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Critical Geopolitics of Internationalization

THE CASE OF TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Özlem Salı & Levent Ürer

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Abstract

This article critically investigates the internationalization of higher education in Türkiye through the lens of linguistic imperialism and cultural hegemony, emphasizing how English-medium instruction reconfigures academic hierarchies and epistemic autonomy. Against the backdrop of globalization and growing foreign student mobility, Turkish higher education has increasingly embraced English as the dominant language of instruction. While often framed as a neutral and progressive strategy for global integration, this shift raises important questions about linguistic inequality, cultural dependency, and the erosion of academic freedom and equity. Methodologically, the article employs a theory-guided case study approach that integrates Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Robert Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism from a Gramscian lens of hegemony. The findings highlight that English functions as a form of institutionalized cultural capital, disproportionately benefiting socioeconomically privileged groups while aligning Turkish universities with Anglo-

American epistemic norms. Simultaneously, the study reveals how English-medium instruction embeds a form of linguistic colonization that undermines multilingualism and marginalizes local knowledge systems. In doing so, it draws attention to the critical geopolitical implications of language policy in higher education, where choices around medium of instruction increasingly intersect with broader questions of inequalities, national sovereignty, hegemony, and cultural alignment. The article concludes by advocating for pluralistic, inclusive, and multilingual internationalization models that uphold academic autonomy and foster epistemic diversity within Turkish higher education.

Keywords
academic autonomy; cultural hegemony; higher education; internationalization; knowledge colonization; linguistic imperialism; Turkish universities

Introduction

Higher education institutions in the Global South often attach strategic importance to foreign language education and foreign language development programs in order to increase their international presence. As a major Global South country seeking to enhance its global influence, Türkiye has made higher education—particularly foreign language education—a strategic priority. In this context, the present study aims to evaluate the geopolitics of internationalization and foreign languages within Turkish higher education. Additionally, the scope of the study is broadened to include debates on academic freedom, university autonomy, and linguistic imperialism. By evaluating the use of English in Turkish higher education from a theoretical lens, the aim is to present a critical reassessment of the current state of Turkish higher education. Although there are many studies related to foreign language education in the literature, research focusing on geopolitical dynamics from a critical perspective is lacking. Critical geopolitics analyzes how spatial imaginaries, discourses, and social practices construct and legitimize power relations in world politics (Dodds, Kuus, & Sharp, 2016), including the ways in which they reproduce

(post)colonial legacies, other forms of dependency, and inequalities. With this in mind, internationalization of higher education is highly relevant to critical geopolitics because it is not a neutral or purely educational process but a geopolitical practice that reshapes cultural alignments, epistemic hierarchies, and sovereignty.

Methodologically, this research offers a theory-guided case study, defined as an idiographic approach that explains cases by applying a clearly defined theoretical framework to structure what is examined and what is set aside. Unlike purely inductive studies, this method uses theory to shape questions, concepts, and causal expectations, directing attention to theoretically relevant features of the case. This explicit grounding enhances analytical rigor: assumptions and normative stances are transparent, causal claims are clearer, internal contradictions are reduced, and findings are easier to corroborate or challenge with evidence (Levy, 2008). As such, this study draws explicitly on established theoretical frameworks such as Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism, which structure the analysis by identifying how language policies and internationalization agendas shape power relations and epistemic hierarchies within the academic field.

This article is structured as follows. It begins by establishing the conceptual foundations of internationalization in higher education, situating it within the broader processes of globalization and outlining its strategic, economic, and cultural dimensions. The next section explores the essential relationship between academic freedom and university autonomy, emphasizing their centrality to independent knowledge production. Building on this, the discussion of cultural hegemony and knowledge colonization introduces a critical framework for analyzing the ideological undercurrents of global educational exchange. The subsequent subsections delve into key theoretical debates—Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital and Robert Phillipson's linguistic imperialism—to conceptualize how language hierarchies emerge and are sustained within higher education systems from the lens of hegemony. These frameworks are then applied to the global spread of English and the rise of English as a lingua franca, before culminating in an analysis of the use of

English in Turkish higher education. This progression—from general concepts to national context, and from theoretical framing to applied critique—builds a coherent and layered argument, ultimately revealing how internationalization processes, when mediated through linguistic hierarchies, can reproduce epistemic dependency and undermine academic autonomy.

Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization in education is defined as international educational activities carried out within the framework of a specific strategy. These activities encompass educational processes that occur among individuals from different nations and involve cooperation, mobility, interaction, and reciprocal relationships among countries, cultures, and institutions. Internationalization at the level of higher education is considered a subcomponent of this broader concept (Bilgili, 2024, p.53).

According to the definition by the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (2019), internationalization in higher education refers to the process of incorporating an international or intercultural dimension into higher education activities in teaching, research and development, and societal contribution. As noted by Cantwell (2009), the impact of globalization has deeply shaped the field of education in the 21st century, alongside political, social, and economic factors, leading to the acceleration of internationalization in higher education. Against this backdrop, the foundations of university governance have also been restructured on a global scale (Cantwell, 2009, p.291).

Internationalization in higher education, shaped by the multifaceted effects of economic and social globalization, is considered a dynamic process of development involving the interaction of various components such as politics, the economy, socio-cultural structures, and academia. Accordingly, the process of internationalization in higher education manifests itself in various forms and dimensions across different countries and institutions. Although the initial aims and expectations may be similar around the world, the

commercial dimension of international higher education causes the process to diverge based on the specific priorities and capacities of different countries and universities (Metin, 2022, p.59).

The activities carried out in support of the internationalization of higher education are primarily driven by goals such as increasing institutional reputation and visibility, strengthening competitiveness, attracting qualified students and successful academics to the institution, and achieving economic gains. In line with these objectives, the most prominent areas in which internationalization is manifested include the development of joint degree programs, the integration of international components into existing curricula, the offering of online courses, the implementation of collaborative research projects, and student and faculty exchange programs (Özerdem, 2016, p.77).

Knight (1993, p.22) defines the internationalization of higher education as the process of integrating a transnational and intercultural dimension into the functions of teaching, research, and service. According to this approach, internationalization is not merely the aggregation or integration of certain activities; rather, it is a dynamic and continuously evolving process that contributes to the sustainability of the international dimension. This definition is grounded in the core and universal missions of higher education institutions: teaching, research, and community service. While the definition of internationalization in higher education may vary depending on goals and priorities, the dynamic nature of the process is generally recognized as a common characteristic.

When viewed through a cultural lens, one of the primary goals of internationalizing higher education is to promote and disseminate a country's national values on the global stage. From an economic standpoint, moreover, international higher education has gained importance as both a short-term and long-term source of income. While universities are generally regarded as strategic actors in a country's academic and intellectual development, it should not be overlooked that—when cultural and economic dimensions are taken into account—these institutions also form the foundation of a country's regional and global competitiveness.

It is evident that the European Union, along with earlier agreements, has played a significant role in accelerating the internationalization of higher education. Although higher education policies, the content of curricula, and the organization of education systems fall within the jurisdiction of the member states, the European Union assumes a coordinating role in this process and provides various forms of support to member countries. In addition to this support, member states are also obligated to exercise their authority in alignment with the fundamental principles of the European Union. Although the European Union's implementation model does not foresee a direct integration process, it enables the development of common practices under a unified framework despite the existence of different national governance systems. In the field of higher education, the European Union focuses on areas such as student and academic staff mobility, mutual recognition of diplomas and study periods, the promotion of inter-university cooperation, and the development of distance education practices. As emphasized by Tuzcu (2002, p.155–156), these policies indicate that the European Union's objective is not to standardize and integrate the national education systems of member states, but rather to advance toward harmonization within a framework of shared systems (Çetin, 2018, p.37).

The internationalization of higher education is considered a strategically significant phenomenon. While shaping quality processes within their own higher education systems, countries may make strategic decisions by taking into account international expectations, demands, and agendas. In this context, internationalization stands out as a process aimed at achieving more effective and successful outcomes through expertise-based knowledge accumulation. At the same time, it brings structural opportunities such as the residence and employment of international students in the host country. Moreover, internationalization supports cooperation in the fields of foreign policy and development, promotes intercultural and scientific interaction, and enables the transfer of quality and capacity between countries and institutions. This process increases the international mobility of academic staff and enables universities

to recruit foreign academics who possess the universal qualifications that institutions require (Seggie & Ergin, 2018, p.61).

Academic Freedom and University Autonomy

While internationalization brings new opportunities and global visibility to higher education institutions, it also raises critical questions about the autonomy of universities and the preservation of academic freedom within increasingly market-driven and externally influenced educational systems. This makes it essential to examine the relationship between internationalization and the core values of academic life, particularly the roles of academic freedom and university autonomy, which are foundational to the mission and integrity of higher education.

