Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes? E-learning Hegemonies and Educational Justice

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Abstract
Although the pandemic has brought about a global interest in online education, the prevalence of e-learning hegemonies still hinders educational justice in many settings. This paper explores and exemplifies the six hegemonies of e-learning (i.e., linguistic, technological, economic, educational, sociocultural, and sociopolitical), as demonstrated in the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) community, and attempts to demonstrate how these hegemonies are detrimental to educational justice. The inter-relation among the different forms of e-learning hegemonies is highlighted, demonstrating that attempting to eradicate one form of hegemonies without addressing the others may not always succeed. The decisive role that context has in determining how the hegemonies play out will also be discussed, such as the pivotal role of sociopolitical hegemonies in the fairly unique context of Iran. Finally, I argue that increasing awareness of such contextual differences is vital; otherwise, self-appointed custodians of educational justice might occasionally exacerbate the situation through setting an accepted tone for the dialog, thus suffocating competing narratives.

Keywords: E-learning Hegemonies, CALL Hegemonies, Educational Justice, Digital Colonialism

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Introduction

Educational injustice in e-learning situations is an under-researched topic, and such research as exists is often centered around issues such as the "digital divide" and unequal access brought about through economic and financial distress, or the paucity of technological savoir-faire. Admittedly, in recent years there has been an increased interest in the different aspects of what is often called *digital (neo)colonialism* (e.g., Adam, 2019; Kwet, 2019; Zembylas, 2023); however, the dialog is far from mainstream, and this absence is particularly evident in the context of computer assisted language learning (CALL). A simple online search on the hegemonies of CALL will reveal a mere handful of studies, mostly appearing in a special issue for the *Language Learning and Technology* journal published over a decade ago (Lamy & Pegrum, 2012). Among the hegemonies, sociopolitical injustices, above all, have been extremely neglected thus far. Perhaps one reason for this has to do with the sensitivity of political issues in general, and the desire to avoid tension and conflicts in the field of language teaching, one that has long boasted of boosting "multiculturalism" and "intercultural competence" (e.g., Zheng & Gao, 2019). Another reason could be the fear of being cancelled or destroying one's future in a world where even peaceful political protests can often have grave repercussions in the academia (Egan, 2023; Hartocollis, 2023). And of course, the gatekeepers of e-learning and CALL often hail from privileged academia (Marandi, 2019); many of them are happily unaware of the existence of such hegemonies, and others are influential in reinforcing them (Marandi, 2019), if even unwittingly or unwillingly. Be that as it may, sociopolitical hegemonies often have the worst impact; this certainly appears to have been the case for Iranian academia, as demonstrated in Marandi (2023). Furthermore, CALL hegemonies are frequently intertwined and reinforce one another; thus, it is important to address them in tandem. It is also important to recognize that different contexts can lead to different hegemonies, and the warriors of online educational justice who fail to acknowledge this may actually intensify and aggravate the situation.

E-learning and CALL Hegemonies

The hegemonies of e-learning (and by extension, CALL) are operative when one of the e-learning constituents restricts the opportunities and affordances available to the stakeholders, or impacts them disproportionately. These have been classified into six types: linguistic, technological, economic, educational, sociocultural, and sociopolitical (Marandi, 2017; Marandi, 2023; Marandi, Karimi Alavijeh, and Nami, 2015).

Linguistic hegemonies mostly involve the dominance or imposition of a language or writing system, like English, in online and e-learning environments. The fact that English dominates most relevant platforms, articles, books, websites, apps, conferences, and teaching materials necessarily harms other languages (Pennycook, 1998), devalues those with different orthographies, and moreover leads to a vicious circle of reinforcing this same hegemony. Looked at from a different perspective, linguistic hegemonies can also be implemented in a more subtle manner, through the very texts used to enlighten new generations of educators. The inundation of popular textbooks with ideologically loaded terms (Phillipson, 1992) presupposes and reinforces the (in)validity or import of certain convictions, often to the exclusion of dialog. These terms are usually popularized educational talking points, such as *autonomy*, *drone-on-the-throne*, *standardization*, *aptitude*, etc. (The terms are randomly chosen for illustrative purposes.) However, there are also a number of terms which are less widespread in education but which are, nonetheless, culturally charged and sensitive, and are sometimes used in educational contexts in order to drive home certain narratives; for

