

# Have Ukrainians Ceased to Be Masters of Their Own English Language-Teaching Landscape?

Valentyna Guseva

Pedagogical University of Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe, Germany

This paper explores the concept of coloniality in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Ukraine, focusing on the influence of foreign organisations such as the Peace Corps, the British Council, and the American Council since Ukraine's independence in 1991. While these institutions have contributed to professional development, they have also imposed Western epistemic frameworks, marginalising Ukrainian scholars and methodologies. Drawing on decolonial theories, the study critically examines the dominance of native-speaker norms and foreign-authored textbooks in shaping Ukraine's TEFL landscape. The paper argues for a shift towards indigenous knowledge production and locally developed ELT practices to foster national academic sovereignty.

**Keywords:** coloniality, decoloniality, English Language Teaching (ELT), native speakerism, epistemic dominance, Ukraine, foreign influence, indigenous scholarship

## Introduction

The term *coloniality* describes the state of the world in which colonialism formally ended after the political liberation of almost all colonized countries. However, the structures of domination have not disappeared, they persist in knowledge production, economic dependencies, and social hierarchies (Quijano, 2007). As Mignolo (2018) argues, coloniality is not just a historical event but an ongoing process that shapes education, culture, and power dynamics. Maldonado-Torres (2007) further expands on this by introducing the *coloniality of being*, which highlights how colonial structures continue to influence identity and subjectivity. The concept of “coloniality of knowledge” refers to the system of knowledge and cognitive practices that emerged as a result of colonial policies and was introduced by Anibal Quijano (2007, p. 169), according to whom the specificity of colonialism as a phenomenon is the result of the systematic suppression and destruction of ways of creating and expressing knowledge, worldviews, interpretations, symbols, etc. that were disadvantageous to the colonizers, and the imposition of cognitive practices used by the colonizers themselves. Since the colonizers created a worldview in which their exploitative policies were justified (usually by some civilizing purpose), this was an effective method of controlling the oppressed peoples. The colonizer was always presented as a rational subject, while the colonized were seen as inferior by definition, as incomplete human beings who could only be objects of knowledge (Stefaniia Sidorova, 2024).

From the 1930s to the 1980s, foreign language education in the Soviet Union, including Ukraine, was heavily influenced by the Communist Party and Soviet ideology. Initially, strict state control ensured that

---

Valentyna Guseva, Ph.D., Visiting Professor, English Department, Pedagogical University of Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe, Germany.

textbooks aligned with Marxist principles, with ideological purges getting rid of materials that did not fit the official ideology. While modernization efforts in the 1940s and 1950s introduced standardized programs and Western literature (e.g. H. G. Wells, Jack London, O. Henry, Theodore Dreiser), ideological themes remained, reinforcing Soviet narratives.

From the 1960s onward, practical language skills were emphasized as international engagement increased, yet Ukraine's education system remained subordinate to Moscow's directives. Even as reforms introduced specialized language classes and experimental textbooks, Russian cultural dominance persisted, marginalizing Ukrainian history and literature and reinforcing Soviet ideological control over Ukrainian identity (Zhosan, 2021).

Overall, Soviet foreign language education in Ukraine served as a tool of ideological control, where linguistic development was shaped by Moscow's dominance, reinforcing Russian cultural and political influence while suppressing Ukrainian identity, preserving it the object of knowledge.

It was not until 1991, when Ukraine gained its independence, that the shackles of colonization fell. This marked a significant liberation from centuries of Russian and Soviet domination and sparked optimism about the nation's potential to rebuild its economy, agriculture, science, and education.

In 1992, various European and American organizations and investors saw an opportunity to invest in Ukraine's fragile economy despite its instability, bringing not only capital but also significant influence to bear on the government, ministries, and local organizations. The period of new coloniality in teaching English began as foreign investment and influence reshaped Ukraine's teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) system.

This stream of external involvement quickly reshaped the landscape of English language teaching (ELT) in Ukraine. Instead of Ukrainian researchers and methodologists leading the way, it was English-speaking native organizations that took center stage, setting up in Ukraine in 1992, just one year after the country's independence. In the following, I will give a brief overview of the three most important English-speaking councils, our cooperation with them, and their influence on our national ELT.

