

## Layers of CALL hegemonies: an Iranian experience

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**Abstract.** It is a commonly held belief that today's "Read/Write Web" has given voice to previously unheard minorities, and that it has enabled all people with an Internet connection to participate in a new "community-driven, participatory space" (Richardson, 2010). Language teachers, no less than others, are also encouraged to believe that the prevalence of networking on the Internet is increasing the multiculturalism of learning and is breaking down cultural barriers. Such a potential obviously has particular relevance to teaching English as an international language and has led many teachers, ourselves included, to rely on the magic powers of the Internet to ensure that our learners have a real audience, thus motivating them to relate their language learning experience to their real-life concerns. However, our personal experiences have sometimes led us to almost unwillingly empathize with those who express concern that the image of a democratic Internet is in fact merely a mirage, all the more dangerous for creating the illusion of all people being given equal voice, while in fact repressing some voices in the most subtle of ways. In this paper, we would like to offer a somewhat different perspective on the hegemonies of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), first briefly offering our classification of e-learning/CALL hegemonies which builds on Lamy and Pegrum (2012), and then sharing first-hand experiences of some less-frequently explored layers of such hegemonies. We hope that sharing these experiences might be beneficial in highlighting the need for a more critical view toward CALL.

**Keywords:** hegemony, inclusion, critical CALL, power relations.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there seems to be an increasing goodwill toward e-learning in general and CALL in particular. Even those who believe in the superiority of face-to-face classes generally acknowledge the occasional necessity of online classes. Despite the acknowledged drawbacks of online courses and the continuing controversy over which teaching mode has more merits, certain acclaimed merits of e-learning are widely cited and in fact sometimes almost taken for granted, such as the ubiquity of technology and increased student motivation. Among other claims made with regard to e-learning, there also seems to be a popular belief that online education naturally leads to more openness, democracy, and pluralism. Richardson (2010), for example, claims,

“[n]o matter how you look at it, we are creating what author Douglas Rushkoff calls a ‘society of authorship’ where every teacher and every student—every person with access will have the ability to contribute ideas and experiences to the larger body of knowledge that is the Internet. And in doing so, Rushkoff says, we will be writing the human story, in real time, together—a vision that asks each of us to participate” (p. 5).

Similarly, Lehman and Conceição (2010) believe that technology gives us “the opportunity to be present with each other without boundaries” (p. vii). They assert that it has succeeded in “connecting us to diverse people all over the world and bringing us closer together” (Lehman & Conceição, 2010, p. vii). While this is in many ways true, it is equally true that information and communication technologies such as the Internet are “controlled in understated but powerful ways by a myriad of stakeholders” (Marandi, 2014, p. 21), often leading to what may be termed *electronic imperialism*. To look at it from a broader perspective, a variety of *e-learning/CALL hegemonies* may be cited, where an e-learning/CALL element limits the choices available to the relevant stakeholders or exerts undue influence over them. Unfortunately, such hegemonies have received very little attention in the literature until now. An outstanding exception to this is Lamy and Pegrum’s (2012) special issue of *Language Learning and Technology*, dealing with “Hegemonies in CALL”. In their commentary, they mention technological, pedagogical, educational, social, cultural and intercultural, and sociopolitical hegemonies.

We found this classification to be a very useful starting point, but believe that certain modifications could enhance its usefulness. The e-learning/CALL classification of hegemonies we propose is as follows:

- Linguistic
- Technological
- Economic
- Educational
- Cultural
- Sociopolitical

It must be noted that these categories often overlap, and distinguishing between them is not always possible. *Linguistic hegemonies* refer to the online dominance of an alphabet/language (currently English) over the others, as well as its instrumental use to promote the cultural/ideological domination of its speakers.

*Technological hegemonies* occur when the hegemonic influence is due to the attributes or predominance of a relevant technology. For example, often popular technologies are limited in the ways they can be used for learning/assessing language skills and subskills, or in the type of skills they favor. Similarly, a technology often addresses certain types of intelligence and not the others. Technological hegemonies also include unwanted investments in expensive technologies, such as being forced to buy or upgrade software/hardware, especially when it interferes with other priorities, such as buying books, paying for a better teacher, etc. Note that this is different from economic hegemonies, which follows.

*Economic hegemonies* occur when educational and/or technological priorities give way to economic concerns; i.e. when certain necessary educational/technological investments are abandoned/delayed/aborted due to financial concerns. For example, when a fully-equipped computer lab is deemed to be necessary but is not affordable.

