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LEARNING ENGLISH IN OUR DAY

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This article aims to examine the symbolic, historical, and social meanings of English in today's world, particularly for learners of English as a second or foreign language. Drawing on the author's lived experience (growing up in a French-English family and learning German during WWII) and key concepts in applied linguistics, the paper addresses the question of how English can simultaneously function as a utopian language (embodying dreams of opportunity, freedom, and modernity) and a language of violence (representing colonialism, inequality, and economic-cultural domination).

Methodology: The study adopts a qualitative, reflexive, and autoethnographic approach, integrating the author's personal experiential data with a systematic review of applied linguistics research (including theories of translanguaging, transpositioning, and transknowledging) and a critical discourse analysis of English usage in economic, political, and technological domains. The work also draws on Edgar Morin's concept of "complex thought" (la pensée complexe) to propose a novel framework for language pedagogy.

Findings: The findings reveal that: English today is not merely a tool for communication but a carrier of symbolic values (identity, dreams, progress) as well as forms of hidden violence (economic, social-symbolic, cultural, and political). Emerging approaches such as translanguaging and transknowledging, though valuable steps toward linguistic and epistemic justice, remain insufficient in addressing the challenges posed by artificial intelligence; AI algorithms tend to reduce language to statistical data and instrumental efficiency, hindering the cultivation of full cognitive, moral, and human potential. Morin's complex thought, with its emphasis on historicity, subjectivity, and dialogue with complexity, offers a promising direction for language education that treats language not as a mere structure but as a human social-symbolic sign.

Conclusion: The author concludes that English language teaching in the age of AI and globalization requires a paradigm shift from instrumental and structural approaches toward critical, relational, and complexity-oriented pedagogies. The paper ends with seven practical recommendations for language teachers, focusing on cultivating critical reflexivity, making explicit the hidden logic of textbooks, teaching relational thinking, contextual interpretation, sharing personal teaching experiences, and separating performance assessment from the existential worth of learners.

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1- Introduction

English has always been for me a cosmopolitan language. As the language of my mother's family since they emigrated from Budapest to London in the early 1900's, I always saw it as an imported language in my own native country: France. My French family welcomed my English mother as a Hungarian-British foreigner and insisted on speaking to her in French, of which she didn't understand a word. For me, growing up in France before, during and after WWII, the English language, in its foreign sounds and cadences, embodied the rivalry between the French world of my father and the English world of my mother - between Jeanne d'Arc and Henry VI, Racine and Shakespeare, Austerlitz and Waterloo, de Gaulle and Churchill, the Château de Versailles and Buckingham Palace. Countless comparisons and jokes around our dinner table evoked the Hundred Year War between the French and "*les Anglais*". Syntactic, culinary, aesthetic and historic differences between the two worlds were endlessly rehashed and always ended in hysterics among my French-speaking siblings and me.

When in 1943 in France under German occupation I had to choose between English and German as my first foreign language in school, my father, who came from a musical family that admired German music, literature and culture, encouraged me to take German. "You have English at home" he said. "Besides, you have to learn the language of the enemy." And so, under the watchful eye of Madame Lallemand and following the grammar translation method of the day, I arduously memorized grammar rules: verb placements and adjective endings, main and subordinate clauses, and how to analyze German literary texts. We never learned how to speak the language, and it would have been useless and dangerous to do so at the time. The grammar-translation method was the safest way to acquire a language that was both hated and admired. Besides, after the war, who wanted to go to Germany to speak with native speakers? The country lay in ruins and many Germans, ashamed of being German, were actively learning English. Some members of my family, who spoke German fluently before the war, refused to speak a word of it after 1945.

In Versailles, I continued to study German in school and later at the Sorbonne, even though I was never very good at it; it seemed particularly difficult for native speakers of French like myself. But when I reached adolescence, I got seduced by the musicality of the German language and its poetry in particular. While I sweated through dry French textual analyses, the cadence of a Rilke poem could bring me to tears; the syntactic rhythms of a Kleist short story could reveal to me transcendental truths; Goethe's *Faust* could make me understand what life was about. By memorizing German poems and even stretches of prose I was slowly internalizing a fund of wisdom that would serve me my whole life. But, at the same time, I had to face the excruciating questions left unresolved by the defeat of Germany in 1945. How could

a people with such high levels of cultural, literary and musical accomplishments espouse such murderous ideologies and commit such horrendous crimes as Nazi Germany? How to reconcile the two?