Established by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, the Peace Corps offered Americans a unique opportunity to volunteer internationally, in line with its mission to connect qualified volunteers with communities in more than 60 countries for various service projects. On 13 July 1992, Ukraine's first president, Leonid Kravchuk, signed an agreement with President of the USA George H. W. Bush formally inviting the Peace Corps to Ukraine. In 1998, our Vinnytsia Regional In-service Teachers' Training Institute, which has been instrumental in providing in-service trainings for teachers of various subjects, welcomed its first Peace Corps volunteer, marking the beginning of a fruitful collaboration with English language teachers in the region. We had high expectations for the impact of native English speakers on ELT in our region, anticipating improvements in teaching methods and a deeper understanding of cultural identities. As a result, we worked closely with Peace Corps volunteers for nearly 12 years, organizing training courses for English teachers in the region, introducing new methods and techniques, exchanging our experiences, and enriching one another. Over these years, six volunteers worked closely with us, each serving a two-year term, the American colleagues brought a variety of backgrounds to our educational institution, including people with teaching qualifications and even a Doctor in linguistics. However, working alongside them has also revealed certain challenges. One notable instance occurred with the first Peace Corps volunteer, whose insistence on administering a written exam at the end of our four-week English training course in our institute was unexpected. This practice was unfamiliar to us, as we had never conducted such exams before, and since the results had no bearing on teacher certification, it seemed unnecessary to subject participants to additional stress. This insistence appeared to reflect a colonial mindset, with the volunteer possibly viewing

our country as subjugated and attempting to impose her educational norms on our in-service system. The imposition of external standards without regard for our local context and practices was, to say the least, perplexing. It underscored the lingering effects of colonialism in education, where dominant powers impose their frameworks and expectations on others without considering their unique needs and circumstances. Despite our commitment to collaboration and mutual learning, such experiences served as stark reminders of the power dynamics embedded in educational exchange.

Another example that can be seen as a colonial aspect was the placement of non-specialist volunteers, such as journalists or photographers, in our regional secondary schools to teach English. While this raised initial concerns within schools, despite these doubts, the teachers embraced the opportunity to learn and work together, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in the face of new challenges. Besides the volunteers worked closely with their Ukrainian counterparts, who provided guidance and support in preparing lesson plans and delivering lessons. However, this approach suggests an assumption that being a native speaker is sufficient qualification to teach a language abroad, which disregards the specific expertise required for effective language instruction. This kind of attitude mirrors dominance-based thinking in which a dominant power assumes superiority, imposing its standards and practices without acknowledging the expertise and context of the local population, thereby leaving them to feel inherently inferior and demonstrating that this sense of inferiority is a result of the behavior of more privileged experts (Burlyuk, 2019, p. 41).

The British Council, another entity in our collaborative endeavor, established its presence in Kyiv in 1992 under a pact of cultural, educational, and scientific cooperation between the United Kingdom and Ukraine. As a conduit for fostering and developing these links, the British Council gradually expanded its presence by opening English Language Resource Centres in Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa, Kharkiv, and Donetsk, extending its reach to English language teachers and learners across Ukraine. Over the years, the British Council has had a significant impact on the landscape of English language education in Ukraine. Through a wide range of initiatives, including seminars, workshops, conferences, courses, and roundtable discussions, it has provided essential resources and support to educators across the country. With a strong 29-year alliance with the Ministry of Education and Science, the British Council has played a pivotal role in enhancing the professional development of English teachers within the state framework.

