English Language Teaching (ELT) materials on Instagram reproduce or resist colonial ideologies through digital discourse. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and a decolonial framework, the research examines the linguistic, visual, and ideological dimensions of ELT content produced by teachers, influencers, and language schools on Instagram. The analysis focuses on how English is represented, commodified, and associated with modernity, prestige, success, and global citizenship. Using Fairclough’s three-dimensional model (text, discursive practice, and social practice) and Kress and van Leeuwen’s multimodal discourse analysis, the study examines how colonial discourses position “native” English as the norm and Global South learners as aspirational subjects requiring linguistic correction despite Anglophone users no longer constituting the majority of English speakers. The study reveals Instagram as a site of digital colonialism where English operates as both symbolic capital and cultural commodity. Findings identified clear colonial echoes in ELT content, including the use of “*bule*” as a benchmark, the promotion of white accents and accent hierarchy, and the Westernization of “global.” These practices reinforce racial and cultural hierarchies by positioning Western identities, languages, and aesthetics as the standard for English proficiency and global modernity.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, English Teaching, Instagram, Multimodal Discourse.

1. Introduction

In the present day, digital platforms have emerged as key spaces for multiple social functions. They facilitate knowledge sharing, enabling users to access, share, and collaboratively construct information across global networks (Ahmed et al., 2019). Beyond knowledge sharing and construction, digital platforms also act as arenas for cultural exchange, where ideas, values, and practices from diverse communities intersect, often reshaping perceptions of identity and belonging (Russo, 2011). Moreover, digital spaces play a critical role in identity construction, providing individuals with opportunities to present themselves, negotiate social roles, and perform cultural, personal, and professional identities in both local and global contexts (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019; Li, 2022). In this case, online environments are not merely passive channels for communication, they are active sites where social and cultural dynamics are continuously produced, contested, and transformed.

Among these digital platforms, Instagram stands out not only as a space for social interaction but also as an increasingly influential site for educational practices, including



English teaching (Carpenter et al., 2020; Erarslan, 2019; Essig et al., 2020). Its multimodal features, such as combining images, videos, text, and interactive elements such as comments, music, stories, and live sessions, allow for a rich and flexible learning environment that goes beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Instagram enables users to meet both cognitive and emotional needs by facilitating the sharing of knowledge, exchanging emotional support, and fostering a sense of belonging (Carpenter et al., 2020). This dual role as both an educational and social space offers learners opportunities to engage with content in ways that are participatory, interactive, and personally meaningful.

While the rise of online English teaching promises easier accessibility and global connectivity (Criollo-C et al., 2021), it also raises critical questions about the cultural and ideological frameworks embedded within such content. This is because discourse is never neutral, which reflects and reproduces particular worldviews. Specifically, whether the legacy of colonialism continues to shape language hierarchies and teaching practices, which potentially reinforces global power imbalances. Previous studies have highlighted the privileging of Western linguistic and cultural norms in digital spaces. While the rise of online English teaching promises easier accessibility and global connectivity (Criollo-C et al., 2021), it also raises critical questions about the cultural and ideological frameworks embedded within such content. This is because discourse is never neutral, which reflects and reproduces particular worldviews. Specifically, this study is motivated by the concern that the legacy of colonialism continues to shape language hierarchies and teaching practices in these new digital spaces, potentially reinforcing global power imbalances. Previous studies have highlighted the privileging of Western linguistic and cultural norms in digital spaces. “While Aiseng (2024) and Prianti & Athique (2025) have identified colonial remnants in broader social media discourses and identity formation, this study extends their work by focusing specifically on the underexplored domain of English language teaching content.

This study seeks to examine how colonial legacies manifest in the discourse surrounding English teaching content on Instagram. Employing Fairclough’s (2013) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Machin and Mayr’s (2023) multimodal CDA framework, the research explores how English teaching content, representations, and interactions on digital platforms participate in the reproduction, negotiation, or resistance of colonial hierarchies. By situating Instagram-based ELT within broader debates on language ideology and cultural hegemony, the study contributes to understanding how seemingly neutral online learning spaces may reproduce historical power relations in contemporary digital contexts. To address this aim, the study asks how linguistic features in English teaching content on Instagram reproduce colonial ideologies, and how visual and multimodal elements in such content reinforce colonial representations and hierarchies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Colonial echoes in ELT

ELT has long been shaped by historical, social, and cultural hierarchies rooted in colonialism (Pennycook, 2007). Despite the fact that speakers of English in the Global South now outnumber those in traditionally “native” English-speaking countries (Sharifian, 2017), ELT continues to privilege Western norms, practices, and varieties of English. This enduring legacy is often evident in the pervasive ideology of native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006), which positions native speakers, typically from Anglo-American contexts, as the ideal teachers and models of English proficiency. Learners are often assessed against these standards (Harding & McNamara, 2017), which reinforces linguistic hierarchies and implicitly devalues the

English varieties spoken in non-Western contexts, often referred to as “unequal Englishes” (Tupas & Weninger, 2022).