*Educational hegemonies* are when the hegemonic influence is due to predominant educational and institutional policies, principles, practices, and pedagogies; this encompasses the concerns addressed in [Lamy and Pegrum's \(2012\)](#) “pedagogical” and “educational” hegemonies, since we believe that distinguishing between the two is not always feasible or useful. An example of educational hegemonies is the current dominance of web tools which are built based on social constructivist principles.

*Cultural hegemonies* refer to when the hegemonic influence on e-learning/CALL is due to predominant social and cultural norms; this largely addresses the same concerns as Lamy and Pegrum's (2012) "social hegemonies" and "cultural and intercultural hegemonies". An example is the violence inherent in some games used for learning purposes, or even just the fact that the existing software may encourage beliefs which might not be shared by all the stakeholders. Many scholars insist that technology is by no means neutral, making a critical approach to e-learning crucial (Albirini, 2004; Bowers, 1998; Reinhardt & Isbell, 2002). As Bowers (1998) points out, "thinking within the decision matrix of the software program really involves using the pattern of thinking of the people who designed the software" (p. 54). This relates to the other hegemonies of e-learning/CALL, as well.

Finally, *sociopolitical hegemonies* refer to hegemonies due to "larger social and political structures", or "resistance to these and other hegemonies" (Lamy & Pegrum, 2012, p. 1).

## **2. Some encounters with less frequently explored hegemonies**

As mentioned earlier, one of the frequently-vaunted merits of e-learning is the ubiquity of digital technologies. In fact, a considerable portion of online language learning is achieved using free and open source software. Unfortunately, however, this is not always the case for Iranian learners, who are often subjected to discrimination and are denied access to even the simplest web services that are known throughout the world to be free. An Iranian attempting to download the "free" Adobe Flash Player software or Java Runtime Environment, for example, would be denied access with a message such as, "Forbidden: You are accessing this page from a forbidden country" or "You are not authorized to view this page".

In fact, this discrimination goes far beyond mere access to web services. One of the more subtle hegemonic strategies utilized in certain popular venues for Internet-mediated English education is the inclusion of political news in online educational programs, often resulting in the misrepresentation of periphery countries as a result of bias and distortion. In studies done by two of the authors (Karimi Alavijeh, 2014; Karimi Alavijeh & Marandi, 2014), applying Critical Discourse Analysis to the contents of certain educational English websites, including widely publicized online news services claiming to teach English revealed that the content was orchestrated in such a way so as to misrepresent Iranians as supporters of violence and terrorism. Thematizing the website information through the application of an adaptation of Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Network revealed that Iranian social actors were associated/dissociated, activated/passivated, and personalized/

impersonalized in such a way so as to link them inextricably to “nuclear programs, sanctions, internal conflicts, espionage, crimes, assassination, terrorist activities, human trafficking, and the like” (Karimi Alavijeh & Marandi, 2014, p. 139).

Similarly, we can point to the turbulences witnessed in Iran after the presidential elections in June 2009. The US government found Twitter to be such an effective tool in support of the Iranian opposition “that it even asked Twitter to postpone its regular maintenance date on June 15, [2010,] saying, ‘Iran is in a defining moment, and Twitter is playing such a vital part in it, can you let it just work as usual?’” (English Eastday, 2010, para. 9; see also Markey, 2009; Yang, 2010).

Interestingly, all three authors have had experiences where even their attempts to publish academic articles dealing with the very hegemonies of CALL were denied due to various forms of the same electronic colonialism, calling into question the very foundations of critical CALL education. For example, when two of the authors submitted an academic article on the sociopolitical hegemonies of CALL to a reputable journal dealing with e-learning, we received an email claiming, “As a result of OFAC sanctions, X [journal] is unable to handle submissions with authors who are employed by the Government of Iran. We regret that unfortunately we are unable to handle your manuscript”. This is while we had openly declared, “This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors”. In fact, we have no affiliation with the Iranian government except for teaching at a public university. Another journal similarly denied us freedom of speech due to what they called “the sensitive nature of relations between your country and X [country]”.

### **3. Conclusions**

The very potentials of the Internet and digital technologies which can lead to new voices being heard may also be abused, resulting in the suppression of other voices and the creation of new “haves” and “have-nots”. So far, little has been done to redress this problem. Hopefully, encouraging a truly critical view toward CALL can lead us beyond the mere online learning of a language and toward building a happier and more understanding community.

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