One of the British Council's flagship projects, "The English for Universities" initiative, which was launched in 2014 to strengthen English language teaching in Ukrainian universities, deserves special attention. This initiative aimed to help Ukrainian institutions develop sustainable teaching skills, establish benchmarks, and enrich language pedagogy to facilitate deeper engagement in international collaborations. Initially involving 15 national universities, the project has then grown to include 32 universities from across Ukraine. A key facet of the project has been the underpinning research undertaken by the British Council to inform policy discussions with the Ministry of Education and Science. Alongside the research, the Council has implemented an extensive teacher development program, directly involving 2,813 educators from 32 universities. Through these concerted efforts, knowledge and expertise have been disseminated to an additional 7,000 teachers, further enriching English language education throughout Ukraine. Against the backdrop of colonial influences on Ukrainian education, the British Council's role as a conduit for cultural and educational exchange between the UK and Ukraine epitomizes wider dynamics of power and knowledge diffusion. While the organization's initiatives have undoubtedly contributed to the professionalization of English language teaching, they also reflect a form of

cultural dominance in which Western norms and standards are imposed on Ukrainian educational institutions without taking into account B. Kumaravadivelu's parameter: particularity. Therefore, while acknowledging the benefits of collaboration, it is imperative to critically examine the underlying power dynamics and ensure that educational partnerships are truly equitable and mutually beneficial.

In this context, I intend to delve into the topics deliberated during the IATEFL (Ukraine) conferences and present the findings through graphical representation. They will illustrate the participation and presentations of native English speakers versus Ukrainian researchers, as well as the representation of schoolteachers vs. university educators. Through these visual representations, I aim to provide insights into the dynamics of knowledge dissemination and professional engagement of native speakers vs. local professionals within the English language teaching community in Ukraine.

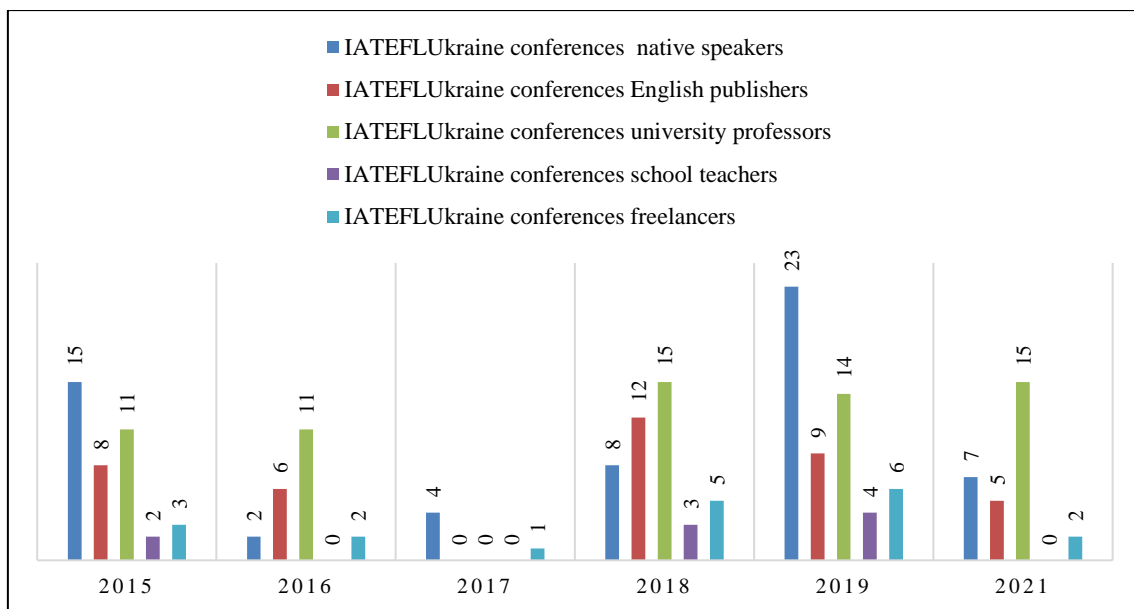


Figure 1. The number of native English-speaking participants and publishers at the IATEFL Ukraine conferences from 2015 to 2021 in comparison to Ukrainian representation.

As observed in Figure 1, there is a certain disparity in participation between native English speakers and Ukrainian professionals at the conference, with a dominance of the former in both attendance and presentations, as evidenced by the conference programs. This imbalance reflects a colonial aspect within the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Ukraine, indicating a hegemonic structure where foreign voices are prioritized over local expertise.