This “othering” extends beyond the classroom. English teachers from non-native-speaking countries or those who do not appear white are often underpaid or face discrimination compared to their Anglo-Saxon-looking counterparts (Hopkins, 2022; Maganaka, 2023; Ramjattan, 2019). In academic publishing, this dynamic often leads to Global South researchers being undercited, while Global North researchers receive disproportionate attention, rendering scholars from the Global South largely invisible (Selvi, 2025).

This colonial echo also extends to the pedagogical methods and materials employed in ELT (Husniyah et al., 2025). Western-based curricula, teaching approaches, and assessment practices are often treated as universally applicable (Husniyah et al., 2025), ignoring localized knowledge, cultural perspectives, and alternative ways of learning (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 1999). Accent, pronunciation, and idiomatic usage are frequently taught as markers of correctness, further privileging Western forms of English, for example in the form of using Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA) as standard language constructs (Isaacs & Rose, 2022), while neglecting the legitimacy of global English varieties.

This narrow focus on Western norms reinforces the notion that English is not only a global language but also a cultural and social asset tied to Western prestige, success, and modernity (Andrade, 2024). This pattern reflects the broader concept of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 2018), in which English functions as both a tool of communication and a symbol of power. Through teaching practices, materials, and institutional policies, ELT continues to reproduce unequal relations of knowledge, culture, and opportunity that are historically rooted in colonial power structures. Even as the majority of English speakers now belong to non-Anglophone contexts, the global ELT landscape largely upholds the authority of Western norms, sustaining a cycle of linguistic and cultural inequality.

2.2. Fairclough’s and Machin and Mayr’s CDA

Discourse is never neutral. It is a social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations in society. In this case, language is a site where social structures, beliefs, and hierarchies are reproduced, challenged, or negotiated (Fairclough, 2013). CDA examines how certain discourse reproduce or challenge power structures through three interrelated levels; text, discursive practice, and social practice (see Figure 1). As this study seeks to uncover underlying power relations embedded in discourse, Fairclough’s CDA is considered an appropriate theoretical framework.

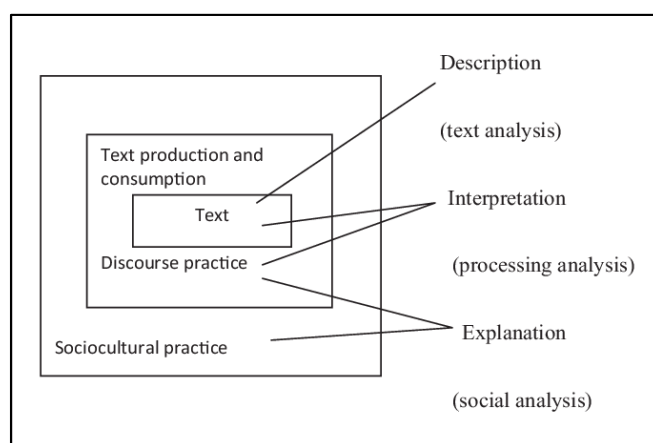


Figure 1. Fairclough’s CDA

At the textual level, CDA examines how linguistic features, such as textual structures, reveal underlying ideologies. The discursive practice dimension focuses on the processes through which texts are produced, distributed and consumed. Finally, the social practice level examines how broader sociocultural contexts, such as power relations and ideological frameworks, shape and are shaped by discourse. Together, these three interconnected levels reveal hidden ideological meanings within texts and demonstrate how discourse contributes to the reproduction or transformation of social power relations.

Given that the materials analyzed in this study are multimodal, a more visually oriented extension of CDA is required, one that accounts for how meanings are communicated through images, layout, and design alongside language. In this regard, Machin and Mayr's (2012) CDA complements Fairclough's framework by offering analytical tools to examine the multimodal construction of ideology and the ways visual and linguistic elements together reproduce or challenge social hierarchies, particularly in media discourse.