Certainly, one of the most fundamental criteria defining the emergence of modern universities is the conduct of scientific research activities. The ability of universities and scientists to successfully fulfill their core duties—such as conducting research, producing scientific publications, and carrying out teaching activities—is only possible within a free working environment. In this context, the development of universities, which are centers of knowledge production, holds great national importance, no less important than the development of industrial and manufacturing facilities. Universities are directly connected to the general structure of society. When a democratic environment and freedom of expression thrive in universities, their positive impact is often reflected across society as a whole. Conversely, the presence of repression and violence within universities may lead to similar negative reflections in society (Güner & Levent, 2020, p.81).

For the establishment of a healthy academic environment, scientists must be able to carry out their duties—such as conducting research, engaging in teaching activities, producing scientific publications, and disseminating knowledge to society—without being subjected to any form of pressure. This understanding of freedom, which is mostly considered within an academic framework, is expressed in the literature as the concept of "academic freedom."

When examining the literature on the concept of academic freedom, it is seen that this concept has a rather complex and controversial structure. The origins of incidents that can be associated with academic freedom date back almost as far as the history of education itself. Academic freedom violations experienced throughout history highlight how essential this freedom is (Doğan, 2015). Due to the historical phases academic freedom has undergone and its multifaceted conceptual structure, it has become quite difficult to define this concept in a definitive and comprehensive manner. Indeed, according to many, there is no clear definition that fully and accurately reflects the complete meaning of academic freedom (Güner, 2017, p.91).

In turn, autonomy in higher education systems can be defined as granting university administrators and academic staff the authority to make their own decisions and act independently in academic, administrative, and financial matters. Universities are institutions that host students and academics from various social segments not only at the national level but also in an international context. Additionally, some universities may be established specifically to respond to the unique needs of the regions in which they are located. This implies that each university is structurally and functionally different from one another. Therefore, managing universities in a similar manner or through a centralized approach may be insufficient to meet the needs of all institutions. Another dimension of the concept of autonomy is financial independence. Particularly in American universities, the intervention of industrialists and businesspeople who provide financial support to universities in management processes and academic activities has raised various issues within the context of autonomy. However, this does not mean that universities and academic staff should possess unlimited autonomy. In democratic societies, the activities of all individuals and institutions must be conducted within a framework of certain oversight mechanisms. In this context, university autonomy is considered as administrators and academic staff having a pre-defined and responsible sphere of freedom in administrative and financial matters (Gedikoğlu, 1990, pp. 26–33).

In the final analysis, one could argue that academic freedom can be examined under two sub-dimensions: individual academic freedom and institutional academic freedom. The protection of academic freedom at the individual level is directly related to the scope of freedom possessed by the institution to which the academic belongs. The ability of academic institutions to conduct scientific activities independently of any external pressure and based on merit is closely connected to the concept of university autonomy. In this context, institutions should use their autonomy rights not to pressure academics but to protect them against external interventions. Therefore, it is a widely accepted view that academic freedom cannot be realized without university autonomy. Additionally, to ensure that institutional autonomy does not override individual academic freedoms, the inclusion of academics in decision-making processes and in the selection of administrators within the university is considered an important factor. Meanwhile, from a critical geopolitical perspective, one should also highlight that the erosion of university autonomy must also be understood in relation to growing forms of foreign dependence—ranging from reliance on external funding and international rankings to the dominance of English as the main medium of instruction. In this sense, linguistic imperialism represents not only a cultural challenge but also a structural threat to knowledge sovereignty, making the defense of autonomy both a national and epistemic imperative.

Cultural Hegemony and Knowledge Colonization: Towards a Critical Geopolitical Framework

Beyond institutional and individual dimensions, discussions of academic freedom and university autonomy must also be situated within broader cultural and ideological structures operating in geographical settings. Hegemony can be defined as the establishment of a common understanding that gains the approval of the masses by creating a cultural and ideological consensus at the social level. This concept provides a functional analytical tool to explain the relationship of consent established between power and society. Various

theoretical approaches consider the media as one of the primary instruments in constructing this consent. Within this framework, Netflix, as one of the digital media platforms, stands among the prominent examples.