example, *pluralism*, *patriotism*, *nationalism*, *patriarchy*, *homophobia*, *appropriation*, *diversity*, *equality*, *equity*, *progressive*, etc. (Again, the terms are chosen at random.) Furthermore, some previously neutral, inclusive terms have also come to gradually become collocated with certain groups more than others; for example, "identity," and "minority group." Such hegemonies are further strengthened through the provision of elitist guidelines on linguistic choices for educators, such as those regularly published and updated by the American Psychological Association (APA) (e.g., 2020, chap. 5). Linguistic hegemonies can ultimately lead to a variety of other hegemonies, such as educational, sociocultural, etc.

Technological hegemonies result from technology-driven educational decisions, such as when technology features or limitations lead to a less than optimal teaching strategy. For instance, most popular contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT) educators lay great emphasis on matters such as authenticity, communication, negotiation, critical thinking, collaboration, etc.; however, these hugely prevalent concepts are often overlooked by many popular apps and programs used for language learning, such as Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, etc. Similarly, the structure and programming of the technology may often lead to neglecting individualized learner needs, or disregarding certain language skills in favor of others, such as putting more emphasis on receptive skills rather than productive skills. This could happen for a variety of reasons: The required technology might not be sufficiently developed; the more useful options of software may be reserved for premium users; or those involved in developing the hardware or software may not have had sufficient concerns or knowledge about educational issues. It is also not unusual for the changing hands of the shares or ownership of corporate tech companies to bring about major changes in the ways a technology can be used, although this can admittedly lead to positive educational changes as well, particularly when the ownership of multiple popular technologies is acquired by the same corporate entity, allowing for a synergy of technology affordances. (Whether such benefits outweigh the menaces of such largescale dominance is another issue.) Technological hegemonies can also impose imprudent budget allocations on the learner or institute, for example, prioritizing unnecessary cutting-edge technology over much-needed teacher professional development. Another example of technological hegemonies is the demanding of device accesses and permissions, and the gathering and sharing of user data. Similar to the other types of hegemonies, technological hegemonies can lead to other forms of hegemonies; for example, they may result in linguistic hegemonies if the technology doesn't support a language, or a right-to-left orthography. They can also be instrumental in paving the way for sociopolitical hegemonies; for instance, when personal data is extracted and used for sociopolitical purposes.

Economic hegemonies arise when financial constraints create a "digital divide" or hinder ideal technology adoption; for example, when the learner or organization is unable to purchase a required device, or has to settle for one with a lower quality. As Kwet (2019) points out, such situations are often exploited by the Global North to increase the dependence of less fortunate countries on "developed" countries; for instance, under the guise of charitable contributions and altruistic education supplied gratis. This, in turn, habitually leads to digital coercion (Timcke, 2017), spawning a host of other forms of e-learning hegemonies.

Educational hegemonies are the result of institutional and pedagogical norms, policies, and practices shaping e-learning; for example, the influence of policymakers and educators on the development or usage of technology for pedagogical purposes. It is only to be expected that the dominance of certain educational theories in a society will influence the ways technologies are used for education; similarly, the beliefs and policies of the CEO of a

language institute will necessarily have an impact on the adoption of educational technologies. Even the choice of a textbook or other learning materials may influence not only the choice of technologies, but how they are employed.

Sociocultural hegemonies involve the imposition of certain cultures or beliefs in online environments. A more blatant example is the domination of Western norms in online environments, which can often lead to some people or groups being overlooked, silenced, censored, or even cancelled. An example of sociocultural hegemonies can be seen on the Second Life virtual platform, a self-proclaimed "inclusive haven of self-expression" (see Figure 1), where a Muslim woman like myself is given 90 different free hair color and style choices for her avatar, not one of which includes hijab (Figure 2), despite the fact that nearly one-fourth of the world population are Muslims.