2.3. Previous Research on Colonial and Capitalist ELT

The structural inequalities embedded in English language teaching (ELT) cannot be fully understood without acknowledging how colonial legacies are sustained through contemporary capitalist systems. Historically, the spread of English accompanied imperial expansion, functioning as a tool of governance, cultural dominance, and resource extraction (Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1997). Today, these power hierarchies continue to be reproduced as English remains tied to economic opportunity, modernity, and prestige which values driven strongly by global market forces (Block et al., 2012).

Commercial interests are deeply entwined with ELT's global growth. Major TESOL providers, textbook publishers, and examination boards frequently promote standardized UK/US-centric models of English because they are profitable and scalable (Brown, 2024). This reinforces the authority of Western linguistic norms while artificially sustaining demand for native-speaker standards, proficiency tests, and "accent reduction" services. Such commodification of English privileges white, Western speakers as the most desirable linguistic models, aligning capitalist goals with racialized colonial ideologies (Holliday, 2006; Ramjattan, 2019). The result is a market-driven system where native-speaking teachers, especially those embodying white Western identities, are valued not for pedagogical expertise but for their perceived economic appeal.

Capitalism also manifests in the geopolitical imbalance of knowledge production. Institutions in the UK, United States, Australia, and New Zealand retain dominance in ELT research, training, and certification pathways (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). Scholars and practitioners in the Global South often remain marginalized, their local knowledge treated as secondary or context-specific, while Western epistemologies are framed as universal and exportable (Canagarajah, 1999). This dynamic reflects an ongoing coloniality of power where the Global North continues to define what counts as legitimate English and legitimate expertise (Santos, 2014).

3. Methods

In multimodal language learning content, messages are often shaped by the interaction of multiple modes (e.g., text, images, video, music, gestures). A purely linguistic analysis would overlook how these modes together construct particular representations, values, and ideologies about English learning, which are the focus of the current study. As such, the current study uses multimodal critical discourse analysis based on the framework proposed by Machin & Mayr (2023) in combination with Fairclough's CDA (2013) (see Figure 2).

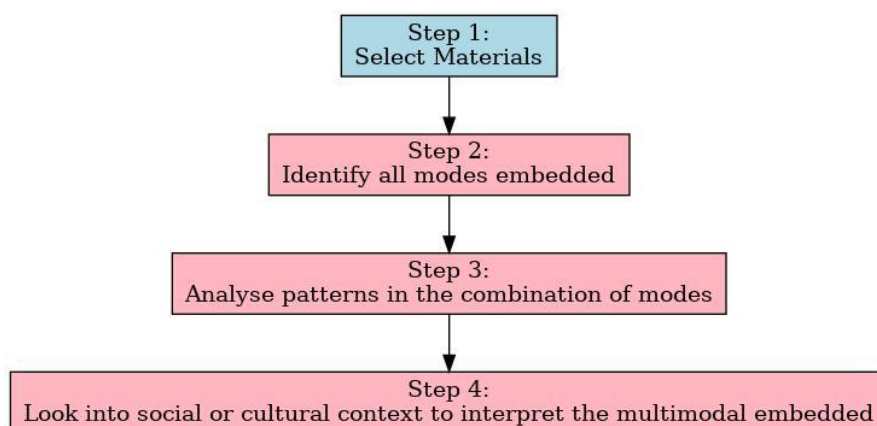


Figure 2. Machin and Mayr's multimodal CDA (2012)

3.1. Data selection

The analysis began with the selection of materials (see Figure 2), which are grouped into three categories to allow for representative yet manageable data analysis (see Table 1). The first category comprises content produced by global language institutions, such as the BBC. The second includes content from local language academies in Indonesia, for instance, English academy from Ruangguru. The third category consists of content created by English language teaching influencers on social media platforms. Selection criteria required accounts to have over 100,000 followers and to primarily focus on sharing English language learning content.

Table 1. Selected materials for analysis

Category	Account names
Global language academies	@bbclearningenglish @ieltsadvantage @britishcouncilielts
Local language academies	@kampunginggrism @englishnesia @englishacademy_id
English teaching influencers	@learnenglishwithbobby @kinaraseto @mrkeminggris

3.2. Data analysis

The next stage is data analysis which involved identifying the various modes embedded within the teaching content. To achieve this, materials produced between 2024 and 2025 were collected, resulting in a dataset of 231 posts including picture posts and reels that featured English teaching content. The selection process was also supported by searching relevant hashtags, such as #learnenglish, to ensure coverage of widely circulated materials. Once the materials were compiled, we conducted a detailed examination of the various modes present, such as visual, textual, auditory, and gestural elements, and explored how these modes were structured within each piece of teaching content. Following this, we analyzed patterns in the multimodal contents to uncover the ways they function together to convey meaning (see Table 2 and 3 for coding process).