Dominant classes maintain their power not only through physical force but also by utilizing cultural and ideological tools. The concept of hegemony, based on the ideas developed by Gramsci in the 1920s and 1930s, forms the foundation of his work on culture and ideology. This concept gains its fullest meaning when considered together with terms such as culture, power, and ideology. Gramsci used the concept of hegemony to express the dominance of one social class over other classes within society, citing the hegemonic structure established by the bourgeoisie as an example (Gürcan & Otero, 2025). Stuart Hall, furthermore, argues that media tools construct meanings about events occurring around individuals. According to Hall, rather than directly conveying global developments, the media present them through a process of reconstruction. In doing so, the media restructure realities and, through this process, produce and communicate specific meanings (Yaylagül & Korkmaz, 2010).

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony offers a framework that includes both the explanation and the re-evaluation of this notion. Hegemony encompasses not only overtly exercised force and power relations but also the establishment or maintenance of dominance through a process of consent and acceptance. From this perspective, the subjugation of the masses occurs not through coercion, but through a certain degree of consent. According to Gramsci, hegemony thereby signifies the construction of consent (Otero & Gürcan, 2024). The concept of cultural hegemony, which is introduced by the Italian thinker Gramsci, highlights the dominance established by the ruling class over society through the guidance and control of economic, political, religious, cultural, or ideological spheres (Fairclough, 2001, p.234).

Cultural hegemony enables the perception that a culture which is demographically in the minority occupies a disproportionately large space within the global range of cultural options, which

reveals the relevance of hegemony as an explanatory concept in critical geopolitics. In this regard, Kuisel offers an apt metaphor for globalized culture by describing it as a "buffet." Through this metaphor, it is suggested that while various options are assumed to exist within global culture, the majority of these options tend to gravitate toward American cultural elements. Cultural consumers in different parts of the world emphasize the need to acknowledge that, although the range of cultural choices may appear vast from the outside, in reality, these options are quite limited (Kuisel as cited in Barrett, 2020, p.200, p.42).

Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Capital in Higher Education

While Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony helps us understand how dominant ideologies shape societal consent through media and cultural institutions, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides a complementary lens to examine how such dominance is internalized, reproduced, and legitimized through education. The concept of cultural capital holds a central importance both in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach and more broadly within the evolution of the notion of capital. Cultural capital is positioned as one of the fundamental elements that enable the formation and regulation of social hierarchy alongside economic capital. In Bourdieu's works, cultural capital is frequently used as a fundamental conceptual tool, especially in the field of education, for understanding the emergence of social inequalities and the mechanisms through which these inequalities are reproduced (Yanıklar, 2010, p.124).

The concept of cultural capital first emerged in Pierre Bourdieu's analyses within the scope of his studies focused on the field of education. Through this concept, Bourdieu aimed to relate the academic success of students from different social classes to the cultural heritage they inherited from their families. This approach moves away from a narrow perspective that evaluates academic success solely as a product of individual abilities while overlooking

the social, cultural, and economic conditions in which individuals find themselves. According to Bourdieu, the reasons behind students' success or failure at school are related to much more complex structures. Traditional perspectives, although they take into account the economic and cultural investments individuals make in education, often overlook the nature, volume, and the means through which these investments are made. According to this understanding, there is a strong relationship between academic success and efforts based on academic investment, and success is mostly explained by natural talents. However, Bourdieu draws attention to a fundamental point neglected by this approach: the cultural capital individuals acquire within their family environment has a decisive effect on academic performance (Bourdieu, 1986, p.17). Cultural capital demonstrates that success within the school context stems from various causes and that numerous different processes related to academic achievement are at play.

From a critical geopolitical perspective, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is highly relevant to understanding the dynamics of higher education and the internationalization process through English as a lingua franca. In global academic settings, especially where English serves as the dominant medium of instruction and scholarly communication, mastery of English functions as a form of institutionalized cultural capital that shapes access to academic opportunities, professional advancement, and international mobility. Just as Bourdieu observed that students' educational success is deeply influenced by the cultural assets inherited from their social backgrounds, the global privileging of English reproduces structural inequalities by favoring those with early and sustained exposure to English-speaking environments—often students from urban, elite, or Western-oriented families. This reinforces educational hierarchies both within and across national borders, as universities that adopt English-language curricula signal greater prestige and global integration, further marginalizing local languages and epistemologies. Thus, cultural capital not only explains domestic educational stratification but also helps expose how internationalization—when

centered on English—can perpetuate symbolic domination and epistemic inequality in global higher education.

Robert Phillipson and Linguistic Imperialism

Building on Gramsci and Bourdieu's insights into how cultural capital is unequally distributed and reproduced through education as a hegemonic practice, Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism extends this analysis to the global scale, revealing how language itself becomes a vehicle of domination.