If this anguished paradox felt familiar to me, it was because I had lived it in other ways in my own family in the France of the 40's and 50's. In those days, having a foreign (and worse: an English) mother was not a badge of honor. *Les Anglais* were often seen with suspicion (“*la perfide Albion*”); French patriotism quickly turned into nationalistic arrogance and intolerance vis a vis “foreigners”, and a condescending colonial interest in other cultures. I was convinced I was handicapped by not having two French parents. English thus embodied for me both a loving bilingual home and a sense of alienation from my own French identity. It was accompanied by a difficult sense of belonging in any one particular place. Much later, as both the French and the British colonial empires crumbled, and English became the global language of the planet, this paradox would make me appreciate and better understand the symbolic complexity of learning and using a foreign language, in particular a language like English that is today both local and global, both colonial and post-colonial, both highly unifying and highly divisive.

Indeed, English for me had always been a paradoxical language. At my Central European grand'parents generation it had been the language of emigration and displacement but also the language of economic opportunity. At my French generation, it was my English mother's native language but for me a second language. At my German-American children's generation, English is their first language but not their parents' native language. And at the youngest generation, it is today my American grandsons' one and only language, but for my German grandson it is his third. English has become in the family the neutral mode of communication, whether spoken with a British, American, French or German accent. But it has not necessarily been where the heart lies. While my siblings fell in love in French, Persian, British and American English, I fell in love in German. I transposed my impossible French-English split onto German poetry, German music and German tragic history and married into a German family... who decided to emigrate to America. I ended up teaching German at an American university.

In the following I examine the values generally associated today with English by learners and users of English as a second or foreign language. These values are not intrinsic to the linguistic system called “English”, i.e., an historical construction with rules of grammar and vocabulary. They are, rather, imagined values, that like Benedict Anderson's “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) are no less real for being imagined. They are linked to the perception, by learners of English, of English-speakers and their world – a world that has been

studied and researched for its relation to learners' construction of such symbolic aspects of life as: acquisition of knowledge, creation of imagined identities, communal belongings, material prosperity, and in general dreams of a better life. So, when I refer to "English" in this paper I mean more than just a bunch of linguistic structures; I mean the use of those structures by speakers of English to index culture, knowledge, identity, ideology and other forms of symbolic, not just linguistic, value.

2- Discussion and review

1.English as the language of dreams and symbolic identities

What does it mean to learn English to-day?

As described by many researchers in applied linguistics, the learning and teaching of English is associated not only with psycholinguistic input/output processes of a linguistic and cognitive nature (Lightbown & Spada 2013, Ellis 1994), and with bilingual processes of language acquisition (Ortega 2019, Cummins 2022) but also with emotions (Pavlenko, 2005 , Dewaele 2010), identifications (Norton 2013), subjective perceptions of self and others (McNamara 2019), symbolic as well as social and historical positionings (Kramsch 2009, Lee et al. in press, Uryu in press) and intercultural mediations and negotiations (Zarate et al. 2003). The intercultural communicative pedagogy used to teach English (Byram 1997) is imbued with an educational philosophy that stresses the value of information exchange, cooperation, participation, but also individual autonomy, entrepreneurship and competitiveness.