Table 2. Textual coding samples

Textual Feature	Caption Example	Initial Code
"Kamu pengen lancar speaking kayak <i>bule</i> ?" (Do you want to speak fluently like <i>bule</i> ?)	"Speak English confidently like native speakers!"	<i>Bule</i> as the sole benchmark
"Do you speak American or British English?"	"Which accent do you prefer?"	Accent hierarchy
"Pengen kerja di luar negeri?" (Do you want to work abroad?)	"Study English and work abroad!"	Westernization of Global

Table 3. Multimodal coding samples

Multimodal Feature	Initial Code
The UK and US flags to illustrate imagined communities of English speakers	<i>Bule</i> as the benchmark
White people speaking English as example of desired accents	Accent hierarchy
The UK and the US flags to illustrate desired accents	Accent hierarchy
Universities in the UK, the US, Australia, and New Zealand as the preferred destinations for study and employment, even though many other countries also use English as a primary working language.	Westernization of Global

Finally, we interpreted these multimodal features within their broader social and cultural context, considering how factors such as societal norms, educational practices, and cultural expectations shape the presentation and reception of the content. In this final phase, we applied Fairclough's approach (2013) to critical discourse analysis in conjunction with Machin and Mayr's multimodal CDA (2012) framework for a nuanced understanding of discourse and sociocultural practices surrounding the contents.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings revealed the presence of colonial echoes within English teaching content on Instagram, suggesting that colonial ideologies continue to shape how English is represented and promoted in digital spaces. These echoes manifest in several ways: first, through the prevalence of "*bule*" marketing; second, in the promotion of white or Western accents; and finally, in the westernization of the concept of "global."

4.1. "*Bule*" as the Benchmark

The prevalent use of the term "*bule*" or references to "native speakers" as language models is evident in many English teaching contents on Instagram. In the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (the official Indonesian dictionary), *bule* refers to white people or Westerners, particularly Europeans and Americans. This term frequently appears in English teaching content produced by local language academies such as @englishacademy_id, @englishnesia and @kampungparelc. It is often used in promotional phrases such as "Do you want to speak like a *bule*?" or "Do you feel nervous whenever you talk with a *bule*?", reflecting how whiteness and nativeness are positioned as desirable linguistic ideals. When the term *bule* is not used, some materials instead employ the phrase native speakers, such as "Do you want to speak English fluently like native speakers?", often accompanied by visuals or icons representing whiteness, such as images of white people or symbols like the UK and US flags.

Other content reflects the assumption that the standard of linguistic correctness in English is defined by white Western norms. For instance, a caption such as "*Istilah ini sudah sering banget dipake bule, masa kamu masih nggak tahu?*" ("This expression is often used by white foreigners; how come you still don't know it?") implicitly positions whiteness as the ultimate linguistic authority. Such statements reinforce the idea that legitimate English belongs to white Western speakers, while any deviation from this so-called standard is perceived as incorrect, deficient, or inferior. This discourse not only reproduces the ideology of native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006) but also perpetuates colonial hierarchies that privilege whiteness as the benchmark of linguistic authenticity and expertise.



Figure 3. “Bule” or native speaker as the benchmark, positioning whiteness as the ideal

This pattern reflects what Pennycook (2007) describes as the enduring colonial hierarchies which continues to privilege Western norms of language, appearance, and authority (Holliday, 2006) in which whiteness and Western nativeness are positioned as the most legitimate and correct forms of English proficiency. In this discourse, the “*bule*” becomes not only a linguistic model but also a symbolic representation of Western prestige and modernity, aligning with Phillipson (2018) notion of linguistic imperialism, where English operates as both a means of communication and a marker of global power. Phrases such as “*Do you want to speak like a bule?*” linguistically construct a hierarchy between the Western speaker and the Indonesian learner, reinforcing the idea that authentic English is solely owned by white, Western speakers.

4.2. Accent Hierarchy



Figure 4. Promotion of British, Australian and American accents

Another pattern observed is the privileging of specific English accents, pronunciations, and spellings, particularly those of the “*bule*” (UK, US, and Australia) accents typically associated with Western or white speakers. Several English teacher influencers, such as @kinaraseto and @mrkeminggris, promote these varieties most likely because they are widely perceived as symbols of modernity, prestige, and upward mobility (Andrade, 2024). This preference also aligns with audience expectations, as many learners continue to regard

Western accents as more desirable and authoritative models of English proficiency, evident in enthusiastic comments such as “*keren, aksennya British banget!*” (“cool, the accent sounds so British!”), or “*aku juga pengen dong aksen begini!*” (“I also want to have an accent like this!”).