Another issue to consider is the limited participation of Ukrainian English schoolteachers in IATEFL (Ukraine) conferences. As the data show (Figure 2), the maximum number of teachers presenting their experiences at these conferences in 2019 was only four. This raises an important question: Is IATEFL primarily intended for university teachers? Why are Ukrainian English language schoolteachers underrepresented in its proceedings? Why is their experience not valued? This question extends to the conference organizers as well as the impact of participation fees.

The next organization with which we entered into a partnership was the American Council. Its stated mission is to strengthen international ties and promote mutual understanding through the promotion of academic,

professional, and cultural exchange. Through their efforts, hundreds of students, professionals, and individuals from diverse backgrounds are allowed to study in the United States, further their professional development, facilitate cross-cultural relationships, and then return home to serve as cultural ambassadors, as outlined in the information available online.

In August 2023, the American Council launched a new project that aimed to embody a teacher-training program called “Insights into Remote Learning and Teaching on the Ukrainian Terrains”. This initiative was designed to address the evolving landscape of education, particularly in response to the increasing prevalence of remote learning modalities, but again, specialists working for the Council, not local ones, and without taking into account our particular local context, created the program.

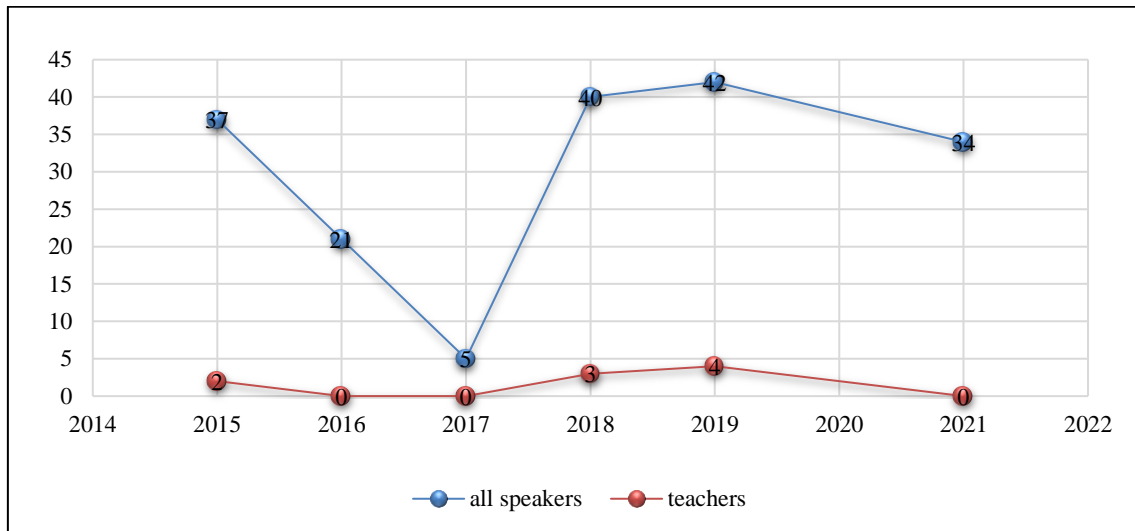


Figure 2. The number of Ukrainian English language teachers who participated and presented in IATEFL Ukraine Conferences in comparison to all participants.

Things did not always unfold in this manner. As I have said, at the dawn of our independence, about three decades ago, the landscape of national English language researchers and specialists was very different. Before international organizations became dominant in our educational landscape, Ukraine managed to produce a significant number of indigenous English textbooks and resources that allowed us to shape English language teaching, changing it into a subject of local expertise rather than an object of external influence. Scholars from Universities such as Kyiv National Linguistic University, Zhytomyr Pedagogical University, Ternopil National University, and V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University were instrumental in advancing the field. Notably, Professor S. Nikolaeva’s seminal two-volume work on Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), published in 2002, became a foundational resource for training future English language teachers.

Over time, however, the presence and influence of Ukrainian-authored textbooks and materials have diminished, replaced by those from native English-speaking publishers, and regarding Kumaravadivelu’s parameter of *Particularity*, these materials were not created specifically for local learners within their particular context, and critical awareness of local conditions did not guide their development (Dengler, 2024). This trend is further evidenced by the decreasing number of Ukrainian-authored textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education and Science for use in Ukrainian schools. While the reliance on foreign-authored textbooks is growing in Ukraine, this stands in stark contrast to policies in other countries that emphasize local scholarship and knowledge production.