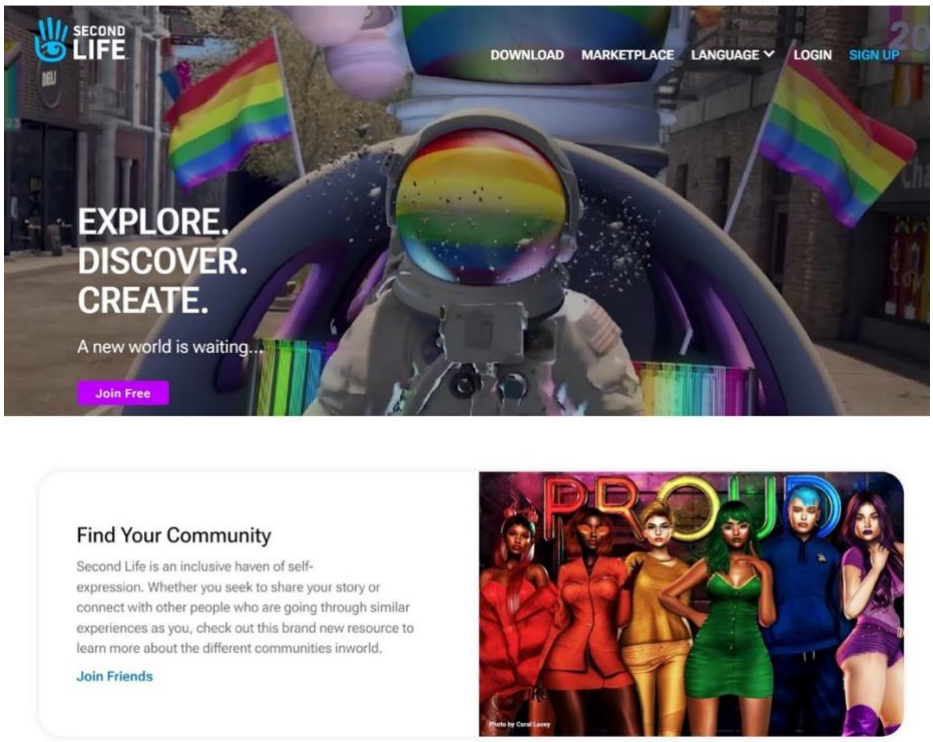

Figure 1: Second Life homepage.

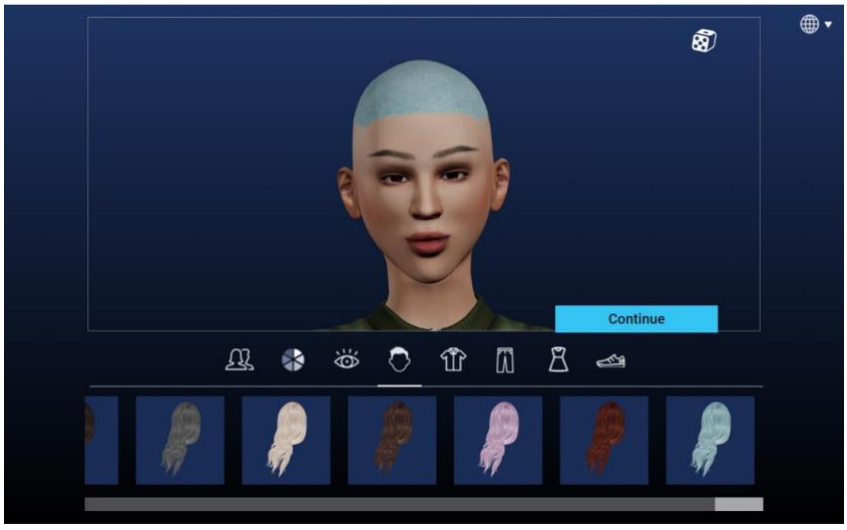

Figure 2: Sample hair choices for a Second Life avatar.

A less obvious instance of sociocultural hegemonies is when a person is forced to install/use a particular app/platform due to peer pressure, although it is worth noting that such pressure can itself be the result of sociopolitical or technological hegemonies.