Whether they are taught through the grammar-translation method or through an intercultural communicative approach, many learners of English discover for the first time the thrill of group- and pairwork, the interactive strategies and tasks, the imaginative hands-on practices, the participatory pedagogies characteristic of English classrooms around the world. Many adolescents also resonate deeply to a poem by Walt Whitman or Thomas Dylan, a passage of Thoreau, or even to a Shakespearean love sonnet; but they can also be moved by a song sung in English by John Lennon, Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen, and by the myriad musical productions accessible in English on Tik Tok and other platforms. Learning English becomes an experience that is linked to the shapes, sounds and rhythms of the language itself, and is at once emotional, aesthetic and cognitive (Kramsch 2009). As Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1994 :xxiii) wrote in her poem "Learning English" about having to change language as a child from Malaysian to English:

It wasn't like
changingshoes,
one pair of shoes
for leather heels

tap-dancing semaphors
of excessive meaning.
Or like simple translation:
Ditditdit dahdahdah ditditdit.
It was like learning
to let go and to hold on:
A slow braking, shifting
gears, an engine
of desire on a downhill
slope. Momentum of vocabularies
carrying the child
to foreign countries,
to families of strangers,
an orphanage of mind,
and technologies of empire.

Precisely because it has not been numbed by everyday use in everyday life, the English language for non-native speakers of English can embody adolescents' dreams of modernity, youthful emancipation from their family's language, unlimited possibilities of renewal. More than being the national language of another country, English is now a global language that enables young learners to escape the limits of their own country and history, acquire a new identity (Norton 2013), take ownership of English (Widdowson 1994), and join a global community engaged in scientific progress, mobility, and intellectual stimulation. Through English and its speakers, they become citizens of a world that is multilingual, multicultural and that values, as the motto goes, "diversity, equity and inclusion".

Recent research in applied linguistics reinforces this dream: *translanguaging* (Garcia & Li Wei 2014, Goodman & Tastanbek 2021) encourages English teachers and learners to adopt a bilingual mindset, to freely use both English and the mother tongue to highlight the cognitive indissociability of the two languages or, on the contrary, to point out their similarities and differences and to make a meaning that might transcend any one linguistic system (Makoni & Pennycook 2007, Li Wei 2018, Cummins 2022). More recently *transpositioning* - a sociolinguistic concept that refers to "a capability whereby individuals contingently, creatively, and critically transcend preexisting boundaries, roles, and discrete positions/positioning—all to be treated as moving coordinates, through social practices such as translanguaging and transmodalities" (Lee et al. in press). After advocating for more social and cultural justice in the importance given to minority languages and voices in applied linguistic research, and

designing multilingual, post-colonial pedagogies (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter 2015), the field of applied linguistics has recently become more aware of epistemic injustices around the world, i.e., inequalities caused by differential access to English publishing practices and knowledge. The term *transknowledging* (Andrews et al. 2023; Singh, Li & Li Xiao-Li 2025; Li & Singh 2026, Song & Lin 2026) captures the current trend that encourages teachers and learners to use English to access knowledges conceived, constructed and expressed in languages other than English. The problems of translation that such an approach entails are to be solved through digital technology such as Google Translate or artificial intelligence that I problematize in the section 3.

For sure, many of these new initiatives are nourished by imagined, projected images and narratives in the media and through the enormous marketing publicity that promotes English around the world. Their success depends on the context in which English is learned. The ideals associated with English: democracy, emancipation, new life, opportunity, freedom are interpreted differently in different countries. For example, in China, the educational system is experiencing a tension between, on the one hand, learning English for getting access to information in a global world beyond China's borders, and, on the other hand, learning English to better understand oneself as Chinese and to make the rest of the world better understand China (Fan 2010, Li 2012, Jian 2021, Jian & Li 2019, Hu 2021). In Latin America, English is learned as the utilitarian second language of the hemisphere and as the entrance ticket to a global economy (e.g., Castaneda Pena et al 2024). And in France, a country whose educational system is based on the traditional distinction between politics and economics, and that values civic virtues, rational and critical faculties rather than economic profit, English is still seen by many as a foreign language that in recent times represents mainly an economic, transactional and business-oriented view of human relations (Gamboa & Kramsch in press).

2.English as the language of physical and symbolic violence

Indeed, not everyone experiences the learning of English as a happy experience. For many immigrants to English speaking countries, English can reinforce a sense of loss and estrangement from one's native country. In *Lost in Translation*, the Polish teenager Ewa Hoffman describes how she feels acute pain at having to speak English in America:

[The problem is that] the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. 'River' in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. 'River' in English is cold – a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke

The river before me remains a thing, absolutely other, absolutely unbending to the grasp of my mind (Hoffman 1989:106).