The invasion of the Americas, considered one of the most significant developments in world history, is regarded as the starting point of the modern colonial process. This historical event, which profoundly affected Western civilization, also triggered many transformations on a global scale (Chomsky, 2010, p.19). Therefore, to fully understand the effects of globalization on language, it is necessary to carefully examine colonial practices. Colonialism is generally used to refer to the economic and political domination established by European nations over various regions and communities around the world. Although its political and economic dimensions are decisive, colonialism is also seen to have left deep and destructive impacts on cultural structures and languages. In this context, the treatment of non-European languages as inadequate and secondary, the emergence of linguistic forms such as pidgin and creole in the wake of colonialism, and the reinforcement of colonial powers' claims to cultural superiority all serve as examples of the linguistic consequences of these practices. Another crucial term in this regard is language expansion, a concept directly related to linguistic imperialism, which refers to the increase in the number of users and domains of use of a language or the community that speaks it beyond its natural development process (Cooper, 1977, p.214). Historically, it is observed that various languages have expanded through expansionist policies. Language expansionism is generally directly related to the political and economic power held by the nation that speaks the language. Between 1500 and 1750, due to colonial activities being predominantly under Spanish and

Portuguese influence, Spanish and Portuguese are known to have acquired an expansionist character during this period. Between 1750 and 1945, English and French assumed this role; and in the post-1945 period, particularly English can be said to have come to the forefront in the context of language expansionism (Barrantes-Montero, 2018, pp.9–10).

In Phillipson's work (1997, p.239), linguistic imperialism is proposed as a theoretical framework that allows for the discussion of how language preference processes are directed by certain centers of power and authorities, and how linguistic hierarchies are constructed. In general terms, linguistic imperialism is defined as the process by which only one language among those coexisting on equal terms in society is supported and brought to the forefront. This phenomenon can be considered a subform of "cultural imperialism" (Gürcan, 2022), as it is based on the belief that development is only possible through European languages. The primary aim of European colonialism was to expand the economic and political influence of European states. Although this objective was initially achieved through the use of military force, over time, this means proved insufficient to maintain the exploitation system established in the occupied territories. Therefore, European powers constructed a social structure that legitimized and solidified their own social, cultural, and scientific superiority (Pennycook, 1998, p.34). Within this structure, colonial Europeans and local collaborators occupied the highest social strata, which led to the languages they spoke being perceived as superior, prestigious, and reputable. In contrast, the languages of the exploited local populations were positioned in the lower tiers of the social hierarchy and were regarded as inadequate or even insignificant.

English as the Lingua Franca: From Cultural Capital to Linguistic Imperialism

The concept of linguistic imperialism provides a critical foundation for understanding the global spread of English and its geopolitical implications for cultural and educational hierarchies, specially in

higher education settings. However, to grasp the full complexity of this phenomenon, it is also necessary to consider the historical context in which English emerged as a global lingua franca—an ostensibly neutral medium of communication that is anything but apolitical on the surface. As English continues to expand its reach across diverse sociolinguistic contexts, debates surrounding its standardization, localization, and pedagogical framing reveal the tensions between linguistic globalization and cultural sovereignty.

One of the key concepts that stands out in research and discussions concerning English as a global language is the term Lingua Franca. Historically, this term originated from the name Lisanul Farang, used by Arab merchants who traded in overseas regions to refer to the common language widely used in the places they visited. In this context, the term does not represent a direct designation but rather a conceptualization shaped by a necessity arising in communication. Today, English holds the position of the most dominant language fulfilling the function of a Lingua Franca. Another important concept evaluated within this framework is the term World Englishes, which refers to the ways in which various nations living in different geographical regions reconstruct English in original forms by incorporating elements from their own local languages, cultural structures, and modes of expression (Seidlhofer, 2001, p.140).

It is argued that the demand for Standard English and the reactions against this language have developed in a mutually reinforcing linear relationship. According to this approach, as the global spread of English increases, interest in the language also grows with the push of several socio-political and economic factors; this situation paves the way for core countries to emerge as rule-setting authorities in their approach to language education. As the core's stance—often described as norm-setting and at times imposing—gains strength, critical reactions from peripheral countries intensify in parallel. Modiano (2001, p.341) describes the insistence on teaching students a form of English close to the "standard" as "a persistence in imposing an action," and argues that this approach serves not to provide students with access to the global community, but rather to carry out cultural indoctrination. The author critiques that some

theorists who embrace the idea of global culture and argue that the so-called "global culture" spreading around the world is not monopolized by the US and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, they consider English Language Education as an important tool for fostering a sense of global citizenship (Modiano, 2001, p.343). Within this framework, it is stated that not all groups who argue that English plays an important role in the construction of global citizenship necessarily adopt Western values in the same way. Moreover, the necessity of using English in a form stripped of cultural identity —as a neutral language of communication—is frequently emphasized. Joshua Fishman argues that a language's potential to function as a "Primary Language of Global Communication (PLGC)" is directly related to the neutral character of that language (Kovacevic, 2004, pp. 323–326).