Sociopolitical hegemonies result from political entities dictating e-learning choices, and can involve online censorship (or even selective freedoms), trade restrictions, membership restrictions, visa bans for conference-goers, gathering people's online data for political purposes, and the like. Sociopolitical hegemonies are extremely dependent on context; what is a major stumbling block in one country might not affect another at all. This was seen in Marandi (2023), where Iranians were seen to be severely impacted by problems that were often unique to their context, such as numerous sanctions, restrictions, and bans they were subject to as a result of long years of being demonized by politicians in international mass media. Figure 3 is a screenshot of an email received by myself, approximately two months after having received a *complimentary* membership for TESOL, due to having worked as a volunteer for some years as a coordinator for the CALL-SIG's annual EVO event. (The name of the sender is redacted, as that person obviously had no choice whatsoever in the matter.) As can be seen in the screenshot, I was being informed that I would be unable to renew my membership the coming year, due to living in Iran.

Unfortunately, such problems are the less easily resolved due to the very lack of awareness among those not affected. Figure 4 below, for example, is how a respected colleague chose to write while rejecting a paper that touched upon the hegemonies that Iranians are often exposed to. Although her response is by no means uncommon, it is sadly reminiscent of the infamous argument, "We can't be racist because we have black friends."

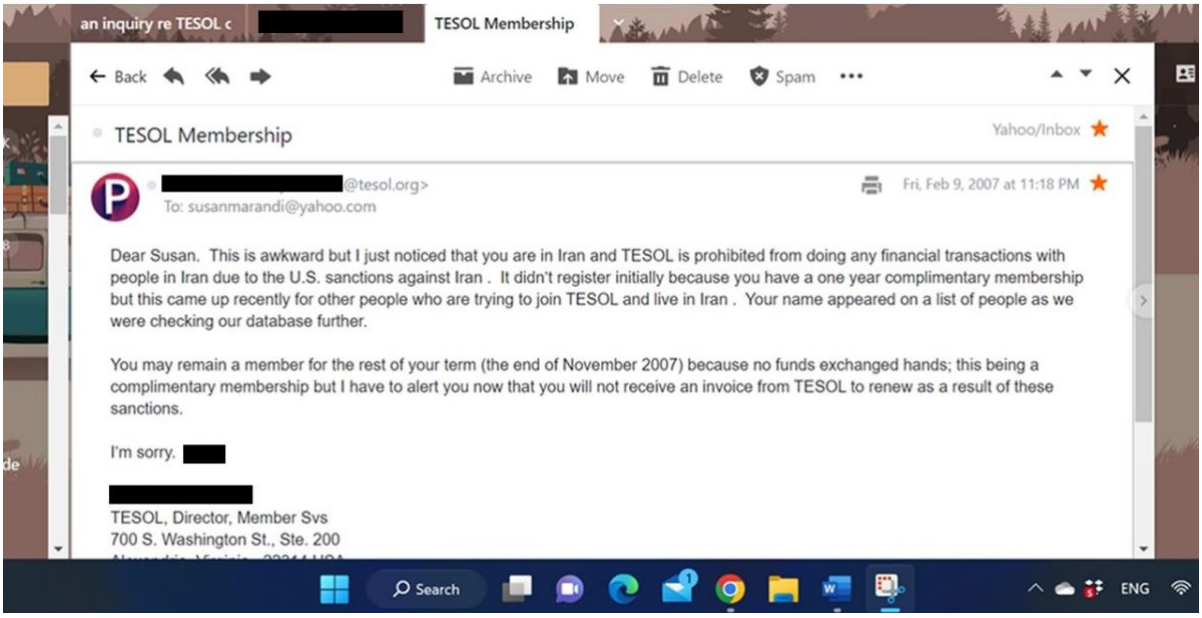

Figure 3: Sample sociopolitical hegemony unique to Iranians.