Much has been written – self-critically, and theoretically grounded – about learning English under conditions of immigration (Norton 2013), or colonial rule (Pennycook 1998). But still too little attention has been paid to those at the receiving end of physical acts of aggression, who have to learn the language of the aggressor under conditions of war, military occupation, economic duress or other forms of physical violence in which the English language is imbricated. For the moment, anecdotal evidence shows that many non-native English speakers are careful to retain a non-native accent to preserve their L1 identity, or they only occasionally code-switch to English to show that they know English but don't identify with its speakers and that they keep a critical distance from the English speaking world (Li & Singh 2026).

For many native and non-native speakers of English, the English language is also linked to other less visible forms of violence that can be economic, social-symbolic, cultural or political. The first form of violence studied by Applied Linguistics research is economic. English today is linked to a ruthless neoliberal form of capitalism that has colonized the world under its mercantile and consumerist domination, and its exploitative practices. Holborow (2012) has documented English keywords of neoliberal discourse, such as “deregulation”, “human capital” or “entrepreneurship”. Gee et al. (1996) have characterized the new work order behind the English language of the new capitalism. Park (in press) is studying the commodification of English along a purely economic vision of human relations and society.

The second form of social symbolic violence is exerted by the effect of the language on the social and subjective identity of immigrant learners. Norton, Pavlenko, Kramsch and others have studied the link between language learning and social identity in learners of English, and the way sociolinguistic identity is embodied in social symbolic strategies, such as face-saving rituals, speech acts, and performatives. It includes the silencing of linguistic identities of speakers of minority languages (May 2012), their ethnic identities (Rosa 2019), and the regional identities of English speakers from the Global South (Tavares & Melo Pfeifer 2027)

A third form of violence is cultural. Researchers have focused on the colonial forms of discourse i.e., linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992, Canagarajah 1999) or cultural colonization (Pennycook 1998) that English speakers implicitly replicate, for example when they value Englishes from the Global North more than those from the Global South, or when English speaking researchers refer to knowledge exclusively from English language sources and ignore other more local forms of knowledge production (Macedo 2019, Pennycook 2019, Tavares & Melo Pfeifer 2027). This form of violence is visible also in the staunch monolingual attitudes of some English speakers or English speaking institutions (Gogolin 1994, Gramling

2016), and the dramatic drop of interest by native English speakers in learning foreign languages at school.

Much effort has been devoted to resisting these three forms of symbolic violence in the teaching of English. This resistance takes various forms. Researchers in applied linguistics have advocated conducting research multilingually” (Holmes et al. 2013). As mentioned above, some have advocated using transknowledging as a form of epistemic resistance (Li & Singh 2026). English teachers have been encouraged to validate the languages their students bring to their class (Cenoz & Gorter 2015), adopt a sociohistorical reflexive pedagogy of the language and of the values it vehiculates (Gamboa & Kramsch 2027), espouse translanguaging practices, either through code-switching or through translation with a follow up reflexion on the differences between languages and on the impossibility of totally capturing all their connotations. They have promoted the idea of the non-native English teacher becoming a “multilingual instructor” who is by definition bilingual, not monolingual (Kramsch & Zhang 2018).

The question is not whether to learn English or not. Indeed, everyone should have access to the benefit of the world’s lingua franca (Kramsch 2023a). The question rather is whether to speak and think only in English, or whether to be able to choose between speaking in English or in other languages when the possibility arises. Translanguaging is not necessarily the solution if one views languages not as autonomous linguistic systems, but as carriers of knowledge, social and cultural identities and embodied human experiences. All too often, only linguistic codes get translanguaged, not cultural semiotic behavioral and epistemic values attached to these codes; those values remain that of the L1, even though translanguaging includes both L1 and L2 codes.