This evolving role of English as a global lingua franca and the contested terrain of "standard" versus localized forms of English must be understood not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a reflection of deeper social hierarchies and global power dynamics. Through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, mastery of English—particularly in its standardized, norm-enforcing form—operates as a powerful form of symbolic capital that grants access to academic prestige, economic opportunity, and international legitimacy. At the same time, Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism highlights how the global diffusion of English often reproduces unequal power relations between the core and periphery, privileging Anglo-American norms while marginalizing local languages and epistemologies. In the Turkish context, this dynamic positions English not merely as a communicative tool but as a vehicle for cultural hegemony and epistemic dependency—reinforcing the idea that language is both a medium of exchange and a mechanism of domination.

To conclude this section, English is often portrayed as a neutral or universally accessible tool for global communication in the context of the internationalization of higher education. However, linguistic imperialism theory emphasizes that English operates not simply as a lingua franca but as a hegemonic medium through

which cultural, ideological, and epistemic dominance is exerted. As universities increasingly adopt English-medium instruction to attract international students and enhance global prestige, they risk reinforcing Anglo-American linguistic norms and marginalizing local languages, knowledge systems, and cultural frameworks. In Türkiye, this dynamic has been particularly pronounced: English language adoption has coincided with geopolitical realignments and economic dependencies, embedding Western-centric values and discourses into the fabric of higher education. Thus, the internationalization of Turkish universities through English not only fosters global integration but also deepens asymmetries in linguistic and cultural power—making linguistic imperialism an essential lens for critically examining the politics of language in global higher education.

Use of English in Turkish Higher Education: A Critical Geopolitical Re-Assessment

The global ascendance of English as a *lingua franca*, framed by the twin dynamics of cultural capital and linguistic imperialism, does not unfold uniformly across contexts—it takes on distinct historical and sociopolitical contours within each national setting. Türkiye offers a particularly illustrative case. As the country has navigated its modern nation-building process and international alignment—especially during the Cold War period—language education policies have increasingly favored English, not only for pragmatic reasons but also as a symbol of modernity, elite distinction, and integration into the Western imperialist system. To fully understand the domestic trajectory of English in Türkiye, it is essential to examine how foreign language education evolved from the early republican period onward, and how this evolution reflects broader ideological, geopolitical, and class-based imperatives.

In the early years of the Republic, foreign languages such as German, French, Italian, English, Arabic, and Persian were taught in Turkish schools. However, Persian was soon removed from the curriculum, and Arabic instruction was limited to institutions

providing religious education. During this period, the most widely taught foreign languages in Turkish schools were German and French (Demircan, 1988, p. 92). Indeed, the Turkish-German rapprochement that took shape before the Second World War, along with the French government's policies promoting the teaching of French, had a significant impact on this development. However, starting from the 1950s, this situation began to change; English began to compete with French and German—which had previously held dominant positions—in various fields ranging from education to diplomacy. As English-speaking countries started gaining influence on a global scale in economic, political, and military domains, the English language became increasingly widespread within international institutions and structures (Tollefson, 1991, p. 82).

The Turkish state, acting in line with the goal of modernizing Türkiye, supported the view that English was an important tool for strengthening commercial relations, ensuring communication at the international level, and sustaining scientific development (Doğançay-Aktuna, 1998). Türkiye's inclusion in NATO and its efforts to strengthen communication with the United States led to an increase in American influence within Türkiye. As a result, the adoption of English within the country accelerated, and English began to gain importance over other languages. Ankara College, operating under the Turkish Education Association, began offering education in English in 1952. From that point on, there was a noticeable increase in the number of schools providing education in English. In 1955, six Maarif Colleges (secondary schools offering instruction in a foreign language) were opened across Türkiye. These schools implemented an education program with a strong emphasis on English; science and mathematics courses were taught in English. In 1975, the name of the Maarif Colleges was changed to Anatolian High School, and with this change, the number of schools offering education in English reached twenty (Demirel, 2008, pp. 13–14).