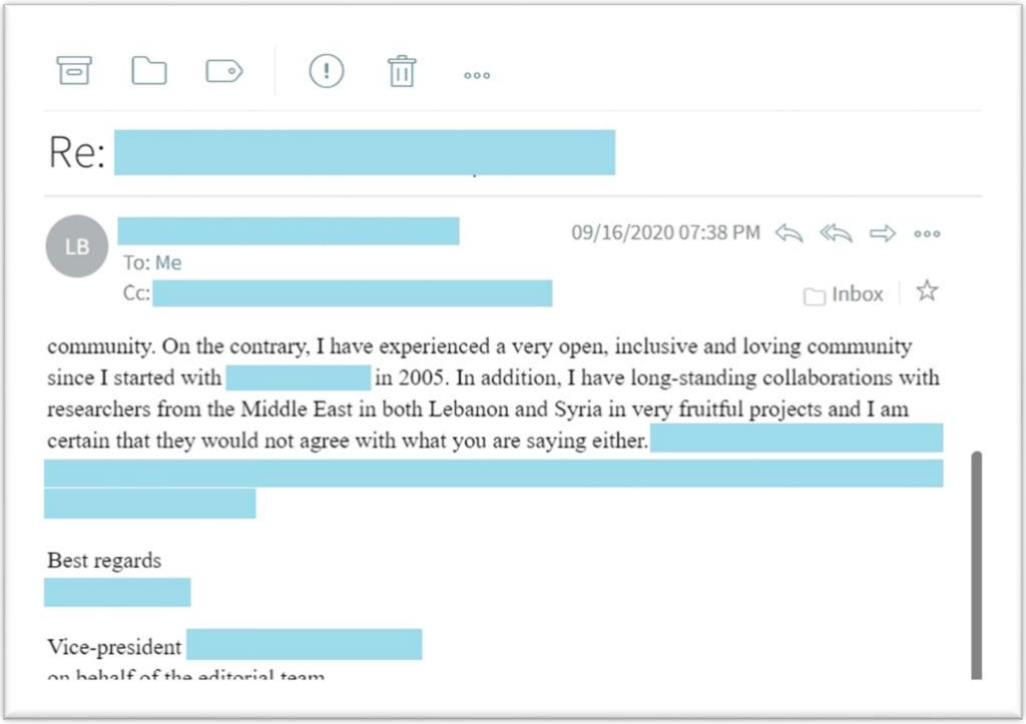

Figure 4: Redacted rejection of publication about hegemonies experienced by Iranians.

However, one need go no further than a few websites to provide proof that Iranians are, without a doubt, the target for many sociopolitical hegemonies that others are fully unaware of. Figure 5, for example, demonstrates how Iran was excluded from the countries listed for online registration for an international CALL conference, making it impossible for Iranians to register. In Figure 6, Iran is explicitly mentioned as being prohibited from receiving the services sanctioned by the U.S. government by a popular MOOC platform. And in Figure 7, it can be observed that, as the Iranian author of an academic manuscript being submitted to an international journal, I am being asked to confirm that I have not prepared the article as a representative of the Iranian government, before I am even able to submit the manuscript for review.