For example, in Germany, primary and secondary schools rely exclusively on English-language textbooks and Teacher's Resource Packs written by local authors. In German schools, teachers are prohibited from using authentic books, promoting them, or requesting that parents purchase them. This policy fosters support for local scholarship and contributes to the decolonization of the educational environment.

This phenomenon in TEFL goes beyond Ukraine and is also occurring in India, for example B. Kumaravadivelu (2016) in his article "The Decolonial Option in English Teaching: Can the Subaltern Act?" highlights the resurgence of indigenous voices in the teaching of English in India. The parallels between the situations in India and Ukraine raise the question of whether both nations have surrendered control of their ELT domain to external influences.

Ultimately, the dominance of foreign-authored materials and the marginalization of indigenous scholarship in ELT reflect broader colonial dynamics in which external forces shape the processes of knowledge production and dissemination. Reflecting on these trends prompts us to reconsider the role of native speakers and the maintenance of national autonomy in English language teaching. The spread of knowledge through the various international organizations, especially in the field of English language teaching methodology in Ukraine, may hinder the development of Ukrainian scholars in this area for several reasons related to epistemic colonialism and the dominance of Western approaches:

(1) Importation of foreign methodologies:

These organizations actively promote English language teaching methodologies that are based on Western standards, including approaches that have become widely accepted in English-speaking countries. This can lead to Ukrainian scholars and teachers focusing on Western approaches, without taking into account the specifics of Ukrainian culture, educational realities, and the needs of students. This limits the development of original Ukrainian methodologies that are adapted to the local context.

(2) Dependence on external sources:

Through their support, Ukrainian teachers and scholars can become dependent on external knowledge and resources that are funded or provided by Western institutions. This dependence can slow the development of local scientific and methodological traditions, as the focus shifts to imported rather than local approaches.

(3) Marginalization of Ukrainian scholars:

When Western methodology dominates, Ukrainian scholars might feel that their approaches are not effective enough or are outdated compared to the international standards dictated by organizations such as the British Council. This can lead to the marginalization of Ukrainian research and approaches in English language teaching methodology.

(4) Lack of original research:

As a result of this type of institutional influence, local scientific research in Ukraine related to English language teaching methodology, based on the specifics of Ukrainian conditions and student needs, may be limited. When the focus is only on Western approaches, local innovations may not receive the attention or funding they deserve.

Thus, while all mentioned above organisations can positively influence the development of language education by improving English language proficiency, it's important to recognize that this process may lead to the subordination of Ukrainian methodological approaches to foreign scientific standards and limit the development of local scientific knowledge in English language teaching.

## Conclusion

Working with the above-mentioned native-speaker organizations has been an enriching experience for us, but it is only now that I begin to wonder why they all have played a significant role in shaping the policies and programs of state-controlled English institutes in Ukraine. Here I would agree with Walter D. Mignolo's perspective that all of these reoriented my praxis of living and my sensoring. As he aptly puts it: "your feeling changes with your knowing; and your knowing reifies or modifies your feelings." (Mignolo, 2018).

This resonates with my own experience, which, like Mignolo's, has been one of fluctuation and evolution. I have been deeply involved in the establishment of a new system of English language teaching in Ukraine, and at first, I wholeheartedly believed that the above organizations were making a valuable contribution and as I have said before, they really did. However, I am now acutely aware of the potential complicity with coloniality inherent in such endeavors.

This realization only became clear to me when I moved to work to Germany. It was a sudden shift in perspective, and I find resonance in Mignolo's assertion that "coloniality names something you do not see that operates in what you do see" (Mignolo, 2007) and highlights the hidden mechanisms of power that shape the world around us.

In my case, I did not recognize the presence of coloniality while being embedded into the system. It was only when I stepped out of it that I began to perceive and feel its effects.

Moreover, the discourse of decoloniality, as articulated by scholars such as Claire Gallien and كلير جالين, is not about promoting a nostalgic or ethnocentric revival of traditions, but about actively engaging with forms of knowledge that have been marginalized by colonial modernity.