Other global language academies, such as @bbclearningenglish, also tend to present only British and American models, as reflected in content that asks, “*Do you speak American English or British English?*” Their materials frequently feature speakers with Caucasian appearances and the iconic flags of these countries, visually reinforcing the association of English with whiteness. This limited representation disregards the legitimacy of other English varieties and overlooks the fact that English now functions as a lingua franca, a global language that is used and shaped by diverse communities worldwide.

Such representations are not merely linguistic preferences but are deeply ideological, reflecting the continuing influence of colonial hierarchies that position Western linguistic norms as the ideal or “authentic” form of English. This privileging reproduces what Tupas & Weninger (2020) term “*unequal Englishes*,” where varieties of English from the Global South are rendered inferior or “non-standard” (Andrade, 2024). Within this hierarchy, Western accents function as forms of symbolic capital that signal education, cosmopolitanism, and access to global opportunities.

4.3. The Westernization of “Global”

Many English teaching contents and influencers often portray English as a gateway to global mobility and success. This discourse is frequently symbolized through an abundance of posts from global and local language academies, as well from English teaching influencers, promoting work and study opportunities exclusively in Global North countries, such as Working Holiday Visas in Australia or study programs in Ireland and New Zealand. The notion of the “global,” therefore, becomes implicitly equated with the *West*, reinforcing a Eurocentric worldview in which the Global North is positioned as the ultimate destination of aspiration and legitimacy.

Within this framing, learners from the Global South are constructed as outsiders striving to gain entry into the imagined “global community” defined by Western norms and institutions, as also reflected in the works of Aiseng (2024); Prianti & Athique (2025). Success, in turn, is validated through proximity to the West, exemplified by the prestige attached to studying in universities in the Global North or adopting Western linguistic and cultural practices. This narrative marginalizes other contexts where English is actively used, rendering non-Western countries invisible within the imagined geography of “global English.” This suggests that global higher education is not neutral. Even the ideas about the ‘future of education’ are shaped by whiteness, which privileges Western countries, people, and values (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). In doing so, English teaching content not only promotes language learning but also reproduces hierarchies of power and desirability that position the West as the center of modernity and opportunity.

However, these “echoes” may not necessarily be direct reproductions of colonialism itself but rather manifestations of capitalism, which perpetuates and benefits from colonial hierarchies. Capitalism, in this sense, extends the colonial project through cultural and linguistic commodification, turning English and the sociocultural practices surrounding it into markers of value and prestige (Brown, 2024). Thus, the term *echo* is used here not only to signify a repetition of colonial ideologies but also to capture the intertwined relationship between colonialism and capitalism as they manifest in contemporary sociocultural practices surrounding English teaching content on Instagram.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined how English teaching content on Instagram reproduces or challenges colonial ideologies through multimodal discourse. By employing Fairclough's CDA and Machin and Mayr's multimodal approach, the research has demonstrated that Instagram functions as more than a pedagogical space, it operates as a site of digital colonialism, where language, image, and ideology intersect to reproduce hierarchies of race, culture, and knowledge. The findings reveal that English teaching content on Instagram frequently reinforces colonial discourses through the prevalence of "bule" marketing, the promotion of white or Western accents, and the westernization of the concept of "global." Such practices collectively sustain the ideology of native-speakerism and privilege Western linguistic and cultural norms as universal standards of correctness, modernity, and prestige. In this way, English continues to function as a form of symbolic capital that privileges whiteness and Westernness while marginalizing local identities and linguistic diversity.

At the same time, the analysis emphasizes the importance of approaching digital English teaching critically. While Instagram presents itself as a democratized learning space, it also reproduces unequal power relations inherited from colonial histories. Recognizing this helps educators and content creators move beyond uncritical adoption of Western models and toward more decolonial pedagogies, ones that validate diverse Englishes, foreground local knowledge, and promote cultural equity in digital learning environments. Finally, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about linguistic imperialism and digital coloniality in English language education. It calls for a reimagining of English teaching practices on social media, transforming them from spaces of imitation and hierarchy into spaces of critical reflection, inclusivity, and resistance against enduring colonial ideologies.

Future research could build on these findings by examining additional social media platforms, such as Facebook or Threads, to explore whether similar patterns emerge in different digital environments. Expanding the scope of data collection would also strengthen the insights gained; for example, incorporating classroom observations could reveal how online discourses translate into teaching practices, while interviews or surveys with English learners and teachers would provide deeper perspectives on their lived experiences, attitudes, and challenges within ELT contexts.

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