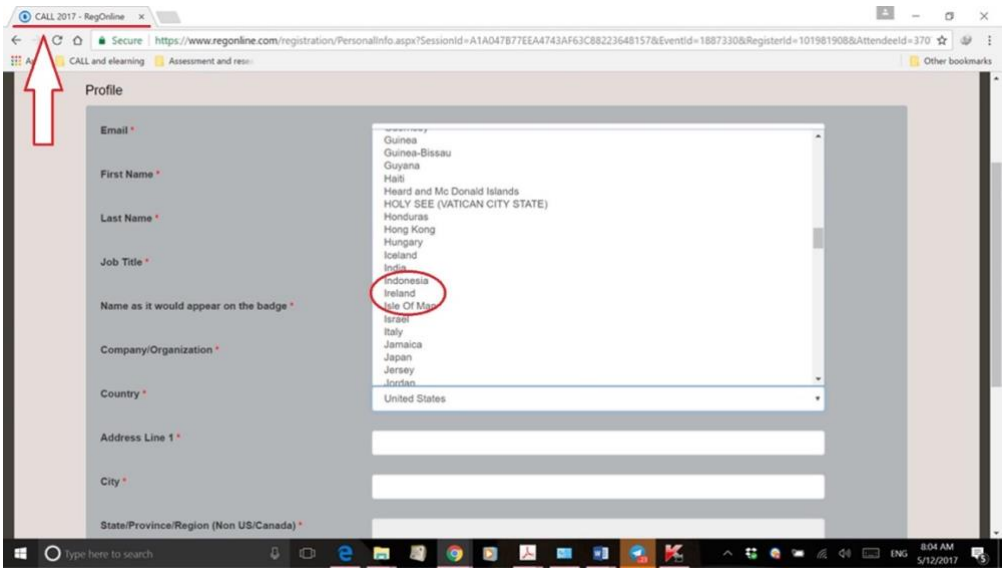

Figure 5: Iran excluded from list of countries for registration in international CALL conference.

Figure 6: Iranians excluded from services of celebrated international MOOC platform.

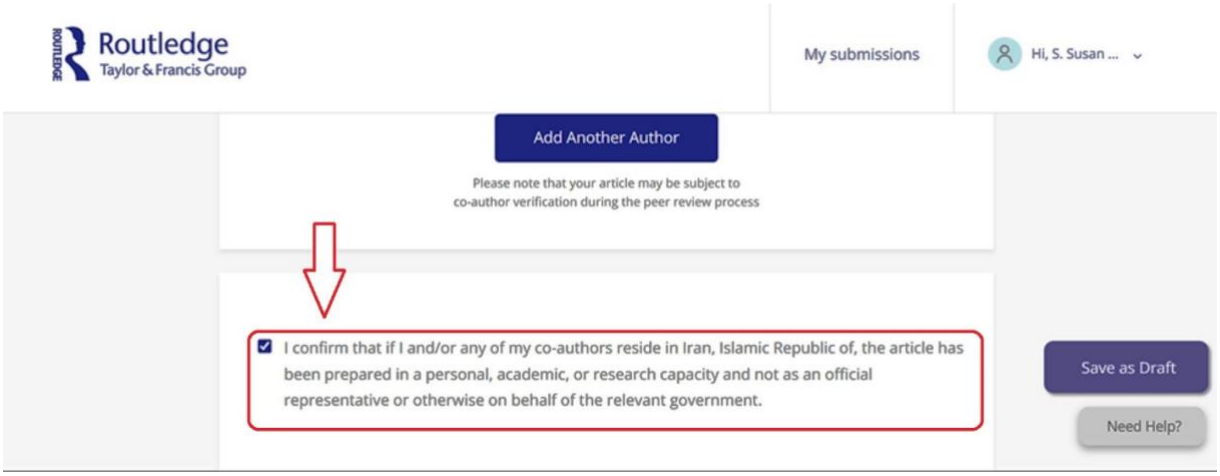

Figure 7: Iranian having to disassociate themselves from their government before being allowed to submit their manuscripts for academic review.

Obviously, this is just the tip of the iceberg, but it hopefully suffices to demonstrate that the person who wrote of her "long-standing collaborations" with Middle Eastern researchers (Figure 3), whom she was "certain … would not agree with what [I was] saying," had judged a bit too hastily.

And therein lies, perhaps, the gravest harm that digital neocolonialism and e-learning hegemonies can inflict upon a society, since, ironically enough, even such lofty ideas as "intercultural competence," "dialog," "diversity," and "inclusivity," appear to have their own gatekeepers.

Conclusion

In the interests of educational justice, this paper attempted to shine the spotlight on the muddy footprints of e-learning hegemonies in the CALL community. It was observed that these little-studied hegemonies are closely intertwined, thus indicating that attempting to remove one kind without focusing on the others may not be very productive. It was also established that the existing hegemonies are very much context-dependent, as was seen in the case of sociopolitical hegemonies in Iran. Finally, I conclude that creating awareness is

paramount, and that obliviousness toward the contextualized hegemonies of one group can ultimately lead even the well-intentioned gatekeepers of educational justice to shut and lock the gate to competing narratives.

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