As we reflect on the state of English Language Teaching in Ukraine, the words of Kumaravadivelu (2016) resonate deeply with the realities faced by educators here:

The vignettes I have narrated above represent only a fragment of my personal and professional experience. There is nothing new or unique about any of them. I am sure many other non-native professionals around the world have experienced something similar. I narrate these rather familiar stories to make a point. And that is: These stories span more than a quarter of a century, and it is precise during this period that the discourse on the marginalization of nonnative speakers in our field has become increasingly pronounced, yet it is precisely during this period that the practice of marginalization has continued to thrive. It is therefore legitimate to ask what the native speaker/nonnative speaker discourse has achieved, where it has fallen short, why it has fallen short, and what needs to be done. (Kumaravadivelu, 2016)

Kumaravadivelu's words highlight an ongoing and troubling reality: while the discourse around the marginalization of non-native English speakers is loud and clear, the practice of marginalization continues. This holds true in the context of Ukrainian ELT, where local educators often find themselves sidelined in favor of foreign-driven policies and materials. To address this, it is crucial to move beyond just discourse and take meaningful action to decolonize and strengthen the field of English Language Teaching in Ukraine.

International collaboration, while valuable in some respects, should not eclipse the need for Ukrainian educators and scholars to shape their own educational framework. To foster a more autonomous and relevant ELT system in Ukraine, the following steps are necessary:

- Empowering Ukrainian scholars and educators: Government and academic institutions must prioritize funding for local research and the development of textbooks that cater to Ukraine's unique educational context.
- Integrating local expertise into international collaborations: Ukrainian educators should be active contributors to shaping global educational policies, not passive recipients of foreign models.

- Developing national teacher training programs: Ukraine should build teacher training frameworks that are rooted in local needs and realities, reducing dependence on foreign-led initiatives.
- Diversifying ELT materials: Encouraging the publication and adoption of Ukrainian-authored textbooks will help mitigate the overreliance on foreign publishers.
- Encouraging critical awareness among educators: Teachers should be equipped with the knowledge and tools to critically assess and adapt foreign methodologies, fostering a more contextually grounded approach to teaching.

In conclusion, the decolonization of English language teaching in Ukraine requires not only a shift in mindset but also concrete actions that prioritize local expertise, scholarship, and context. By empowering Ukrainian professionals and promoting self-determined educational practices, we make our TEFL subjected that can work toward an ELT system that truly serves the needs of our educators and students.

### References

- American Councils Ukraine. (2025). *Programs*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from <https://americancouncils.org.ua/en/program/>
- British Council Ukraine. (2025). *Teaching projects: English in universities*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from <https://www.britishcouncil.org.ua/en/teach/projects/english-universities>
- Burlyuk, O. (2019). Fending off a triple inferiority complex in academia: An autoethnography. *Journal of Narrative Politics*, 6(1), 28-50.
- Dengler, R. (2024). Intercultural barriers to language learning in “international course books” in Laos: A case study at Savannakhet University (Doctoral dissertation, PH Karlsruhe).
- Gallien, C. (2020). A decolonial turn in the humanities. *Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 40, 28-58.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2009). *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod*. London: Routledge.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2016). The decolonial option in English teaching: Can the subaltern act? *TESOL Quarterly*, 50(1), 66-85.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the colonality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 240-270.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2018). Decoloniality and phenomenology: The geopolitics of knowing and epistemic/ontological colonial differences. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 32(3), 360-387.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2018). *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Peace Corps Ukraine. (2025). Retrieved March 1, 2025 from <https://www.peacecorps.gov/ukraine/>
- Quijano, A. (2007). Coloniality and modernity/rationality. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 168-178.
- Sidorova S. D. (2024). Epistemic oppression of Ukrainian voices in the modern western academic space. e-ISSN 2617-5703. *Scientific Notes of NaUKMA. Philosophy and Religious Studies*. 2024. Volume 14. ORCID: 0000-0002-9663-3894
- Zhosan, O. E. (2021). *Textbooks and manuals for general secondary education in 1921-1991*. Exclusive-System.