The fourth form of symbolic violence is currently in full display in the political realm of symbolic power and influence. This form of violence is linked less to the linguistic than to the social semiotic structures of power indexed by the discourses of new capitalism (Gee et al.1996) expressed in such English phrases as: “maximizing opportunities”, “optimizing conditions”, “maintaining competitiveness”, “using language as a tool”, “as a resource”, “promoting growth”, “meeting goals”, “achieving success”. Media scholars have discussed the more subtle forms of symbolic domination exerted by what has been called the “economy of attention” or “mental capitalism” promoted by the use of English as a neoliberal global language. These terms refer to the rising importance given not only to material and financial wealth but more importantly to such markers of political capital as visibility, notoriety, celebrity, public acclamation. Yves Citton (2014) calls these forms of public recognition “attentional capital”. Rankings, scorings, become indices of success; googleability ensures that one’s name gets

cited, one's work gets referred to and talked about; the new digital media provide platforms for capturing the attention of others through self-promotion, networking, marketing and making useful and profitable connections.

Through its powerful marketing strategies of videos, podcasts and other TV products the visual medium has become an irresistible center of attention; it has helped usher in dystopian visions of reality that we see at work today in American politics. It is also at work in the algorithms of A.I. and the training of A.I. agents or chatbots that are programmed to elicit maximum emotional engagement and addictive user behavior, as I discuss in the next section.

3.English as the language of A.I. algorithms: rationality, instrumentality, efficiency.

With its international reach and multilingual database, A.I. speaks of course more languages than just English. Based on Large Language Models, it produces texts, conversations and interactions in many different grammars and vocabularies ; A.I users around the globe prompt , read and respond to chatbot messages in their own language as well as English. And yet, the fact that Google, Google Translate, Deep L, Wikipedia, Gemini, Claude and other platforms were conceived in English and that their database is drawn mainly from texts produced by native speakers of English makes English the dominant language of A.I. Its algorithms are programmed according to the logic of a business market-driven mindset: customer friendliness, effective performance, quantity and speed of information, optimization of emotional capital, ease and convenience of use, encyclopedic knowledge are all characteristics of a global world order that speaks pre-dominantly English. Learners of English, accustomed since the advent of the communicative approach to learning the language for communicative, interactive purposes, have found in social media, the internet, and now ChatGPT an ideal way of practicing their speaking and writing skills. Some make friends with chatbots; they enjoy their non-judgmental, supportive conversational style, the informative content of their messages, their ability to instantly correct students' mistakes and explain the nature of the errors made. A.I. tutors are becoming so good that language teachers have started to worry being replaced by chatbots. As students get their assignments completed by artificial intelligence, educators struggle to deal with plagiarized essays, A.I.-powered assignments and A.I. generated reading summaries that they don't know how to evaluate.

Educational institutions are pushing back: interdiction to bring computers or iphones to class; strict rules of usage for A.I. in the completion of assignments; tests are given exclusively in class and many only in oral form; students are taught critical skills to read A.I. generated texts and compare them to human texts. These measures, however, as Chatonsky pointed out recently, addresses A.I. as a problem of usage or management (Chatonsky 2026); they do not address the fundamental difference between human learning, based on human cognition, life

experience, motivation, purpose in limited time and space, and machine learning based on statistical mappings, frequency counts and number of hits, and devoid of authorial intention and communicative purpose. As the poet Jorie Graham dramatically expressed in her latest poem “Killing Spree” (2026), “violence and consumerism are as intertwined as strands of DNA... conditions of experience have been so transformed by algorithms that perception is now ruled by a warped sense of time and flattened voice, as we navigate the violence flowing seamlessly within everyday life..., compressing time into a perpetual present of imminent disaster” (Simonds 2026).

4.Learning English as an introduction to “la pensée complexe”

In addition to the push for the decolonization of English monolingualism, the plurilingual imperatives of social and epistemic justice and the increasing complexities of our current political times, English teachers are now facing the challenges presented by A.I. The solutions proposed for translanguaging, transpositioning, and transknowledging are a valiant effort to make English more diverse and inclusive. But they do not address the complex role now played by A.I. whose algorithms can help learners of English acquire the structures of the language, and provide models of native language use, but threatens the very nature of their educational experience by preventing them from developing their full cognitive and moral, i.e. human, potential.