With the increase in the number of Anatolian High Schools, public high schools focusing on foreign language instruction, the number of schools offering education in English also grew rapidly

over time. In 2005, when the duration of high school education was extended to four years, the English preparatory classes in Anatolian High Schools and Super High Schools were abolished; only eight Anatolian High Schools were permitted to continue this preparatory education. Since the 1950s, English has risen to the position of the primary foreign language in Turkish schools. Today, foreign language instruction in Turkish public schools begins at the second-grade level, and the vast majority of students receive English education as their first foreign language (Çakır, 2017, p. 16). In parallel with all these developments, English-medium instruction has also grown steadily in higher education, and this increase appears to be closely linked to the rapid rise in the number of international students coming to Türkiye. While the number of international students studying in Türkiye was recorded as 16.656 in the year 2000, this figure rose to 154.505 by 2019 (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi, 2022, p.1).

Table 1. Number of International Students in Türkiye
(Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 2025, p.9)

Year	Number of International Students
2001	16656
2002	16328
2003	15719
2004	15288
2005	15028
2006	16059
2007	16455
2008	17388
2009	18720
2010	21948
2011	26228
2012	31933
2013	44025
2014	48184
2015	72178
2016	87903
2017	108076
2018	125138
2019	154505
2020	185047
2021	224048
2022	260289
2023	301694
2024	336366

The consideration of internationalization in higher education as a public policy area, and its regulation within this framework, began to emerge toward the end of the 20th century. In Türkiye, the massification of higher education became particularly evident starting in the 2000s, with a notable increase in both the number of students and higher education institutions. During this period, the growth process accelerated through policies aimed at meeting the needs of individuals seeking access to higher education, and this development has been referred to as the "massification of higher education".

Indeed, one of the key enablers of this transformation has been the expansion of English language education at the university level. As English increasingly becomes the medium of instruction in many Turkish higher education institutions, it enhances the accessibility of academic programs to a wider international audience, thereby strengthening the country's attractiveness in the global education market. In this sense, there is a strong, mutually reinforcing relationship between the rise in international student numbers, the internationalization of higher education, and the institutionalization of English as the primary foreign language of instruction.

In this context, the trajectory of English language adoption in Türkiye's education system—particularly from the 1950s onward—can be deeply understood through the combined lenses of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Phillipson's concept of linguistic imperialism. As the Turkish Republic shifted from a multilingual imperial legacy toward a nationalist modernization project, the choice of foreign language instruction became tightly entangled with the broader geopolitical goal of aligning Türkiye with Western hegemonic centers. In this context, English gradually supplanted French and German as the dominant foreign language, not merely due to geopolitical alliances or pragmatic utility, but also through processes of symbolic valuation, social distinction, and epistemic alignment—all central concerns of Bourdieu's cultural capital framework.

According to Bourdieu, language is not merely a neutral communicative tool, but a bearer of symbolic power and cultural

legitimacy. The privileging of English in Turkish educational institutions, especially elite ones such as Ankara College or the Anatolian High Schools, functioned as a mechanism for accumulating institutionalized cultural capital—a form of capital that signals academic prestige, access to global networks, and social mobility. Mastery of English increasingly came to serve as a gatekeeping criterion for accessing high-status educational and professional trajectories, particularly in the sciences, diplomacy, and international business. This was not only a reflection of global trends but also a domestically cultivated hierarchy of linguistic legitimacy, where English was constructed as the language of progress, science, and modernity, while other foreign languages—once dominant—receded in both symbolic and practical importance.

However, as Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism suggests, the global spread of English cannot be understood solely in terms of voluntary adoption or functional necessity. Rather, it must be analyzed within broader structures of power, domination, and epistemic control. The expansion of English in Türkiye occurred within the context of Cold War geopolitics, NATO integration, and increasing economic dependence on Western institutions—conditions that reflect what Phillipson identifies as the asymmetrical global order underpinning linguistic hierarchies. In this framework, the dominance of English represents not a benign tool of internationalization but a mechanism of linguistic and cultural subordination, wherein knowledge production and educational practices become increasingly aligned with Anglo-American norms, values, and epistemologies. Thus, what appears as a rational policy choice aimed at internationalization can also be interpreted as a process of knowledge colonization, in which local languages and alternative modes of thought are gradually marginalized or rendered invisible.