The challenge for language teachers is to wean themselves from viewing knowledge of a language as the mere ability to string together nouns, adjectives and verbs in accurate form and sequence; they are faced with the need to evaluate their students according to other criteria than their ability to respond to questions correctly according to fixed definitions of truth. Chatbots are slowly becoming as good as humans at teaching that. What human teachers are now challenged to teach and test are: discourse awareness, critical reading of texts, how to ask insightful questions, question established institutional practices, transgress disciplinary boundaries, make connections - including human-machine connections and collaborations.

In his little book “*Introduction a la pensée complexe*, (2005), the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin can help us find a way of teaching a language as paradoxical as English. Morin, who already in 1946, after having fought in the French Resistance against the German occupant, wrote against the collective culpability of Germany for the crimes committed by the Nazis, died in May 2026 at the age of 104. Praised as a “global humanist”, he knew well the paradoxes I describe at the beginning of this paper; he laid out his answer to it in his lifelong reflection on what he called “the challenge of complexity”. His last book, published in 2022, contains some of his major essays translated into English. Through insights taken from sociology, ecology, education, and politics, Morin takes a trans-disciplinary approach to dealing

with paradox and contradiction. By contrast with the simplistic, reductionist thinking of many journalists, educators and politicians, he emphasizes the interconnectedness, uncertainty, and ambiguity of reality, and advocates dialoguing with complexity rather than trying to master it.

In the lineage of such sociologists and humanistic educators as Pierre Bourdieu and Mikhail Bakhtin, Morin traces a path to teaching language not as structural code, but as human social symbolic sign; not as communication tool, but as cultural creation; language use not as information exchange but as the exercise of symbolic power; not as reading and writing skill but as critical symbolic literacy in global contexts. Morin's approach is a way of viewing language use as imbued with historicity (how language has been used in discourse in the past) and subjectivity (how memories are preserved in embodied experiences and in social hierarchies of symbolic power) (Kramsch 2021, Uryu in press). Morin shifts attention from the producers to the recipients of texts, their point of view, their interpretive practices, their ability to make connections, see parallels, analyze equivalences, imagine alternative possibilities. (Kramsch 2023b).

3- Conclusion

Learning English today is of course much different from learning German eighty years ago during and after WWII. The global nature of English today, together with the global means of communication and the growing advances in artificial intelligence are presenting inordinately more challenges today for teachers of English around the world. And yet, in many parts of the world, English as a foreign or second language continues to be taught as a neutral tool for the transmission of neutral knowledge in the same way as German was taught in my days – a system of grammatical and lexical structures severed from their actual historical, ideological, subjective use by actual living speakers and writers, who, through language, perform and construct actual realities on the ground.

If I were to give English classroom teachers today my two cents' worth of personal advice, I would suggest the following seven recommendations that have served me well over the years.

1. Cultivate critical reflexivity. Remind your students that the textbook, the syllabus, the lesson plans have a point of view, a rationale for the way they present and prioritize readings, assignments, tasks and activities. Make them discover that rationale.
2. Make your students discover the logic behind your choice of readings, activities and their sequencing. Discuss which choices were not made. Don't let yourself become prisoner of the linearity of the textbook, make explicit the connections between its different parts and recurring patterns.
3. Teach them how to think relationally, how to make connections between the different items of knowledge gained at different times both in this class and across their classes.

4. Teach them not only how to understand the dictionary meaning of words but how to interpret, from clues in the discourse context, why a speaker or a writer or a character in a novel might have uttered these words and not others in this particular context at this particular time with this particular interlocutor or reader.

5. Let your students in on your own experience learning the language you teach. How did you manage the uncertainties and ambiguities of meaning, the cultural and historical paradoxes in the use of the language by its speakers?

6. Never miss an opportunity to make them aware that you yourself are under institutional constraints to evaluate them, assess and rank their performance (not them themselves!) comparatively to that of others in the class.

7. Remind them that their performance is not necessarily the totality of who they are and can be. They are learning many things in your class that cannot be captured through tests and scores but that they will find essential in their lives. Help them discover and put into words what these things might be.

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3. The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence was used in writing this article and that the entire work is their own creation.

4- During the preparation of this work, the author(s) did not use Generative Artificial Intelligence tools.

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