This tension is especially salient in the Turkish context, where the discourse of internationalization in higher education is frequently framed as a neutral or even emancipatory project. Yet, when viewed through the critical perspectives of Gramsci, Bourdieu and Phillipson, internationalization—particularly through English—

reveals its ideological underpinnings and social consequences. It reinforces existing social inequalities by rewarding those with early and sustained access to English-medium education (often urban, middle- or upper-class students), while excluding others from high-status academic and economic opportunities. Simultaneously, it channels research agendas, pedagogical approaches, and academic identities toward alignment with dominant Western paradigms, undermining both academic autonomy and knowledge pluralism.

In sum, Bourdieu's theory explains how English functions as a form of cultural capital within Türkiye's stratified education system, while Gramsci and Phillipson's frameworks highlight the imperial logic embedded in its global hegemonic dominance. Together, these theories illuminate how internationalization—far from being a purely technical or inclusive endeavor—is entangled with historically rooted forms of symbolic violence, epistemic dependency, and cultural hegemony. Recognizing these dynamics is essential not only for critiquing current policy trajectories but also for envisioning more equitable, multilingual, and context-sensitive models of international engagement in Turkish higher education.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the internationalization of higher education in Türkiye—particularly through the proliferation of English-medium instruction—is not a neutral or universally progressive development, but one deeply embedded in global structures of inequality and domination. By drawing on Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism, the study has shown how English functions both as a marker of academic prestige and as a vehicle of epistemic subordination. Within this framework, the rise of English in Turkish universities reinforces existing social hierarchies, privileges elite groups with access to English-language capital, and constrains the scope of autonomous knowledge production by aligning academic norms with Western hegemonic standards. When higher education policies prioritize global competitiveness and

international visibility through English, they risk reproducing colonial patterns of linguistic and epistemic dependency. In this light, internationalization becomes a process not of reciprocal exchange, but of asymmetrical integration into a global order that privileges Anglo-American modes of thought, research, and pedagogy.

Within this context, fostering linguistic pluralism and academic autonomy emerges as both a strategic necessity and a form of resistance to epistemic dependency. One crucial step toward this goal is to reimagine internationalization not as a process synonymous with Anglicization, but as a multidimensional framework that values linguistic diversity and regional engagement. Multilingual internationalization models—incorporating Turkish alongside other regional and global languages—can help decenter English while still maintaining international competitiveness. This requires strategic partnerships beyond the Anglophone world, particularly with non-Western and postcolonial academic institutions such as the BRICS Universities League and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization University.

Moreover, academic output in Turkish must be re-legitimized and institutionally supported. The dominance of English in publication criteria and academic evaluation risks marginalizing local knowledge systems and excluding scholars without privileged access to English-medium education. National funding agencies, academic journals, and university promotion committees must actively recognize and reward scholarly work produced in Turkish and other non-dominant languages. Doing so will both democratize academic participation and strengthen Türkiye's intellectual sovereignty. At the curricular level, universities should localize educational content by integrating national histories, languages, and epistemologies into course design. This does not imply isolationism but rather the development of context-sensitive knowledge production that reflects Türkiye's own sociocultural realities. Similarly, language policy reforms are needed to regulate the proportion of English-medium instruction and ensure the continued centrality of Turkish as a language of science and scholarship.

Importantly, any pluralist language agenda must be accompa-

nied by efforts to democratize access to English, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While English proficiency remains a valuable skill in global academia, it must not become a tool of stratification. Addressing this imbalance requires the expansion of public English-language education and support services while simultaneously working to decenter English as the only gateway to international academic legitimacy.

Institutionally, universities must reclaim autonomy from external dependencies, including over-reliance on foreign donor agendas, standardized global rankings, and externally imposed research priorities. Building independent research ecosystems, regionally grounded collaborations, and diversified funding sources away from the neoliberal paradigm will empower Turkish academia to set its own priorities and pursue its own models of excellence. Finally, these transformations must be supported by a pedagogical shift toward critical language awareness. Students and educators alike should be encouraged to interrogate the ideological dimensions of language, understand how linguistic hierarchies are constructed, and reflect on how language shapes access to knowledge and power. Language education, in this sense, should be not only technical but emancipatory.

In the final analysis, achieving linguistic pluralism and academic autonomy in Turkish higher education requires moving beyond surface-level notions of internationalization. It demands a structural rethinking of how language, power, and knowledge intersect. By embracing a multilingual, contextually rooted, and critically engaged vision of higher education, Türkiye as a major Global South country can contribute to a more equitable and diverse global academic order—one in which it is not merely a participant, but a co-architect.

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